

Aristotle and Christianity

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In this paper, I will be comparing Aristotle's views on human nature and citizenship as outlined in his work *Nicomachean Ethics* to the Christian perspective on human nature and virtue as presented in the book of Ephesians in the Bible. Aristotle argues that man is born without knowledge and that morality is not a part of his nature, but rather something that is gained through experience. He also believes that human beings are hedonistic by design, seeking pleasure and avoiding suffering. In contrast, the Christian perspective as presented in the book of Ephesians holds that man is born with a sin nature and that morality is not something that can be gained, but rather something that must be instilled through faith in Jesus Christ. I will also be examining Aristotle's views on citizenship and how they differ from the Platonic perspective.

Aristotle formed a concept of human nature that he tied into his idea of virtue theory, which is detailed in the book *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle begins embedding his ideas on human nature into the text very early on. He argues that since man is born without knowledge, morality cannot be a part of his nature because he has not yet obtained moral understanding. This suggests that man would be by nature an immoral creature. His prior argument that man is born without knowledge supports this claim. Aristotle is not only arguing that man lacks morality in this instance, but also that morality is gained, as opposed to an *a priori*, understanding. Furthermore, Aristotle backs this claim by stating that “None would be vile, and none would not be blest seems to be half false, though half true: it is true that no one is unwilling to be blessed, but not true that wickedness is involuntary; or else we must contradict what we just now asserted, and say that man is not the originator and begetter of his actions as he is of his children.” Thus according to Aristotle, morality is a decision that we make after birth; no one is born with an

immoral nature. This further supports Aristotle's view that man is an immoral animal and that morality develops after the fact.

Another example of Aristotle's understanding of human nature is that we are hedonistic by design, which is defined as seeking pleasure and avoiding suffering. Aristotle states this in book 1 of *The Nicomachean Ethics* saying “To judge from the lives that men lead, most men, and men of the most vulgar type, seem (not without some ground) to identify the good, or happiness, with pleasure; which is the reason why they love the life of enjoyment.”

From a Biblical perspective of human nature, it holds very different from Aristotle's claim. In proving this we can use Genesis 4, which contains the story of Cain and Abel. Previously in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden. This was a consequence of disobeying God, because of this they inherited what is called sin nature. This “sin nature” is inherited when we are born, which is in contrast to the Tabula Rasa theory. In Genesis 4 Cain becomes jealous of his brother because God accepted Abel and not him. Cain became jealous and angry, God warns Cain of the path he is taking and asks him “Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.” God directly tells Cain that if he continues being prideful and jealous, sin lies at the door. This shows that we are born with the freewill to sin and also rule over our sin.

According to Aristotle, a citizen is any individual who is able to participate in the political system. He discovers that the majority of polis residents are capable of being citizens. This completely goes against the Platonist perspective, which states that only a relatively small number of people may participate in the legislative or judicial administration of the state.

Given that there are several forms of government, Aristotle states that there must also be various types of citizens. As a result, while mechanics and laborers may be considered citizens under some forms of government, they are not in others, such as aristocracies where honors are bestowed in accordance with merit and virtue because no one can live a life of virtue while working as a mechanic or laborer. In oligarchies, the bar for holding office is high, therefore a worker can never become a citizen; yet, a mechanic may.

Ephesians 4-5 describes how the Christian individual should truly behave. This behavior is virtuous in a biblical sense but opposes Aristotle's claim. If behaving this way is virtuous then they should be considered a citizen in Aristotle's words. I think the most important piece of Ephesians 5 is the comparison between a man and his wife and that relationship to the church. Paul explains that in Ephesians 5 "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything." Ephesians 5 also explains that men should love their wives as Jesus has loved the church, and love them as our own bodies.

According to Aristotle, there are four main academic fields of study: reading and writing, physical education or gymnastics, music, and drawing. Exercise fosters bravery, while reading, writing, and sketching all have practical applications. It is more difficult to assess the utility of music, but Aristotle tries to describe that it supports the beneficial use of free time. In doing so, he makes a distinction between work, play, and leisure. Play and relaxation are ways to unwind after a long day of work. More than merely a means of solace, leisure serves as a vehicle for pursuing pleasure and a happy life. Aristotle also describes that if all leisure was play and

relaxation, then a happy life, the ultimate objective of human endeavor, would be nothing more than play and relaxation.

Music is considered not courageous nor needed although Aristotle claims it is the best way for a man to use his leisure. He believes that there are three reasons for the use of music: enjoyment and relaxation, strengthening of moral character, and intellectual development. Further reasoning also concludes that the very nature of music is beneficial to education because it helps the soul balance its emotions in harmony with reason.

I would personally agree with the overall thought of Aristotle. The four categories he created are a little indifferent to present times but are reasonable. The way he describes the importance of each is what I more agree with. There is time for work and there is time for leisure. There is also a detrimental repercussion to partaking in one more than the other. For example, Aristotle explains that it is good to exercise but not to the point where you can become a savage character.

I also partake in music and drawing in my leisure time. I grew up learning how to play different instruments and drawing in my free time. I believe that these hobbies have shaped me into the character that I am or at least have had a great influence on that fact. Growing up playing sports also shaped me into who I am and what I find enjoyable. I cannot say whether playing sports makes you more brave or courageous but it has had a positive impact on my character.

In conclusion, the views on human nature and citizenship presented by Aristotle in his work *Nicomachean Ethics* differ significantly from the Christian perspective as outlined in the book of Ephesians in the Bible. While Aristotle believes that man is born without knowledge and that morality is something that is gained through experience, the Christian perspective holds that man is born with a sin nature and that morality must be instilled through faith in Jesus Christ.

Additionally, Aristotle's views on citizenship conflict with the Platonic perspective, with Aristotle arguing that any individual who is able to participate in the political system should be considered a citizen, while the Platonic perspective asserts that only a select few should be involved in the legislative or judicial administration of the state.