

An Analysis of Aristotle & His Positions

By: Shane Radliff

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1. Aristotle's Position

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is an interesting examination into morality and happiness that provides a clear and concise explanation of what it truly means to be virtuous. Contrary to Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill's stances (which are deontological ethics and utilitarianism, respectively), his is virtue ethics. He starts out by clarifying what "good" is, and it is "...the end of action" (Aristotle 427). More simply put, "good" is the outcome of whatever action or task that is being partaken in, and more specifically, he believes that the ultimate human good is happiness.

Aristotle also believes that for something to be "good", it must be complete. He says that "happiness meets the criteria for completeness" (428), and that it is something universally strived for by all human beings. Additionally, it is self-sufficient and relies on the function of the being in question. If it is a cook, the function will be cooking; if it is an architect, the function will be building. More simply put, it is rational activity. The function itself has no value judgement placed upon it, it is "good" based off of the mere completion of the action itself. Aristotle further clarifies "excellence", which is the ability to perform the function well, and he postulates that the virtuous person performs his or her function excellently. In his own words, "The human good is activity expressing virtue" (429).

The quality of virtue, though, can be examined further, as Aristotle believes that there are two types—virtues of thought and virtues of character. Virtues of thought are achieved by teaching and experience, and virtues of character are achieved by habit. To expand upon virtues, he says that "virtue requires practice" (431). More simply put, we become virtuous in character by doing virtuous acts. Aristotle closes out his virtue ethics theory with a clear definition of virtue, which can be summarized as essentially positive human states that enable us to fulfill our

functions as human beings, which always reside in the “intermediate between excess and deficiency” (Aristotle 433).

2. Critiques of Aristotle’s Position

Being one of the most important philosophers in history, Aristotle’s theory of virtue ethics has received numerous criticisms by prominent modern-day philosophers from all over the political spectrum.

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* offers one insight into potential issues with Aristotle’s stance. They mention one complaint about his conception of happiness, and that it is “too general to show that it is in one’s interest to possess any of the particular virtues as they are traditionally conceived” (*SEP*). In other words, temperance, justice, and courage cannot automatically be inferred to be virtues. The source also names one other issue with Aristotle’s stance. Namely, the limiting of his audience, due to his assumption that they will already possess virtues, such as courage and generosity. What about those that do not already possess those qualities?

Another interesting insight is from the Austrian economist and philosopher, Tibor R. Machan. In his article titled, “A Problem With Aristotle’s Ethical Essentialism,” he lays out a couple of problems with Aristotle’s position. Machan discusses Aristotle’s viewpoint, in that,

There is an aristocratic, intellectualized conception of the good human life if pure contemplation is the road to happiness... we get this idea from Aristotle that of all human beings, those who are capable of contemplation are the only ones that can be ethically

successful, the only ones who can live a good, morally or ethically excellent or upstanding, a noble life. (Machan, 6)

The author describes this as “a type of hierarchicalism or elitism” (Machan, 6), and continues on by explaining Aristotle’s preference for intellectual professions over making money in business, which Aristotle seems to demean and belittle. Aristotle even makes the claim that those who just make money cannot be virtuous.

A similar insight was also proposed by one of the most renowned libertarians, Murray Rothbard. Rothbard praised Aristotle’s adherence to private property and opposition to communism, by stating that Aristotle provided “the brilliant insight that only private property furnishes people with the opportunity to act morally, e.g. to practise the virtues of benevolence and philanthropy” (Rothbard, 14), and that “communal property would destroy that opportunity” (Rothbard, 14).

Rothbard did see some flaws within Aristotle’s economic and philosophical stance, namely his criticism of money making. Rothbard adds the caveat that Aristotle did oppose any limitation on the activity, which is contrary to their predecessor, Plato. Rothbard also saw major problems with Aristotle’s scorn of labor and trade; most noteworthy, is Aristotle’s desire to eliminate trade, commerce, transportation, and the hiring of labor.

To conclude, all three of these sources provide varying criticisms of Aristotle’s stances, which can provide the philosophers of today the tools necessary to build upon his work.

3. An Evaluation of Aristotle's Position

Aristotle has contributed much to the field of philosophy. Most of his stances were correct, and are still upheld by modern day philosophers, but there are some minor flaws that deserve discussion.

Aristotle's focus on virtue and happiness is extremely important and is what sets him apart from philosophers that followed him and preceded him. If I were to place a value judgement on happiness being the highest good, I would consider it a true statement, as all human beings strive for pleasure in their lives. The only example I can think of where that may not be the case is with masochism, although they obtain the aforementioned pleasure, through the pain.

I am also pleased by his promotion of private property and opposition to the communism that his predecessor, Plato, strived for. He is correct in his position, that with communal property, the ability to be virtuous is destroyed, which means that (following his reasoning) happiness, the highest good, cannot be obtained.

Continuing forward, I agree with his assertion that virtue requires practice and is something that is not immediately or inherently obtained; rather, it requires some time of virtuous acts and teaching. His focus on action is something I am completely in favor of, and reminds me of Ludwig von Mises' concept of human action (in other words, purposeful behavior).

At this point in time, there is only one disagreement I have with Aristotle, and it is his assumption that "legislators concentrate on habituation" (Aristotle, 430). I believe that human beings are inherently good and government actually halts the progress of humanity.

To conclude, Aristotle's work will be studied as long as human beings walk this Earth. Its importance in attempting to answer the questions that plague humanity will be understood by all that utilize their faculties, their intellect, and their ability to reason.

Works Cited

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