

Outline and illustrate
the view that virtue is
its own reward



It has been argued that morality or virtue are constitutive of self-interest or, as one could put it, 'its own reward'. By being moral we are benefitted in one way or another, whether that be due to happiness or the result that the action of morality leads to, such as some form of recognition, which in turn usually leads to happiness. One philosopher who agreed with this view was Plato. His argument is psychological; he said that if you act immorally, your soul will be at war with itself.

This occurs when the different parts of the soul are pulling in different directions. For example, your desire might be telling you to do what you instinctively want to do, such as eating the last piece of chocolate cake, whereas your rational part is telling you to do what you know, on reflection, you should do and to offer the last piece of cake to your friends. Plato argues that we are much happier when there is no conflict between these two parts of our souls and that we are happiest when reason is in charge - leading to a moral life.

Using this argument it is clear that virtue has its own reward as a virtuous life supposedly leads to a happier life as a life without inner conflict is a happier life than one in which parts of the soul fight each other for supremacy. Similarly Aristotle also argued that we act morally because it leads to happiness, which in turn benefits us. His argument was a teleological approach. He said that as rational humans, every action is aimed at some positive end or ideal situation, with this aim being happiness (Greek term - eudaimonia).

This happiness is not pleasure as such but more like well being or flourishing fulfilment. He argued that this happiness was achieved by exercising the unique human faculty which is reason. He reasoned that self-interest is a constituent of a happy life. Using this very reason, we are lead to Aristotle's doctrine of ' the mean', he argues that excess is to be avoided and that human beings should moderate their behaviour in order to flourish. Virtues are the traits of character which cause us to act ' for the right reasons'.

He uses the analogy of an archer to illustrate this, saying that the moral virtues, guided by reason enable us to hit the target. He said that we must practice the virtues and acquire them through following role models of virtuous people. This idea can be illustrated by the idea of playing an instrument; one receives instruction from wise experts and by practising until they develop the skill to a degree of excellence. In the same way, virtues will eventually become our habit and, like good music, should flow naturally.