

The goodness in the situational ethic



The nature of goodness is distinctly disparate between Plato and Aristotle. Plato argues for a higher form of goodness, while Aristotle argues back with a societal form of goodness. Aristotle's view of goodness is far more realistic to the actual world, and it disproves Plato's belief that goodness is eternal, essential, and universal.

Plato presents a dualist view of goodness. His goodness is an absolute form above society and its interactions. Plato states as a conclusion to his allegory of the cave, "...the entire soul must be turned away from this changing world, until its eye can bear to contemplate reality and that supreme splendor which we have called the Good" (Republic 232). He obviously holds goodness in high regard and as an entity apart from society, making it a dualist view. He calls for a person to seek goodness by turning away from society because society is analogous to the cave in his allegory; this person must emerge into the light to seek goodness. Plato believes goodness exists outside of society and is an intangible form, yet it is attainable through careful, meticulous thought, as exemplified by Plato's allegorical prisoner striving for the blinding light: goodness. To Plato, knowledge is real; the highest form of this knowledge is goodness. It is illustrated by the light in his allegory: "...to look at the firelight itself, would not his eyes ache" (Republic 229). Continuing with his allegory of the cave, Plato illustrates how the light from a fire can reveal a distorted view of the surroundings, or truth.

Goodness is being sought as the prisoner emerges and views the truth of the world in the full light, the sun. There, the sun enlightens everything in a radiant, clear view, giving the prisoner a full sense of the world, truth.

Aristotle, however, illustrates a relativist view of goodness. Aristotle offers a contrasting view of goodness by claiming it exists within the boundaries of society and therefore, without society, there would be no goodness.

Aristotle's goodness is illustrated when actions "do these things to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right manner, is not what everybody can do, and is by no means easy...right doing is rare and praiseworthy" (Ethics 363). Goodness is determined by the actions taken in society. This is relativism since there are many actions that exist within the world. Both philosophers relate goodness as a tribute rather difficult to attain, but it is the physical and metaphysical nature of goodness that sparks the discrepancy between Plato and Aristotle. Plato severely disagrees with Aristotle by claiming, "It should be a matter of knowledge, not of personal experience" when describing which qualities make the best judge in a court of law, meaning knowledge is far more precious than action (Republic 90). Plato's goodness wishes to illustrate the one truth being the knowledge of action. Aristotle's goodness, though, is more realistic because it offers a flexible definition of goodness for an ever changing world. It counters Plato's view of goodness effectively since it broadens Plato's goodness and has it exist in society, not far and above it. Aristotle disproves Plato with his physical definition of goodness ultimately because of the constant change in this world. A higher form of goodness cannot withstand time realistically.

With time now introduced as an important factor of goodness, goodness is argued by Plato to be eternal. Plato presents his supreme form of goodness to be eternal by stating, "This, then, which gives to the objects of knowledge

their truth and to him who knows them his power of knowing, is the Form or essential nature of Goodness" (Republic 220). Plato's nature of goodness must be eternal because he claims it yields truth, which is unchanging, and therefore goodness must not change throughout time by his definition since a Form, such as beauty, will be that form perpetually. Plato further claims goodness to reside in only an object or person's one natural function: "more work be more easily and better done...the one thing for which he is naturally fitted" (Republic 57). This is Plato's definition of virtue, a being is to only have one function presented to it by goodness. He believes this function is the one truth that remains true regardless of time.

Aristotle, however, proves how goodness is not eternal. Aristotle argues goodness to be entwined in the function of an object or person through his analogy of the artists: "For as the goodness and the excellence of a piper or a sculptor, or the practiser of any art, and generally of those who have any function in business to do, lies in that function, so man's good would seem to lie in his function" (Ethics 353). Aristotle asserts an object's function possesses the goodness. A man is surely temporary and changes frequently, so his goodness is not everlasting. Goodness has been described as the form revealing to an object its function by Plato or goodness as the function of an object by Aristotle. The function of an object can change; a hammer can pound a nail into a house, yet with a turn of its head, it can pull out the same nail it just pounded in. Thus, the goodness in Aristotle's view is not eternal. If the function of an object can change, then the goodness in Plato's definition must change in order to reveal a new truth since it was defined by an object only having one function. Aristotle's view is simply more fitting to the actual

world than Plato's. Certainly, an object's function, its goodness, is best understood when it is utilized according to the situation, the correct time and place, for that function to be demonstrated, as illustrated with the hammer. It can equally pound, as well as pluck, nails, so its goodness will change, therefore goodness is not eternal.

Plato pushes for an essential goodness, but Aristotle demonstrates how goodness is not entirely necessary for function and living. Plato states in his sun metaphor, "...you may have the power of vision in your eyes and try to use it...but sight will see nothing and the colours will remain invisible in the absence of a third thing" (Republic 218). This 'third thing' is without question the sun; Plato argues goodness is necessary and is the way to truth. He compares goodness to the sun metaphorically, asserting vision is caused by the sun, as truth is caused by goodness. Plato further asserts education and nurture are necessary for a person to realize the goodness in stating, "I would rather call it the one thing that is sufficient: education and nurture" (Republic 114). For Plato, it takes nurturing in order to seek his essential goodness, so an education must also be essential. Aristotle argues, however, goodness is not essential for the individual when claiming, "...what is called the function of a man of any profession and the function of a man who is good in that profession are generically the same" (Ethics 354). Aristotle asserts that goodness is irrelevant when speaking of how well a person performs a function, disproving Plato's idea of goodness is essential. This allows the possibility a person will perform a function poorly and in bad form. He also illustrates how any being's goodness lies simply within its nature: "...man has no business and no function assigned him by nature? Nay, surely as

his several members...plainly have each his own function" (Ethics 353). To Aristotle, no education or nurturing is necessary in order to simply realize the goodness already naturally existing in an individual.

Goodness is described as an essential entity to the world, by Plato, and also as just an object's function that is not critical, by Aristotle. Aristotle illustrates how goodness itself is inessential. Realistically, a person or object can perform a function regardless of how well it is performed. "Goodness is beneficent" by Plato's definition will therefore never produce bad; yet people function in some ways that are considerably bad, so goodness is not essential for function of an individual (Republic 71). By viewing the actual world and realizing there is certainly bad function, Plato is contradicting himself. An essential goodness would not bring into realization a bad function. It could be argued on the side of Plato that a poorly functioning individual has not have realized goodness yet, but this individual is operating on some level, so it would be false to claim an absence of goodness is prohibiting the individual from functioning. Furthermore, goodness does not need to be educated since it is inessential in itself. Goodness lies within a person because of function by Aristotle's standard, but goodness is not entirely essential since goodness in function is only in the noble actions. An inessential goodness seems tragic, but it truly allows for people to be themselves. It is more realistic being inessential because it allows for humans to commit errors and practice more freely while still continuing living.

Plato's goodness is universal and independent of society, but Aristotle reveals how goodness is completely relative to the situation. With Plato's

definition of goodness, there is only one goodness casting truth into the world. He believes, "...Goodness itself...corresponding to each of these sets of many things, we postulate a single Form or real essence" (Republic 218). Plato argues goodness is universal because there is the single, encompassing goodness enlightening the truth. This implies there is only one truth for everything with no dependence on the situation. He believes the same goodness will reveal the truth of an object in every situation. Instead of the one function and action in any situation, Aristotle argues with the situational ethic to illustrate how goodness is purely dependent on the situation and completely relative. He illustrates this ideal as he quantifies his doctrine of the mean: " By an equal or fair amount I understand a mean amount, or one that lies between excess and deficiency" (Ethics 359). For Aristotle, there is no universality of goodness; with this assertion, he pushes the doctrine of the mean: there is always a mean in every situation since there are opposing extremes which contain it. Certainly, different situations call for different functions. This is where Aristotle's virtue plays in: "...the virtue or excellence of a thing causes that thing...to perform its function well" (Republic 359). In different situations, Aristotle's virtue allows for the situation to be acted on in the best possible way since Aristotle's goodness is in the function, allowing for multiple functions, which enables an individual to act in the most effective and efficient way with virtue. Plato's virtue for a person is to focus on " the one thing for which he is naturally fitted" (Republic 57). This limits a person because then he or she can only be best in one situation with the function Plato's goodness has instilled in them. Goodness has hence been portrayed as a universal principle casting the same truth, by Plato, or more practically as the function for which the

situation calls for, by Aristotle. Surely, an object or person can have more than one function, and different situations will call for different functions and objects. An individual or object should never be limited to only one function. There is no practicality of inflexibility, so goodness is not universal.

The essence of goodness is neither eternal, essential, or eternal. Goodness seems useless by this description, but it must be true for goodness to exist in a realistic world. Aristotle's situational ethic allows for difference in culture, views, and actions among different societies. "The thing that is done, therefore, is called just or temperate when it is such as the just of temperate society would do" (Ethics 358). Actions are simply relative to society; society is then able to define what is and what is not. This is much more realistic than Plato's rigid, higher form of goodness. He claims there to be only one goodness bringing forth truth of goodness, limiting society because then an individual is left to only function within its one truth. To apply goodness realistically, Aristotle reflects on happiness, "It seems that happiness is something final and self-sufficing, and is the end of all that man does" (Ethics 353). Aristotle's allowance of multiple functions according to what is deemed necessary by the situation is the only way for man to be truly happy in the end. Plato even admits "...to live well is to be happy" (Republic 36). To live well, people certainly make decisions and commit to action. To have a realistic, encompassing definition of goodness, it must be practical and realistic. Aristotle's situational ethic and doctrine of the mean allow for change and for people to make decisions. This certainly holds true as a means to happiness than a supreme entity of goodness looming over

society. By allowing an unfastened definition of goodness, Aristotle is most accurate in defining it in society.