

Ethics according to plato and aristotle

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



Descriptive ethics is sometimes referred to as comparative ethics and involves the studying of people's belief about morality. It differs from the normative ethics which is concerned with prescribing how people should behavior and act, and from metaethics which is concerned with what the actual meaning of 'right' is. The philosophical field of descriptive ethics is a type of empirical study of people's or individual's attitudes.

Those who study the descriptive ethics are primarily concerned with finding out people's belief with regard to things like values – which behaviors or action would be considered right or wrong and which features of moral agents would be considered virtuous. Studies in the descriptive ethics sometimes look into the individual's ethical ideals or which actions societies would condemn or punish in politics or law. This paper will bring into perspective Aristotle's ethics and how ethical decision is made by individuals in a society.

In the present state of affairs the moral good of a citizen is not considered the obligation of the state; political leaders may not even be expected to be highly moral or to show moral purposes to the physical state of life. However, for Aristotle and Plato, politics and ethics had close connection. According to Plato whoever wanted the best form of state must first determine and understand what forms of life are eligible. He argued further that virtue should be the force behind any form of state and politics (Solomon, 1984). Plato was greatly concerned with virtue and its role in our daily activities.

According to him virtue is what makes something performs its duties well. In this case its duties or functions are the only things it can do or things others

cannot do well. For example, an ear can only be used for listening and a knife for cutting, but although, other equipments can be able to perform such functions, they may not perform it well enough. Aristotle follows up on the Plato's argument and states that virtue like the sharpness (in the case of the knife) makes the tool a good one for a particular job and also makes it perform that function effectively.

Man therefore needs virtues to be able to be a good person and perform his or her duties well. According to Aristotle this virtue must be in the person's state of character. There are different forms of virtues required by humans in order to function well. These ranges from physical virtues, moral virtues to intellectual virtues like science and practical wisdom. According to the Nicomachean ethics, specific jobs or professions call for particular forms of virtue that correspond with the special obligations within such works (Pakaluk & Giles, 2010).

For examples virtues required of a doctor may not be the same with those required of a statesman, slaves, sculptors, women or painters. This is the general understanding of the human virtues in the Nicomachean ethics (Solomon, 1984). Aristotle tried to distinguish the natural virtues from the moral ones. According to him natural virtues are manifestations of temperament while the moral virtues are only shown in particular situations. That if a person is born with brave temperament, he may seek the presence of those qualities in another way.

For example, if a person had acquired reason after a natural virtue, then the moral virtue would call for submission of his feelings or behaviors to reason.

The two virtues therefore complements each other, so that a person who has quiet temperament may be quiet even in situations where such virtues are not appropriate may be differentiated from a person who has the corresponding moral virtue like reason who would remain quite or not depending on the situation. The human's emotional soul is always rational in that feelings can always be modified and shaped by thought.

It may listen, obey and sometimes persuaded and convinced by reason. Aristotle therefore concluded that the moral virtues strive to right the elements of man's nature that are persuadable by rationalization (Charles, 1984). Moral virtues therefore are not innate like the natural temperaments. They are acquired in the course of life through habituation. Unlike other virtues like natural and intellectual virtues which are not habits, the moral virtues that are part of our souls and can be influenced by reason are habits (Pakaluk & Giles, 2010).

According Aristotle, nature does not compel certain virtues on us; however, humans are adapted by nature to acquire the virtues which are then perfected by habits. The gap between personal temperament and human nature that subsequently results into a tension between feeling and thought always gives a room for humans to habitually develop the feeling of reasoning or thoughtfulness. Aristotle hence argues that it is not by frequency of using our sights that we acquired the sense of sight, but it is the virtues we acquired when we first used them. In essence, we only become just when we do just acts or brave by exercising our brevity.

And every time a person stops to thoughtfully question whether a feeling is appropriate in a particular situation or not would enable the person do just that next time when face with the same or different situation. However, if we refrain from employing thoughtfulness each time we indulge our feeling, we develop hardship in restraining such feelings in the future (Charles, 1984). Certain feelings like fear, confidence and friendliness sometimes are weaker or stronger depending on appropriateness of different situation. Again sometimes certain outward action may be overdone or suppressed and never carried through (Taylor, 2008).

However, moral virtues level the performance in all these respects. It makes it easier to act appropriately depending on the situation. One will act or feel neither too little nor too much but as much as our thoughts and reasons would judge appropriate. The rule therefore would enable everyone to know when to heighten or relax certain activities or behaviors just like an archer who tenses his bow less or more depending on where the arrow would most likely land. This actually forms the first doctrine in the understanding of moral virtue so that we target the mean or intermediate point.

Virtue therefore can be understood as excellence or pursuance of excellence. For the example of the archer, it can be seen that his virtue enables him to obtain the most excellent score; however, to achieve this, he must neither over-shoot nor fall short of his mark but must hit the middle point. Similarly, virtue calls for avoidance of defects as well as excesses in our feelings and action, so as to satisfy the definition that states in essence that virtue is a

mean (Pakaluk, & Giles, 2010). However, in respect to what is right and best these feelings and actions can be extreme.

For one to be virtuous therefore, he or she has to stop exactly at the right moment or point in order to excel (Solomon, 1984). Aristotle also discussed the role of pleasure in the moral judgment of human beings. Just as discussed above, the emotional elements of our souls are normally persuaded by reason and therefore influenced to act and feel in a particular way without much struggle. Virtuous persons would therefore find pleasure in doing good and acting rightly but on the other hand a vicious person do also take pleasure in doing bad which comes naturally because they lack reasoning.

While the virtuous persons will act rightly without any struggle or regrets and with a lot of pleasure, the vicious act wrongly without hesitation and with no remorse (Taylor, 2008). However, almost of all of human beings are neither vicious nor virtuous and to do well is always a struggle and failure would only bring remorsefulness to us. The post-Aristotelian philosophers have always argued that it is quite unattainable to achieve a perfect virtue in actual practice and that most if not all of us are on the path towards virtue (Charles, 1984).

The gap between remorseless vice and untroubled virtue is captured in Aristotle's plot by continence or incontinence and endurance or softness. According to Aristotle, a continent person weathers successfully against the attractions of pleasure and the enduring person struggle with pain and suffering which may be encountered on the way to the right action (Pakaluk,

& Giles, 2010). However, he contends that endurance and continence as virtues would not be perfect until the habituation of right action and feeling is completed.

He therefore discusses the paradox of Socrates which argues that no man does wrong knowingly. That pleasure and pain cannot deflect or stop anyone from doing what is he or she knows is right. He then tries to distinguish between the various senses of ‘know’ and the different things individuals ought to know in order to act rightly. Aristotle then concludes that Socrates was partly right and partly wrong in his analysis of virtues and vice (Solomon, 1984). For most contemporary moral philosophers, ethics is a sphere involving voluntary actions that deserve either praise or blame.

But for Aristotle, ethics is something involving broader study of various spheres of life. According to him virtues are primarily concerned with actions and passions and praise and blame are manifestations of voluntary actions and passions while on those that are involuntary pity or pardon are bestowed. He therefore argued that it is paramount that voluntary actions and passions are distinguished from the involuntary ones so that the study of the nature of virtue may be understood (Charles, 1984).

While the moral virtues are concerned with perfecting the part of the human soul deemed responsible for judgment by controlling and influencing by reason, the intellectual virtues is concerned with the perfection of the part of the soul responsible for reasoning and thinking. Intellectual virtues are grouped into two categories as either practical like art and practical wisdom or theoretical as in intuitive reasoning, wisdom and science (Pakaluk & Giles,

2010). However, in the modern sense, some of the intellectual virtues may not be considered as ‘moral’.

For example, a good scientist does not necessarily make a morally good person. Nevertheless, a skillful practice as a scientist projects a possibly part of good life, one of the Aristotle’s subjects. Practical wisdom according to Aristotle forms part of the intellectual virtues which in turn is a moral virtue (Taylor, 2008). My Take One inherent problem with Aristotle’s definition of virtue as a mean is that it is not easy or possible to locate the mean or the middle point in abstract terms.

This can only be possible through a simple arithmetic if we have definite extremes with the right point rightly in the middle between them (Charles, 1984). Unfortunately extremes are never definite. For example what Aristotle may consider excessive anger can sometimes be less or more excessive. And as for the example of the archer, he may not find the mark in the middle of either overshooting or falling short simply because these two points are not definite. Again, a moral mean may appear more extreme than another.

For example, rashness which is considered an excess may not be more oppose to courage than cowardice which is considered a deficiency. Further what is considered the right amount or the right point varies from an individual to another. The intermediate proposed by Aristotle may be the equidistant from each extremes and therefore one point and applicable to everyone. However, the point may be relative to every person; the equidistant may just be too little or too much depending on individuals

(Pakaluk & Giles, 2010). It is for these reasons that defining the, mean in abstract terms would be impossible.

An individual may not just estimate to another person the appropriate and how much will be enough. Virtues are sometimes learned by apprenticeship; that is by associating with individuals considered to be a better judge and watching how the person resolves various issues in different situations. A good judge must possess practical wisdom – while moral virtues ensures that a person feels and acts in accordance with reason, judging is the function of reason which is perfected for judging a person's practical wisdom(Pakaluk & Giles, 2010).

In essence therefore, virtue is primarily concerned with striking a mark which is relative to all and is determine by how the principle employed by persons with practical wisdom consider it. Using the example of the archer, habitual overshooting of the mark is not a virtue nor is habitual falling short. This therefore means that every virtue is sandwiched by two opposing vices and opposes the virtue itself (Charles, 1984). This confirms Aristotle's doctrine that virtue is actually a mean; and in a tabular representation of vices and virtues, the latter will always fall in the middle with two columns of vices on each side.

However, this is not applicable to all virtues as the case of justice would reveal. It is a mean in that a just individual would excel either by ensuring that he gives or takes neither too little or too much but just the appropriate and right amount. However, it is not opposed by two but just only one vice – injustice. Always when too much is offered to an individual, the other

receives too little and this therefore makes no difference whether we habitually overshoot or we habitually fall short (Pakaluk & Giles, 2010).

Aristotle again overemphasizes his understanding of the moral virtues as primarily concerned with obtaining just the appropriate amount of actions and feelings. Moral virtue has other essential aspects that Aristotle mentioned briefly. For example, he said that 'To feel them (fear and confidence) at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best' (Ross, 2009: 303). What is not clear in this is whether these other aspects can have virtue represented as an intermediate point.

And perhaps most of them are concerned with the practical wisdom and not with moral virtue. Aristotle also believed that actions may not solely be driven by moral virtue alone unless the action is chosen for the virtue's own sake and not for some ulterior motives like to avoid criticism or punishment. This is an important point in the understanding of moral virtue; however, it does not apply to Aristotle's doctrine of virtue as a mean or intermediate point (Taylor, 2008). In Aristotle's analysis of voluntary and involuntary actions, he argued that compulsion makes a particular act involuntary.

The problem with his understanding of compulsion is that he assumes it to mean only physical compulsion. However, it would be wrong to assume that a person may be physically compelled to do wrong or right by anger, threats, danger and the attractions of pleasure. These are simply not physical compulsion and therefore cannot be used to justify an action as involuntary (Solomon, 1984). Conclusion Aristotle was a great thinker of his time and

must be credited with numerous studies involving the broad discipline of philosophy.

His philosophical works are relevantly applicable to the fields of ethical studies; from descriptive ethics, normative ethics, applied ethics to meta-ethics. He not only laid a foundation to his contemporaries and modern philosophers, but also offered critical understanding of the world he live in, some of which are still relevant and applicable to date. That said Aristotle's major undoing was his overgeneralization of ethical standing of man. He thoughtfully analyzed the Greek cultural and social developments during his time and generally assumed that the nature of man's behavior is similar every where.