

## Moral Psychology

Session 4a  
Aristotle's *Ethics* 1-3

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## Aristotle

- Aristotle was born in 384 BCE in Stagirus and brought up after his father's death by relatives in Asia Minor.
- A student at Plato's Academy in Athens from age seventeen until his late 30's.
- When Plato died, a student named Speusippus became head of the Academy and Aristotle left and pursued his own investigations in Asia Minor and Lesbos.

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## Aristotle's Life

- A large portion of his time--perhaps the largest--seems to have been devoted to the study and cataloging of biological specimens.
- About four years later, in 343bc, he was invited by Philip of Macedon to be tutor to his son Alexander, later Alexander the great.
- After Philip's death Aristotle returned to Athens and founded his own school, called the Lyceum. He and his students called "peripatetics"--people who walk around--because this was his preferred mode of philosophical discussion.

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## Aristotle

- In the *Ethics*, Aristotle is concerned with the nature of the good.
- And more specifically, he is concerned with good for human beings—with what it is to be a good human being and to live a good life.
- In Plato, things were called good by reference to a single abstract Form, which had to be known through a kind of intellectual epiphany.
- Different method in Aristotle

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## Homonymy of 'good'

- First, he points out that the word “good” seems to indicate different properties in different contexts.
- The qualities of a horse that make it a good horse are different from the qualities of a wine that make it a good wine, and both differ from the qualities of a person that make her a good person.
- What “goodness” comes to depends on what kind of thing you are calling good.

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## Methodology must suit the subject

- different kinds of subject matters can be known in different kinds of ways and require different methods of inquiry.
- With mathematics, you start from principles that are most certain in their own right and derive conclusions from them.
- But with other kinds of inquiry—say, biology—you start by looking at lots of examples, beginning with examples that are near to hand.

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## Ethics Like Biology?

- You can't do biological classification from first principles, you have to look at lots of animals to figure out what the important generalizations are.
- And Aristotle thinks that inquiry in the the good of human beings is much more like biology than mathematics: it is an inexact science that requires a lot of data.

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## Why Politics Unsuitable for the Young

- They do not have sufficient experience with human affairs to have enough *experience or data* for a theoretical discussion.
- It would be like arguing biological taxonomy with someone whose only experience with animals was having owned a pet cat once.
- They are interested in politics, not as political theory—not as an enterprise of examining what makes for good people and a good state—but in terms of *action*. How can I make my mark?

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## Unpacking the word 'good'

- Every art and every action has something that it aims at, and that whatever this is is regarded as the "good" of that art or action. We call those things good that we aim at.
- There is a kind of hierarchy of goods in our actions:
  - we pick up the pen to write (the pen is good for writing),
  - we write to compose an essay (language is good for expression),
  - we write the essay to do well in class (an essay is a good way to show what you know),
  - we take the class to make us wise,
  - we want to be wise because that will make us happy. (or something like that)

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## An ultimate good??

- Aristotle suggests that we might look to see whether there is *some* good that, as it were, stands at the top of this hierarchy: something that is, in a sense, the ultimate good.
- There are two sorts of criteria for this--
  - 1) Other things must be pursued for its sake
  - 2) It must be pursued *only* for its own sake, not for the sake of anything else

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## Happiness the ultimate good

- We pursue other things in order to be happy. If you decide that doing something will make you unhappy, you will not do it.
- We never pursue it as a means to an end: we don't say, but "What do you want to be happy *for*?" the way we say "What do you want a hammer for?"
- What people don't agree about is what happiness consists in. There are popular options like health and wealth and honor, and some more philosophical options like the contemplative life.

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## Note on 'happy'

- Important to note that the word that is translated "happy"—*eudaimon*—has somewhat different overtones in Greek than "happy" does in English.
- For us, "happy" has come almost to signify a kind of emotional state that you can have one moment and lose the next. (I was happy sitting there on the bench until my mother in law appeared around the corner.)
- For the Greeks, "eudaimon" carries the double association of *doing well* and *faring well*, and is not particularly concerned with the emotions. In a way, "happy" is a perilous translation, but it is probably an inevitable one.

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## Role of Teleology and Function in Determining the Good

- Now Aristotle suggests that we look at the question of the good for human beings in the same way we would look at the question of the good for other things: by looking at their characteristic function.
  - If you want to know what a good hammer is, you have to know what the function of a hammer is. A good hammer is one that is effective at driving nails.
  - If you want to know what a good baker is, you have to know what a baker does: a good baker is one that makes good bread.

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## What is a Good Human?

- So, by analogy, if you want to know what a good human being is, you have to know what the characteristic function of a human being is—what it is that makes a human a human, just as you might look at what makes something a hammer or a baker.
- Identification of things by genus and species
- What is distinctive of humans?
  - The faculty of rationality, as exercised in action

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## Virtue as excellence

- The good for humans is going to be concerned with how we act—what kinds of actions we tend to engage in, and in particular with excellences of these, good character traits that lead to good actions.
- These kinds of character traits Aristotle calls *virtues*. (= “excellences”)
  - Intellectual Virtues
  - Moral Virtues

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## Intellectual Virtue

- Intellectual virtues are a matter of how good we are at thinking clearly, at reasoning and deliberation.
- These are important to goodness and happiness because action involves making choices, or decisions, based on what we understand of the world and how we reason about it.
- Our choices will be no better than the understanding and the practical reasoning that guides them. (Good motives aren't enough for a good life, it *isn't* only the intent that counts.)

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## Moral Virtues

- The second sort of virtue is what he calls “moral virtue.” The moral virtues are not a product of thought but of temperament.
- In general, they are dispositions we have that are closely connected with emotions like fear or anger or pride.

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## Virtues and Emotions

- A variety of emotions -- anger, pride, fear
- Can be experienced
  - Weakly or strongly
  - In response to the right things or to the wrong things
- Virtue consists in experiencing them in the right measure in response to the right things

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## Virtue and Emotions

- Example: fear
- Fearing the right things
  - An invading horde of barbarians ought to inspire a certain amount of fear
  - A mouse on the table ought not
- Fearing in the right measure
  - Too much: so afraid you can't fight back
  - Too little: you disregard the danger
  - Just right: you experience fear but are undaunted

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## Virtue is found in the Mean

- Mean = mid-point between the ends of a line.
- Virtue consists in feeling an emotion moderately -- I.e., not the extremes of
  - Feeling it too much (e.g., trembling at every noise)
  - Feeling it too little (e.g., being rash)

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## Acquiring Virtue

- Moral and intellectual virtue are acquired in different ways
  - Intellectual virtue by teaching
  - Moral virtue by habituation
- In habituation, you acquire a disposition to do something by doing it!
- Doing the things a courageous person does shapes you into a courageous person yourself!

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## Practical Implications

- Becoming virtuous requires us to habituate ourselves in the things that a virtuous person does
  - Being trained by others from childhood
  - Imitating what virtuous people do
  - Learning what is right intellectually and then training ourselves to act that way
- An inexact art. Requires “navigating” between the extremes.

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## Personal Difference

- There is one way of acting rightly (I.e., the mean), but there are many ways of acting wrongly.
- The moral task is different for each of us, because we are approaching the mean from different places, have different temptations.
  - One is inclined to rashness
  - Another to cowardice -- requires different therapy.

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## Recap

- Good Consists in Happiness
- Happiness requires
  - Virtue
    - Intellectual
    - Moral
  - Good fortune -- one cannot be truly happy if one is, say, poor or ugly!

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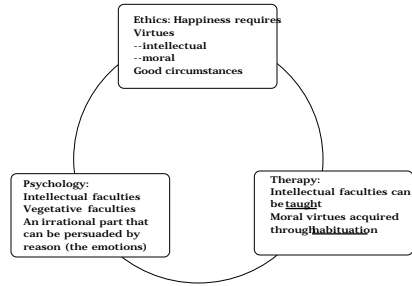
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# Aristotle's Moral Psychology



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