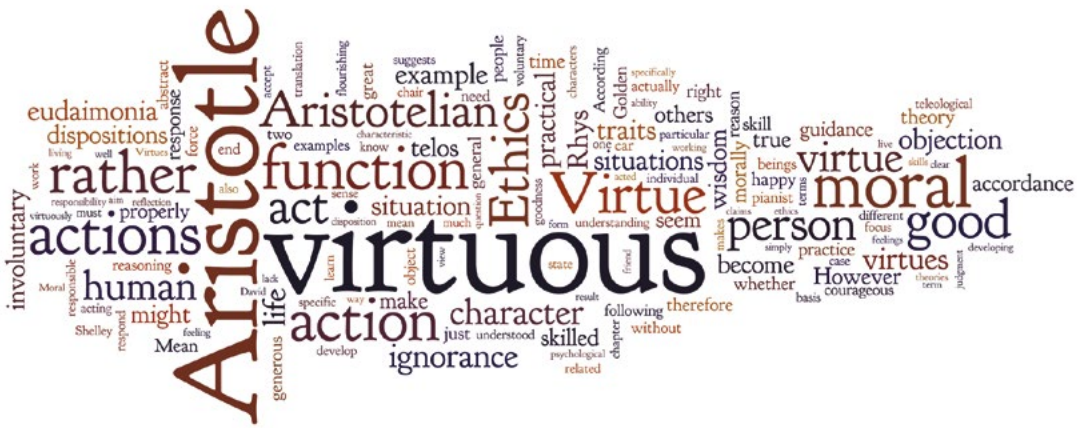

CHAPTER 3

Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

To seek virtue for the sake of reward is to dig for iron with a spade of gold.[1]

1. Aristotelian Virtue Ethics Introduction

Aristotle (384–322 BC) was a scholar in disciplines such as ethics, metaphysics, biology and botany, amongst others. It is fitting, therefore, that his moral philosophy is based around assessing the broad characters of human beings rather than assessing singular acts in isolation. Indeed, this is what separates Aristotelian Virtue Ethics from both Utilitarianism and Kantian Ethics.

2. The Function Argument

Aristotle was a *teleologist*, a term related to, but not to be confused with, the label "teleological" as applied to normative ethical theories such as Utilitarianism. Aristotle was a teleologist because he believed that every object has what he referred to as a final cause. The Greek term *telos* refers to what we might call a purpose, goal, end or true final function of an object. Indeed, those of you studying Aristotle in units related to the Philosophy of Religion may recognise the link between Aristotle's general teleological worldview and his study of ethics.

Aristotle claims that "…for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function".[2] Aristotle's claim is essentially that in achieving its function, goal or end, an object achieves its own good. Every object has this type of a true function and so every object has a way of achieving goodness. The *telos* of a chair, for example, may be to provide a seat and a chair is a good chair when it supports the curvature of the human bottom without collapsing under the strain. Equally, says Aristotle, what makes good sculptors, artists and flautists is the successful and appropriate performance of their functions as sculptors, artists and flautists.

1 I. Panin, *Thoughts*, p. 92, https://ia601405.us.archive.org/8/items/thoughts00panigoog/thoughts00panigoog.pdf

2 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, http://sacred-texts.com/cla/ari/nico/index.htm

This teleological (function and purpose) based worldview is the necessary backdrop to understanding Aristotle's ethical reasoning. For, just as a chair has a true function or end, so *Aristotle believes human beings have a telos*. Aristotle identifies what the good for a human being is in virtue of working out what the function of a human being is, as per his Function Argument.

Function Argument

1. All objects have a *telos*.
2. An object is good when it properly secures its *telos*.

Given the above, hopefully these steps of the argument are clear so far. At this point, Aristotle directs his thinking towards human beings specifically.

3. The *telos* of a human being is to *reason*.
4. The good for a human being is, therefore, acting in accordance with reason.

In working out our true function, Aristotle looks to that feature that *separates man from other living animals*. According to Aristotle, what separates mankind from the rest of the world is our ability not only to reason but to *act on reasons*. Thus, just as the function of a chair can be derived from its *uniquely differentiating characteristic*, so the function of a human being is related to our uniquely differentiating characteristic and we achieve the good when we act in accordance with this true function or *telos*.

The notion that man has a true function may sound odd, particularly if you do not have a religious worldview of your own. However, to you especially Aristotle wrote that "…as eye, hand, foot and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these?"[3]

On the basis that we would ascribe a function to our constituent parts — we know what makes a good kidney for example — so too Aristotle thinks it far from unreasonable that we have a function as a whole. Indeed, this may be plausible if we consider other objects. The component parts of a car, for example, have individual functions but a car itself, as a whole, has its own function that determines whether or not it is a good car.

3. Aristotelian Goodness

On the basis of the previous argument, the good life for a human being is achieved when we act in accordance with our *telos*. However, rather than

3 *Ibid*.

leaving the concept of goodness as general and abstract we can say more specifically what the good for a human involves. Aristotle uses the Greek term *eudaimonia* to capture the state that we experience if we fully *achieve* a good life. According to Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is the state that all humans should aim for as it is the aim and end of human existence. To reach this state, we must ourselves act in accordance with reason. Properly understanding what Aristotle means by *eudaimonia* is crucial to understanding his Virtue Ethical moral position.

Eudaimonia has been variously translated and no perfect translation has yet been identified. While all translations have their own issues, *eudaimonia understood as flourishing* is perhaps the most helpful translation and improves upon a simple translation of happiness. The following example may make this clearer.

> Naomi is an extremely talented pianist. Some days, she plays music that simply makes her happy, perhaps the tune from the television soap opera "Neighbours" or a rendition of "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star". On other days, she plays complex music such as the supremely difficult Chopin-Godowsky É*tudes*. These performances may also make Naomi happy, but she seems to be flourishing as a pianist only with the latter performances rather than the former. If we use the language of function, both performances make Naomi happy but she fulfils her function as a pianist (and *is* a good pianist) only when she flourishes with the works of greater complexity.

Flourishing in life may make us happy but happiness itself is not necessarily well aligned with acting in accordance with our *telos*. Perhaps, if we prefer the term happiness as a translation for *eudaimonia* we mean really or *truly* happy, but it may be easier to stay with the understanding of *eudaimonia* as flourishing when describing the state of acting in accordance with our true function.

Aristotle concludes that a life is *eudaimon* (adjective of *eudaimonia*) when it involves "…the active exercise of the mind in conformity with perfect goodness or virtue".[4] *Eudaimonia* is secured not as the result exercising of our physical or animalistic qualities but as the result of the exercise of our distinctly human rational and cognitive aspects.

4. *Eudaimonia* and Virtue

The quotation provided at the end of section three was the first direct reference to virtue in the explanatory sections of this chapter. With Aristotle's theoretical presuppositions now laid out, we can begin to properly explain and evaluate his conception of the virtues and their link to moral thinking.

4 *Ibid*.

According to Aristotle, *virtues are character dispositions or personality traits*. This focus on our dispositions and our character, rather than our actions in isolation, is what earns Aristotelian Virtue Ethics the label of being an *agent-centred* moral theory rather than an *act-centred* moral theory.

Act-Centred Moral Theories

Utilitarianism and Kantian Ethics are two different examples of act-centred moral theories due to their focus on actions when it comes to making moral assessments and judgments. Act-centred moral theories may be teleological or deontological, absolutist or relativist, but they share a common worldview in that particular actions are bearers of moral value — either being right or wrong.

Agent-Centred Moral Theories

Aristotelian Virtue Ethics is an agent-centred theory in virtue of a primary focus on people and their characters rather than singular actions. For Aristotle, morality has more to do with the question "how should I *be*?" rather than "what should I *do*?" If we answer the first question then, as we see later in this chapter, the second question may begin to take care of itself. When explaining and evaluating Aristotelian Virtue Ethics you must keep in mind this focus on character rather than specific comments on the morality of actions.

Aristotle refers to virtues as character traits or psychological dispositions. Virtues are those particular dispositions that are appropriately related to the situation and, to link back to our function, encourage actions that are in accordance with reason. Again, a more concrete example will make clear how Aristotle identifies virtues in practice.

All of us, at one time or another, experience feelings of anger. For example, I may become angry when my step-son thoughtlessly eats through the remaining crisps without saving any for others, or he may feel anger when he has to wait an extra minute or two to be picked up at work because his step-father is juggling twenty-six different tasks and momentarily loses track of time (how totally unfair of him…). Anyway, as I was saying, back to Aristotle, "Anyone can become angry — that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way — that is not easy".[5]

For Aristotle, *virtue is not a feeling* itself but an appropriate psychological disposition in response to that feeling; the proper response. The correct

5 *Ibid*.

response to a feeling is described as acting on the basis of the *Golden Mean*, a response that is neither excessive nor deficient. The table below makes this more apparent.

Feeling/Emotion	Vice of Deficiency	Virtuous Disposition (Golden Mean)	Vice of Excess
Anger	Lack of spirit	Patience	Irascibility
Shame	Shyness	Modesty	Shamefulness
Fear	Cowardice	Courage	Rashness
Indignation	Spitefulness	Righteousness	Envy

Anger is a feeling and therefore is neither a virtue nor a vice. However, the correct response to anger — the Golden Mean between two extremes — is patience, rather than a lack of spirit or irascibility. Virtues are not feelings, but characteristic dispositional responses that, when viewed holistically, define our characters and who we are.

The Golden Mean ought not to be viewed as suggesting that a virtuous disposition is always one that gives rise to a "middling" action. If someone puts their life on the line, when unarmed, in an attempt to stop a would-be terrorist attack, then their action may be rash rather than courageous. However, if armed with a heavy, blunt instrument their life-risking action may be courageously virtuous rather than rash. The Golden Mean is not to be understood as suggesting that we always act somewhere between complete inaction and breathless exuberance, but as suggesting that we act between the vices of excess and deficiency; such action may well involve *extreme* courage or *exceptional* patience.

In addition to feelings, Aristotle also suggests that we may virtuously respond to situations. He suggests the following examples.

Situation	Vice of Deficiency	Virtuous Disposition (Golden Mean)	Vice of Excess
Social conduct	Cantankerousness	Friendliness	Self-serving flattery
Conversation	Boorishness	Wittiness	Buffoonery
Giving money	Stinginess	Generosity	Profligacy

We must keep in mind the agent-centred nature of Aristotelian Virtue Ethics when considering these examples. A person does not cease to have a witty disposition in virtue of a single joke that might err on the side of buffoonery, or cease to be generous because they fail to donate to charity on one occasion. Our psychological dispositions, virtuous or not, are only to be assessed by

judgment of a person's general character and observation over more than single-act situations. If we act in accordance with reason and fulfil our function as human beings, our behaviour will generally reflect our virtuous personality traits and dispositions.

5. Developing the Virtues

In a quote widely attributed to Aristotle, **Will Durrant** (1885–1981) sums up the Aristotelian view by saying that "…we are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit".[6] It is fairly obvious that we cannot become excellent at something overnight. Making progress in any endeavour is always a journey that requires both effort and practice over time. Aristotle holds that the same is true for human beings attempting to develop their virtuous character traits in attempt to live the good life. You may feel yourself coming to an Aristotelian Virtue Ethical view after reading this chapter and therefore be moved to become wittier, more courageous and more generous but you cannot simply acquire these traits by decision; rather, you must *live* these traits in order to develop them.

Cultivating a virtuous character is something that happens by practice. Aristotle compares the development of the skill of virtue to the development of other skills. He says that "…men become builders by building" and "… we become just by doing just acts".[7] We might know that a brick must go into a particular place but we are good builders only when we know how to place that brick properly. Building requires practical skill and not merely intellectual knowledge and the same applies to developing virtuous character traits. Ethical characters are developed by practical learning and habitual action and not merely by intellectual teaching.

In the end, the virtuous individual will become comfortable in responding to feelings/situations virtuously just as the good builder becomes comfortable responding to the sight of various tools and a set of plans. A skilled builder will not need abstract reflection when it comes to knowing how to build a wall properly, and nor will a skilled cyclist need abstract reflection on how to balance his speed correctly as he goes around a corner.

Analogously, a person skilled in the virtues will not need abstract reflection when faced with a situation in which friendliness and generosity are possibilities; they will simply know on a more intuitive level how to act. This is not to say that builders, cyclists and virtuous people will not sometimes need

6 W. Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, p. 76.
7 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, http://sacred-texts.com/cla/ari/nico/index.htm

to reflect specifically on what to do in abnormal or difficult situations (e.g. moral dilemmas, in the case of ethics) but in normal situations appropriate responses will be natural for those who are properly skilled.

It is the need to become skilled when developing virtuous character traits that leads Aristotle to suggest that becoming virtuous will require a lifetime of work. Putting up a single bookshelf does not make you a skilled builder any more than a single act of courage makes you a courageous and virtuous person. It is the repetition of skill that determines your status and the development of virtuous characters requires a lifetime of work rather than a single week at a Virtue Ethics Bootcamp.

6. Practical Wisdom (*Phronesis*)

Aristotle does offer some specifics regarding how exactly we might, to use a depressingly modern phrase, "upskill" in order to become more virtuous. Aristotle suggests that the aim of an action will be made clear by the relevant virtuous characteristic as revealed by the Golden Mean; for example, our aim in a situation may be to respond courageously or generously. It is by developing our skill of practical wisdom (translation of "*phronesis*") that we become better at ascertaining what exactly courage or generosity amounts to in a specific situation and how exactly we might achieve it.

By developing the skill of practical wisdom, we can properly put our virtuous character traits into practice. For the Aristotelian, practical wisdom may actually be the most important virtuous disposition or character trait to develop as without the skill of practical wisdom it may be difficult to actually practice actions that are witty rather than boorish, or courageous rather than cowardly. Imagine trying to be a philosopher without an acute sense of logical reasoning; you would struggle because this seems to be a foundational good on which other philosophical skills rely. So too it may be with the virtues, practical wisdom supports our instinctive knowledge of how to respond virtuously to various feelings, emotions and situations.

If this still seems to be somewhat opaque, then we may develop our sense of practical wisdom by looking at the actions of others who we do take to be virtuous. A child, for example, will most certainly need to learn how to be virtuous by following examples of others. If we are unsure in our own ability to discern what a courageous response in a given situation is, then we may be guided by the behaviour of Socrates, Jesus, Gandhi, Mandela or King, as examples. If we learn from the wisdom and virtue of others, then just as a building apprentice learns from a master so too virtue apprentices can learn from those more skilled than they in practising virtue. Hopefully, such virtue

apprentices will eventually reach a point where they can stand on their own two feet, with their personally developed sense of practical wisdom.

7. Voluntary Actions, Involuntary Actions and Moral Responsibility

Despite the focus on agents and not actions, Aristotle does have something to contribute when it comes to discussions of potential *moral responsibility* as associated with particular actions. We can separate actions into two obvious categories:

1. Voluntary actions
2. Involuntary actions

Very broadly, an action is voluntary when it is freely chosen and involuntary when it is not — these terms are more precisely defined next, in line with Aristotle's ideas. These distinctions matter in ethics because a person might be held to be morally responsible for their voluntary actions but not for their involuntary actions. According to Aristotle, an action is voluntary unless it is affected by *force* or *ignorance*, as understood in the following ways.

Physical Force

Imagine that Reuben is driving his car on his way home from work. Out of the blue, his passenger grabs his hand and forces him to turn the steering wheel, sending the car into oncoming traffic. Without this physical force, Reuben would not have turned the wheel and he very much regrets the damage that is caused. According to Aristotle, Reuben's action is involuntary because of this external physical force and so he is not morally responsible for the crash.

Psychological Force

Think of David, working at a bank when a group of thieves break in armed with guns. David is told that if he does not open the safe then he will be killed. Under this extreme psychological pressure, Aristotle would accept that David's opening of the safe is involuntary, because David would not have opened the safe otherwise and he very much regrets doing so. On this basis, David is not morally responsible in any way for the theft.

In addition to force, ignorance of a certain type can also support an action being labelled as involuntary.

Action from Ignorance

Rhys, a talented musician, wishes to perform a surprise concert for a friend and has been practicing songs from the Barry Manilow back catalogue for weeks. However, in the days before the surprise concert his friend, unbeknown to Rhys, develops an intense and very personal dislike for Manilow. Thus, when Rhys takes to the stage and blasts out his rendition of the classic tune "Copacabana" his friend storms off in much distress. In this situation, Aristotle would accept that Rhys acted involuntarily when causing offence because he was unaware of the changed circumstances; he acted from ignorance when performing the song rather than from malice. Without this epistemic (or knowledge-related) barrier, Rhys would not have acted as he did and he very much regrets the distress caused. For these reasons, Rhys bears no moral responsibility for the upset resulting from his song choice.

Crucially, Aristotle does not allow that all action that involves ignorance can be classed as involuntary, thereby blocking associated claims of moral responsibility.

Action in Ignorance

Laurence has had too much to drink and chooses to climb a traffic light with a traffic cone on his head. Laurence's alcohol consumption has made him ignorant, at least temporarily, of the consequences of this action in terms of social relationships, employment and police action. However, for Aristotle this would not mean that his action was involuntary because Laurence acts in ignorance rather than from ignorance due to an external epistemic (or knowledge-based) barrier. Laurence does not, therefore, escape moral responsibility as a result of his self-created ignorance.

Finally, Aristotle also identifies a third form of action — non-voluntary action — that is also related to ignorant action.

Action from Ignorance with No Regret

Return to the case of Rhys and his Manilow performance but remove any sense of regret on Rhys' part for the distress caused. If, at the moment that the epistemic gap is bridged and Rhys learns of his friend's newly acquired musical views, he feels no regret for his action, then Aristotle would class it as a non-voluntary rather than involuntary action. The action cannot be voluntary as Rhys acted from ignorance, but it is not obviously involuntary as, without a sense of regret, it may have been that Rhys would have performed the action even if he knew what was going to happen.

The detail above is important and your own examples will help your understanding and explanations. The summary, however, is refreshingly simple. *If an action is voluntary, then it is completed free from force and ignorance and we can hold the actor morally responsible. However, if the action is involuntary then the actor is not morally responsible as they act on the basis of force or from ignorance.*

8. Objection: Unclear Guidance

Consider yourself caught in the middle of a moral dilemma. Wanting to know what to do you may consult the guidance offered by Utilitarianism or Kantian Ethics and discover that various specific actions you could undertake are morally right or morally wrong. Moving to seek the advice of Aristotelian Virtue Ethics, you may find cold comfort from suggestions that you act generously, patiently and modestly whilst avoiding self-serving flattery and envy. Rather than knowing how to live in general, you may seek knowledge of what to actually do in this case. Virtue Ethics may therefore be accused of being a theory, not of helpful moral guidance, but of unhelpful and non-specific moral platitudes.

In response, the virtue ethicist may remind us that we can learn how to act from considering how truly virtuous people might respond in this situation, but this response raises its own worry — how can we identify who is virtuous, or apply their actions to a potentially novel situation? Although a defender of Virtue Ethics, **Rosalind Hursthouse** (1943–) gives a voice to this common objection, putting forward the worry directly by saying that "'Virtue Ethics does not, because it cannot, tell us what we should do… It gives us no guidance whatsoever. Who are the virtuous agents [that we should look to for guidance]?"[8] If all the virtue ethicist can offer to a person wondering how to act — perhaps wondering whether or not to report a friend to the police, or whether or not to change careers to work in the charity sector — is "look to the moral exemplars of Socrates and Gandhi and how they would act in this situation", then we might well sympathise with the objector since very often our moral dilemmas are new situations, not merely old ones repeated. Asking "what would Jesus do", if we deem Jesus to be a morally virtuous role model, might not seem very helpful for an MP trying to determine whether or not to vote for an increase in subsidies for renewable energy technologies at huge

8 R. Hursthouse, 'Normative Virtue Ethics', pp. 701–03.

expense, and potential financial risk, to the tax-payer (to take a deliberately specific example).

Despite her statement of the objection, Hursthouse thinks that this is an unfair characterisation of Virtue Ethics. Hursthouse suggests that Virtue Ethics provides guidance in the form of "v-rules". These are guiding rules of the form "do what is honest" or "avoid what is envious".[9] These rules may not be specific, but they do stand as guidance across lots of different moral situations. Whether or not you believe that this level of guidance is suitable for a normative moral theory is a judgment that you should make yourself and then defend.

9. Objection: Clashing Virtues

Related to the general objection from lack of guidance, a developed objection may question how we are supposed to cope with situations in which virtues seem to clash. Courageous behaviour may, in certain cases, mean a lack of friendliness; generosity may threaten modesty. In these situations, the suggestion to "be virtuous" may again seem to be unhelpfully vague.

To this particular objection, the Aristotelian virtue ethicist can invoke the concept of practical wisdom and suggest that the skilled and virtuous person will appropriately respond to complex moral situations. A Formula One car, for example, will be good when it has both raw speed and delicate handling and it is up to the skilled engineer to steer a path between these two virtues. So too a person with practical wisdom can steer a path between apparently clashing virtues in any given situation. Virtue ethicists have no interest in the creation of a codified moral rule book covering all situations and instead put the onus on the skill of the virtuous person when deciding how to act. Again, whether this is a strength or weakness is for you to decide and defend.

10. Objection: Circularity

An entirely different objection to Aristotelian Virtue Ethics is based on a concern regarding logical circularity. According to Aristotle, the following statements seem to be correct:

1. An act is virtuous if it is an act that a virtuous person would commit in that circumstance.
2. A person is virtuous when they act in virtuous ways.

9 *Ibid.*

This, however, looks to be circular reasoning. If virtuous actions are understood in terms of virtuous people, but virtuous people are understood in terms of virtuous actions, then we have unhelpfully circular reasoning.

Julia Annas (1946–) responds to this apparent problem by arguing that there is nothing dangerously circular in this reasoning because it is simply a reflection of how we learn to develop our virtuous dispositions.[10] Annas suggests the analogy of piano-playing:

1. Great piano playing is what great pianists do.
2. A pianist is great when he "does" great piano playing.

In this case, there does not seem to be any troubling circularity in reasoning. It is not the case that whatever a great pianist plays will be great, but rather that great pianists have the skills to make great music. So too it is with virtues, for virtuous people are not virtuous just because of their actual actions but because of who they are and how their actions are motivated. It is their skills and character traits that mean that, in practice, they provide a clear guide as to which actions are properly aligned with virtues. Thus, if we wish to decide whether or not an act is virtuous we can assess what a virtuous person would do in that circumstance, but this does not mean that what is virtuous is determined by the actions of a specifically virtuous individual. The issue is whether or not a person, with virtuous characteristics in the abstract, would actually carry that action out. Virtuous people are living and breathing concrete guides, helping us to understand the actions associated with abstract virtuous character dispositions.

11. Objection: Contribution to *Eudaimonia*

The final distinct objection to Aristotelian Virtue Ethics considered in this chapter stems from the Aristotelian claim that living virtuously will contribute to our ability to secure a *eudaimon* life. A challenge to this view may be based on the fact that certain dispositions may seem to be virtuous but may not actually seem to contribute to our flourishing or securing the good life.

As an example of this possible objection in practice, consider the following. Shelley is often described as generous to a fault and regularly dedicates large amounts of her time to helping others to solve problems at considerable cost, in terms of both time and effort, to herself. Working beyond the limits that can reasonably be expected of her, we may wish to describe Shelley as virtuous given her generous personality. However, by working herself so hard for others, we may wonder if Shelley is unduly limiting *her own* ability to flourish.

10 J. Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*.

Responses to this initial statement of the objection are not hard to imagine. We may say that Shelley has either succumbed to a vice of excess and is profligate with her time rather than generous, or we may accept that she is generous rather than profligate and accept the uncomfortable conclusion and say that this virtuous character trait is helping her to flourish. This second claim may seem more plausible if we ruled out a description of Shelley wasting her time.

Still, this objection may stand up if you can envisage a situation in which someone could be properly described as rash rather than courageous or wasteful rather than generous and, because of these traits, actually be contributing to their own flourishing. You should consider your own possible cases if you seek to support this general objection.

12. Moral Good and Individual Good

For Aristotle, moral goodness and individual goodness may seem to be intimately linked. After all, a virtuous person will be charitable and friendly etc. and as a result of these characteristics and dispositions will both advance their own journey towards *eudaimonia* and make life better for others. Hedonism (which claims that pleasure is the only source of well-being — see Chapter 1), as a rival theory attempting to outline what is required for well-being, might be thought to fail because it downplays the importance of acting in accordance with reason, so hedonists do not therefore live according to their *telos* or true function.

Aristotle says of his ideally virtuous person that they will have a unified psychology — that their rational and non-rational psychologies will speak with one voice. On the contrary, the non-virtuous person will have a psychology in conflict between their rational and non-rational elements. In considering who has the better life from their own individual perspectives — the happy Hedonist or the Aristotelian virtuous person — you should again form your own reasoned judgment.

It is important to note, as we conclude this chapter, that Aristotle does not suggest that living a virtuous life is sufficient to guarantee a state of *eudaimonia* for a person. External factors such as poverty, disease or untimely death may scupper a person's advance towards *eudaimonia*. However, for Aristotle, being virtuous is necessary for the achievement of *eudaimonia*; without the development of virtues it is impossible for a person to flourish even if they avoid poverty, disease, loneliness etc.

SUMMARY

Aristotelian Virtue Ethics is very different in nature to the other act-centred normative moral theories considered in this book. Whether this, in itself, is a virtue or a vice is an issue for your own judgment. The lack of a codified and fixed moral rule book is something many view as a flaw, while others perceive it as the key strength of the theory. Some, meanwhile, will feel uncomfortable with Aristotle's teleological claims, differing from those who are happy to accept that there is an objectively good life that is possible for human beings. Regardless, there is little doubt that Aristotelian Virtue Ethics offers a distinct normative moral picture and that it is a theory worthy of your reflections.

COMMON STUDENT MISTAKES

- Understanding virtues as feelings.
- Misunderstanding the function of a human being (*eudaimonia*).
- Thinking that the Golden Mean always suggests "neutral" or "middling" actions.
- Incorrect differentiation between voluntary, involuntary and non-voluntary actions.
- Claiming that Virtue Ethics offers no guidance whatsoever in moral situations.
- Claiming that Virtue Ethics is uninterested in actions.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

1. Who has the better life — the happy hedonist or the virtuous individual?
2. Are the virtues fixed and absolute? Or can virtues be relative to culture and time?
3. Is becoming moral a skill? Is morality based on "knowing that" or "knowing how"?
4. Can Virtue Ethics offer useful guidance?

5. Is the Golden Mean a useful way of working out virtuous characteristics?
6. Are some virtues more important than others? Why?
7. Can you think of a virtue that does not contribute to *eudaimonia*?
8. Can you think of something that contributes to *eudaimonia* that is not a virtue?
9. If there is no purpose to life, is there any point in subscribing to Aristotelian Virtue Ethics?
10. What should you do if virtues seem to clash when faced with different possible actions?
11. Who might count as virtuous role models and why?
12. Do human beings have a *telos* or proper function?

KEY TERMINOLOGY

Act-centred	Phronesis
Agent-centred	Virtue
Dispositions	*Telos*
Eudaimonia	Golden mean

References

Annas, Julia, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by William David Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), freely available at http://sacred-texts.com/cla/ari/nico/index.htm

Hursthouse, Rosalind, 'Normative Virtue Ethics', in *Ethical Theory*, ed. by Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 701–09.

Panin, Ivan, *Thoughts* (Grafton: Ivan Panin, 1887), freely available at https://ia601405.us.archive.org/8/items/thoughts00panigoog/thoughts00panigoog.pdf