

PHI 1500: Major Issues in Philosophy

Session 20

November 16th, 2015



Ethics: Aristotle

Aristotle (384-322 BCE): ancient Greek philosopher and polymath (jack of all trades)

- Student of Plato (who was a student of Socrates)
- Father of the formal study of logic and the Peripatetic school of philosophy



***ethics* = the study of human behavior**

- *descriptive ethics* = the study of people's beliefs about what are the right & wrong ways of behaving
- ***normative ethics* = the formulation of principles about how people *should* behave** (*our focus in this class*)

Nicomachean Ethics describes Aristotle's ***virtue ethics***,

» which encourages us to develop good moral character: i.e, to become the kind of person who acts virtuously.

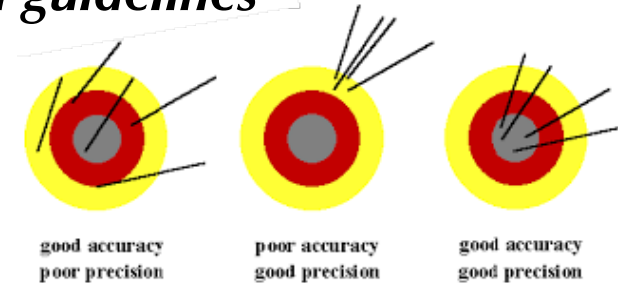
- In contrast, other systems of ethics (e.g., utilitarianism & deontology) say that good actions are those that follow hard-and-fast ethical rules/principles.



Aristotle begins by stating that since human action is complex & situationally-dependent,

➤ **we should only expect to be able to develop *rough guidelines* for how to act rightly – *not* rigid laws.**

- “Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of,
- for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions...



– Now noble and just actions, which political science [the study of human behavior] investigates, exhibit much variety & fluctuation...

- ...**We must be content**, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises **to indicate the truth roughly and in outline**,
- ...**speaking about things which are only for the most part true**, and with premises of the same kind, to reach conclusions that are no better.”

➤ He believes that **we cannot make any universal statements about the right way to act**: we can only say what will be right most of the time, in most circumstances.

– “In the same spirit, therefore, should each type of statement be received;
» for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits.” (1.3)

To understand Aristotle's ethics,

- we must understand his **teleological approach** to explaining how people, animals, and objects behave.

» **telos** (Greek) = end, aim, final purpose, ultimate goal

– Aristotle believes that that **anything which undergoes change throughout its existence is developing toward its telos:**

- **it is trying to to become what it is supposed to be.**

» E.g., an acorn develops to become a glorious oak tree.

» a caterpillar develops to become a butterfly.



He thinks **human action must have a telos, too,**

➤ so the first step in determining the *best* way to act (the aim of ethics) is to determine what the *telos* of human actions is.

➤ *The best way to act will be whatever is most effective at achieving this final objective of our actions.*

➤ Aristotle identifies “the good” as the *telos* of all human action.

- “Every art & every inquiry, and similarly every action & choice, 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.” (I.1)

Aristotle wants to know “*the highest of all goods achievable by action*” (I.4),

➤ since **the best way for humans to act must aim at achieving the highest good.**

- He reasons that
 - “If...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),
 - » ...clearly **this must be...the chief good.**”



He asks (rhetorically):

- “Will not the knowledge of [the highest good], 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?*” (I.2)

He notes that *if you ask people what one thing they desire just for its own sake, and not for anything else,*

- they will all say **this highest good** is *happiness*.

➤ Aristotle confirms that this common-sense answer is in fact *correct*:

- “...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**.

- ...**honor, pleasure, reason**, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves...but **we choose them also for the sake of happiness**, judging that through 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. . . .**

» Happiness, then, is something *final* and *self-sufficient*,
» and is **the end [goal] of action.**” (1.7)

However, *though everyone agrees that happiness is the highest good,*

- ***different people have different ideas of what happiness is:***

- » “the many” – i.e., ordinary, uneducated people –
“do not give the same account as the wise.” (1.4)

- “To judge [what happiness is] 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”

- » – a *hedonistic* life directed towards maximizing pleasure (1.5)

- Meanwhile, “**people of superior refinement** and of active disposition **identify happiness with *honor***,”

- » **But** since “men seem to pursue honor in order that they may be assured of their merit...on the ground of their virtue;

- » clearly, then, **according to them...virtue is better.**” (1.5)

- Aristotle reasons that educated people actually value *virtue* above honor, because they only want honor in recognition of their virtues.



So, *who's right about what happiness really is?*

- Aristotle answers this question by appealing to **the *telos* of human existence**: the function or purpose our lives serve.
 - “For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or any artist, and...**for all things that have a function or activity, the good...is thought to reside in the function** so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function.

- **“What then can this [function of human life] be?”**

- He rules out some potential functions that are not specific to humans, but instead shared with other beings:

- “Life seems to belong even to plants, but we are seeking what is [unique] 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 shared even by the horse, the ox, and every animal.

- The only potential function left, which is unique to humans, is “an active life of the element [of man] that has *reason*,” i.e. the part of our minds which enables thought.

» “...***the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies reason.***”



“Now if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies reason,

- [then] **the function of a good man [must] be the good & noble performance of these”** activities of reason.

- “...and if any action is *well-performed* when it is *performed in accordance with the appropriate virtue...*”

- [since for activity x,
virtue = the most excellent way of doing x]

- “...[then **happiness**] **turns out to be activity of soul exhibiting virtue,**

- and if there are more than one virtue,
- **human good is activity of the soul in accordance with the best and most complete [virtues].**

- But we must add ‘in a complete life’ ...one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed & happy.” (1.7)

- » This is because ***happiness isn’t a feeling: it’s a state of living excellently.***



According to Aristotle,

- **Every human action has a virtue: a way that it can be done best.**
 - But whereas *intellectual virtues* (e.g., thoughtful philosophical reasoning, good math skills) *must be taught*,
 - **“moral virtue comes about as a result of habit”** (II.1)
 - We cannot just be taught how to behave morally in the best way;
 - » we only become truly moral by repeatedly doing moral acts.

He explains that “none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature”:

- **we are *not* born virtuous, but we *have to become virtuous* through our actions.**



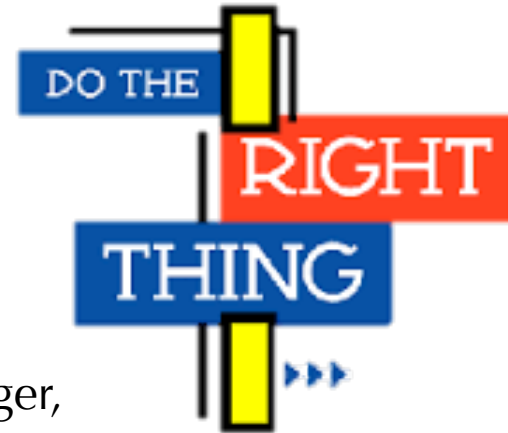
- ...[T]he virtues we get by first *exercising* them, as also happens in the case of the arts”:
 - just as “men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre;
 - so too **we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.**
- ...This is confirmed by what happens in states; for legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them” (II.1)

According to Aristotle, **doing the right thing is a practical skill,**

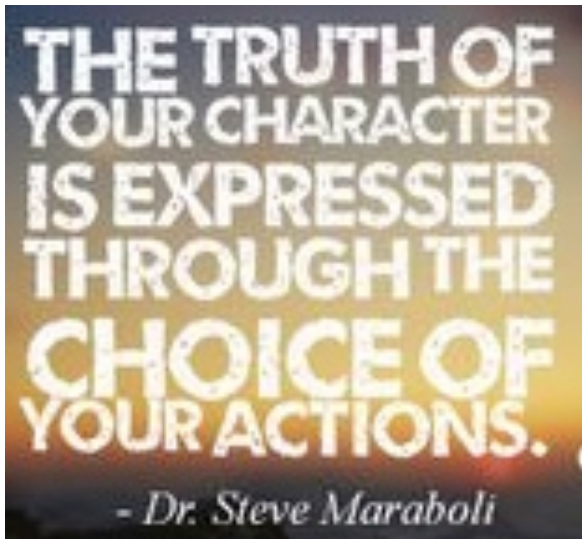
- *which becomes a habit if we do it consistently enough.*

Every interaction with other people is a chance to hone our skill of acting virtuously.

- “...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 by 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 & good-tempered, others self-indulgent & irascible, by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances.” (II.1)
- *So, it's not enough just to have good intentions, or to understand what you ought to do,*
 - **We become morally virtuous only by *actually doing what is right* when opportunity arises.**



You are
what you do
not what
you say
you'll do.



- **Our *actions* determine our *moral character*.**
 - “This is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind;
 - it is because the **states of character** [e.g., generosity and selfishness] **correspond to the differences between acting generously & acting selfishly.**



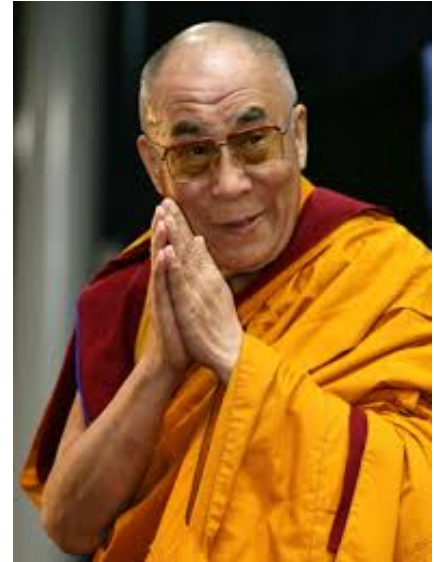
- So, it is **very important “whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth.”** (II.1)
 - It is easy to do the right thing if we are encouraged to do so when we are children.
 - It is much harder to learn to do the right thing later in life,
 - because that requires changing our habits.

Moreover, Aristotle thinks that **to be *truly* virtuous,**

- **it isn't even enough to do the right thing –**
 - ***you also have to enjoy it*** (& *not* enjoy doing wrong).
- “We must take as a **sign of states of character** the ***pleasure or pain that [result from] 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 & delights in this or at least is not pained is brave,
 - while the man who is pained is a coward.

He concludes that:

- ***[someone with] virtue tends to do what is best with regard to pleasures and pains,***
- ***and [someone with] vice does the contrary.”*** (II.3)



Since virtue has to do with regulating our pleasure & pain,

- Aristotle thinks this is **even more reason for our moral education to begin at an early age.**

- We must learn early in life to take pleasure in doing good things (like being helpful, giving to charity, persevering through challenges),
- and find it painful to do wrong.

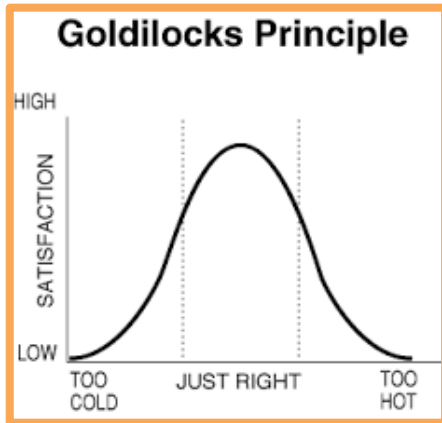
- He notes that **our habits with respect to pain & pleasure “have grown up with us all from our infancy; – this is why it is difficult to rub off this passion, engrained as it is in our life.”** (II.3)

- » In other words, it’s hard to train yourself out of enjoying something bad or disliking doing good.
- » It’s best that we learn to enjoy the good and dislike the bad from the start.

- **“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; *this is the right education.*”**

Aristotle suggests that

- **virtuous actions are those that represent *the golden mean* (the average, midpoint) between two extremes: an excess (too much) & a *deficiency* (too little).**



– He draws this conclusion by noting that **most things that are good for us are best in moderation:**

- E.g., “drink or food which is above or below a certain amount destroys the health,
- while that which is proportionate [to our needs] produces and increases and preserves it.”

» Too much or too little food is bad:
an intermediate amount is good for you.

- **“So too is it, then, in the case of temperance & courage and the other virtues...**

– temperance and courage, then, are destroyed by excess and defect, and preserved by the mean.”



Every moral virtue is an intermediate between extremes.

➤ **Courage** is the intermediate between *fearing everything* & *fearing nothing*:

- "...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,
 - ...[but] **by being habituated to despise things that are fearful and to stand our ground against them we become brave,**
 - » and it is when we have become so that we shall be most able to stand our ground against them."



➤ **Temperance** is the intermediate between *enjoying too much pleasure* and *not enjoying enough pleasure*.

- "...the man who indulges in every pleasure and abstains from none becomes self-indulgent,
- while the man who shuns every pleasure...becomes in a way insensible"
 - **[but] by abstaining from [most, but not all] pleasures we become temperate,**
 - » and it is when we have become so that we are most able to abstain from them" (II.2)

everything
in moderation
including
moderation!

Aristotle's "Golden Mean" Philosophy

The middle between two extremes



Animal Abuse
Animal Cruelty
Animal Negligence

Animal Welfare

Animal Radicals
Animal Liberation
Animal Rights Extremism

According to Aristotle,

- **doing the right thing is like *sailing the middle path between two evils.***
 - ...like Odysseus steering his ship between Scylla (a whirlpool) and Charybdis (a multi-headed monster) in Homer's *The Odyssey*



Aristotle's Concept of the Golden Mean

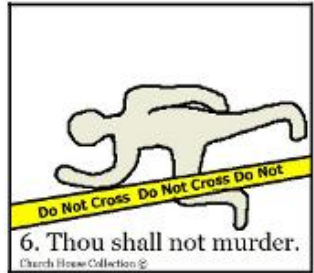
Deficiency (-)	BALANCE	Excess (+)
cowardice	COURAGE	rashness
stinginess/miserliness	GENEROSITY	extravagance
sloth	AMBITION	greed
humility	MODESTY	pride
secrecy	HONESTY	loquacity
moroseness	GOOD HUMOR	absurdity
quarrelsomeness	FRIENDSHIP	flattery
self-indulgence	TEMPERANCE	insensibility
apathy	COMPOSURE	irritability
indecisiveness	SELF CONTROL	impulsiveness

Everything in the middle column is a **virtue**, while both the Excesses & Deficiencies are **vices**.

- *Do you agree with his list?*
- *Can you give examples of people (real or fictional) who embody Aristotle's virtues or vices?*
- *Can you think of any counterexamples – i.e., people who seem virtuous despite exhibiting what Aristotle thinks are vices?*

Aristotle thinks there aren't hard-and-fast rules which tell us the right way to act in a certain situation.

➤ ...but **there are certain things he is sure are *never* right.**



- “not every action nor every passion admits of a mean;
 - ... **some actions 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 such like 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” [in doing any of these]. (II.6)**



- E.g., there is no such thing as “committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way,
 - but simply to do [commit adultery at all] is to go wrong.”

This complicates his ethical account:

- **Along with following the guideline to always aim for the mean,**
- **you must also know & follow *some rules* like “murder is always wrong”.**

Acting ethically always requires care & discretion, and isn't always easy.



- » “to what point and **to what extent a man must deviate [from the mean] before he becomes blameworthy it is not easy to determine by reasoning,**
- » any more than anything else that is perceived by the senses;
 - such things depend on particular facts, and **the decision rests with perception” of the situation (II.9)**

- Ethical decision-making gets easier if we establish a habit of *aiming at* the mean.
 - Even so, we ought to expect that **we will occasionally err on the side of excess or deficiency:**
 - “the intermediate state is in all things to be praised,
 - but...we must incline sometimes towards the excess, sometimes towards the deficiency;
 - for so shall we most easily hit the intermediate and what is right.”
- So on Aristotle’s account, **you don’t have to do the right thing every time in order to be a virtuous person.**
 - **You just have to aim to behave virtuously as often as possible.**

Summary of Aristotle's **virtue ethics**:

- **We can only determine general guidelines for right & wrong actions – not inviolable rules.**
 - (with just a few exceptions...)

- **Moral virtues are excellent states of character, which we develop by doing the best action in each situation.**
 - A virtuous person is *disposed* to act rightly *by habit*.
 - The best way to act is generally the *intermediate between extremes*.
 - Moral virtue also requires taking *pleasure in doing the right thing*, and being pained by wrongdoing.
 - That's why it's important for *moral education* to begin while we're very young.

- ***Happiness = acting virtuously:***
 - living up to our highest potential as human beings by acting the most excellent way in every situation.

