

Nicomachean Ethics

Aristotle's Theory of Virtue Ethics

Virtue Ethics Overview

- Before we get started, a few things to note:
 - Aristotle believes the world has always been the way it is
 - Not familiar with anything like evolution
 - Abrahamic religions: doctrine borrowed many explanations from Aristotle
 - That all celestial objects are perfectly circular - the moon, the sun
 - That God created man with a purpose - related to the notion of Telos

Virtue Ethics Overview

- We know that somewhere along the line, Aristotle is going to tie the idea of the “good” with virtue.
- Aristotle uses both dispositions and purposes to help us understand virtue.
- Ultimately, a person who accomplishes “good” actions, will be a virtuous person. This is the foundation for his ethics.

Virtue Ethics Overview

- Rough Definition: Virtue is similar to temperance
- Question: Can I act justly and not know it?
- Aristotle: Yes - but a just act is not always a just virtuous act

- There are three conditions for acting virtuously
 - First: You have to know you are acting virtuously
 - Second: The action is done for the sake of being virtuous.
 - Third: From a firm and unchanging state

Virtue Ethics Overview

- **FIRST Condition:** You are in a situation where you know what act is the virtuous one
- **SECOND Condition:** You choose it because it is the virtuous choice
- **THIRD Condition:** This isn't a one off type of thing. It comes from a state of character which doesn't change over time.
- **SOURCE:** Tamar Gendler, Yale

Virtue Ethics Overview

- Consequentialism
- Recall from introductory notes:
 - Consequentialism: The theory of ethics which pursues the best outcomes
 - Not concerned with intentions

If I return an item to its rightful owner, then it was the best action
(EVEN IF I DIDN'T KNOW I WAS DOING IT)

Aristotle: **You get no credit!**

Virtue Ethics Overview

Virtue Ethics Overview

- So you can be mistaken about being virtuous.
- If you do the right thing but for the wrong reasons:
 - Aristotle: No Credit for being virtuous
- I have to express something about my character which extends over time.
 - One virtuous action doesn't make a virtuous person.
- Last thing: You must enjoy, or take pleasure, in acting virtuously

Virtue Ethics Overview

- This last part - we have to get lost in it
 - In the way athletes get lost in the game
 - In the way artists get lost in their work
 - In the way gamers get lost in the game



Virtue Ethics Overview

- All humans possess *Phronesis* or “practical wisdom”
 - This is a field of study - pretty much the study of Ethics
 - Ethical decisions are practical decisions
 - There are no concrete facts like one would find in mathematics or biology
 - Approaching Ethics in the same way we approach other fields of study is a mistake

Dispositions & Purposes

- Everyone is born with natural dispositions which influence their ability to accomplish certain tasks
 - Example: Height - Being taller will aid someone at being a better basketball player.
- Aristotle believes that dispositions are also based upon familial ties.
- Dispositions are like states of character.

Dispositions & Purposes

- Someone who is born to a family of barbers, for example, has a disposition to be a better barber than someone born to a family of mathematicians.
- The level of “good” a person could achieve was relegated to the class they belonged to (the downside):
 - Peasants
 - Land Owners
 - Nobility

Dispositions & Purposes

- Aristotle thought it was improbable for people to move between classes (though not impossible)
- All things have *Telos*
 - *Telos* - the greek word for “moving towards”
 - Otherwise, we can think of this as “purpose”

Telos

- The purpose of a shipbuilder is to build excellent ships
- The purpose of legs is allow mobility
- The purpose of leaves is to absorb sunlight and convert to energy.



Telos

- Human pursuits take time to be perfected.
 - a. One cannot become an excellent shipbuilder overnight.
 - b. One must learn from another person who is an excellent shipbuilder.



Virtue Ethics Overview

- The “good” life
 - Related to dispositions
 - Related to purposes
- A person that makes “good” decisions, is someone who lives the “good” life.
- So the idea is that being “good” is a disposition. Doing “good” things is fulfilling the purpose of that disposition.

Telos

- Question:
 - a. What is the purpose of a human? What is our function?



Telos

- Aristotle's answer:
 - a. To be happy



Aristotle's main argument #1

1. Is happiness the purpose of human life?
 - a. Aristotle: Yes, but we have to learn how to be truly happy.
 - i. In the same way we have to learn to be a shipbuilder
 - b. Life = Activity
 - c. Humans are rational and active beings.
 - d. The Sauce: “The function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle”

Aristotle's main argument #2

1. Rational Principle = Virtue
2. We cannot be truly happy without being virtuous.
3. It is easy to be mistaken about whether we are truly happy
4. Animals and children are not rational - they cannot be virtuous.
 - a. Thus, they cannot be happy



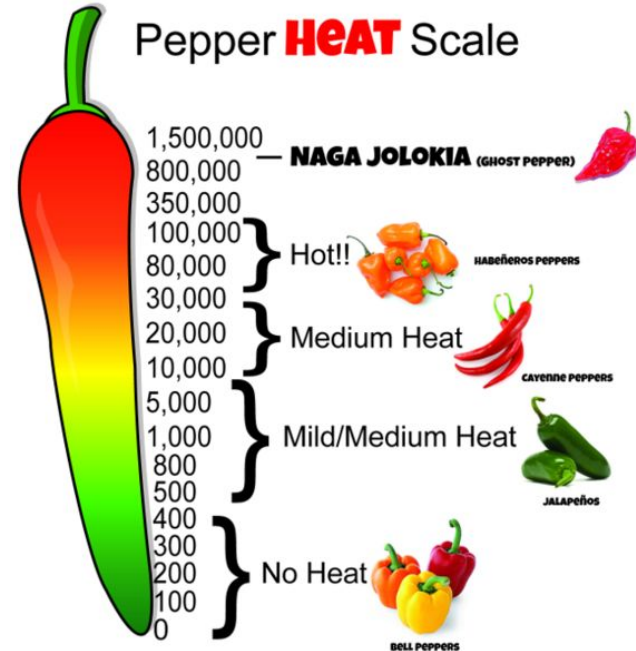
How do we learn to be virtuous?

1. “Happiness comes as a result of virtue and some process of learning or training”
2. Ethos = Habit
3. Very important to form the proper habits in our education and experiences
4. Virtue is a RATIONAL disposition



Being Rational - Moderation

1. Moderation is the key to virtue
2. The Golden Mean - the mean between two extremes
 - a. Excess and Defect
3. The mean is different depending upon one's circumstances and situation.
4. Aristotle Example: Running into a fight on your own is foolish. Running away from a fight is cowardly. Knowing when to fight is Courage.



Being Rational - Moderation

1. Aristotle Example #2: Generosity is the mean between the excess of wastefulness and the deficiency of stinginess
2. Example #3: Cleverness is the mean between buffoonery and boorishness
3. Remember: The “Golden Mean” may be different depending upon the person and circumstance



GROUP ASSIGNMENT!

1. Come up with your own example(s) for “finding the Mean between excess and defect”. Be creative!
2. 15-20 mins
3. All groups will present their example to the class.
4. Write down all group members' name on one sheet of paper and write down your examples and how they apply Aristotle's theory.