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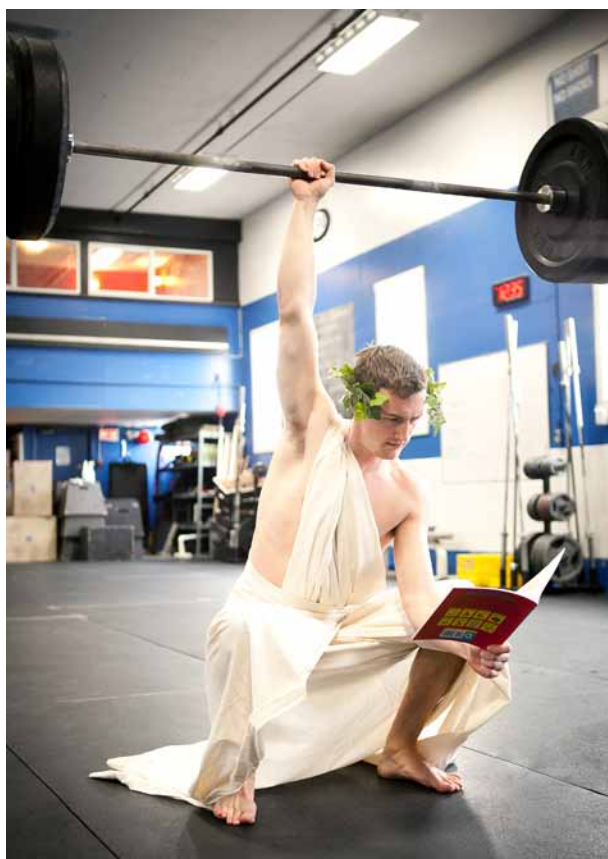
## Aristotle in a Box

Dr. Jane Drexler reflects on philosophical ideas through the lens of CrossFit. It's like Philosophy 101 with CrossFit as the frame—or perhaps CrossFit 101 with philosophy as the frame.

By Dr. Jane Drexler

February 2013

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Kim BellaVance

### CrossFit as Eudaimonia

*"Men will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly." —Aristotle*

Right around Day 12 of a 30-day nutrition challenge, I start to feel good.

The first week and a half feels like my body is on strike—"Where the hell is my sugar?"—and there are some mornings I have difficulty imagining ever feeling good again. But then, one day, that feeling of weary despair just sort of floats off; my eyes are bright, my legs have bounce, my mind is clear, and I feel on my way to a better self.

Day 12 is when I start to believe Aristotle again.

I start to believe again that the road to a good life—an excellent, happy life—requires difficult, uncomfortable steps for both mind and body. I start to believe again that the road is long but gets easier, that on the road we are helped along by our friendships, by courage and by self-love, each of which are, in turn, nourished as we take each step.

I start to believe again in a fundamental truth: each success gets imprinted on my character, and I become a little bit more "one-who-succeeds."

These are some of the key principles of Aristotle's ethics. His overall point is that when we "train"—physically, morally, intellectually—and, indeed, when we don't, we are molding not just our bodies or behaviors, but also our very characters, and in doing so, we are cultivating a core set of virtues that either enable or hinder our ability to flourish as human beings.

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I have come to see that CrossFit—all of it: its nutritional focus, mental rigor, physical pursuit, community spirit and more—manifests Aristotle's principles. CrossFit is not just a workout with a physical goal. It is also, and maybe even primarily, about cultivating a set of character traits that can enable a person to flourish in all aspects of life.

Eudaimonia means "excellence," "flourishing" and "functioning well."

In moral philosophy, there are essentially two kinds of questions. The first is "What ought I to do?" This question occupied most philosophers' attentions through Medieval and Enlightenment philosophy. For instance, St. Augustine and Immanuel Kant focused on coming up with moral rules to follow, and they emphasized the moral duty to obey those rules. The source of the rules differed, of course—God or Universal Reason—but nevertheless, to be "good" meant to adhere to a set of moral rules.

Aristotle, on the other hand, didn't care about that question too much. He asked a different one all together: "What kind of person ought I be?"

His was a question of character. He insisted that "rules" could not be given for how one ought to be because the moral question was always about whether or not people were flourishing, and flourishing looks different—in its particulars—on different people. Thus, there can be no moral cookie cutter dictating right action.

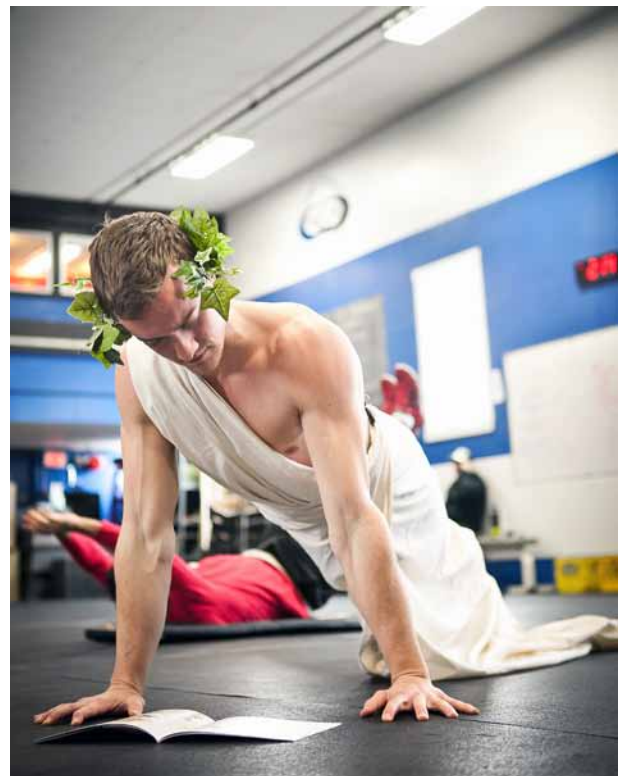
Flourishing means the capacity of a being to be its best self, to thrive, to vibrantly inhabit the world. This definition underlies Aristotle's central concept of eudaimonia, an

ancient Greek word. What eudaimonia really means is "functioning well." Excellence means "to function well." Happiness means "to function well." And "to be good"—and that's not just descriptively good, but also morally good—means to be "functioning well."

In carpentry, it is having a good eye for proportion and hand-eye coordination. In violin playing, it means sense of timing, tone and musicality, and so forth. And we might imagine then that in CrossFit, eudaimonia is achieved by "functioning well across broad time and modal domains." Take a second to enjoy how Aristotelian the very definition of CrossFit is.

But in addition to the eudaimonia of particular social locations and activities, Aristotle was primarily interested in the eudaimonia of being human.

What did it mean to "function well" as a human being? In answering that question, Aristotle found that there were some character traits, or virtues, essential to human flourishing, such as courage, perseverance, friendship, self-love and others.



Kim Bellavance

***To hand-release or not to hand-release? That is the question.***

Jane Drexler



***It's so much more than working out. CrossFit teaches perseverance, courage, confidence and friendship.***

One can easily imagine the explanation: One cannot be one's best self, thrive and vibrantly inhabit the world if one lacks the courage to move forward, the perseverance to push through difficulties, the friends who support one's endeavors, or the self-love to find oneself worth the effort.

CrossFit cultivates all these virtues:

1. We practice perseverance whenever we reach that pinnacle moment in a workout, described by Todd Widman in one of the first *CrossFit Journal* videos I ever saw: "(You see) the face go pale from lack of oxygen and start to turn blue and purple, and you see that wild-eyed kind of look, like 'I can't do this anymore,' and yet they push through" ([Portrait of a Flowmaster: The Conclusion Part 1](#), Feb. 18, 2010).
2. We practice courage every time we walk in the next day to face challenges again. As Neil Amonson put it last year in the *CrossFit Journal* feature [Muscle-Ups at 10,000 Feet](#), our workouts "are scary in their own way. It's not like scared you're gonna die, but just scared that you're gonna not meet your own expectations." Aristotle holds that courage is not just a soldier's concept, and it's not just about life and death. Instead, at its heart, courage applies in any situation when you are faced with a choice or action for which you cannot see the end result. That action can be running into a burning building or onto the front lines, yes. But it can also be asking someone out on a date, deciding whether to apply for a job or go back to school, expressing your view, or taking on a CrossFit challenge. All are examples of courage.

3. We practice self-love. We get up at 4:30 a.m. to head to the gym, or we suit up after a long day of work. We honor ourselves when we take a recovery day. Every time we finish a workout, we practice self-achievement. And when we abstain from sugars and grains, we enact the view that our sense of achievement and growth is more valuable than our desire for brownies.
4. We practice friendship, belonging and community. We come from so many different social locations—soldiers, mothers, lawyers, doctors, athletes, firefighters, teachers—but we all come together a few times a week to experience the energy of community. Amonson said it well: "Maybe that's what it is about the CrossFit community that's so incredible: we all share this experience, which is emotional. It doesn't look emotional. It looks like people working out. But it's emotional. It's raw. It's intense."

Aristotle is perhaps best known for this line: "Man is by nature a social animal." We need each other to flourish, on a practical level and on a spiritual one. Aristotle described many kinds of friendship, but true friendship for him was manifested in those relationships where each person actively sought to help the other to flourish as well. This was not a "yes friend" then. It meant being willing to critique, to help one's friend see a clearer path toward his goals, to help him get back on track when drifting. True friendship for Aristotle was not always fun or easy, though, of course, it sometimes could be.

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Aristotle's description of friendship is reflected in many relationships I see in CrossFit—when I see friends discussing recipes or helping to correct the depth of a squat, when I see competitions (or just the daily WOD) where the fellow competitors cheer for the successes of each other.

And I see that level of friendship in the harder times, when deaths occur or when folks' lives are altered. I see it too in CrossFit's enduring commitment to the flourishing of those whose opportunities are limited. CrossFit's efforts in Africa are but one example of the way CrossFit athletes help others, and there are thousands of such examples in affiliates around the world. As we play a role in the flourishing of others, we participate in our own flourishing.

In short, CrossFit has the capacity to help us cultivate the Aristotelian character traits so crucial to our endeavors to be fully human.

### Becoming by Doing

Aristotle started from a basic premise: no one is born virtuous or viceful. No one is born good or bad. Rather, we become virtuous (or viceful) through what we do.

We have a phrase today that basically captures Aristotle's point: "Fake it till you make it."

Aristotle said it this way in his *Nicomachean Ethics*: "By being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly. ... Thus, in a word, states of character arise out of like activities."

To become a good builder, you must build. To become a good runner, you must run. To become a good violinist, you must practice the violin.

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**Every time I say yes to  
a workout, I am choosing  
to re-create who I am.**

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As CrossFit athletes, we are all Aristotelian on this point. To become good at the clean and jerk, we carefully practice that lift. To correct a weakness, we work that weakness. Further, we recognize the importance of starting early and thus build CrossFit Kids programming into our boxes throughout the world.

Incidentally, Aristotle would have loved CrossFit Kids. It's all about practicing in order to become: to become fit, active, disciplined, adventurous, ambitious, courageous, supportive, self-assured, etc., CrossFit Kids wholly manifest Aristotle's point: "It makes no small difference, then,

whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference."

Simply put, we become what we do. If we practice virtues that enable our flourishing, we will become beings that can flourish. If we don't, then we can't.

For example, if we grow up never practicing cleaning our rooms, it would be exceptionally difficult to be tidy as an adult. Similarly, if we haven't exercised in a long time, it is exceptionally difficult to start exercising. But when we have cultivated the habit of exercising, it is often very difficult not to do it.

Another way of thinking about it—and I think this is a lovely, inspiring thought—is this: we never simply decide once and for all, "Hey, I'm gonna be a runner." Or "I'm going to be a bad-ass CrossFit athlete." Rather, becoming that person is a choice that we make over and over and over again by saying, each day, "I will run" or "I will do CrossFit," then saying it every week, every month, every year. We never finish choosing.



Courtesy of Jane Drexler

**The author (right) believes, as Aristotle did,  
that we become something by doing it.**

Jane Drexler



***Is finishing the workout with ripped hands worth ruining the next five days of CrossFit? There's a fine line between courage and poor judgment.***

To me, that's a powerful thought. Every time I say yes to a workout, I am choosing to re-create who I am. I am choosing to move myself forward toward flourishing.

And, as a bonus, I am strengthening a habit.

The good news for Aristotle is that the choice becomes easier the more you cultivate a habit. Habits are like inertia: they help keep you moving when you're already in motion, and they help keep you stagnant when you're sitting still.

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**Aristotle taught us that there are excesses and deficiencies of each of the virtues—too much or too little of a good thing can easily slip into a vice.**

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As he reflected on the importance of habit—and the internalization of the virtues (or vices) through habit-formation—Aristotle distinguished between three types of personalities. The weak-willed personality is the person who desires those behaviors or things that will hinder his or her flourishing. These people want to eat the Twinkie. And, because they lack the will to fight that desire, they eat the Twinkie.

The continent personality is the person who desires the Twinkie—desires the thing that is bad for him/her—but has the power to control that desire and does not eat the Twinkie. He or she wants the Twinkie but eats the salad.

For Aristotle, the person who has desires “rightly ordered” is the temperate person. He or she does not want the thing that will hinder flourishing. These people have cultivated their desires to be in line with their flourishing. They want the salad—and that's what they eat.

We all know people who are one of the first two types at times. We, ourselves, fit into these categories. I, personally, am often continent or weak-willed. In fact, right now, I really, really want a cookie (and a cocktail—which I would argue is not necessarily bad for one's flourishing, dammit).

But, Aristotle's point here is essential: the more we cultivate good practices through habit formation, the more we internalize the virtues informing them, the more we want to perform those virtuous actions, the easier it becomes to choose those virtuous actions, the more we cultivate the habit. And repeat.

### **The Golden Mean**

We also know we're not always completely in the sweet spot of those virtuous practices that enable our flourishing. Aristotle taught us that there are excesses and deficiencies of each of the virtues—too much or too little of a good thing can easily slip into a vice.

Consider the virtue of courage. Yes, we came back again to push ourselves and dig deep in that next WOD. That's courageous, right? But to have the character trait of courage, one must have good judgment regarding three things: one's abilities, the risk of the endeavor and the value of the goal. Bad assessment of any of these three and you become reckless or cowardly.

It's probably easy to remember those times when we've slipped into recklessness: pushing through to ripped hands on the morning WOD's 100 pull-ups for time. When I do that, I have overestimated the value of the goal that day: the 100 pull-ups become all I can myopically see, obscuring my overall goals, which I dare say include being able to hold onto anything for the next five days, including the barbell that might indeed help me continue to flourish. Of course, I am not talking here about, say, the CrossFit Games, where you might very well judge the ripped hands to be worth it, in which case you've accurately assessed the value of the goal.

We fail to reach that Golden Mean between excess and deficiency all the time. We become resentful when we performed less well than we wanted. We become jealous of others and über-critical (of range of motion, most often). We push through on injuries that we should be nursing. These are not acts of self-love: here, we practice egotism (excess of self-love) or self-loathing (deficiency of it).

### Eudaimonia as Scalability

Knowing which actions would fall under excess, deficiency or mean depends on the person, and Aristotle was adamant that courage and other virtues require good judgment. By way of analogy, he put it this way: "If 10 lb. are too much for a particular person to eat and 2 too little, it does not follow that the trainer will order 6 lb., 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."

This is his whole this-is-not-a-rulebook philosophy. It is a set of guidelines toward which one must apply sound reasoning and self-discipline in order to flourish.

Take, for example, the question of whether or not you should move up to the RX weight. One person might be underestimating his abilities, never believing himself capable of moving forward and thus undermining his efforts of self-love and practicing cowardliness. But another may be soundly reasoning that she is not ready to move up in weight, and doing so would be rash and ego-driven. Sometimes we allow someone else to define for us where we are at and do not trust our own judgment. Other times, we let our fear or hubris clog our ears to sound judgment from our trainers.

So, no, we're not perfect on hitting that Golden Mean every time.

And for Aristotle, there is no way around it. Simply put, we have to be wise. We have to be thoughtful and willing to make choices. We have to be able to trust ourselves and be willing to know ourselves.

None of those are easy things. But they are essential for our ability to flourish.



Courtesy of Jane Drexler

### About the Author

*Jane Drexler is an associate professor of philosophy at Salt Lake Community College and holds a Level 1 CrossFit Certificate. She has published essays in several books and professional journals, primarily on political theory and ethics. At 43, her Fran time is an awesomely average 7 minutes, and her clean-and-jerk max hovers around 135 lb.*