

## IV.1 Aristotle

PHIL101

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### Section IV: What is it worth?

#### Reading IV.1

Aristotle was the second great Ancient Greek philosopher, after Plato. He was Plato's student and later directed his own school of philosophy, the Lyceum, in Athens. His influence on Western thought has been enormous: he founded such disciplines as logic and biology and wrote the treatises in physics and metaphysics that dominated those fields until the Renaissance. Aristotle's political and moral philosophy have also been highly influential, and his theory of morality, in particular, remains one of several still studied and developed today.

Aristotle's theory of moral virtue is based on an account of human being. Since, on his view, we are organisms of a certain sort, we function in a certain way. And given our functioning, certain qualities – the virtues – will enable us to function well and thus live well.

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#### **The Highest Good**

Aristotle's first goal is to identify the primary human good. All human activity is directed towards some good or other, he observes. But some goods are greater than others, and the question arises whether there is not a chief or primary good towards which all human activity is directed. Knowledge of this good, presumably, would aid us in our pursuit of it.

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. ...

If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right?<sup>1</sup>

As it happens, for Aristotle, the central human good is in one sense not difficult to identify, though the specifics pertaining to that good are less easily known.

Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness, and identify living well and doing well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ, and the many do not give the same account as the wise. For the former think it is some plain and obvious thing, like pleasure, wealth, or honor; they differ, however, from one another – and often even the same man identifies it with different things, with health when he is ill, with wealth when he is poor.

Aristotle's term for happiness, *eudaimonia*, has a broad meaning, encompassing what we mean by saying "living well" or "the good life." '*Eudaimonia*' is sometimes translated as 'flourishing'. Thus, it means not the relatively fleeting feelings of gaiety or giddiness that we sometimes call happiness, but a more prolonged, satisfying form of being.<sup>2</sup> That this is the highest good for humans is generally agreed. But what exactly enables us to live this way is much debated, as Aristotle acknowledges. That the "popular" choices of pleasure, honor, and wealth are inadequate as routes to happiness, he argues in the following:

... To judge from the lives that men lead, most men, and men of the most vulgar type, seem (not without some ground) to identify the good, or happiness, with pleasure; which is the reason why they love the life of enjoyment. For there are, we may say, three prominent types of life – that just mentioned [i.e., the life of pleasure], the political, and thirdly the contemplative life. Now the mass of mankind are evidently quite slavish in their tastes, preferring a life suitable to beasts, but they get some ground for their view from the fact that many of those in high places share the tastes of Sardanapallus.<sup>3</sup> A consideration of the prominent types of life shows that people of superior refinement and of active disposition identify happiness with honor; for this is, roughly speaking, the end of the political life. But it seems too superficial to be what we are looking for, since it is thought to depend on those who bestow honor rather than on him who receives it, but the good we divine to be something proper to a man and not easily taken from him. Further, men seem to pursue honor in order that they may be assured of their goodness; at least it is by men of practical wisdom that they seek to be honored, and among those who know them, and on the ground of their virtue; clearly, then, according to them, at any rate, virtue is better. And perhaps one might even suppose this to be, rather than honor, the end of the political life. But even this appears somewhat incomplete; for possession of virtue seems actually compatible with being asleep, or with lifelong inactivity, and, further, with the greatest sufferings and misfortunes; but a man who was living so no one would call happy, unless he were maintaining a thesis at all costs. ... Third comes the contemplative life, which we shall consider later.

The life of money-making is one undertaken under compulsion, and wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else.

Aristotle's reasons for rejecting these candidates for the happy life are interesting and carefully considered. The good life is not simply the life of wealth, for, first of all, we seek money primarily "under compulsion" – i.e., because we must, not because we wish to. Further, Aristotle points out, wealth is not in itself a good, but rather a good only for what it brings. It is an *instrumental* rather than an *intrinsic* good. The greatest good, then, will be what Aristotle calls a *final* good, the end, as stated above, at which all acts aim.

Since there are evidently more than one end, and we choose some of these (e.g. wealth, flutes, and in general instruments) for the sake of something else, clearly not all ends are final ends; but the chief good is evidently something final. Therefore, if there is only one final end, this will be what we are seeking, and if there are more than one, the most final of these will be what we are seeking. Now we call that which is in itself worthy of pursuit more final than that which is worthy of pursuit for the sake of something else, and that which is never desirable for the sake of something else more final than the things that are desirable both in themselves and for the sake of that other thing, and therefore we call final without qualification that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else.

Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else, but honor, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that by means of them we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself.

So, if human happiness is chosen only for itself and never as a means to some higher good, then it must be a final good "without qualification." Wealth, we think, is desired solely as a means to

something else; and if so, then it cannot constitute the highest good, cannot be identical with human happiness. Honor and pleasure, too, Aristotle rejects as unqualified final goods. We distinguish them from something further that they may bring, namely, the life of happiness. Consequently, while they may be desirable in their own right, they are also desired for the sake of something else.

Aristotle identifies a second important requirement of the good life, in the above passage. Despite the fact that even the noble and privileged may pursue it, the life of pleasure Aristotle rejects as “slavish” and “suitable to beasts.” The happy life, then, it would seem, requires a measure of autonomy and dignity. The life of honor – fame and public acclaim – Aristotle rejects on the grounds that it is again lacks autonomy: fame and honor require the admiration of others, making one’s happiness conditional upon the behavior of others.<sup>4</sup> Aristotle thus appeals to a conviction that human happiness must be something that is relatively stable, a condition *in the individual*, primarily, or what Aristotle here calls *self-sufficiency*:

From the point of view of self-sufficiency the same result seems to follow; for the final good is thought to be self-sufficient. Now by self-sufficient we do not mean that which is sufficient for a man by himself, for one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and in general for his friends and fellow citizens, since man is born for citizenship. ...[T]he self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be; and further we think it most desirable of all things, without being counted as one good thing among others – if it were so counted it would clearly be made more desirable by the addition of even the least of goods; for that which is added becomes an excess of goods, and of goods the greater is always more desirable. Happiness, then, is something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action.

## **Human Being**

Having identified some of the general parameters of human happiness, and having rejected several candidates for constituting our happiness, Aristotle returns to the question of what, exactly, human happiness consists in.

Presumably, however, to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or an artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the ‘well’ is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he born without a function? Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these? What then can this be?

Aristotle’s tack is now to consider the kind of being humans are. If humans are a kind of being that behaves (“functions”) in a particular manner, then, perhaps, we can identify what human happiness is by determining what enables humans to behave *well*. Aristotle draws upon the analogy with other things that have a “function”. The flute-player, for instance, has a particular function, namely, to play the flute. And there is a relationship between this function and what we may call the “virtues” of flute-playing: given a grasp of the function of the flute-player, we can identify what enables one to play the flute well. The virtues or qualities of the flutist are qualities pertaining to how to play the flute, the flute-playing function.

What, then, is the function of a human? That is, what behaviors are characteristic of humans? What do we do, exactly, that distinguishes us from other things?

Life seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but it also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle; of this, one part has such a principle in the sense of being obedient to one, the other in the sense of possessing one and exercising thought. And, as ‘life of the rational element’ also has two meanings, we must state that life in the sense of activity is what we mean; for this seems to be the more proper sense of the term.

Humans are living things, so a basic human behavior is “the life of nutrition and growth.” This we may understand, roughly, as the human capacity for metabolic function, the conversion of matter in some form into energy. This capacity, however, we share with other forms of life, both plants and animals, so this “function” isn’t unique to humans, and thus won’t help us to identify the form of good life that is unique to us. Another general form of life is what Aristotle calls the “life of perception” – i.e., the capacity for sensation, such as taste and touch. But this form of life we share with other forms as well – specifically, with any creature with a nervous system. One form of behavior does seem to set us apart, however, according to Aristotle, and this is the “life of the rational element.” That is, the general form of behavior that is uniquely human is activity that involves the use of reason.

We share many features with other organisms, but our capacity for rational thought appears to set us apart, for Aristotle. Indeed, rational thought suffuses our activity, as we think constantly about what to do, from moment to moment, and this thought exhibits rational principle. This is not to say that all of our decisions are rational in the sense of well-chosen. And it is in precisely this respect that the concepts of human virtue and the good life become relevant. We reason about what to do; sometimes we reason poorly or not at all. What traits or habits of decision would enable us to choose well and thus to live as well as possible? These traits are what Aristotle calls the human virtues, the qualities that enable humans to function well.

Now if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle, and if we say ‘so-and-so’ and ‘a good so-and-so’ have a function which is the same in kind, e.g. a lyre, and a good lyre-player, and so without qualification in all cases, eminence in respect of goodness being added to the name of the function (for the function of a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre-player is to do so well): if this is the case, and we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete.

Consider, then, the general thrust of Aristotle’s thought, here. Humans, like other things, have a characteristic function. This function enables humans to realize a certain end. The better the functioning, the better we are able to realize this end. The qualities or features that enable us to function well Aristotle calls *virtues*. Human virtue, then, enables humans to function well and thus to achieve their proper end. This end, as Aristotle has observed, appears to be human happiness – that at which all of our activities are directed. Human virtues, then, will be those qualities that enable humans to live well.<sup>5</sup>

	<i>telos</i> (end)	<i>ergon</i> (function)	<i>eidos</i> (form)	<i>arete</i> (virtue)
hammer	the driven nail	to strike	hammer shape; hard head and shaft (varies by particular hammer)	optimal shape and composition

			kind)	
horse	good horse life; the good horse	to gallop, to graze, to mate, etc.	shape and constitution enabling galloping, grazing, etc.	optimal shape and constitution
human	good human life (“happiness” – <i>eudaimonia</i> ); the good human	reasoning, intellectual and practical (plus nutritive and animal function)	reason (etc.)	intellectual and practical (“character”) virtues

**Human Virtue**

It remains for Aristotle to identify more specifically the nature of human virtues, the qualities enabling humans to live well. He proceeds by further attention to the specific form and function of human being. Human rational activity occurs in two forms, Aristotle observes, with corresponding virtues. We have intellectual activity as such – the very reasoning of the mind, independent of its application to our behavior. And, then, we have rational activity precisely as found in our actions. The virtues of the former can be taught and learned, as for instance in a logic course; the virtues of the latter, like their vices, however, are acquired only by practice.

Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (*ethike*) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word *ethos* (habit). From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. For instance the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times; nor can fire be habituated to move downwards, nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.

Again, of all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity (this is plain in the case of the senses; for it was not by often seeing or often hearing that we got these senses, but on the contrary we had them before we used them, and did not come to have them by using them); but the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.

Again, it is from the same causes and by the same means that every virtue is both produced and destroyed, and similarly every art; for it is from playing the lyre that both good and bad lyre-players are produced. And the corresponding statement is true of builders and of all the rest; men will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly. For if this were not so, there would have been no need of a teacher, but all men would have been born good or bad at their craft. This, then, is the case with the virtues also; by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly. The same is true of appetites and feelings of anger; some men become temperate and good-tempered, others self-indulgent and irascible, by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances. Thus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities. This is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind; it is because the states of character correspond to the differences between these. It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference.

We become virtuous by practicing virtue, on Aristotle's account. Bravery results in bravery – that is, the brave act habituates one to bravery, instill in one's character the virtue, bravery. Our behavior throughout life, then, and especially in our up-bringing, is crucial to our acquiring the virtues.

Aristotle notes, too, a distinction between the brave act per se and the act that merely conforms with a standard of bravery. It is not enough simply to know what the brave choice might be, in the given situation; one must also be disposed to act bravely.

The question might be asked, what we mean by saying that we must become just by doing just acts, and temperate by doing temperate acts; for if men do just and temperate acts, they are already just and temperate, exactly as, if they do what is in accordance with the laws of grammar and of music, they are grammarians and musicians.

Or is this not true even of the arts? It is possible to do something that is in accordance with the laws of grammar, either by chance or at the suggestion of another. A man will be a grammarian, then, only when he has both done something grammatical and done it grammatically; and this means doing it in accordance with the grammatical knowledge in himself.

Again, the case of the arts and that of the virtues are not similar; for the products of the arts have their goodness in themselves, so that it is enough that they should have a certain character, but if the acts that are in accordance with the virtues have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately. The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character. These are not reckoned in as conditions of the possession of the arts, except the bare knowledge; but as a condition of the possession of the virtues knowledge has little or no weight, while the other conditions count not for a little but for everything, i.e. the very conditions which result from often doing just and temperate acts.

Actions, then, are called just and temperate when they are such as the just or the temperate man would do; but it is not the man who does these that is just and temperate, but the man who also does them as just and temperate men do them. It is well said, then, that it is by doing just acts that the just man is produced, and by doing temperate acts the temperate man; without doing these no one would have even a prospect of becoming good.

And, further, for Aristotle, the virtuous must *enjoy* their virtuous behavior.

We must take as a sign of states of character the pleasure or pain that ensues on acts; for the man who abstains from bodily pleasures and delights in this very fact is temperate, while the man who is annoyed at it is self-indulgent, and he who stands his ground against things that are terrible and delights in this or at least is not pained is brave, while the man who is pained is a coward. For moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of the pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of the pain that we abstain from noble ones. Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; for this is the right education.

Finally, Aristotle turns his attention to the specific form of the moral virtues. As a careful observer of nature, Aristotle notes that the virtues appear to have a distinctive, structural character. Where human feeling and activity are concerned, it appears that it is possible to err in either of two ways – either by feeling or doing “too much” or by feeling or doing “too little.” We find the habits conducive to good life “in between,” in what Aristotle calls the *mean* or the *intermediate*.

First, then, let us consider this, that it is the nature of such things to be destroyed by defect and excess, as we see in the case of strength and of health ...; both excessive and defective exercise destroys the strength, and similarly drink or food which is above or below a certain amount destroys the health, while that which is proportionate both produces and increases and preserves it. So too is it, then, in the case of temperance and courage and the other virtues. For the man who flies from and fears everything and does not stand his ground against anything becomes a coward, and the man who fears nothing at all but goes to meet every danger becomes rash; and similarly the man who indulges in every pleasure and abstains from none becomes self-indulgent, while the man who shuns every pleasure, as boors do, becomes in a way insensible; temperance and courage, then, are destroyed by excess and defect, and preserved by the mean.

...

If it is thus, then, that every art does its work well by looking to the intermediate and judging its works by this standard (so that we often say of good works of art that it is not possible either to take away or to add anything, implying that excess and defect destroy the goodness of works of art, while the mean preserves it; and good artists, as we say, look to this in their work), and if, further, virtue is more exact and better than any art, as nature also is, then virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate. I mean moral virtue; for it is this that is concerned with passions and actions, and in these there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue. Similarly with regard to actions also there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. Now virtue is concerned with passions and actions, in which excess is a form of failure, and so is defect, while the intermediate is praised and is a form of success; and being praised and being successful are both characteristics of virtue. Therefore virtue is a kind of mean, since, as we have seen, it aims at what is intermediate.

Note, again, that Aristotle's virtues are not the acts themselves, but the in-grown character trait to act in certain ways resulting from long habit. The virtue, courage, does not consist in any single act of facing fear, though we may call the single act courageous. Rather, courage as a virtue is the habit of facing fear that results from many instances of facing fear. And neither does courage consist in *always* or *automatically* facing fear. The virtues involve *rational thought*, so that the truly courageous will judge when fear is to be faced and when it is wise to flee. In this sense, the virtue is an intermediate between extremes of always fleeing and always facing fear.

Aristotle's account is also notable for its provision for variation among humans. The virtues are means between extremes of excess and defect, but the mean may vary from one person to the next.

In everything that is continuous and divisible it is possible to take more, less, or an equal amount, and that either in terms of the thing itself or relatively to us; and the equal is an intermediate between excess and defect. By the intermediate in the object I mean that which is equidistant from each of the extremes, which is one and the same for all men; by the intermediate relatively to us that which is neither too much nor too little – and this is not one, nor the same for all. For instance, if ten is many and two is few, six is the intermediate, taken in terms of the object; for it exceeds and is exceeded by an equal amount; this is intermediate according to arithmetical proportion. But the intermediate relatively to us is not to be taken so; if ten pounds are too much for a particular person to eat and two too little, it does not follow that the trainer will order six pounds; for this also is perhaps too much for the person who is to take it, or too little – too little for Milo, too much for the beginner in athletic exercises. The same is true of running and wrestling. Thus a master of any art avoids excess and defect, but seeks the intermediate and chooses this – the intermediate not in the object but relatively to us.

In sum, the moral virtues are for Aristotle a developed state consisting in the power of rational choice, the power to choose a rational course of action with respect to some passion or action, where the result of this choice, over time, strikes a mean between extremes of too much and too little. To be otherwise disposed, by character, is to fall into vice. Vices are simply character traits that incline us to poor decisions, decisions that strike extremes of too much or too little which result in our living less well than we otherwise might. The virtues, by contrast, provide us precisely those trained habits of choice that enable us to live well.

Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate.

One final qualification completes Aristotle's account.

But not every action nor every passion admits of a mean; for some have names that already imply badness, e.g. spite, shamelessness, envy, and in the case of actions adultery, theft, murder; for all of these and suchlike things imply by their names that they are themselves bad, and not the excesses or deficiencies of them. It is not possible, then, ever to be right with regard to them; one must always be wrong. Nor does goodness or badness with regard to such things depend on committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way, but simply to do any of them is to go wrong. It would be equally absurd, then, to expect that in unjust, cowardly, and voluptuous action there should be a mean, an excess, and a deficiency; for at that rate there would be a mean of excess and of deficiency, an excess of excess, and a deficiency of deficiency. But as there is no excess and deficiency of temperance and courage because what is intermediate is in a sense an extreme, so too of the actions we have mentioned there is no mean nor any excess and deficiency, but however they are done they are wrong; for in general there is neither a mean of excess and deficiency, nor excess and deficiency of a mean.

Again, it is possible to fail in many ways (for evil belongs to the class of the unlimited, as the Pythagoreans conjectured, and good to that of the limited), while to succeed is possible only in one way (for which reason also one is easy and the other difficult – to miss the mark easy, to hit it difficult); for these reasons also, then, excess and defect are characteristic of vice, and the mean of virtue.

For men are good in but one way, but bad in many.

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### **Ask Yourself**

1. What general characteristics must a good have if it is to be considered by Aristotle the highest human good?
2. What are the function and end of human life, exactly, for Aristotle?
3. In what respect does human activity exhibit rational principle, as Aristotle understands the matter? (Give an example or two.)
4. If happiness, or living well, is the highest human good, then in what way, exactly, does virtue contribute to that state?
5. What is the relationship between virtue and virtuous acts, for Aristotle, exactly? Why does Aristotle deny that a single act of courage may, after all, be an act of courage?
6. What does Aristotle mean by saying that a virtue is a mean between extremes?



<sup>1</sup> Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. W. Ross, trans. (Public Domain, as per <http://classics.mit.edu/Help/general.html>.)

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Aristotle asserts, the whole of one's life is relevant to judging human happiness: "For there is required, as we said, not only complete virtue but also a complete life, since many changes occur in life, and all manner of chances, and the most prosperous may fall into great misfortunes in old age, as is told of Priam in the Trojan Cycle; and one who has experienced such chances and has ended wretchedly no one calls happy." Priam was a great and wise king, in ancient Greek myth – the king of Troy. He is reputed to have been virtuous and thus to have lived well. But the end of his life saw the sack of his city, the death of his sons, and enslavement of his family, so that he cannot be said to have been a happy man.

<sup>3</sup> Sardanapallus (Sardanapalus) is another character from Ancient Greek myth, an Assyrian king famed for his licentiousness and decadent death.

<sup>4</sup> It is true that Aristotle recognizes an important role, in our happiness, of the regard and behavior of others. ... But these are not identical with the good life, but rather important parts of living well.

<sup>5</sup> Compare, for example, an Aristotelian treatment of another object, such as a hammer. Hammers have a certain function which results in a certain end – generally, their function is to pound, their end something like the driven nail. Some hammers are better than others; that is, some have what we could call "hammer virtues," which might include an optimal balance, size and shape, and material constitution. These qualities enable good hammers to realize their intended ends well.