A number of contemporary philosophers have turned away from the duty-based approach to ethics, harking back to the older, virtue-based approach that we’ll see in Aristotle and Hume.

They’ve been reacting in part to some of the specific problems we’ve noted with both utilitarian and Kantian ethics. More generally, many have thought that the modern approach ignores

- the central role of moral feelings (cf. Williams on integrity),
- important nonmoral aspects of virtue, and
- morally significant relationships that aren’t governed by clear-cut rules.
ARISTOTLE

The good for humans depends on using reason to find an appropriate point between extremes.
Happiness as the human good

- Aristotle begins with the claim that all action aims at some good, and that it’s widely accepted that happiness is the chief human good. However, he notes that this is just a platitude that needs explanation.

- [It’s important that the Greek word translated as “happiness,” eudaimonia, implies a life that goes well for the one living it.

  - ≠ a feeling, e.g. pleasure, though accompanied by pleasure

  - A more accurate translation that’s sometimes used is “flourishing.”]
Characteristics of happiness

- Happiness is “final,” i.e. it comes last in the chain of ends that justifies action. We pursue other ends (e.g. pleasure, honor, intelligence) for its sake, whereas we pursue happiness only for its own sake.

- Happiness also is “self-sufficient,” in the sense that nothing further is needed to make life desirable. This doesn’t mean that the happy person doesn’t need others; humans are naturally social.

- Aristotle goes on to argue that only a life exhibiting virtue [ = excellence] satisfies these two conditions.
The function argument

1. The good of anything with a function [= ergon: work. task (distinctive role in the cosmos)] amounts to performing that function well.

2. The human function is rational activity (“activity of soul in accordance with, or implying, a rational principle”).
   - This is what’s proper to [= distinctive of] humans.
   - Other human activities are shared by other living beings: plants also exhibit growth and nutrition; animals, sensation.

3. So the human good [= happiness] amounts to rational activity in accordance with virtue [= excellence], i.e. performed well.
Important qualifications

- Aristotle immediately adds: “in a complete lifetime.” One can’t be said to be happy just for a while, in the Greek sense; and on Aristotle’s account children can’t yet be happy.

- Virtue naturally brings pleasure at virtuous acts, but its active exercise, as needed for happiness, depends to some extent on “external goods” [= goods outside the agent’s control]:
  - favorable upbringing and physical/mental endowment
  - fortunate circumstances, e.g. adequate wealth, trustworthy friends

- At the same time, virtue is learnable, and the capacity for happiness is widely shared. Nor is it easily undermined by reversals of fortune, though extreme changes can affect happiness (cf. his discussion of Priam, p. 11, p. 24).
Aspects of soul

- **rational (= reason):**
  - limited to humans
  - can exhibit intellectual virtue (treated in VI)

- **appetitive/desiderative/sensitive:**
  - shared with animals
  - partakes of reason in humans when they bring desires under rational control, exhibiting “moral” virtues (II-V) = virtues of character

- **vegetative/nutritive:**
  - shared with both animals and plants
  - controls growth and nutrition
Levels of character

- Aristotle briefly brings up incontinence [= weakness of will] in discussing the desiderative soul. He’s working from a fourfold classification of types of character (cf. VII, i-x). In descending order of goodness:
  - **virtue**, e.g. courage, temperance, justice, etc., without conflicting desires
  - **continence** = strength of will, resisting temptation
  - **incontinence** = weakness of will, yielding to temptation
  - **vice** = wickedness, deliberate badness, without conflicting desires

- Among other things, the list illustrates how Aristotle rates below true virtue a successful internal struggle to act rightly, of the sort that Kant thought worthy of the highest esteem.

- In II he discusses how we attain virtue and what virtue entails. In the first part of III he defends his category of vice against Socrates’s claim that no one does wrong voluntarily.
Learning virtue

- Habituation (= instilling a habit by repetition) results in virtuous (e.g. courageous, temperate, or just) acts. However, this is just a necessary initial stage of learning.

- *Being* virtuous (or courageous, moderate, just, etc.), or acting *virtuously*, also requires that the acts be:
  - accompanied by pleasure, not pain
  - done knowingly,
  - based on a choice, to do them *because* they’re virtuous, and
  - done out of a firm disposition [= tendency], i.e. a trait of character.

- Which specific acts one should do has to be determined by reference to a personal model: the “prudent” person (in your translation), exhibiting excellence in practical reasoning = practical wisdom (VI).
Virtue as a mean

- Virtues of character are always somewhere in between two extremes (= bad traits of defect/excess) of some quantity of action or feeling, e.g. his initial examples (cf. also the editors’ table on pp. 285f.):
  - (fear)/confidence:
    - cowardice/COURAGE/rashness
  - desire for bodily pleasure/(or to avoid pain):
    - insensibility/TEMPERANCE/licentiousness

- But Aristotle notes that there isn’t always a term for all three traits.

- Also, the mean needn’t fall exactly in the middle; it’s determined “relatively to us,” meaning that it reflects our needs, tendencies, circumstances, etc. [vs. our personal judgments or preferences].

- Hitting the mean implies doing things in the right way, at the right time and place, etc., as well as to the right degree. The doctrine of the mean doesn’t just advocate “moderation in all things.”
Other moral virtues

- Aristotle goes on in II and III-IV to discuss various other moral virtues (or feelings resembling virtues) concerned with

  - **external goods**:
    - giving money: liberality, magnificence (for the wealthy)
    - claiming honor: magnanimity [= “greatness of soul,” “proper pride”; see IV.iii] and “proper ambition”

  - **social goods**: patience [= mean of (proneness to) anger], truthfulness [about one’s achievements], wit, friendliness

  - **states of feeling**: shame [for children], righteous indignation.

- In V he treats justice as a mean amount of “graspingness”: taking only your fair share. But he says it doesn’t quite fit his doctrine of the mean, since taking less isn’t unjust.
Answering Socrates

- Aristotle has to defend the possibility of vice, or deliberate wrongdoing, against the Socratic view of virtue as knowledge.

- Socrates also held that doing wrong is bad for the one who does it -- it makes him worse and therefore does him harm – so that no one could voluntarily do wrong, in a sense that involves genuinely knowing what you’re doing.

  - He even denied the possibility of incontinence (= weakness of will), understood as action against one’s better judgment [akrasia].

  - In VII (pp. 174f.) Aristotle decides that the incontinent agent does know that what he’s doing is wrong or harmful, but only in the sense in which a drunk reciting verses knows what they mean, though he doesn’t really understand them at the time.

- In III.i-v Aristotle gives a systematic treatment to issues of responsibility, designed to allow for the connection between virtue/vice, praise/blame, and choice.
Voluntary action

- a necessary condition of praise/blame, and hence of virtue/vice

- characterized negatively, in terms of sufficient conditions for involuntary action = action the agent regrets, that’s done out of either
  - *compulsion* (= force, with causes completely external to the agent), or
  - *ignorance* (of the particular facts of the case, i.e. those determining the nature and circumstances of his action – vs. moral ignorance, negligence, etc., which is blameworthy; cf. “culpable ignorance”)

- Aristotle treats “mixed” cases, involving a choice between evils, as voluntary, since at the time of action the agent wants to do them.
  - The agent may be praiseworthy where he chooses the lesser evil (e.g., throwing goods overboard in a storm).
  - But failure to choose the lesser evil may sometimes deserve pity rather than blame, where it’s something a normal agent couldn’t bear.
Deliberate action

- a further necessary condition of full responsibility (involving attribution to the agent’s character)

  - Voluntary action is also exhibited by infants, animals, and adults acting on impulse (e.g. out of passion, including incontinent action).

  - “Deliberate” for Aristotle means based on deliberation [vs. our common use of the term for acts done “on purpose,” but not necessarily on the basis of any reasoning].

- deliberation = practical reasoning

  - about available means to your ends (= objects of wish).

  - terminates in a choice (in a sense that entails consideration of reasons): making up your mind to take the means to your ends

  - can Involve a chain of means/end reasoning that terminates when it gets to something immediately within our power.
The practical syllogism

- The final stage of a process of deliberation can be reconstructed logically as a three-step argument, consisting in
  - **major premise** ("the universal": desire/wish for end E):
    1. E is good [for me, humans, or etc.].
  - **minor premise** ("the particular": belief that act A promotes E):
    2. A would bring about E.
  - **conclusion** ([choice resulting in] A, assuming no impediment):
    3. A [= an immediate action (or intention to act)].

- In contrast to Socrates, Aristotle holds that responsibility isn’t ruled out by ignorance of the universal, i.e. of 1 rather than 2.
Limitations

- In his treatment of responsibility issues Aristotle pays no attention to questions of “free will” raised by scientific determinism (which emerged much later, with the rise of modern science).
  - He does briefly discuss responsibility for character, given that the ability to discern the good and take it as our end might be said to be inborn (pp. 64f.).
  - But he argues that the acts resulting from our choices of means to our ends help form our character and thus make us responsible for what we do as a result of our [developed] character.

- With respect to ethics generally, Aristotle’s account of virtue doesn’t tell us
  - how to resolve moral conflicts, or answer disputed moral questions, of the sort more likely to arise in our pluralistic society, and
  - how to identify and emulate the excellent person in an age when life offers multiple specialized areas in which one can succeed – or fail, perhaps through no fault of one’s own.
Contributions

Despite these drawbacks, many contemporary philosophers have come to appreciate several features of Aristotle’s approach:

- Just because his treatment of responsibility is independent of determinism, it fits in nicely with a “compatibilist” view on free will (of the sort we’ll see in Hume).

- He doesn’t put morality in a separate sphere from self-interest, or the pursuit of one’s own happiness. Instead, he focuses on self-development, in a sense that essentially combines the two.

- His emphasis on rationality in the doctrine of the mean amounts to something like regulating one’s emotions and desires, rather than detached calculation of consequences or blindly following rules.

- His account of particular virtues gives serious treatment to emotions, character-development, and smaller-scale interpersonal relationships, in contrast to modern duty ethics.