

Moral Rationality and the Formation of Ethical Action: A Study of Aristotle's Thought

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Aristotle's conception of moral rationality and its role in the formation of ethical action. The research is grounded in the premise that reason constitutes the defining characteristic of human beings and serves as the primary foundation for moral judgment and ethical behavior. Employing a qualitative library research approach, the study analyzes Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* alongside relevant scholarly literature on virtue ethics, practical wisdom, and moral philosophy. Data were collected through a systematic review of primary and secondary sources and analyzed using descriptive and analytical methods to explore the relationship between reason, virtue, and action within Aristotle's ethical framework. The findings reveal that moral rationality functions as the guiding principle of ethical action by enabling individuals to distinguish right from wrong and to act in accordance with virtue. Practical wisdom (*phronesis*) plays a crucial role in translating rational deliberation into concrete moral decisions, while virtue formation develops through habituation and continuous practice. The study further demonstrates that ethical character emerges from the integration of reason, emotion, and desire under the guidance of rational judgment. Ultimately, Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia* illustrates that genuine human flourishing is achieved through virtuous activity directed by reason. These findings highlight the enduring relevance of Aristotle's ethical thought for contemporary discussions on moral education, character development, and ethical decision-making. The study contributes to moral philosophy by clarifying the systematic relationship between moral rationality and the formation of ethical action.

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Introduction

The question of how human beings determine ethical actions has remained one of the central concerns in moral philosophy from antiquity to the present day. Contemporary societies face increasingly complex ethical challenges arising from technological advancement, political polarization, environmental crises, and shifting social norms. In such circumstances, understanding the foundations of moral judgment becomes essential for explaining why individuals act in certain ways and how ethical behavior can be

cultivated. Discussions concerning moral rationality have therefore regained significance, particularly in relation to the role of reason in guiding human conduct (Annas, 2011; Fowers, 2016; VanderWeele, 2017; Wallach & Allen, 2009).

The relationship between reason and action occupies a strategic position within ethical theory because moral decisions are rarely detached from cognitive deliberation (Greene, 2013). Human beings continuously evaluate alternatives, weigh consequences, and consider values before acting. Ethical action is therefore not merely a spontaneous reaction but often the result of reflective judgment. This perspective contrasts with approaches that emphasize emotions, desires, or social conventions as the primary determinants of moral behavior (Nussbaum, 2001).

Among classical philosophers, Aristotle offers one of the most influential accounts of moral rationality through his doctrine of virtue ethics. Unlike ethical systems that focus primarily on rules or consequences, Aristotle places character and practical wisdom at the center of moral life. For Aristotle, ethical excellence emerges through the cultivation of virtues that enable individuals to act appropriately in various situations. Moral action is thus inseparable from the rational capacities that guide human judgment and decision-making (Aristotle, 2009).

Aristotle's ethical framework is grounded in the concept of *eudaimonia*, commonly translated as flourishing or human well-being. According to Aristotle, every human action aims at some good, and the highest good is the realization of a fulfilled life achieved through virtuous activity. This understanding implies that moral action cannot be reduced to compliance with external norms; rather, it requires the active exercise of reason in accordance with virtue (Kraut, 2018). Ethical behavior becomes meaningful because it contributes to the realization of human excellence.

Central to Aristotle's account is the notion of practical reason (*phronesis*), which enables individuals to deliberate wisely about actions conducive to the good life. Practical wisdom differs from theoretical knowledge because it concerns concrete situations requiring judgment and discernment. Through *phronesis*, individuals learn to balance competing interests and identify the appropriate course of action. Consequently, moral rationality functions not only as a cognitive capacity but also as a guiding principle for ethical conduct (Broadie, 1991).

Recent scholarship has demonstrated the continuing relevance of Aristotelian ethics for contemporary moral discourse. Studies have shown that virtue ethics provides valuable insights into moral education, professional ethics, leadership development, and civic responsibility (Arthur et al., 2017; Curzer, 2012; Han, 2022; Kristjánsson, 2015; Russell, 2009). The emphasis on character formation and rational deliberation offers an alternative to ethical approaches that prioritize procedural rules while neglecting the development of moral agents themselves.

Several contemporary studies have examined Aristotle's virtue ethics from different perspectives. Kristjánsson, (2015) emphasizes the educational significance of virtue formation in character development, while Russell, (2009) focuses on the role of practical wisdom in ethical judgment. Similarly, Carr, (2014) highlights the contribution of Aristotelian ethics to moral education, and Narvaez, (2010) discusses the relationship between moral reasoning and ethical behavior within contemporary moral psychology (Curren & Kotzee, 2014; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004; Sanderse, 2015). Although these studies provide important insights into virtue, character, and practical wisdom, they tend to address these elements separately rather than examining their systematic interconnection within Aristotle's conception of moral rationality.

Furthermore, contemporary debates in moral psychology increasingly acknowledge the interaction between rational reflection and moral behavior. Although some scholars argue

that moral judgments are largely influenced by intuition and emotion, others maintain that rational deliberation remains indispensable for ethical decision-making (Darnell et al., 2019; Haidt, 2001; Narvaez, 2010). Aristotle's ethical thought provides a useful framework for reconciling these perspectives by recognizing both the role of habituation and the importance of reason in shaping virtuous action.

The significance of Aristotle's theory extends beyond philosophical inquiry into broader educational and social contexts (Peters, 2015). Moral education, for instance, seeks not only to transmit ethical knowledge but also to cultivate dispositions that enable individuals to act responsibly. Aristotelian ethics suggests that ethical conduct emerges through continuous practice guided by rational judgment, thereby linking moral understanding with concrete action (Carr, 2014). This perspective remains highly relevant in contemporary efforts to strengthen character education.

Despite the extensive scholarship on Aristotelian ethics, existing studies predominantly concentrate on individual themes such as virtue, happiness (*eudaimonia*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*), or moral education. Limited attention has been devoted to explaining how moral rationality functions as an integrative framework connecting rational deliberation, virtue formation, ethical action, and human flourishing. Consequently, a theoretical gap remains regarding the systematic role of moral rationality in shaping ethical conduct within Aristotle's ethical philosophy. Understanding this relationship is important because it reveals how rational capacities contribute to the development of virtuous character and ethical behavior (Reeve, 2014).

Moreover, contemporary ethical challenges frequently expose tensions between knowledge and action. Individuals may recognize what is morally right yet fail to act accordingly. Aristotle addressed this problem through his analysis of moral weakness (*akrasia*), arguing that ethical action requires not only knowledge but also the proper cultivation of character and desires. This insight highlights the complexity of moral agency and reinforces the importance of examining the interaction between reason and conduct (Moss, 2012; Snow, 2015).

From a theoretical perspective, investigating Aristotle's conception of moral rationality contributes to ongoing debates concerning the foundations of ethical behavior. It provides a framework for understanding how rational deliberation, virtue formation, and practical judgment operate together in guiding human actions. Such an approach offers a more holistic account of morality than theories that isolate reason from character or action from ethical reflection (MacIntyre, 2007).

The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to reconstruct Aristotle's ethical philosophy through the lens of moral rationality as a unifying concept. Rather than discussing virtue, practical wisdom, and human flourishing as separate themes, this study proposes an integrated analytical framework that explains how moral rationality operates as the foundation linking character formation, ethical decision-making, and virtuous action. This perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of Aristotle's ethical theory and its relevance to contemporary discussions of moral education and ethical agency.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze Aristotle's conception of moral rationality and its role in the formation of ethical action. Specifically, the study explores how reason functions within Aristotle's ethical system, how practical wisdom guides moral decision-making, and how ethical actions contribute to the realization of human flourishing. By revisiting Aristotle's thought, this research seeks to contribute to contemporary discussions on moral philosophy and the cultivation of ethical character in modern society.

Method

This study employed a qualitative library research design to examine Aristotle's conception of moral rationality and its role in the formation of ethical action (Flick, 2014). The data consisted of primary and secondary sources related to Aristotelian ethics, including Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* as the principal text, supplemented by scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles discussing virtue ethics, practical wisdom (*phronesis*), moral reasoning, and ethical behavior. Data were collected through a systematic literature review by identifying, selecting, and evaluating relevant academic sources from philosophical and ethical studies. The collected materials were analyzed using a descriptive-analytical approach, focusing on interpreting key concepts, examining the logical structure of Aristotle's ethical arguments, and exploring the relationship between reason, virtue, and action. The analysis further incorporated comparative interpretation of contemporary scholarly discussions to contextualize Aristotle's thought within current ethical discourse. Conclusions were drawn through critical synthesis of the literature, identifying recurring themes and theoretical relationships that explain how moral rationality functions as the foundation for ethical action and human flourishing.

Results and Discussion

1. Moral Rationality as the Foundation of Human Action

Aristotle's ethical philosophy places rationality at the center of human existence. Unlike other living beings that are primarily guided by instinct, human beings possess the capacity for reason, enabling them to deliberate, evaluate alternatives, and determine appropriate courses of action. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that the distinctive function (*ergon*) of human beings is rational activity, and therefore human excellence must be achieved through the proper exercise of reason (Aristotle, 2009). This conception establishes moral rationality as the fundamental basis of ethical conduct.

The relationship between rationality and morality in Aristotle's thought is not merely theoretical but practical. Reason functions as an internal guide that directs individuals toward virtuous behavior. Ethical actions emerge when rational deliberation governs desires and emotions rather than being dominated by them. Consequently, morality is inseparable from the capacity to think critically about what is good and beneficial for human flourishing (Annas, 2011).

Aristotle rejects the notion that moral goodness is solely determined by external rules or social conventions. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of internal judgment developed through rational reflection. Individuals become morally responsible because they possess the ability to distinguish between right and wrong through reasoned evaluation. This perspective highlights the autonomy of moral agents and their capacity for ethical decision-making (Broadie, 1991).

Furthermore, rationality serves as a mediating mechanism between knowledge and action. Human beings often encounter competing desires and interests that may influence behavior. Through rational deliberation, individuals assess the consequences and moral significance of their actions before making decisions. Rationality therefore functions as a stabilizing force that prevents impulsive and excessive behavior.

The analysis indicates that Aristotle's conception of moral rationality provides a coherent framework for understanding ethical action. Moral conduct is not accidental but results from the deliberate exercise of reason. Ethical behavior becomes possible because rationality enables individuals to identify virtuous actions and align their conduct with moral objectives. In this regard, reason constitutes the foundational principle upon which ethical action is constructed.

This interpretation is consistent with contemporary virtue ethics scholarship. Annas, (2011) argues that moral development requires the cultivation of rational capacities that enable individuals to understand and pursue ethical goals. Similarly, MacIntyre, (2007) maintains that practical reasoning is inseparable from the formation of virtuous character because moral agency emerges within traditions of rational evaluation. These perspectives reinforce Aristotle's claim that ethical action depends upon the capacity to deliberate about what constitutes the good life (Besser-Jones, 2015; Fowers, 2016).

2. Practical Wisdom (*Phronesis*) and Ethical Decision-Making

A central component of Aristotle's moral rationality is the concept of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). While theoretical wisdom concerns universal truths, practical wisdom focuses on concrete situations requiring judgment and action. Aristotle maintains that ethical decisions cannot be reduced to abstract rules because human circumstances are diverse and complex (Kraut, 2018).

Practical wisdom enables individuals to determine the most appropriate action in specific contexts. Through *phronesis*, people learn to evaluate circumstances, balance competing values, and identify morally appropriate responses. Ethical action therefore requires more than intellectual knowledge; it requires sound judgment developed through experience and reflection (Russell, 2009).

The importance of practical wisdom becomes particularly evident when individuals face moral dilemmas. Situations involving conflicting duties, competing interests, or uncertain outcomes demand careful deliberation. Aristotle argues that virtuous individuals possess the capacity to navigate such complexities because practical wisdom allows them to discern the morally relevant aspects of each situation.

Another important feature of *phronesis* is its connection with moral character. Aristotle contends that practical wisdom and virtue develop simultaneously. Individuals cannot become practically wise without possessing virtuous dispositions, nor can virtues be fully realized without practical wisdom. This reciprocal relationship demonstrates that rationality and character are mutually reinforcing elements of ethical development (Reeve, 2014).

The findings suggest that practical wisdom serves as the operational dimension of moral rationality. It translates rational principles into concrete ethical actions. Consequently, Aristotle's theory offers a valuable perspective for contemporary discussions concerning ethical leadership, professional responsibility, and moral education, all of which require sound judgment rather than mere rule compliance.

From a contemporary perspective, Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* offers an important corrective to rule-based ethical models that often struggle to address contextual complexity. While deontological approaches emphasize universal principles and consequentialist theories focus on outcomes, practical wisdom highlights the necessity of situational judgment. This suggests that ethical competence involves not merely knowing moral rules but also possessing the capacity to apply them appropriately in diverse social circumstances (Darnell et al., 2019; Kristjánsson, 2017).

3. Virtue Formation and the Development of Ethical Character

Aristotle's account of ethical action extends beyond rational deliberation to include the formation of virtuous character. According to Aristotle, individuals are not born virtuous; rather, virtues are acquired through habituation and repeated practice. Ethical excellence develops gradually as individuals consistently perform morally appropriate actions (Aristotle, 2009).

The process of habituation demonstrates that moral rationality must be cultivated through education and social experience. Rational understanding alone is insufficient to produce ethical behavior. Individuals must repeatedly practice virtuous actions until such behaviors become stable dispositions. Through this process, moral principles are internalized and integrated into character (Carr, 2014).

Virtue formation also reflects Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. Moral virtues represent balanced dispositions situated between extremes of excess and deficiency. Courage, for example, occupies the middle position between recklessness and cowardice. Rational judgment enables individuals to identify and maintain this balance according to particular circumstances (Nussbaum, 2001).

Moreover, the development of ethical character requires the alignment of reason, emotion, and desire. Aristotle does not advocate the suppression of emotions but their rational regulation. Virtuous individuals experience emotions appropriately because their desires have been shaped by rational principles. This integration distinguishes Aristotelian ethics from approaches that portray reason and emotion as fundamentally opposed.

The analysis reveals that ethical character functions as the practical embodiment of moral rationality. Virtues transform rational insights into habitual patterns of conduct, ensuring consistency between moral understanding and ethical action. Consequently, character formation becomes an indispensable element in Aristotle's theory of moral agency.

The implications of this argument are particularly relevant for contemporary moral education. Educational institutions frequently emphasize cognitive achievement while giving less attention to character formation. Aristotle's theory suggests that ethical competence cannot be achieved solely through the transmission of moral knowledge; it requires repeated practice, habituation, and the cultivation of virtuous dispositions. Therefore, moral education should integrate ethical reflection with concrete experiences that encourage responsible action (Arthur et al., 2017; Han, 2022; Snow, 2015).

4. Moral Rationality and Human Flourishing (Eudaimonia)

The ultimate objective of Aristotle's ethical philosophy is the achievement of *eudaimonia*, commonly translated as flourishing, well-being, or genuine happiness. Unlike temporary pleasure or material success, *eudaimonia* represents a comprehensive state of human fulfillment attained through virtuous activity guided by reason (Kraut, 2018).

Aristotle argues that every human action aims at some perceived good, but not all goods possess equal value. Certain goals are pursued as means to other ends, whereas *eudaimonia* is sought for its own sake. It constitutes the highest good because it is complete, self-sufficient, and intrinsically desirable. Ethical action therefore derives its significance from its contribution to human flourishing.

The connection between rationality and flourishing is central to Aristotle's ethical framework. Since rationality is the distinctive characteristic of human beings, flourishing must involve the excellent exercise of rational capacities. Individuals achieve fulfillment when their actions reflect virtue and practical wisdom. Thus, happiness is not a passive emotional state but an active mode of living in accordance with reason.

This perspective contrasts sharply with contemporary understandings of happiness that emphasize subjective satisfaction or material achievement. Aristotle maintains that genuine flourishing requires moral excellence. A person may possess wealth, power, or pleasure yet fail to achieve *eudaimonia* if these advantages are not accompanied by virtuous conduct and rational self-governance (MacIntyre, 2007).

The findings demonstrate that moral rationality serves not only as a guide for ethical action but also as the pathway toward human flourishing. Aristotle's philosophy presents a holistic vision in which reason, virtue, and happiness are interconnected dimensions of a well-lived life. This framework remains relevant for contemporary ethical discussions seeking to connect personal development with moral responsibility.

In contemporary society, discussions of success are frequently associated with economic achievement, social status, or personal satisfaction. Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* challenges these assumptions by emphasizing moral excellence as an essential component of human fulfillment. This perspective provides an alternative framework for evaluating well-being, suggesting that sustainable happiness depends upon the harmonious development of rational, moral, and social capacities rather than the accumulation of external goods alone (Fowers, 2016; Kristjánsson, 2017; VanderWeele, 2017).

The findings demonstrate that Aristotle's ethical philosophy constitutes an integrated framework in which moral rationality, practical wisdom, virtue formation, and human flourishing are mutually reinforcing dimensions of ethical life. Moral rationality functions as the cognitive foundation that enables individuals to recognize ethical values and deliberate about appropriate actions. Practical wisdom operationalizes this rational capacity by guiding decision-making in concrete situations, while virtue formation transforms rational judgment into stable patterns of conduct through habituation and practice. The culmination of this process is *eudaimonia*, understood as a flourishing life characterized by virtuous activity in accordance with reason.

This integrated interpretation contributes to contemporary ethical discourse by clarifying the systematic relationship between moral reasoning and ethical behavior. Rather than treating moral knowledge and action as separate phenomena, Aristotle's framework demonstrates that ethical conduct emerges through the continuous interaction of rational reflection, character development, and practical judgment. Consequently, moral rationality should be understood not merely as an intellectual capacity but as a formative principle that shapes the entire process of ethical action (Han, 2022; Sanderse, 2015).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that moral rationality occupies a central position in Aristotle's ethical philosophy and serves as the foundation for the formation of ethical action. Aristotle argues that human beings are distinguished by their capacity for reason, making rational deliberation essential for identifying and pursuing morally appropriate actions. Ethical behavior, therefore, is not merely the result of external rules or social expectations but emerges from the proper exercise of reason in guiding desires, emotions, and decisions. The analysis further reveals that practical wisdom (*phronesis*) functions as the operational dimension of moral rationality. Through practical wisdom, individuals are able to evaluate concrete situations, balance competing considerations, and determine actions that reflect moral virtue. Ethical action is consequently shaped not only by knowledge of what is right but also by the ability to apply such knowledge wisely in real-life circumstances.

In addition, Aristotle emphasizes that moral excellence is achieved through the cultivation of virtuous character. Virtues are developed through habituation and continuous practice, enabling individuals to align their actions with rational principles. This integration of reason, virtue, and character highlights the dynamic relationship between moral understanding and ethical conduct. Ultimately, Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia* demonstrates that human flourishing is inseparable from rational and virtuous activity. Genuine happiness is attained not through pleasure, wealth, or external success alone, but

through a life guided by moral rationality and ethical excellence. The enduring relevance of Aristotle's thought lies in its holistic understanding of morality, offering valuable insights for contemporary discussions on character development, moral education, and ethical decision-making in modern society.

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