5 STUDY UNIT 4: GREEKS II – PLATO AND ARISTOTLE'S THEORETICAL ETHICS

Learning Outcomes

When you have completed this study unit, you should be able to:

- describe what ethics is
- list and describe the major questions and themes in Western ethical theory
- give a critical account of Socrates's ethical theory
- outline and critically evaluate Plato's conception of ethics
- explain and evaluate Aristotle's approach to ethics

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 What is ethics?

Ethical theory is concerned, primarily, with the question of what constitutes (morally) right and wrong action. More specifically, it inquiries into the theoretical possibility of establishing the principles, assumptions and values that inform our moral conduct. As a theoretical enquiry into the nature of right and wrong action, the ethical theorist seeks to discover the normative or regulative basis of our moral actions by examining our conception of moral duty and obligation, our sense of right and wrong and, in certain instances, our sense of good and evil.

Even though the discipline of ethics is primarily of a theoretical nature, it would be misleading to suppose that it is one of those fields of philosophical enquiry that is "up in the clouds". On the contrary, ethics seeks to establish the principles, values and assumptions that are implicitly presupposed in our ordinary, everyday moral life. Such principles then become the basis for evaluating our moral experience. In the final analysis, it is only to the extent that such principles and assumptions can be shown to have a bearing on our ordinary moral experience that we are willing to be persuaded. It is for this reason that certain ethicists are of the opinion that there is more to ethics than simply providing a normative basis for our notions of right and wrong. Such ethicists claim that the question of right and wrong cannot be separated from questions of human goodness or the "good life". This focus on the "good life" emphasises the concrete nature of ethics as a discipline which confronts the individual in his or her every day, existential situation as a "real" person faced with various moral dilemmas which are not always easy to solve. From this perspective one can understand why the question of the "good life" has invariably been linked with questions regarding the "true" purpose of human existence.

According to this approach, the ethical questions of right and wrong are determined by our view of life. And, if such a view is something along the lines of: "human beings are rational beings", or, "we (Christians) are all God's children", the situation can become oppressive for those who do not share our particular worldview. It is very easy to assume that rationality or reasonableness means the same thing to all people.

For certain people, it is irrational (because it is immoral) under any circumstances to take another person's life, because, they argue, life is sacred. In this example we can clearly see that the sense of rationality regarding conduct has its roots in the values that inform people's lives. The challenge for the ethical theorist lies in determining how to proceed in a multicultural society such as ours, where our sense of right and wrong is rooted in different cultural traditions. Are moral questions ultimately reducible to the cultural values and traditions that inform them, or can we still provide a more universal basis for our moral actions? These are just a few of the questions that we are currently faced within the field of ethical theory.

We often tend to confuse the business of the ethical theorist with that of the moralist. It is therefore important to bear in mind that the moralist is primarily concerned with the quality of moral life in his or her community. This concern usually translates into various forms of exhortation, censure, persuasion and prescription, aimed at changing people's lives in accordance with the moralist's set of beliefs and system of values.

The ethical theorist, on the other hand, is more concerned with providing standards for action based on a critical examination and evaluation of the underlying assumptions and principles governing our present moral lives. Thus the ethical theorist is not really concerned with converting others to a particular point of view; instead, she is primarily concerned with trying to understand “why we do the things that we do”.

5.2 What Are The Major Questions And Themes In Western Ethical Theory?

5.2.1 The Greek tradition: what is the highest Good?

Within the Greek tradition, the central focus is the question of the highest Good (or moral excellence or perfection). The possibility of moral perfection is linked to the possibility of establishing the appropriate political institutions for the pursuit of the highest Good. From the Greek perspective, ethics and politics are inseparable.

Within ancient Greek culture, ethics was conceptualised as relating to the “good life", which was mainly associated with the nature and pursuit of human happiness.

Aristotle, for example, was of the opinion that ethics, which focuses on the question “How should I live?", cannot be approached independently of the question of the highest Good, or that which is the noblest and most worthy purpose of human existence. For Aristotle, human happiness is the highest Good, and the ethical question of “How should I live?" cannot be divorced from the possibility of living a life aimed at attaining happiness of the highest intellectual or spiritual order.
On the Aristotelian account, our understanding of the good life determines how we should live, and the pursuit of the highest Good in accordance with the highest faculty in human beings: the faculty of reason. The pursuit of happiness is therefore a rational activity made possible by the rational “nature of human beings".

5.2.2 Ethics in the Judeo-Christian tradition: how is moral conduct to be defined?

The Christian thinker adds to the Greek tradition the notion of love, defined in terms of compassion and sensitivity to suffering. But, in the Christian tradition, unlike the Greek tradition, there is a clear separation between the ethical and political.

The supremacy of the authority of the church over the authority of the state, resulting from a Christian worldview, has meant that the question of ethics and morality has invariably been connected with Christian values.
In the Judeo-Christian tradition, “God" is the central figure. Thus ethical life within this tradition is based on such principles as righteousness before God, love of God and love of one's neighbour. Saint Augustine (354-430 CE), for example, bases his ethical teachings on the Christian creed as set forth in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, where God is characterised as the omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent Creator of humankind and universe. The human being, who is situated (spiritually) somewhere between the angels and the “lower" forms of life, is blessed with a free will, and therefore with the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil. According to Augustine, the central purpose of life is love.

Thomas Aquinas, like Augustine, has a vertical view of life in which God who is believed to be in heaven is in direct control of human beings who are bound to the earth. According to Aquinas, our ultimate destiny as human beings is to be united with God in heaven. He (Aquinas) argues that, through philosophical reflection on our human nature, we can understand ourselves on certain moral laws that are part of us. For Aquinas, these moral laws are based on inclinations which are an integral part of our nature. He therefore calls his ethical theory “natural law".

5.2.3 Ethics in the modern tradition: how is moral conduct to be defined?

5.2.3.1 Consequentialist ethics

In terms of this approach, the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by the value of its consequences. Utilitarianism, conceived of as right action insofar as it contributes to the general happiness of the greatest majority of people, is the most popular version of consequentialist ethics. This approach was made popular by the British philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-73). The utilitarian claims that right action must be understood in terms of human good or wellbeing, which is conceptualised as pleasure, desire-satisfaction or, more generally, happiness. Right action is accordingly defined as action that leads to the greatest balance of happiness or pleasure over pain.

5.2.3.2 Non-consequentialist or deontological ethics

According to this approach, the rightness of an action is not determined on the basis of the possible value of its consequences, but on the basis of the value or moral significance of the action itself. In contrast to the consequentialist, whose actions are aimed at bringing about the best state of affairs (happiness), the deontologist is more inclined to concentrate on actions that are generally considered to be wrong for example, promise-breaking.
This approach challenges the consequentialist approach in that it cannot accept that the rightness of an action is determined by the wellbeing of the majority. Thus the deontologist claims that it is wrong to let one innocent person die so that two or more persons may live, since the act of murder in itself is wrong. The deontological approach to ethics is associated with the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

5.3 SOCRATES (470-399 BC)

Socrates was born in 470 BCE in the Greek capital, Athens. His beliefs are known only through the writings of his pupils Plato and Xenophon (see study unit 2). He was indicted for impiety and corruption of youth and was sentenced to death. In 399 BCE, at the age of 71, Socrates drank the deadly hemlock (poison) in compliance with the death sentence imposed by the court.

Socrates is one of the most significant, but also one of the most enigmatic, figures in the history of philosophical thought. His significance stems from the fact that he has influenced the thought of one of the greatest philosophers of all time: Plato. As we have already pointed out, Socrates never wrote anything so we have to rely on the reconstruction of thinkers such as Plato for an account of the Socratic teaching. In the Dialogues written by Plato (with the exception of The Laws), Socrates is the main character. This situation presents us with the problem of not really being able to identify and distinguish the thinking of the historical Socrates within the writings of Plato, simply because we don't really know where Socrates ends and Plato begins. What we do associate with Socrates, however, is the question-and-answer method of philosophising (dialect) which he used in conjunction with his pretence of ignorance (known as Socratic irony). This pretence of ignorance enabled him to question the knowledge of others (usually experts in their field) on the traditional virtues of Greek culture: piety *(Euthyphro),* temperance *(Charmides),* and friendship *(Lysis).*

It was Socrates's belief in the objective existence of these virtues, the knowledge of which was, in principle, attainable within a process of rational discourse, that set him in conflict with the thoughts of one of the most celebrated thinkers of the 5th century BCE, Protagaros (490-420 BC), who claimed that “man is the measure of all things''. This teaching introduced a relativistic approach to ethics, and the question of right and wrong ultimately assumed an individualistic approach in which virtue was no longer a subject of rational inquiry, but a matter of individual taste or preference.

In his search for a more objective and universal basis for ethics, Socrates turned away from the naturalistic speculation of his predecessors, such as Thales (6th century BC), Heraclitus (500 BC) and Parmenides (480 BC), whose primary concern was to establish the ultimate nature of reality. More significant for Socrates instead was the teaching of Pythagoras (550-500 BC) from whom he appropriated the religious notion of “the soul'' or “the mind'' as a rational faculty which attests to the uniqueness of the human being. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that we learn from Socrates that the highest duty of the individual resides in the “improvement of the soul'', which takes the form of a process of rational enquiry, argumentation, and discourse because, for Socrates “the unexamined life is not worth living”.

For Socrates, virtue is teachable, hence his credo “Virtue is knowledge'', but part of the teaching process is to uncover the problematic nature of the principles and assumptions on which our moral actions are based.
Even though Socrates's search for universal standards did not produce the desired results (given his self-professed “philosophy of ignorance''), he did provide his contemporaries with a new sense of purpose guided by the principles of rational conversation and enquiry. His endless questioning came at a time when Athens was in need of political stability, hence the charges of corruption brought against him.

Socrates's inability to provide the answers to the questions about the general principles of ethics, together with the underlying belief that the ethical theorist must provide a rational basis for the principles of moral conduct, provided the impetus for Plato to make his contribution to the Greek tradition of ethics. Unlike Socrates, who depended on his “inner voice” or “divine sign'' when he could not provide a rational account of ethical principles from a universal perspective, Plato believed that the question of ethics (the question of right and wrong) cannot be separated from the political question of justice.

Point to Ponder

Consider the following extract about Jesus's crucifixion and explain the similarities between the trial of Jesus and the trial of Socrates.

A physician testifies about the crucifixion “After the arrest in the middle of the night, Jesus was next brought before the Sanhedrin and Caiaphas, the High Priest; it is here that the first physical trauma was inflicted on him. A soldier struck Jesus across the face for remaining silent when questioned by Caiaphas. The palace guards then blindfolded him and mockingly taunted him to identify them as they each passed by, spat upon him, and struck him in the face. In the early morning, battered and bruised, dehydrated, and exhausted from a sleepless night, Jesus is taken across the Praetorium of the Fortress Antonia, the seat of government of the Procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate. You are, of course, familiar with Pilate's action in attempting to pass responsibility to Herod Antipas ... It was in response to the cries of the mob that Pilate ordered Bar-Abbas to be released and condemned Jesus to the scourging and crucifixion.'' (By Dr CT Davis, Founder and President of the Excellent Trinity Christian School in Mesa Arizona) The Review of the NEWS, April 14, 1976.

Feedback: Socrates, like Jesus, was accused of corrupting others and thus threatening the state. His method of questioning his opponents in the search for truth earned him enemies in the ruling elite and this led to the accusations made against him. The way in which Socrates helped a slave boy to recover his knowledge of geometry led to the charge that Socrates corrupted the Athenian youth. All these accusations, none of which could be proved, led to Socrates's trial and death. As the extract shows, like Socrates, Jesus was given no real opportunity to defend himself. As in the case of Socrates, Jesus's execution was orchestrated by a group of powerful people who wanted to see him dead. And, like Socrates, Jesus was not given a proper trial. Socrates was given the option of ceasing to do philosophy or face the death sentence. He showed his commitment to what he was doing by choosing death. In the same way, Jesus showed his commitment to his message for humankind by choosing death rather than asking for pardon.

Further Reading: Plato. 1980. **Apology.** Plato. 1972. **Phaedo.**

5.4 PLATO (428-347 BC)

Plato was born into one of the most successful and distinguished of Athenian families, and this gave him the opportunity to thoroughly absorb Athenian culture of the time. There is a belief that his early training must have included ingredients of Athenian culture in the arts, politics, and philosophy.
Plato's ethical system takes the form of an enquiry into the nature of the “highest Good''. Unlike his mentor Socrates, for whom ethical enquiry takes the form of an attempt to provide definitions of the various Greek virtues (such as piety, courage, and friendship), Plato goes one step further in that he seeks to establish the common basis for all such virtues. He refers to this common basis as the “highest Good''.

Plato's concern with the “highest Good'' represents an attempt to overcome the Socratic position of universal ignorance concerning the essential nature of human goodness.

You will remember that Socrates's position is based on the assumption that, while we may be able to recognise certain moral qualities in others, as long as we lack conceptual clarity on the essential nature of such qualities, we cannot really have knowledge of human goodness as such. Hence the Socratic creed of universal ignorance. In order to overcome this impasse in Socrates's position, Plato reinterprets the Socratic notion of ignorance in terms of forgetfulness. He thus develops his own theory in which he tries to demonstrate that knowledge is just a matter of recollecting or remembering the things that which we once knew, but which, as a result of our human frailties, we have been forgotten. Plato's response to Socratic ignorance is therefore his theory of recollection. In the Meno, Plato attempts to validate his theory of recollection by posing a series of questions to a slave with no formal education. The lesson to be learned from this exercise is the significance of logic and the process of deductive reasoning. Thus one can logically deduce that if a = b, and b = c, then c = a.

Plato uses this form of reasoning as the basis for his theory of recollection which, in turn, provides the answer to the Socratic position of universal ignorance. Plato argues that Socratic ignorance is based on an implicit desire for knowledge of the highest Good. Plato's ethical theory is thus based on the assumption that humankind is potentially omniscient, and that this potential omniscience makes possible moral perfection, which coincides with insight or knowledge of the Form or Idea of the Good. Here we can see that, for Plato, the discipline of ethics cannot be separated from either the discipline of metaphysics (which deals with the ultimate nature of reality) or epistemology (which deals with the status of our knowledge regarding that reality). In his metaphysical theory, Plato argues for the existence of Ideas of Beauty, Courage, Truth, etcetera, as if these Ideas or Forms enjoy an objective existence (that is, independently of the human mind), with the Form of the Good being superior in status to the other Forms. The possibility of our knowledge of these Forms depends on a stringent process of philosophical education in which “the mind” or “the soul” seeks to be released from its mortal or temporal limitations in order to enter the eternal realm of absolute knowledge of “the Good’’ the ultimate objective of all moral behaviour.

It is worth mentioning at this stage that Plato conceptualises the notion of perfection in a manner similar to that of the Christian tradition. He bases his ethical theory on a belief in transcendent (divine) realm of eternal bliss. This hope of immortality lies at the basis of every truly universal religion. However, the Greeks, unlike the Hebrews, had no messianic expectations, and so they turned to poets, and not prophets, for their moral instruction. But, given his faith in the capabilities of a well-trained philosopher, Plato believed that the task of moral instruction would ultimately become the responsibility of the philosopher, for whom rational insight was superior to all forms of mysticism, especially that which claimed to be based on divine inspiration. But then we have to ask: What is the nature of the knowledge claims assumed to be capable of accounting for that (Reality) which transcends the finite condition of human beings? Or, as Socrates expresses it in the Meno:

> But how will you look for something when you don't in the least know what it is? How on earth are you going to set up something you don't know as the object of your search? To put it another way, even if you come up right against it, how will you know that what you have found is the thing you didn't know (1961:81d-e).

In Plato's system, the key to the highest Good can be found in the Orphic- Pythagorean doctrine of a purified soul, free from the limitations imposed on “the mind” by the body. In the *Phaedo* Plato writes (1972:67a-b):

> It seems to me that, as long as we are alive, we shall continue closest to knowledge if we avoid as much as we can all contact and association with the body, except when they are absolutely ready, and instead of allowing ourselves to become infected with its nature, purify ourselves from it until God himself gives us deliverance. In this way, by keeping ourselves uncontaminated by the follies of the body, we shall probably reach the company of others like ourselves and gain direct knowledge of all that is pure and uncontaminated, that is, presumably of truth. For one who is not pure himself to attain to the realm of purity would no doubt be a breach of universal justice.

Plato thus puts his faith in the soul or mind, which seeks to dwell in the Parmenidean realm of being, as opposed to the body, which he relegates to the inferior realm of becoming, as propounded by Heraclitus. What are the implications of his speculation about the previous existence of the soul (that is, as existing in a disembodied condition in which it knows everything)? The main implication is that Plato views our moral existence on earth in terms of abstaining from physical pleasure. In certain respects, his ethics resemble the fundamental assumptions of the Hindu religion, where a clear distinction is made between the body and the soul, the temporal and the eternal existence of human beings, in which the selfish interests of the ego or the “I” are overcome in the discovery of an immortal primal Self. For Plato, we are limited by the imperfections of the body in which the soul is temporally incarnated. But the experience of death holds out the promise of reincarnation, an experience that can repeat itself until the person is considered worthy of regaining a state of perfection, free from all bodily impediments. According to Plato, although human beings have fallen from a state of perfection, this does not mean that we are condemned to a life of moral imperfection. It is through a process of recollection that we can regain our former state of perfection. It is in this context that Plato speaks of knowledge and virtue as coinciding with a direct insight into the highest Good.

By assuming the existence of the Form of the Good, Plato places his faith in the existence of a Higher Self, the attainment of which is the potential of every individual. The striving for knowledge and truth cannot therefore be separated from the striving for human goodness or perfection. It is this striving that makes the individual lose his or her identity as a separate being on earth because alienation, for Plato, means being cut off from your “true” Self. In the *Republic,* he writes (1955: 508 d-e):

> When (the soul) is firmly fixed on the domain where truth and reality shine resplendent it apprehends and knows them and appears to possess reason, but when it inclines to that direction which is mingled with darkness, the world of becoming and passing away, it opines only and its edge is blunted, and it shifts its opinions hither and thither, and again seems as if it lacked reason ... This reality that gives its truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower, you must say is the idea of the good, and you must conceive it as being the cause of knowledge, and of truth insofar as known.

For Plato, the search for the highest Good is synonymous with the search for the meaning of life; it is a search for coherence in the light of which the passing reality of our temporal existence can be explained.

In the Republic(Book vii), Plato likens the human condition to a state of imprisonment within a dark cave, where the only source of light comes from a fire behind us, and the only source of life are the shadows cast by the firelight on the wall before us. In this condition we are not aware of the illusory nature of our condition until we turn our heads away from the shadows before us. Behind us we see a procession of men and woman walking back and forth before the firelight. We then recognise the shadows on the wall for what they are an illusion. At this stage of the allegory, the prisoner is entirely free until he has finally left the cave and, once outside, he realises that it is the sun that is the source of all light and all life. In the allegory, the sun is compared to the Form of the Good. It is only once we behold the sun and realise its ultimate significance in our lives that we reach the condition of moral perfection which, for Plato, is the true meaning of our lives.

As Plato he puts it:

> This image then ... we must apply as a whole to all that has been said. Likening the region revealed through sight to the habituation of the prison, and the light of the fire in it to the power of the sun. And if you assume that the ascent and the contemplation of the things above is the soul's ascension to the intelligible region, you will not miss my surmise, since this you desire to hear. But God knows whether it is true. But, at any rate, my dream as it appears to me is that, in the region of the known, the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of good, and when seen it must needs point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause for all things, of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light, and the author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private and public life must have caught sight of this (1955:517b-c).

Plato's vision of the potential perfection of humankind in and through reason causes him to turn his attention to a question that has become the central focus of political theory: What is justice? With this question in mind, Plato seeks to spell out the practical (political) implications of his ethical theory.

In concluding this section, it is important to bear in mind that, for Plato, and indeed for Aristotle as well, the notion of the highest Good is not just based on a particular understanding of historical tradition, but also on a particular interpretation of “human nature''. Plato has been accused by Aristotle of being too idealistic in his claims regarding the moral potential of human beings in general for whom, the expectation to act morally is of greater importance than the pursuit of the highest Good for its own sake. Plato does indeed distinguish between the rational, the emotional, and physical needs of the individual but, for him, the meaning of life lies in the challenge of subordinating our emotional and physical desires to the rational component of “the mind'' or “the soul, because it is only when reason is allowed to prevail that the individual is in harmony with him/ herself, with others, and the cosmos, the harmony of which ought to be reflected in the life of every human being. It is from this perspective that Plato seeks to develop his principle of justice in political life, where justice ultimately becomes synonymous with harmony ``within'' (ethically) and “without” (politically).

Point to ponder

Reflect on the following newspaper article and analyse the moral of the story within the context of the allegory of Plato's Cave. (If you remember, in this allegory, the prisoners in the cave mistake shadows for reality, just as we do, according to Plato, when we try to rely on the senses rather than on reason.)

In the following excerpt former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan was quoted as saying, ahead of World Aids Day, that many political leaders still simply do not care enough to fight the disease, which has killed 28 million people since it was first reported among homosexual men in the United States in 1981:

> "I am not winning the war because I don't think the leaders of the world are engaged enough", Annan said. "I feel angry, I feel distressed, I feel helpless ... because I live in a world where we have the means ... to be able to help all these patients, but what is lacking is the political will. ... Access to anti-retrovirals around the world is minimal in the poverty-stricken countries worst affected by the virus; of the 4,2 million people who need them in sub-Saharan Africa, only an estimated 50 000 get supplies, health officials say. Experts say the WHO will also promote the provision of emergency response teams to guide the purchase and financing of anti-retrovirals for poor countries where treatment is sparse. The United Nations says the epidemic, fuelled by drug abuse and unprotected sex, is spreading in India, China, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Vietnam, Russia, Ukraine, Estonia and Latvia." (Sowetan 2003, December 1)

Feedback: Elected political leaders are role models for many people. This means that the behaviour of these ordinary people is easily influenced by how their leaders approach critical issues that influence ordinary people's lives. If political leaders adopt the "I don't care attitude" in dealing with HIV and AIDS, their followers are likely to follow suit. The reason for this is simple. Many people believe that political leaders, and in particular, the political leader of the party they voted for, cannot and should not be questioned. It is this kind of unquestioning attitude that makes the people prisoners of their own circumstances (their "caves"). If my leader says that there is no such thing as AIDS, why should I take care of my behaviour? If he/she says AIDS does not exist, then it does not exist.

It is in a situation like this that the people "mistake shadows for reality" and the end result, as in this case, is death. If there is no AIDS-related death in your family or community, do not assume that AIDS does not exist or that it belongs to specific communities/groups. If you do, you may find yourself trapped in a cave of your own thinking. It is important for us to use our power of reason when it comes to what is happening around us rather than to rely on untested assumptions or, worse still, to simply rely on what other people tell us. Plato argues that we are prisoners living in a world of untested assumptions and we are not aware of how much we are missing. "We are living in the dark, both literally and figuratively", he says.

Further Reading: Plato, 1972. Phaedo; Plato, 1961. Meno; Plato, 1955. The Republic (part vii).

5.5 ARISTOTLE (384-322 BC)

Aristotle's ethical position can be found in major works such as his *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudaemian Ethics*. Nicomachean Ethics is especially important for our purposes since Aristotle himself wrote it in conjunction with another major work, Politics. These two books must therefore be seen as part of a single project: an investigation of human conduct or "practical reason".

The notion of "practical reason" is especially important in the Greek tradition of ethical and political thought, and it is especially in Aristotle's work that the significance of ``practical reason'' finds its fullest expression. You will remember that Socrates introduced the method of "question and answer", and that Plato developed Socrates's "conversational approach" into the "dialogues".

In these dialogues, Socrates sought to defend and develop the integrity of the “spoken word'', that is, reason in dialogue as a search that includes every interlocutor as an equal partner in dialogue with others. The implication of this method is that every opinion that is expressed is seen as an important contribution to the general search for “Truth”. This “dialectical process” is thought to be a rational process in which a guiding sense of “truth”, as it finds expression in various opinions and arguments, ultimately leads to the discovery of “Truth”. So, for Socrates and Plato, the rationality of dialogue (critical discussion and argument) is the condition of the possibility of knowledge.

But in moral- political matters, however, the Greek philosophers embraced a conception of “theoretical” rationality (episteme) that applies to the natural sciences. This form of rationality differs significantly from both the “practical rationality” (praxis) that applies to the moral-political aspects of human conduct, and from the “technical'' rationality (techne) that applies to craftspeople (for example, the skills needed by the artisan to build a house). The Greeks therefore hold that the rationality of scientific knowledge must at all times be distinguished from the rationality of moral- political conduct. Scientific knowledge is therefore different in status from “practical” knowledge. It is for this reason that Aristotle seeks to base his ethics on generalisations that derive from an inductive process of reasoning, that is, reasoning based on empirical observation rather than deductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning, you will remember, is based on logical abstraction and seeks the precision and necessity of mathematical and scientific reasoning in real life. Furthermore, the advocates of this form of abstraction believe that there is a realm of knowledge ``above'' the heads of ordinary men and women.

In his ethical investigations Aristotle, like his predecessor Plato, seeks to define the highest Good. In the introductory chapter of the Nicomachean Ethics, he defines the highest Good as “that which all things aim at” (1947:109 4a). Aristotle assumes that “there is some one End which we desire for its own sake ... (namely) ... the Chief Good (1094a). Aristotle writes further:

> If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake ... clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right? (1947:109a)

According to Aristotle, in our moral lives we have an end in view, namely the “the achievement of the Good Man” (1947:1094b). Aristotle, who fully realised that few would take issue with the assumption that human happiness is the highest Good, is nevertheless equally aware that happiness means different things to different people. This does not deter him, however, because he believes that the various activities of human beings can be traced back to three distinct generalizable elements within the human personality structure. Here, Aristotle distinguishes between the rational dimension (which, as the highest faculty, constitutes the unique character of human existence) on the one hand, and the emotional and physical dimensions of human life on the other. The emotional and physical dimensions, as important as they are for the survival of human life, cannot be exalted to the same status as the rational dimension because we share these dimensions with other forms of life.

For Aristotle, therefore, any attempt to define the highest Good must take into account the essential “nature of human beings”, which derives its uniqueness from its capacity to reason. This rational capacity presupposes the possibility of education for the sake of moral excellence; it also presupposes the possibility of deliberation and free choice. Virtue is a matter of exercising deliberate choice.

It is determined furthermore by reason, and a person acts wisely when he or she opts for “the least of the evils as the safest plan’’ (1947:1109 a). Aristotle's argument here is based on a profound conviction on his part that it is “hard to be good" and “goodness is rare" (1947:1109 a).

The various types of moral excellence admired by the Greeks, friendship, fairness, self-discipline, and courage, are also accepted by Aristotle. But he also wants to emphasise that “perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of the good man is his seeing the truth in every instance, he being in fact, the rule and measure of these matters" (1947:1113a). With regard to the question of truth, Aristotle emphasises the importance of (i) friendship and (ii) the contemplative life.

5.5.1 Friendship

Aristotle distinguishes between two basic types of friendship. Firstly, he identifies the type of friendship where the “object of our friendship is indeed beloved in that he is the man that he is" (1947:1156a). Secondly, he identifies friendship as a form of strategy aimed at one person's advantage. Aristotle claims that the very young and the very old are incapable of true friendship. This argument is based on the assumption that the young are unduly driven by passion and, this being the case, the object of their friendship will change in accordance with their changing passions. The elderly, on the other hand, are more interested in what is profitable to them. Using the principle of “the golden mean", Aristotle proceeds to argue that true friendship exists between these two extremes where we will find those who are good and whose friendship is based on their common identification with goodness as the only criterion of friendship. In this regard, “the good alone can be friends" (1947:1157a), as a matter of “mutual confidence", for “requital of friendship is attended with moral choice" (1947:1157 b), as “the good, in loving their friend, love their own good" (1947:1157 b).

Furthermore, “good men, being stable in themselves, are also stable as regards others" (1947:1159 b), which is a prerequisite for the “communion" on which friendship is based. Aristotle also argues, rather controversially, that there can be no friendship between a “free man" and a “slave", because the slave is lacking in the “common humanity" that unites all “free men". It is also interesting to note that Aristotle explains the institutions of marriage in terms of friendship (1947:1160a-1161b) but, throughout his writings, the family is found to be “prior in order of time and more absolutely necessary than the community in general" (1947:1162a). The wife and husband have differentiated functions according to their gender in a friendship which “is thought to combine the profitable and the pleasurable ... (and) ... will be also based upon virtue if they are good people" (1947:1162a). A primary norm in social friendship is equality in economic terms. Aristotle believes that “the cobbler, for instance, gets an equivalent for his shoes according to a certain rate; and the weaver, and all others in like manner, a common measure, which is provided in money (1947:1163b-1164a).

Aristotle claims that “man” is a “social animal” (1947:1169b), and that “the happy man does need friends" (1947:1169 b). In addition, “virtue itself can be improved by practice, from living with the good" (1947:1169b-1170a). He believes that “living is in itself one of the things which is good and pleasant (for life constitutes something that is “whole", and whatever is such is also good).
This also implies that the good are pleased at the good fortune of their friends, and that the community of friendship makes it possible to do things in solidarity with others.

5.5.2 The contemplative life

According to Aristotle, true happiness is not found in physical pleasure, but in “the workings of excellence ... the highest principle which, in its own nature, is divine or the most divine of all internal principles''. Aristotle has no doubt that “it is contemplative'', for “since the intellect is the highest of our principles ... (it is evident) ... that the pursuit of science is thought to contain pleasures which are admirable for purity and permanence''. Aristotle argues that “pleasure must be, in some way, an ingredient in happiness ... (while) ... the self-sufficiency people speak of will attach chiefly to the contemplative working'' (1947:1177a). The “highest principle in us'' (which seems to make us like immortals) and “would seem to constitute each man's Self, is most truly man, (and is therefore) also the happiest’’ (1947:1178 a).

Aristotle believes that “in proportion as people possess the act of contemplation so far they also have the ability of being happy'' (1947: 1178b). This happiness is different from the kind of happiness that derives from physical pleasure, wealth, honour, health and nourishment. Aristotle seeks to justify his ethical theory by inviting his reader to examine his statements in the light of ``facts and actual life, and when these statements harmonise with facts we may accept them, and when they are at variance with them, we may conceive of them as mere theories” (1947:1178 a).

5.5.3 Summary

Nature, custom and teaching are all acknowledged as determining factors in the attainment of the good life. But while Aristotle acknowledges that private education has certain advantages over public education, such as individual attention, “the fact remains that generalities are the object matter of the sciences” (1180b). Aristotle feels that “political science” is wanting in this respect, for the “matters of statesmanship which the sophists profess to teach are not practised by themselves. This is “left to those actually engaged in it: and these might very well be thought to do it by some singular knack and by mere practice than by any intellectual process; for they can neither write nor speak on these matters'' (1181 a). According to Aristotle, correct judgment in statesmanship requires not only theory, but practice as well. It is this conviction that inclined him to the study of “human philosophy''. For Aristotle, this study means taking into account “what it means to be human''. The Aristotelian conception of ``human nature'' is one that views human beings as physical, emotional, and intellectual beings. But, in the final analysis, we are directed (as moral and political beings) by the education of the soul which, if it is allowed to function in accordance with the principle of reason, will lead to human happiness. For Aristotle, then, the experience of happiness is a product of reason, and not a product of the pleasures of the body. But for human beings to be happy, we must acknowledge the “sensuous” as well as the “spiritual” dimensions of the human personality.

5.6 Self-Assessment Questions

1. “Virtue is knowledge''. What do you think Socrates meant by this?

2. Do you agree with Socrates that the purpose of life is “to care about the greatest improvement of the soul”?

3. Explain the Socratic notion of “the soul”.

4. How would you explain Socrates's reliance on a “divine sign'' or “inner voice”?

5. To what extent does Plato integrate traditional religious beliefs into his ethical system?

6. Discuss critically the implication of the Socratic-Platonic argument that “knowledge is virtue”.

7. Give a critical account of Plato's theory of “human nature”.

8. Explain briefly what Aristotle means by the “contemplative life”.

9. Compare and contrast Aristotle's ethical theory with that of Plato's.

10. Discuss the significance of the distinction between “theoretical reason” and “practical reason”.

6 STUDY UNIT 5: MEDIEVAL ETHICS [AUGUSTINE AND AQUINAS]

Learning Outcomes

When you have completed this study unit, you should be able to:

- Give an account of Saint Augustine's ethical approach which depicts God as the chief good of humankind.
- Give an account of Thomas Aquinas's ethical theory as “natural law”.
- Evaluate the respective merits of these two influential figures in the Judeo-Christian tradition

6.1 St AUGUSTINE (354-430 CE)

Augustine was born in Tagaste in the African province of Numidia. His father was a pagan, but his mother was a devout Christian and it is likely that it was his mother who was the deciding influence in his life. In 396 CE he became Bishop of Hippo, the seaport near Tagaste. The driving force of his philosophical activity was his intense concern over his own, personal destiny.

6.1.1 Introduction

Augustine's concern for his personal destiny prompted him to raise critical questions about himself and humanity in general. What puzzled him was the ever- present problem of moral evil. It was difficult for Augustine to explain the existence of evil in human experience. Augustine, like many others, found it difficult to reconcile Christianity's portrayal of a good creator God with the fact of evil. If God is a loving God, how can he allow evil to rule “a world that a perfectly good God had created"? Because he could find no answer in the Christianity that he supported as a young man, Augustine turned to the Manichaeans. The Manichaeans were a group who claimed intellectual superiority over others. But, despite this attitude, the Manichaeans were sympathetic to some Christian views. They openly rejected “the basic monotheism of the old Testament and, with it, the doctrine that the Creator and Redeemer of man are one and the same” (Stumpf 1983:130).