

## The Good Life

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**Nietzsche** sees ultimate value in harnessing emotions that inspire creation and expression as in his view the greatest life is lived by acting passionately and boldly. Conversely, Aristotle seeks to temper and control emotions with reason, and relegates emotions to the 'semi-rational' or 'appetitive' faculty of the mind. So should reason be the primary legislator in ethical decision-making, or should we '[let] fall of the reins' and follow our instincts? This essay will compare and question the levels of importance that Nietzsche and Aristotle place upon the emotions, and will consider the implications of these conceptions for the good life, with regard to the value of emotions in moral judgment.

A fundamental divergence in Nietzsche and Aristotle's views is the different degrees of executive power that they afford to the emotions. Nietzsche believes that the greatest life is lived by 'following the instincts', asserting ourselves and taking bold risks, and condemns the common view that rationality 'deserves to have more authority' than our 'passions'. Aristotle, on the other hand, attributes less power to emotion, and more to reason. His establishment of the 'semi-rational' area of the mind forms a practical, viable compromise between two more radical stances: the Nietzschean endorsement of 'passions' and strong 'impulses', and Plato's relegation of all emotion to the 'irrational element of the soul'. Aristotle recognises that emotions should be expressed and present in moral thinking, but only at a suitable time and measure. Our emotions are under the jurisdiction of reason, as

our rational capacity allows us to judge ‘what is right ... in passions’, and to interpret and act appropriately on our feelings. Positioning reason to preside over emotion in this way allows for the passionate assertiveness that Nietzsche suggests, but with an essential consideration of what is appropriate and most beneficial.

Despite this central disagreement, however, both Nietzsche and Aristotle agree that we are not praised or blamed for our raw emotions, but for what type of person they turn us into. Aristotle claims that our virtue is determined by our ‘states of character’ because virtue is concerned with our deliberate choices, and in his view, we are merely ‘moved’ by our passions, and ‘feel [them] without choice’ or control over their occurrence. He gives the example of a person who feels anger. By simply feeling this emotion, or possessing the capacity to feel it, a man is not considered bad. If he then becomes ‘angry, spiteful or violent in character’, however, ‘he stands badly’ and is not virtuous. Nietzsche mirrors this idea of our character being paramount, as he does not consider the emotions as being valuable or contemptible in themselves, but only with regard to the attitudes and actions that they bring about. He denounces fear for the ‘herd timidity’ and ‘mistrust’ that it encourages, and condemns the ‘morbid mellowing’, ‘over-tenderness’, ‘gloom and sensitivity’ that are brought on by feelings of pity. The emotions play such a key role in Nietzsche’s ethic because he recognises the great influence they can have over one’s character, and he advocates expressing our strongest drives and passions with a view to cultivating ‘affirmative’, ‘bold’ ‘new philosophers’.

In evaluating the implications of these views for the good life we must start with a central question: what are the roles of the emotions and of reason in moral decision-making? We must first clarify that the emotions are not blind, unthinking impulses, but in fact have a rational or analytical core. An examination of an emotion such as fear, for instance, reveals that it involves an assessment of the possible outcomes of a situation, a consultation of previous experience and a judgment about the likelihood of harm and danger. Emotions are not, as

the Stoic philosopher Seneca claims, ‘intruding forces that hurl the self about’; they in fact have their very grounding in the act of moral judgment. Time and time again in society it is those with defective emotional capacities, not defective reason, who are considered the most morally unsound. Consider the example of serial killers, who often have superior reason and intellect, but are seen as dangerous and immoral because of their failure to feel guilt. In this light, we see the worth of the emotions, and feel that perhaps the Nietzschean man led by the harnessed power of his passions could truly live a great life. By following his emotional drives and instincts, he would not merely be buffeted by chaotic and arbitrary surges; rather, his rationally-motivated emotions would aid his judgments and reveal value to him.

Ultimately, though, Nietzsche’s conception is still not viable, as with our emotions alone we cannot know or justify things, we can only feel or perceive that they are so. Let us return to the example of fear. To fear something is to sense that it poses a danger or threat, but this fear is considered irrational or unfounded unless we can verify, empirically or reasonably, that the danger is real and impending. Therefore, our process of evaluation relies upon our capacity to reason. As Aristotle suggests, our emotions are an intrinsic part of our moral judgments, but must play a subsidiary role to rationality. When he describes reason as legislating when and to what degree it is ‘appropriate’ for emotions to be expressed, he is essentially describing this process of verification that makes a fear ‘rational’. The way in which we navigate the world around us — and indeed, live the best possible life — is dependent upon this relationship between our emotions and our reason, with the former assessing the appearance of things and the latter assenting to these appearances.

Nietzsche’s celebration of bold, powerful passions ‘that raise individuals above the herd’ has an immediate allure that Aristotle’s more ‘tame, peaceable’ dealings with emotions do not. Nonetheless, the impracticality of acting solely in accordance with instinct and emotion is undeniable. It is thus

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Aristotle's conception that holds the most worth for a good life, as he ensures that emotions play a role in our decision-making, but are ultimately controlled by reason.



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