

# The ethics of ancient greece philosophy essay



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In ancient Greece two great written philosophers lived. First there was Plato and then Aristotle. Aristotle was a pupil of Plato. Despite being taught by Plato they had different theories and views. Their ethics were very typical and traditional of ancient Greece but Aristotle detailed virtue ethics and the path to happiness. Plato's political theories for a utopian society varied from Aristotle's view of 'best state for each society'. Their metaphysical theories are complete opposites and very contradicting. Even though Plato and Aristotle came from the same era and were closely linked they had very different philosophies.

Plato had typical views of ethics for an ancient Greek. Aristotle shared these views he was more specific about ethics and the path to happiness. Plato and Aristotle both believed that a good person choose morally sound choices because of their reason and good character. A person who follows their good character and reason instead of trying to avoid consequences is a virtuous person. Aristotle believed " virtue is a matter of developing the unique ability to reason."(Pacquette 268) Being virtuous to Plato and Aristotle also meant, " doing things- no matter what these things were- in a way that reflected rational thought and involved making the best of one's skills, talents and opportunities." (Pacquette 268) Aristotle and Plato both agreed that a person's good moral character and reason guided their ethical choices. A good moral life to them would lead to " eudaimonia, an ancient Greek word that translates into English as happiness." (Pacquette 268) Though Plato talked and wrote about virtue and happiness, Aristotle went into great detail about his ideas. Aristotle is known as the creator of the theory of virtue ethics. " Aristotle held that there are three forms of happiness. The first form

of happiness is a life of pleasure and enjoyment. The second form of happiness is a life as a free and responsible citizen. The third form of happiness is a life as a thinker and philosopher."(Gaarder 115) Aristotle felt that for a person to achieve eudaimonia, they must achieve all three forms of happiness otherwise they will not be truly happy and satisfied because their life would be unbalanced. Aristotle believed balance is key to happiness. " To be a good person, according to Aristotle, is to act in accordance with right reason, in other words, the rational part of the soul must control the irrational parts by choosing to follow a middle path or mean between the extremes of excess and deficiency. This was Aristotle's theory of the Golden Mean."(Pacquette 268) Aristotle thought that true happiness could only happen when people live a balanced life, Plato also agreed. " The ethics of both Plato and Aristotle contain echoes of Greek medicine: only by exercising balance and temperance will achieve a happy or 'harmonious' life." (Gaarder 115) Both Plato and Aristotle agreed that a balanced life is a good life, and that with reason people will make morally good choices but Aristotle believed that this did not come naturally. He felt that " moral virtue is the result of habit and training. Because if this, he believed that people can be taught to be virtuous. He said that people must know- the deliberately choose to do- what is good."(Pacquette 269) Aristotle and Plato had very similar views on ethics due to both living in the same era in ancient Greece.

Political and social theories between the two philosophers were very different. Plato had very Totalitarian or even communist views for state government. He in his novel The Republic, he describes in much detail his

utopian society. He felt society should be organized into three groups: " rulers, auxiliaries and labourers."(Gaarder 91) The rulers or guardian class would have reason; education and intelligence this would make them well suited for leadership. Plato called these rulers 'Philosopher Kings', they would rule for the good of all in the society. Philosopher Kings would not be allowed to possess material objects as to avoid corruption. Private ownership and wealth would not be allowed in Plato's state. " Everyone would own property in common, and money wouldn't exist."(Pacquette 389) In this way Plato's utopian society resembled a communist state but he did this because he " strongly believed that abolishing wealth and private ownership of property would eliminate the difference between rich and poor. This would mean that people would be distinguished only by their intelligence and character, not by family background or personal wealth."(Pacquette 389) He not only wanted private ownership banned but also family as an institution because he felt the " rearing of children is considered too important to be left to the individual and should be the responsibility of the state." (Gaarder 92) Plato's hierarchical state did though allow social mobility. " People could move up to the next level if they demonstrated certain abilities."(Pacquette 389) Plato felt his anti-democratic state would work very well because " everyone would know and accept his or her position in society, and everyone would have enough material comforts and education to function in his or her designated role. Because people's social class would correspond to their innate characteristics, Plato believed that the citizens of his imaginary city state would know true happiness."(Pacquette 390) Plato believed that his Republic would be the ideal state and would work for everybody, Aristotle disagreed. He did not believe that one kind of government would suit every society. He

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" acknowledged that no one system of government suited every society. Much depended on the aims of the state and whether the rulers could be trusted to act for the benefit of all citizens."(Pacquette 391) Aristotle believed that there were three forms of good constitution. " Monarchies can succeed if the rulers are as wise as Plato's philosopher kings, but fail if the rulers are tyrants who oppress people. Aristocracies can also succeed provided the small group of people who hold power do not enslave the people they rule."(Pacquette 391) " The third good constitutional form is what Aristotle called polity, which means democracy. But this form also has its negative aspect. A democracy can quickly develop into mob rule."(Gaarder 116) Aristotle and Plato both " feared democracy might lead to the rule of the ignorant many over the educated few."(Pacquette 392) He felt that it might be possible to combine the best aspects of each constitution while avoiding their downfalls but the best aspects and the downfalls depend on the state. " Unlike Plato, Aristotle believed firmly that the rule of law is the foundation of political order."(Pacquette 392) Aristotle felt this because he thought that law can guarantee that reason prevails, and it can balance the forces that contend for power in society."(Pacquette 392) Aristotle valued the rights of the individual citizen over the power of an absolute ruler. This is in contrast to Plato because Plato puts the greater good of society over the individual citizen. Plato and Aristotle also disagreed about the role of women in the state and in society. Aristotle viewed women very negatively. He felt women were the incomplete or an " unfinished man"(Gaarder 116) Aristotle thought that women should not participate in the government and " should be excluded from political life." (Pacquette 392) He based this on the fact that he felt women " do not have the capacity

to reason."(Pacquette 268) Plato thought the opposite. " Women could govern just as effectively as men could for the simple reason that the rulers govern by virtue of their reason. Women [...] have exactly the same powers of reasoning as men, provided they get the same training and are exempted from child rearing and housekeeping."(Gaarder 92) Plato took his argument a step farther by saying " that a state that does not educate and train women is like a man who only trains his right arm."(Gaarder 92) Plato's totalitarian utopia with sexual equality is opposite and contradicting to Aristotle's good forms of constitution and sexual discrimination.

Plato and Aristotle have adverse metaphysical philosophies and theories. Plato believed that everything has a " timeless 'mold' or 'form' that is eternal and immutable."(Gaarder 83) and they exist in a " reality behind the 'material world' called the 'reality of ideas'"(Gaarder 83) Plato called these forms " ideas"(Gaarder 85) Aristotle disagreed, he stated, " the 'idea' horse was simply a concept that we humans had formed after seeing a certain number of horses. The idea horse or 'form' thus had no existence of its own."(Gaarder 107) He did not agree with Plato's theory of ideas of the 'forms' existing in a world beyond our own. He felt " the 'idea' or 'form' horse was made up of the horse's characteristics"(Gaarder 107) and that " the forms were in the things, because they were the particular characteristics of these things"(Gaarder 107) Plato and Aristotle have opposing theories of forms. Plato believed the forms exist first in the 'world of ideas' while Aristotle believes forms come after we see objects numerous times. Plato believed that all natural phenomena are merely shadows of the eternal 'forms', but most people give no thought to the shadows, never realizing

even that they are shadows and pay no heed to the immortality of their soul. (Gaarder 89) This is explained in Plato's famous "allegory of the Cave." Aristotle disagreed with Plato's "Allegory of the Cave", he did not think all natural phenomena including humans are just shadows or reflections of another world. He felt these shadows or reflections were in our soul and are "reflections of natural objects"(Gaarder 107) Aristotle thought these shadows are in our souls because we experienced them first in nature. He thought, "nothing exists in our consciousness that has not first been experienced by our senses."(Gaarder 107) He did not believe in innate ideas and he felt the "highest degree of reality is that we perceive things with our senses."(Gaarder 107) Aristotle trusted and believed what he experienced with his senses while Plato only trusted his reason. Plato felt that only with our reason could we understand and obtain true knowledge. We can only have 'opinions' about what we experience with our senses. He only trusted his reason because "we cannot always trust the evidence of our senses. The faculty of vision can vary from person to person."(Gaarder 86) He also did not trust the sense because he felt we couldn't have "true knowledge of something that is in constant state of change."(Gaarder 85) He trusted reason because he felt reason was the same for every person. Plato only trusts his reason and does not believe what he experiences with his senses while Aristotle felt that experiencing things with our sense is the highest degree of reality and believed all our knowledge comes from what we experienced with our senses. Plato and Aristotle's theories on metaphysical topics, of 'forms' and what is reality are very different and completely opposite.

Even though Plato and Aristotle lived in the same country during the same time period and Plato was Aristotle's teacher, they had very different ideas about politics and metaphysics while both maintaining traditional ancient Greek ethics.