THE GOOD
Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* with the question ‘What is the good for human beings?’ What is it that we are aiming at, that would provide a successful, fulfilling, good life?

Our different activities aim at various ‘goods’. For example, medicine aims at health; military strategy aims at victory. For any action or activity, there is a purpose (a ‘why’) for which we undertake it - its end. An analysis of the purposes for which we do things is an analysis of what we see to be ‘good’ about them. An answer to ‘Why do that?’ is an answer to ‘What’s the point?’ - and ‘the point’ is what is worthwhile about doing that.

Now, complex activities, such as medicine, have many component activities, e.g. making pharmaceuticals, making surgical implements, diagnosis, etc. Where an activity has different components like this, the overall end (health) is better - ‘more preferable’ - than the end of each subordinate activity (successful drugs, useful implements, accurate diagnoses). This is because these activities are undertaken for the sake of the overall end.

We undertake actions and activities either for the sake of something further or ‘for their own sake’. Suppose there is some end for whose sake we do everything else. Suppose that this end we desire for its own sake, not the sake of anything else. Then this end would be the good for us (Bk 1, §2).

EUDAIMONIA
People generally agree, says Aristotle, that this is ‘eudaimonia’. Before going any further with Aristotle’s argument about the good, we should take time to understand what Aristotle means by eudaimonia.

Eudaimonia is the good for a human life. It is usually translated as ‘happiness’ but Aristotle says it is ‘living well and faring well’. We have some idea of what it is when an animal or plant is living and faring well - we talk of them ‘flourishing’. A plant or animal flourishes when its needs are met in abundance and it is a good specimen of its species. Gardeners try to enable their plants to flourish, zookeepers try to enable the zoo animals to flourish. So eudaimonia is ‘the good’ or the ‘good life’ for human beings as the particular sort of being we are. To achieve it is to live as best a human being can live.

There are a number of contrasts we can draw with our usual idea of ‘happiness’.
1. We can talk of people being happy as a psychological state. But eudaimonia is not a state of mind, but relates to an activity – the activity of living. A good life is one that realises the full potential that a human life has.

2. Eudaimonia is not something subjective, but objective. To say someone is or was eudaimon is to make an objective judgement about their life as a good human life. It is not to say anything (directly) about their state of mind; nor is it a judgement the subject themselves has any special authority over. By contrast, if someone says they are happy or unhappy, it is difficult to correct them or know better.

3. Eudaimonia is not something easily changed. It does not come and go as happiness (in the usual sense) can. For it is an evaluation of a life (a life lived well) or a person (a good person) as a whole. These are very stable judgements.

If eudaimonia relates to the whole of someone’s life, then can you call someone eudaimon while they are still alive (§10)? Their life is not yet finished – something terrible may yet happen that would lead us to say that theirs was not a good life. On the other hand, it is absurd to say that they are eudaimon after they have died. We could say, once they are dead, that they were eudaimon, but then it is strange that we cannot say that they are eudaimon before they have died. We will see how Aristotle solves this puzzle once we have seen his proposal for what eudaimonia consists in.

FINAL ENDS

So, people agree that eudaimonia is the good. But they disagree on what eudaimonia is, e.g. pleasure, wealth, honour, or something else again (§§4, 5). It can’t be just pleasure per se, Aristotle argues, since people can seek animal pleasures, but we’re after the good for human beings. It can’t be wealth – money is only useful as a means to an end, it isn’t an end in itself. It can’t be honour, since to have honour, others must honour you. What is it you want to be honoured (recognised, rewarded, praised) for? Whatever the answer, having that must be what is good.

Aristotle briefly raises the suggestion that the wise person wants to be honoured for their virtues. (We’ll consider what a virtue is below.) But just having virtues, e.g. courage or intelligence, can’t be enough for a good life, for two reasons. First, you can have virtue while asleep. Such inactivity isn’t our end in life. Second, having virtue is compatible with suffering great misfortune in life. But this isn’t a good life either. So we still don’t know yet what eudaimonia is.

Given that people think pleasure, honour, or again, knowledge, are all good, is eudaimonia our only good (§7)? Call an end that we desire for its own sake a ‘final’ end. We can’t give some further purpose for why we seek it. If there is just one end for the sake of which we do everything else, that is the good. If there is more than one end, there are various final ends, each of
which is good. If pleasure, honour and knowledge are final ends, doesn’t that show that eudaimonia is not our only good?

Not yet. Some final ends we might seek both for their own sake and for the sake of something else. Everything that we pursue for its own sake - such as pleasure, knowledge, honour, and so on - we also pursue for the sake of eudaimonia. How can we pursue something both for its own sake and for the sake of eudaimonia? The solution was to distinguish between external means and constitutive means. Final ends are constitutive parts of eudaimonia. For example, we can pursue knowledge for its own sake and pursue it for the sake of living well if we understand acquiring knowledge as part of the good life. Everything we do is done for the sake of living and faring well.

By contrast, says Aristotle, we never want to live and fare well in order to achieve some other end. If there is a final end which we never seek for the sake of anything else, but only ever for its own sake, this will be a final end ‘without qualification’. This is eudaimonia.

A further reason for thinking eudaimonia is our only good is that the good should be self-sufficient, i.e. it makes life desirable on its own. Eudaimonia is the most desirable thing, and we can’t make it more desirable by adding something else to it. In fact, given what we’ve just said, to add some other goal, e.g. knowledge, to eudaimonia is just to make that other thing part of your eudaimonia. Eudaimonia is the only self-sufficient good.

EUDAIMONIA AND PHILOSOPHY
In the second half of Bk 10, Aristotle returns to the question of what eudaimonia is. First, what has already been said (§6)?

1. Eudaimonia is not a state, but an activity. You don’t live the best life by being asleep or suffering such misfortune that you can do very little.
2. It is desirable for its own sake and it is self-sufficient.
3. It involves virtuous actions, as these are desirable for their own sake (Bk 2).

Aristotle also argues that eudaimonia involves pleasure. But we shouldn’t make the mistake of thinking that the best life is one of pleasant amusements, even if this is what people with power and wealth spend time doing. People find different activities pleasant depending on their character. What is truly pleasant is what is pleasant to the good person, and this is a life of virtuous activity, not a life of mere amusement.

Aristotle divides reason into practical reason and theoretical reason (Bk 6). Virtue, which is necessary for eudaimonia, is impossible without practical reason, so practical reason is necessary for eudaimonia. But what about theoretical reason?

Theoretical reason - the contemplation of truth - is what is ‘highest’ about human beings, Aristotle argues. Animals have a form of practical wisdom, in
that they consider and act on what is best for themselves. But they do not contemplate general truths. This ability is our share in ‘divinity’. Eudaimonia, therefore, must include excellent activity of theoretical reason, which is philosophy.

1. This activity is best, because theoretical reason is the best thing in us and with it, we contemplate what is best (the greatest, most wonderful and most divine things in the universe), not merely what is best for us (as in practical wisdom).
2. We are able to undertake this activity more continuously than any other activity, so it leads to the most continuously happy life.
3. It is the most pleasant activity - at least, its pleasures are most pure and enduring, unlike pleasures of the body.
4. It is the most self-sufficient activity. Nothing further arises from it (it is knowledge for its own sake), while in other virtuous activities, we normally gain something (honour, gratitude, friendship, power, etc.) beyond doing the action. We need fewer external goods for this than for any other virtuous activity. (To be generous, you need money. To be courageous, you need power. To be temperate, you need opportunities...)
5. We are active in order to have leisure. ‘Leisure’ is undertaking those activities we wish to undertake. The virtues of politics aim at creating space for leisure, just as we only undertake war in order to achieve peace. They serve the activity of reason.
6. Finally, theoretical reason is what we most are, it is our characteristic activity.
7. Therefore, the best and most pleasant life for us, given our nature, will be a life of reason. The life of the philosopher (or more generally, a life dedicated to knowledge) will be the best life.

Aristotle concludes that we should strive to live such a life of theoretical reasoning as far as possible, to live in accordance with the best thing in us. But we are human, and require more than this. Hence the life of virtue more broadly is also part of eudaimonia, as he has argued all along. Having passions, having a body, living with others - these are all characteristically human too. Furthermore, the life of virtue doesn’t require a great deal of external goods, and so while these are necessary, they are not central.