



## Lecture 6: Aristotle's Virtue Ethics



### What makes us Human?

In Aristotle's ontology, all things, or Substances, have both Form and Matter. The Form is what makes something essentially the kind of thing that it is. X is a Chair. X is a Horse. What is, then, the Form of Human? What makes us essentially human?

We saw in Plato that we should try to be like our Form: the more we resemble the perfect, ideal Form, the better we are as Humans. Aristotle did not believe in separately existing non-material Forms, but he did believe that our human Form gives us a potential to fulfil. For Aristotle, Form is about *function*.

To be a virtuous human, we should fulfil our function as Humans. But what is this function? In order to see this, we must look at what it is that distinguishes humans from all other things.

### 3 types of souls

Aristotle thought that all living things have a soul (ANIMA). This is because the soul is what gives life to things. Without a soul, there is only a material object, like an eye without vision. The *type of soul* defines one's *essence*. There are 3 kinds of soul, going from the lower primitive level to the higher one:

The Vegetative Soul: the ability of self-nutrition and growth. This is the soul of plants.

The Sensitive Soul: the ability of movement and sensations, in addition to self-nutrition and growth. Animals have this soul.

The Rational Soul: the ability of thought and deliberation, in addition to movement, sensation, self-nutrition and growth. Humans have this soul.

There can be a conflict between the rational part of the soul and the irrational ones. Unlike Plato, who said that to *know* what is right is to *do* what is right, Aristotle thought that one can know what is right to do, but still not do it. This is because the rational soul is not always in charge of the irrational part. One can have *weakness of will* (AKRASIA = lack of mastery).

### Form and TELOS

The type of soul gives us different types of potentials and TELOS. As humans, we have a number of abilities, capacities or causal powers to actualise. What is unique for the human Form is that we have a rational capacity for knowledge, reasoning and truth. This is a main function of being human.

When the rational soul is in control of the irrational soul, we can become virtuous. According to Aristotle, we are not born with virtue and our souls are not already good. But we carry within us the *potential* for good and for virtue. It takes lots of hard work and practice to realise this potential.

Aristotle thought that all things have a TELOS; the final cause or aim for development. Knowledge is an aim of Humans but not the only one. We have different types of potentials to fulfil, since the human soul includes many abilities: political, moral, intellectual, personal and biological.

### Happiness as the Human TELOS

The ultimate aim (TELOS) of Human life is Happiness. Happiness, unlike money and wealth, is an ultimate aim because it is not "for" anything else. Everything we do, we do to be happy.

Happiness has *intrinsic value*. Money only has *extrinsic*, or *instrumental value*. We want it for what we can get with it.

### Happiness = living a life of virtue

Aristotle thought that Happiness (EUDAIMONIA) comes from living the good life. This is not primarily a life of pleasure, but of virtue (ARETE). We become happy when we fulfil our potential in a virtuous way. But we need both intellectual and moral virtues. We must also actualise potentials of our rational soul.

To be a good and virtuous person, it is not enough to be so now and then. The good actions should come spontaneously. Morality should be an integrated part of us, so that we make good choices and act morally. How does this happen?

Aristotle thought that the only way to become virtuous is to act virtuous: *To become good, we must do good acts*. Moral goodness is a result of habit and takes a lot of practice.

In Aristotle's virtue ethics, there are no universal principles or rules to live by. Instead, we need good moral role models. When thinking about how to act, we could ask ourselves: what would this person do? This would give us a guide for how to act.

### Virtue is the Golden Mean between two vices

Aristotle thought that moral virtues were found in the middle of two extremes: The Golden Mean. If one has too much of a virtue it becomes a vice, and the same if one has too little, it becomes a different vice. A brave person is a virtuous one, but if one is too brave, one becomes reckless, which is a vice. To be not brave enough is to be coward, which is also a vice.

People are different and we have different strengths and virtues. But some are more important than others. Like Plato, Aristotle thought of Wisdom, Courage, Self-control and Justice as cardinal virtues. In addition, he discusses virtues such as Generosity, Mildness, Friendship, Wittiness and Modesty.

### PHRONESIS – we need practical judgement

Essential for Aristotle's ethics is practical wisdom, or judgement (PHRONESIS). A virtue cannot be universally defined, but must always be considered within a particular situation.

For instance, honesty is a virtue, but what is the right amount of honesty will depend on the situation, the person and the context. Too much honesty can be a vice, but what counts as too much in this situation is something we must judge for ourselves. PHRONESIS then becomes crucial.

### Politics

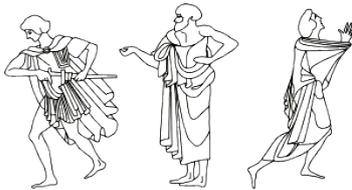
Plato's ideal state was an attempt to develop a state that would help its citizens to become good and virtuous. While Aristotle did not think the ideal state was the best to do this, he agreed with Plato that the state is important for people's moral lives.

A good state ought to be stable and help us live good lives. The state exists for the sake of a good life, and for us to fulfil our moral and intellectual potential. He included political activity in a virtuous life. Humans are social and 'political animals', or ZOON POLITIKON. The opposite is to be an IDIOS or idiot, someone who is not interested in politics (a 'private' citizen).

**Discussion questions**

- What is a virtue, according to Aristotle?
- What is the Golden mean?
- How did Aristotle think that we become good people?
- What makes humans different from animals and plants?
- What is a good way of living, according to Aristotle?
- Aristotle's ethics is a virtue ethics. A major focus is on character traits. Which traits would you emphasise for a morally good person?*
- Do you see any similarities between the virtue ethics of Plato and Aristotle? Which version do you prefer?*

**Virtues are the Golden Mean between two vices:**



VICE (DEFECT)	VIRTUE (GOLDEN MEAN)	VICE (EXCESS)
Apathy	Concern	Fanaticism
Vulgarity	Decency	Prudishness
Starvation	Sufficiency	Greediness
Cynicism	Faith	Gullibility
Dispassion	Love	Sentimentality
Uniformity	Individuality	Eccentricity
Slavery	Freedom	Anarchy
Chaos	Order	Oppression

**Virtue Ethical Theory Summary**

- Virtue Ethics is an ethic approach emphasizing the **virtues, or moral character** of persons
- Virtue Ethic Theory is different than the duty approach that emphasizes duties or rules and
- Virtue Ethics is different from all theories that emphasize consequences (results) of actions.

**Aristotle's Classification of Government**

	Public Interest	Selfish Interest
<b>The One</b>	Monarchy	Tyranny
<b>The Few</b>	Aristocracy	Oligarchy
<b>The Many</b>	Constitutional Democracy	Democracy

'The Golden mean' would be Aristocracy: not ruled by too few or too many, and for public rather than selfish interest.

Hipparchia of Maronea (lived c. 330 BCE)



Chose to marry Crates (an act which gave her the freedom to choose the Cynic lifestyle).

Cynics considered that EUDAIMONIA (happiness) came from living a virtuous life. For Cynics this meant a life in "accordance with nature", and therefore defined by poverty, self-sufficiency, freedom (of speech/behaviour), and reason. It was a life of physical hardship.

Hipparchia was known for her excellent rhetorical skills. She participated in symposia (which was usually reserved for men).

Hipparchia influenced Stoicism (along with Crates).

*Diogenes of Sinope is one of the best-known Cynics, famous for (briefly) living in a barrel, and considered by Plato to be "a Socrates gone mad". His "madness" was his embodiment of the Cynic value of using reason, and ignoring absurd societal conventions.*

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<https://www.politicalscienceview.com/classifications-of-government>



Calvin's dad is a virtue ethicist. But is this how we usually think of happiness?