

Aristotle and the Question of Virtue: Why Bother Being Good?

Chapter 1

Learning Objectives

- After reading this chapter, you will be able to:
 - 1.1 Analyze virtue and define its role in making moral decisions.
 - 1.2 Examine virtue ethics after Aristotle and apply it to today's issues.
 - 1.3 Discuss Elizabeth Anscombe's philosophy and the concepts of "right" and "wrong."
 - 1.4 Critically analyze Ayn Rand's praise of selfishness and compare it to Aristotle's ethics.

What Is Virtue?

- So what is **virtue**?
 - Aristotle defines virtue as a midpoint between two extremes or vices, those of excess and deficiency.
 - For example, a generous person is neither cheap nor extravagant. A courageous soldier is neither reckless nor cowardly.

Ethics

- Ethics is the branch of philosophy that studies questions about right and good.
- Moral theories provide a framework for answering such questions and for evaluating human action.

Are There Ethical Facts

- It is a fact that the Rocky Mountains are located in North America?
- Are there similar sorts of facts in ethics?
- If so, why do so many people disagree about what is right and wrong?

Amoralist

- There is no right or wrong.
- There is no ethics.

Ethical Skepticism

- This view claims that moral knowledge is not possible.
- **Strong view:** This view claims that we cannot, as rational human beings, determine what is objectively right or wrong.
- There may be a truth, but we can't know it.
- **Weak:** we cannot figure it out in some cases.

Relativism

- Species Relativism
- Descriptive Relativism
- Cultural Relativism
- Religious Relativism
- Individual Relativism (subjectivism)

Species Relativism

- This view claims that ethics is relative to our species or relative to humanity as a whole.
- There is one ethical truth for all humans even if we disagree.

Descriptive Relativism

- Descriptive Relativism says that as a matter of empirical fact, different cultures have different beliefs about what is morally right and what is morally wrong.
- This seems to be true. In other words, different societies have different moral standards. (But those standards might be wrong)

Cultural Relativism

- This view claims that ethics is determined by each culture. What is right and wrong ought to be determined by culture.
- All moral standards that are endorsed by a culture are true. This leads to relativism as different cultures believe different things to be moral.

Religious Relativism

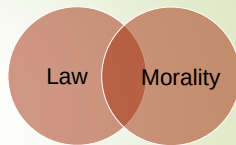
- Morality is determined by God or religion.
- This view is what many people subscribe to; however with more than 10,000 different religions, which one is the right one?
- This leads to relativism as different religions believe different things to be moral.

Individual Relativism (Subjectivism)

- This view claims that each person ought to determine what is ethical for themselves.
 - As long as you do what you think is right, then you have acted correctly.
 - "I do, what I do, because, it's the right thing to do." - Jimmy Carter
 - This leads to relativism as different people believe different things to be moral.

Law vs. Morality

- There can be overlap between legal and moral principles.
- In an ideal setting all laws would be moral laws. The Venn diagram to the right is a country with few moral laws.



Basic Moral Concepts

- Deontological concepts
 - The prefix "deon" comes from the Greek and means duty.
 - Normative in nature - what we ought to do.
- Obligatory Actions
- Prohibited Actions
- Optional Actions

Goals of a Moral Theory

Theoretical Goals

- Explains why something is moral.

Practical Goals

- Procedures for evaluating morality of action.

Main Ethical Frameworks

- Deontological Theories
 - Divine Command Theory
 - Kantian Ethics
 - Natural Rights
- Teleological Theories
 - Utilitarianism
 - Egoism
 - Hedonism
 - Virtue Ethics
- Relativism

Deontological Theories

- Determine right or wrong on the basis of action.
- Kantian Constructivism
- Divine Command Theory
- Natural Rights Theory

Teleological Theories

- Also known as Consequentialist
- Determine right or wrong on the basis of Consequences.
- Utilitarianism
- Egoism
- Hedonism
- Example: Robin Hood

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

- Aristotle argues that happiness is the goal of life. Happiness, Greek: eudaimonia, means human flourishing, or living well or doing well.

Happiness and Function

- Human happiness is tied to human function. Aristotle feels that we will be happy if we are all fulfilling our function. Further, he thinks that everything has a function. The function of something is whatever makes that thing good. Something is good according to Aristotle if it fulfills its function. A good knife is one that cuts well.

Function of a Person

- What is a good person?
Aristotle says that the function of man is rationality. Therefore, a good man is one that is rational.
A rational man is controlled by reason in all things.

Reason as our Guide

- To be happy we must be "acting in accordance with right reason." The rational part of the soul must be in control of our appetites.
- Reason (or rationality) allows us to determine the virtuous action in a given situation.

Golden Mean

- It is for this reason that Aristotle discusses the golden mean. The golden mean is the balance between excess and deficiency.
- | | | |
|--------------|------------|---------------|
| ■ Foolhardy | Courage | Cowardice |
| ■ Gluttony | Temperance | Starvation |
| ■ Greed | Ambition | Sloth |
| ■ Indulgence | Temperance | Insensibility |
