Chapter 6: Virtue Ethics

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# Aristotle on the Virtuous Life

In the *Nicomachean Ethics,* **Aristotle** (the “Father” of logic, biology and lots of other stuff) defends a **virtue-based** theory of ethics. Like his teachers Plato and Socrates, Aristotle argues that it is generally in a person’s *own best interest* to be ethical. However, his theory is many ways much more nuanced and complex than are their accounts. Aristotle’s account of ethics was also one of the major influences on later “Western” ethical theories, including Roman (“Pagan”), Jewish, Christian, and Islamic ethics. Some of the ethical precepts that we now take to be “common sense” are originally explained and defended by Aristotle in this book.

## Eudaimonia and the Virtues

“Suppose, then, that there is some end of the things we pursue in our actions which we wish for because of itself, and because of which we wish for the other things; and (b) we do not choose everything because of something else, since (c) is we do, it will go on without limit, making desire empty and futile; then clearly (d) this end will be the good, i.e., the best good. Then surely knowledge of this good is also of great importance for the conduct of our lives, and if, like archers, we have a target to aim at, we are more likely to hit the right mark.” (Aristotle, Nich. Ethics 1094a18-22)

Aristotle begins by noting that every human activity or investigation has some *goal* or *end* that it aims to accomplish. For example, the end of medicine is “health”, the goal of shipbuilding is a “vessel”, and the goal of business is “wealth.” Other examples: the goal of most games and sports is to “defeat your opponent while following the rules”, while the goal of weight-lifting might be “to increase your strength.” Aristotle then notes that, while we value all of these goals, we value them in two different ways:

* We might value the goal or end only **instrumentally,** or insofar as it allows us to accomplish some other goal. For example, Aristotle thinks that most people value money only instrumentally.
* We might value the goal or end purely **intrinsically,** or for its own sake. Aristotle argues that we value **eudaimonia** (which means something like “true happiness” or “a fulfilled and successful life”) intrinsically. He argues that it would be nonsense to ask “Why do we value eudaimonia?” since there nothing “better” or “more basic” that could explain why we value eudaimonia.
* Aristotle thinks that, while everyone *wants* eudaimonia, people sometimes get confused on what it actually is, and what it would *really* mean to be happy. He thinks some people think that happiness is simply *physical pleasure,* and so they devote their lives to this (which often doesn’t end well for them). Somewhat better than this are those people who think that happiness has to do with *pride* or *social status* (“How will I look to other people?”) but Aristotle thinks this is still a mistake. Only those who aim at *wisdom* will be happy. One way of thinking about this: “eudaimonia” is the state you are in when you are lying on your death bed and can (accurately and honestly!) look back and say “I lived my life as best I was able to.”

**What is eudaimonia? And how do I get it?** Aristotle sees ethics as a “practical” discipline that aims to help us achieve eudaimonia:

**Step 1: Determine the “function” of a human.** Aristotle argues shows us that each class of living being has its own “function” or “purpose.” Plants, for example, merely seek nutrition and growth; while animals *also* feel pleasure and pain, which causes them to seek/avoid various things. Finally, humans are *rational* animals that, in addition to food and pleasure, want to live in communities of other reasonable beings.

**Step 2: So, a human’s goal (achieving eudaimonia) is to be a *good* rational animal.** From this, Aristotle concludes that achieving *eudaimonia* is a matter of perfecting our natures as rational, social beings. This will require developing both **intellectual virtues** (math, science, theoretical philosophy, etc.) and **moral virtues** (ethics). Where the former can be learned from books and discussion, the latter require *practice.*

## What is a Moral Virtue? How Do Virtues Relate to Ethics?

“[V]irtue of character is concerned with pleasures and pains. For it is pleasure that causes us to do base actions, and pain that causes us to abstain from fine ones. Hence we need to have had the appropriate upbringing—right from early youth, as Plato says—to make us find enjoyment or pain in the right things; for this is the correct education.” (Aristotle, Nich. Eth. 11049-13)

Aristotle thinks that “functioning well” (and thus achieving eudaimonia) requires cultivating the **virtues.** So what are virtues?

**Virtues are “habits” of acting well. They are NOT “natural instincts.”** Aristotle argues that we can become more virtuous by behaving virtuously; conversely, we can become less virtuous by behaving less virtuously. Because of this, it is clear that your parents, society, and religion will strongly influence what moral virtues you have as an adult. For Aristotle, this explains the close link between the moral virtues of a particular person and the *ethike* (roughly, “custom”) of the culture in which they live.

**Virtues require more than “doing the right thing.” They require you *practice* it. You must also do it for the right *reason* and with the right *emotion.*** For Aristotle, you don’t immediately become virtuous just by “thinking about it” (i.e., he doesn’t think reading this handout is going to help you too much). Instead, you become virtuous only when you have “internalized” the principle of acting correctly. For example, Aristotle thinks that that a virtuous person will eat an appropriate amount of food, since eating too much or too little will be unhealthy. However, the virtuous person (unlike, say, the person who has just started a diet this week) will have internalized this as a *habit—*he or she will intuitively “know” the correct amount to eat and won’t have to make too much of an effort to stay within this range. Moreover, if asked, “Why do you behave in this way?” the virtuous person will be able to account correctly for it in terms of rational life goals (i.e., “Because I want to be healthy” and not “Because I want to look like an underwear model”).

**By the time the “crisis” hits, it is already too late.** Aristotle thinks that most of the real “ethical choice” is done *before* we encounter crises. So, for example, Aristotle would emphasize that while one cannot *immediately* become a “healthy eater” by beginning a diet, but that one can *eventually* change one’s habits if one simply continues to eat healthily for long enough. Aristotle repeatedly emphasizes the idea that, by the time a “crisis” arrives (e.g., you are sitting in front of an entire pie, and are trying to decide whether to eat it), it is many cases “too late” to do anything about it (e.g., you may be “unable to resist” eating it). The same thing goes for moral virtues (the inveterate liar “can’t help” lying when everything is on the line; the coward is simply “overcome by fear”). The role of rationality in developing virtues comes in the many small moments *before* we find ourselves faced with stressful, make-or-break decisions (when emotions will take over).

The philosopher James Rachels has summarized this idea of **virtue** as “A trait of character, manifested in habitual action, that it is good for a person to have.”

## Virtues as the Median Between Two Extremes

After all this build-up, you might be wondering, “so just what is a virtue, anyway?” Aristotle has a ready answer for you: Every virtue is a mean (or median) between two opposed vices (**The Doctrine of the Mean)**. This simple theory is complicated a bit by the following facts:

1. **Every virtue is a median between two extreme vices. However, some vices are NOT simply extreme versions of virtues.** For example, moderation (in eating) is a virtue, whereas as gluttony and self-starvation are vices. The same thing holds for things like sexual desire and desire for safety. These involve different attitudes and behaviors toward food, which is something humans need to live. However, while cruelty is a vice, there is no corresponding virtue—there is simply no *reason* for human to intentionally inflict suffering on one another (in this sense, cruelty is very unlike the vices of gluttony, lust, or fear which correspond to “good” emotions taken too far).
2. **Not every virtue is equally distant from both vices.** Aristotle often refers to the virtues as a sort of “peak”, which emphasizes the fact that there may be a further/sharper descent down *one* side of the line than along the others. For example, Aristotle thinks that moderation in eating is (for most of us, though certainly not everyone) is closer to eating too little than it is too eating too much, and that bravery is closer to foolhardiness than it is to cowardice (since most of us are more inclined to run from danger than we are to simply ignore it altogether). Aristotle says that, in general, we ought to (a) try to figure out which vice we are more prone to and (b) aim to err on a bit the side of the *other* vice, in cases where we are forced to do so. This will, in the end, result in a more virtuous action.
3. **A person can be *more* or *less* virtuous, and for various reasons.** A truly **vicious** person doesn’t care about virtue at all, and instead cultivates vice. So, for example, a truly vicious person might *enjoy* torture, and aim to inflict just enough pain so that (a) the victim suffers horribly but (b) the victim does not pass out. Aristotle has very little to say to this person, though he suggests that this sort of life would be a terrible, unhappy one for most humans. Aristotle thinks that the vast majority of us are NOT vicious, but are simply **weak-willed** people who “want” to be virtuous, but who get “swept away” by various desires.

## What are the Aristotelian Virtues? Some Examples

In general, Aristotle seems to take the proud Greek warrior (such as Achilles or Hector) as his model of the “virtuous man.” As we’ll discover later, modern virtue ethicists tend to choose slightly different lists of virtues. Some of his virtues are as follows:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Sphere of Action | Vice of Deficiency | Virtuous Mean | Vice of Excess |
| Fear and Confidence | Cowardice | Courage | Rashness |
| Pleasure | Ascetism (denying oneself any pleasure at all) | Temperance (with regards to bodily pleasures like food and sex) | Addictive (give in to desires immediately) |
| Money and stuff (personal spending) | Selfishness | Generosity (with regards to giving money/time/stuff to individuals in need) | Prodigality (“throwing away” your money). |
| Money and stuff (“public” spending) | Pettiness | Munificence (with regards to spending money/time/etc. to establish your “legacy” in the community) | Vulgarity |
| Self-regard | Inappropriate self-doubt | (Appropriate) self-confidence | Vanity |
| Honor | Lack of ambition | Goal-driven | Overly “proud” |
| Anger | Being a “push-over” | Good temper / “Righteous” anger | Vengeful |
| Society | Being “quarrelsome” | Friendliness | Bootlicking |
| Self-expression | Overly ironic | Sincerity | Boastfulness |
| Conversation | Boorishness (cruel, inappropriate humor) | Wittiness | Buffoonery (clown-like behavior; no sense of tact) |
| Shame | Shamelessness | Modesty | Bashfulness |

## Virtue ethics: Other versions

**Religious Ethics.** Religions such as Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, etc. have, to a varying degree, emphasized the idea that believers ought to *emulate* certain saints, heroes, or deities, and to practice certain virtues. So, for example, Catholicism offers a list of seven virtues (Humility, Kindness, Abstinence, Chastity, Patience, Generosity, and Diligence), while Buddhism offers a similar list of “perfections” (Generosity, Proper Conduct, Renunciation, Wisdom, Equanamity, etc.). Finally, Confucianism offers a list of five (Benevolence, Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom, Fideilty).

**Care Ethics.** Some contemporary virtue ethicists (primarily feminist ethicists) have argued that the “good mother” is a better ethical role model. In particular, they think that the virtue of maternal **care** (or maternal “love”) is something like the *most important virtue.* (Biologically speaking, it’s pretty plausible that maternal care was the first sort of love/care to evolve, which would probably have interested a biologist like Aristotle.) One advantage of this view is that it seems to do a good job explaining why we have such extensive moral obligations to the people *close* to us (parent-child, close friends, physician-patient). It also places an emphasis on emotions such as *empathy* for others, which are lacking from Aristotle’s list.

One disadvantage is that it doesn’t say much about the different *types* of caring that might be appropriate for different relationships. For example, most care ethicists emphasize that you *should* care about strangers (and that you should somehow act on this), but they don’t really say much about how this sort of caring should/does differ from the care for the people you are close to. In this sense, Aristotle’s long list of virtues might do a somewhat better job.

## Criticisms of Virtue Ethics

For traditional deontologists and utilitarians, the major problem with virtue concerns the list of virtues chosen (How are we supposed to figure out *which virtues* are the right ones to follow, given the fact that every culture, religion, and thinker provides different ones?) and its vagueness (How on earth are we supposed to figure out what Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, Achilles, the perfect mother, etc. would actually do? History provides plenty of evidence that people don’t agree on things like this.) For these reasons, they have defended their simpler, more “rule-based” approaches to ethics.

## Review Questions

1. What does Aristotle mean by *eudaimonia?* In general, how does he think that we achieve eudaimonia?
2. Give an example of how a particular virtue (good character trait) that might be thought of as a “mean” between two extreme vices. Which vice do you think this is “closer to”? (That is, what sort of vice are people *more likely* to fall into)?
3. How do you think our *current* ideas about what a *virtuous person* is compare to Aristotle? So, for example, Aristotle seemed to think of “virtuous” people as being people like Achilles (a great warrior) or Socrates (the poor philosopher who cared only for the truth). Who plays these roles in our society? What are the similarities? The differences?
4. What do you think of virtue ethics as an “alternative” to traditional moral theories? Can it replace them altogether? Should it simply be ignored? Is it somehow possible to somehow make the theories work “together”?

# Virtue Ethics in the Modern World: Hursthouse on Abortion

**Rosalind Hursthouse** is among the most important living defenders of virtue ethics, and has written a number of books and articles on the subject[[1]](#footnote-1). Hurthouse’s work owes a lot to her teachers **GEM Anscombe** and **Phillipa Foot,** who helped bring back virtue ethics and related approaches in the 1940s (they were also among the most significant women philosophers of the 20th century). In this lesson, we’re going to take a look at Hursthouse’s general approach, and how she applies it the problem of abortion.

**What is eudaimonia?** Eudaimonia involves fulfilling one’s aims with regard to one’s life. It is distinct from merely material success – we can be miserable with lots of stuff and happy without very much. It is also distinct from mere “physical pleasure,” since many/most of us would probably rather live “worthwhile” lives (that occasionally required pain and sacrifice) than lives in which we were continually experiencing physical pleasure. Some examples of things relevant to achieving eudaimonia: creating a piece of art that one is proud of, becoming a skilled athlete, being a loyal friend or good parent, or succeeding in one’s career.

**How does behaving “virtuously” help me achieve eudaimonia?** Human physiology and psychology being what they are, it is simply a fact that most humans deeply (and intrinsically) value having meaningful relationships with other humans. Cultivating these relationships requires behaving virtuously. Moreover, most of the other things that humans care about (for example, acquiring wealth or knowledge) also requires that we cultivate relationships with other humans.

* A **compassionate** (virtue) person who can place themselves “in another’s shoes” and respond appropriately to their needs will, in general, have more successful relationships than someone who is **cold/unfeeling** or someone who is a “bleeding heart”, and whose excess of feeling prevents them from acting.
  + Note: The opposite of compassion might be **cruelty,** which involves (like compassion) attending to the thoughts/feelings of others but only so that you can HARM them more. For Aristotle, cruelty is NOT merely an excess/deficiency of some virtue. Instead, it is a vice that might be more typical of truly “vicious” person, rather than someone who is merely “weak-willed.”
* A **discerning** (virtue) person who learns to “step back” from situations, and not allow emotions to unduly influence moral decisions will, in general, have a more productive and happy life than a **thoughtless** (vice) or **cold** (vice) person.
* A person who is **generous** (virtue) to others will, in general, find that others are more likely to be generous to her when she needs help. A person who makes a habit of being generous will cultivate better friendships than a **selfish** (vice) person who is simply generous “when she will get something from it” or from a **gullible** person who gives time and money unwisely.
* An **honest** (virtue) person will, in general, find that others believe him in those times when he really needs to be believed. A person who makes a habit of being honest will find it easier to be honest when it really counts, and will (perhaps) be better at self-assessment. A **dishonest** (vice) or **loose-lipped** (vice) person, by contrast, will suffer over the long term.
* A person with **integrity** is willing to (1) spend time reflecting on their values, and (2) stick up for these values when they are challenged. They take ownership of their own lives and choices.
* A **courageous** (virtue) person will, in general, find it easier to pursue her goals in situations where this becomes difficult. A person who makes a habit of “doing the right thing” even in the face of danger will cultivate loyal friends, and is likely to accomplish her important life goals. A **coward** (vice) or **foolhardy** person(vice) is unlikely to accomplish anything worthwhile.

From these observations, we can draw the following conclusion: In general, a virtuous person will have a better chance of leading a happy life (achieving **eudaimonia**) than will a non-virtuous person.

## I Don’t Want to be Virtuous

Of course, the above argument does not convince everyone. Here are three worries about virtue ethics.

**Do We Really Understand Eudaimonia?** For Hursthouse, a virtue is *defined* as something that, when practiced regularly, helps the person achieve eudaimonia. But this raises a question: what exactly is eudaimonia (or “true happiness” or “fulfillment”)? If this notion is utterly mysterious (or worse, isn’t actually something that is possible for humans to achieve), then this would be a fatal objection to virtue ethics. Hursthouse argues (with some plausibility) that this problem is NOT unique to virtue ethics, and isn’t a fatal objection. For example, deontologists struggle to define “reason,” utilitarians to define “happiness”, and natural law theorists to define “natural function.” But this doesn’t mean that these terms don’t refer to anything, or that theories in question can’t be understood. We have a good enough idea about what these things means to make sense of the theories; virtue ethics is the same way.

**How do We Choose the Virtues?** Another common worry about virtue ethics concern the choice of virtues. Why, for example, do we think that it is good to be honest, but not to be cruel? (One could imagine a version of “virtue ethics” that celebrated cruelty, after all.) If the choice of virtues is entirely culturally relative, or varies according to the individual, this would undercut the claim that virtue ethics is a genuine ethical theory, which can actually help us make tough choices. Again, Hursthouse thinks this criticism is both unfair and ungrounded. It’s unfair because *every* ethical theory has to start with some assumptions about what is good/bad (for example, nearly every ethical theory assumes that egoism is false, and that suffering is bad). It’s ungrounded because we *do* have some means for figuring out which character traits are the virtues—we just need to consider which character traits *actually help beings like us achieve eudaimonia!*

**Virtue Ethics Can’t Give Us Any Useful Guidance.** A final criticism of virtue ethics concerns its ability to come up with action-guiding *rules* that can actually help a person make decisions. Basically, the worry is that, for any given virtue ethicist, they are going to have to consider which virtues best promote eudaimonia and then, when making a decision, try to think how this virtue “directs” them to act. The idea: “In my life, it seems like cultivating honesty will lead to eudaimonia. So, I should try to ask myself ‘What should an honest person do?” The worry is that this basically reduces to “do whatever you think best, after considering all of the different virtues you are trying to cultivate, and your goals if life.” Hursthouse DISAGREES with this: she thinks consideration of virtues can genuinely help us, even if it (unavoidably) involves making some assumptions about what is objectively “good” or “bad” for people, in ways that other ethical theorists might be uncomfortable with.

## How Should We Evaluate Abortion? Virtue Ethics in Action

Many contemporary writers on abortion seem to adopt a deontological standpoint toward abortion, in that they assume there must be some relatively simple *moral rules* that decides the issue. So, for example, consider the following two arguments:

* **Simple Pro-Choice Argument—**A fetus lacks cognitive capacities and is incapable of making moral decisions. It is also completely dependent on the mother for life. Because of this, a fetus is NOT a **person** (i.e., a being with full moral status), and the mother has the **right** “to choose,” and thus to kill the fetus whenever she desires to.
* **Simple Pro-Life Argument—**A fetus is biologically human, and has the *capacity* to develop into an intelligent, morally responsible agent. Because of this, a fetus IS a **person** (i.e., a being with full moral status), and it has the **right** NOT to be killed by the mother (the fetus has “the right to life”).

According to the people who advance these arguments, there is a clear, correct answer to “Is abortion (considered as an act in and of itself) morally OK?” Importantly, the morality of abortion on these views is largely *independent* of the mother’s motives and her life situation (with a few exceptional cases, such as rape or life-threatening pregnancies). Hursthouse disagrees with this approach for at least two reasons: (1) it makes the morality of abortion dependent on an abstract, metaphysical debate that seems unlikely to be solved anytime soon (“What is a *person*?”) and (2) it ignores all sorts of *other* morally relevant features, which have to do with the virtues. So, for example (I’ve reworded her arguments here):

* A compassionate person needs to think about the fetus (which gains increasing cognitive ability over time), as well as about the effect of the abortion on other people (if she chooses NOT to have an abortion, will this affect her ability to care for other children?). She understands how her actions affect others, and genuinely cares about this.
* A discerning person recognizes the inherent of being a parent, as well as the inherent value of other things she could do (education, etc.). She does not have an abortion “because she wants to drink beer,” and does not decide to continue a pregnancy “because she wants someone to love her.”
* A person with integrity will recognize her own contribution to her pregnancy (if it resulted from consensual, unprotected sex), but can also recognize when things were “beyond her control” (such as in in the case of rape). She engages in moral self-reflection, and recognizes that guilt or regret are sometimes (but not always!) appropriate reactions.
* A courageous person will neither *overestimate* the requirements of pregnancy (“it will ruin my life!”) nor *underestimate* them (“the doctors say my pregnancy is life-threatening, but they must be wrong”!), and will respond appropriately.

Hursthouse notes that many of these points apply to men (as potential fathers) as well. Her main conclusion: Regardless of what your *political* stance on abortion is, you must grant that evaluating the morality of abortion in a particular case is often tough. Making the right choice is, in many cases, not an easy one, and it cannot be resolved by considering the sorts of simplistic deontological or consequentialist theories defended by many ethicists. So, we ought to give virtue ethics a chance.

## Review Questions

1. Hursthouse’s virtue-based analysis of abortion rests on a number of assumptions about what is good/valuable. Most notably, she assumes that some activities (such as parenthood) are objectively more valuable than other activities (having a good time). Do you think this is a fair assumption? Why or why not? (Or, in other words, is it really the case that some sorts of activities are objectively better than others?)
2. Do you agree with Hursthouses’s analysis of the morality of abortion (basically, that it depends a lot on the motivations and circumstances of the pregnant woman, and can vary quite a bit from case to case). Why or why not?
3. Choose an issue BESIDES abortion, and try to apply the virtue ethics framework to it in as much detail as you can. Examples: “What job should I choose?”, “Is it morally OK to eat meat?”, “What does it mean to be a good parent/friend/nurse/etc:?”

# Reading: Why read Aristotle today? (by Edith Hall)[[2]](#footnote-2)

*Modern self-help draws heavily on Stoic philosophy. But Aristotle was better at understanding real human happiness*

In the Western world, only since the mid-18th century has it been possible to discuss ethical questions publicly without referring to Christianity. Modern thinking about morality, which assumes that gods do not exist, or at least do not intervene, is in its infancy. But the ancient Greeks and Romans elaborated robust philosophical schools of ethical thought for more than a millennium, from the first professed agnostics such as Protagoras (fifth century BCE) to the last pagan thinkers. The Platonists’ Academy at Athens was not finally closed down until 529 CE, by the Emperor Justinian.

That longstanding tradition of moral philosophy is an invaluable legacy of ancient Mediterranean civilisation. It has prompted several contemporary secular thinkers, faced with the moral vacuum left by the decline of Christianity since the late 1960s, to revive ancient schools of thought. Stoicism, founded in Athens by the Cypriot Zeno in about 300 BCE, has advocates. Self-styled Stoic organisations on both sides of the Atlantic offer courses, publish books and blogposts, and even run an annual Stoic Week. Some Stoic principles underlay Dale Carnegie’s self-help classic *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* (1948). He recommended Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* to its readers. But authentic ancient **Stoicism** was pessimistic and grim. It denounced pleasure. It required the suppression of emotions and physical appetites. It recommended the resigned acceptance of misfortune, rather than active engagement with the fine-grained business of everyday problem-solving. It left little room for hope, human agency or constructive repudiation of suffering.

Less familiar is the recipe for happiness (*eudaimonia*) advocated by Aristotle, yet it has much to be said for it. Outside of philosophy departments, where neo-Aristotelian thinkers such as Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse have championed his virtue ethics as an alternative to utilitarianism and Kantian approaches, it is not as well known as it should be. At his Lyceum in Athens, Aristotle developed a model for the maximisation of happiness that could be implemented by individuals and whole societies, and is still relevant today. It became known as ‘**peripatetic philosophy’** because Aristotle conducted philosophical debates while strolling in company with his interlocutors.

The fundamental tenet of peripatetic philosophy is this: the goal of life is to maximise happiness by living virtuously, fulfilling your own potential as a human, and engaging with others – family, friends and fellow citizens – in mutually beneficial activities. Humans are animals, and therefore pleasure in responsible fulfilment of physical needs (eating, sex) is a guide to living well. But since humans are *advanced* animals, naturally inclining to live together in settled communities (*poleis*), we are ‘political animals’ (*zoa politika*). Humans must take responsibility for their own happiness since ‘god’ is a remote entity, the ‘unmoved mover’ who might maintain the universe’s motion but has neither any interest in human welfare, nor any providential function in rewarding virtue or punishing immorality. Yet purposively imagining a better, happier life is feasible since humans have inborn abilities that allow them to promote individual and collective flourishing. These include the inclinations to ask questions about the world, to deliberate about action, and to activate conscious recollection.

Aristotle’s optimistic, practical recipe for happiness is ripe for rediscovery. It offers to the human race facing third-millennial challenges a unique combination of secular, virtue-based morality and empirical science, neither of which seeks answers in any ideal or metaphysical system beyond what humans can perceive by their senses.

**[Brendan: How does Aristotle’s view of life, and the appropriate way to live it, differ from the Stoics? Which do you prefer?]**

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

But what did Aristotle mean by ‘happiness’ or *eudaimonia*? He did not believe it could be achieved by the accumulation of good things in life – including material goods, wealth, status or public recognition – but was an internal, private state of mind. Yet neither did he believe it was a continuous sequence of blissful moods, because this could be enjoyed by someone who spent all day sunbathing or feasting. For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* required the fulfilment of human potentialities that permanent sunbathing or feasting could not achieve. Nor did he believe that happiness is defined by the total proportion of our time spent experiencing pleasure, as did Socrates’ student Aristippus of Cyrene.

Aristippus evolved an ethical system named ‘hedonism’ (the ancient Greek for pleasure is *hedone*), arguing that we should aim to maximise physical and sensory enjoyment. The 18th-century utilitarian Jeremy Bentham revived hedonism in proposing that the correct basis for moral decisions and legislation was whatever would achieve the greatest happiness for the greatest number. In his manifesto *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), Bentham actually laid out an algorithm for quantitative hedonism, to measure the total pleasure quotient produced by any given action. The algorithm is often called the ‘hedonic calculus’. Bentham spelled out the variables: how intense is the pleasure? How long will it last? Is it an inevitable or only possible result of the action I am considering? How soon will it happen? Will it be productive and give rise to further pleasure? Will it guarantee no painful consequences? How many people will experience it?

Bentham’s disciple, John Stuart Mill, pointed out that such ‘quantitative hedonism’ did not distinguish human happiness from the happiness of pigs, which could be provided with incessant physical pleasures. So Mill introduced the idea that there were different levels and types of pleasure. Bodily pleasures that we share with animals, such as the pleasure we gain from eating or sex, are ‘lower’ pleasures. Mental pleasures, such as those we derive from the arts, intellectual debate or good behaviour, are ‘higher’ and more valuable. This version of hedonist philosophical theory is usually called prudential hedonism or qualitative hedonism.

Train yourself to be the best possible version of yourself until you do the right thing habitually, on autopilot

There are few philosophers advocating hedonist theories today, but in the public understanding, when ‘happiness’ is not defined as the possession of a set of ‘external’ or ‘objective’ good things such as money and career success, it describes a subjective hedonistic experience – a transient state of elation. The problem with both such views, for Aristotle, is that they neglect the importance of fulfilling one’s potential. He cites approvingly the primordial Greek maxim that nobody can be called happy until he is dead: nobody wants to end up believing on his deathbed that he didn’t fulfil his potential. In her book *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying* (2011), the palliative nurse Bronnie Ware describes exactly the hazards that Aristotle advises us to avoid. Dying people say: ‘I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.’ John F Kennedy summed up Aristotelian happiness thus: ‘the exercise of vital powers along lines of excellence in a life affording them scope’.

For Aristotle insisted that happiness is constituted by something greater from and different to an accumulation of agreeable experiences. To be happy, we need to sustain constructive activities that we believe are goal-directed. This requires conscious analysis of our goals and conduct, and practising ‘virtue ethics’, by ‘living well’. It requires being nurtured effectively to develop your intellectual and physical capacities, and identify your potential (Aristotle had strong views on education), and also training yourself to be the best possible version of yourself until you do the right thing habitually, on autopilot. If you deliberately respond in a friendly way to everyone you encounter, you will begin to do so unconsciously, making yourself and others happier.

**[Brendan: How does Aristotle’s conception of eudaimonia differ from Bentham’s “quantitative hedonism”? From Mill’s “qualitative hedonism”? Which do you prefer?]**

Historically, of course, many philosophers, such as Egoists, have questioned whether virtue is inherently desirable. But, since the mid-20th century, others rehabilitated virtue ethics and focused intensively on Aristotle’s ideas: unfortunately, this academic interest has yet to achieve any real public presence in broader culture in the way that Stoicism has.

Some thinkers today distinguish between two sub-categories of virtue: between virtues such as courage, honesty and integrity, which affect your own and your community’s happiness; and ‘benevolence virtues’ such as kindness and compassion, which benefit others but are less obviously likely to gratify the agent. But Aristotle, for whom self-liking is necessary to virtue, argues that virtues do have *intrinsic* benefits, a view he shares with Socrates, the Stoics and the Victorian philosopher Thomas Hill Green. For part of his life, Aristotle lived in the Macedonian court tyrannised by the decadent and ruthless Philip II, whose lieutenants and concubines resorted to plots, extortion and murder to further their self-advantage. He knew what an immoral person looks like, and that such people were often subjectively miserable, despite the outward trappings of wealth and success. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he wrote (all translations my own):

Nobody would call a man ideally happy if he has not got a particle of courage nor of temperance nor of decency nor of good sense, but is afraid of the flies that flutter by him, cannot refrain from any of the most outrageous actions in order to gratify a desire to eat or to drink, and ruins his dearest friends for the sake of a penny …

Aristotle says that if happiness is not god-sent, ‘then it comes as the result of a goodness, along with a learning process, and effort’. Every human being can practise a way of life that will make him happier. Aristotle is not offering a magic wand to erase all threats to happiness. There are indeed some qualifications to the universal capacity for pursuing happiness. He accepts that there are certain kinds of advantage that you either have or you don’t. If you have the bad luck to have been born very low down the socio-economic ladder, or have no children or other family or loved ones, or are extremely ugly, your circumstances, which you can’t avoid, as he puts it, ‘taint’ delight. It is harder to achieve happiness. But not impossible. You do not need material possessions or physical strength or beauty to start exercising your mind in company with Aristotle, since the way of life he advocates concerns a moral and psychological excellence rather than one that lies in material possessions or bodily splendour. There are, he acknowledges, even more difficult obstacles: having children or friends who are completely depraved is one such obstacle. Another – which Aristotle saves until last and elsewhere implies is the most difficult problem any human can ever face – is the loss of fine friends in whom you have invested effort, or especially the loss of children, through death.

Yet, potentially, even people poorly endowed by nature or who have experienced terrible bereavements can live a good life. It is possible to undergo even apparently unendurable disasters and still live well: ‘even in adversity goodness shines through, when someone endures repeated and severe misfortune with patience; this is not owing to insensibility but from generosity and greatness of soul.’ In this sense, Aristotle’s is a deeply optimistic moral system. And it has practical relevance to ‘everyone’, implied by Aristotle’s inclusive use of the first personal plural: ‘This sort of philosophy is different from most other types of philosophy, since we are not asking what goodness is for the sake of knowing what it is, but with the aim of becoming good, without which our enquiry would be useless.’ In fact, the *only* way to be a good person is to do good things and treat people with fairness recurrently.

**[Brendan: Aristotle holds that it is, at least in most cases, “within our own power” to lead a good, fulfilling life, and that part of this involves cultivating moral virtues. What do you think of this? Can you give examples (perhaps of elderly people) who you think give evidence for or against this?]**

Aristotle insists that individuals who want to treat others fairly need to love *themselves*

Friendships are important to the Aristotelian, and adopting virtue ethics need not disrupt your life. An Aristotelian goal is moral self-sufficiency so that you are invulnerable to psychological manipulation, but he recognises that even the most self-sufficient person’s life is enhanced by having friends, and writes brilliantly on different types of relationship, from marriage or its equivalents to reciprocal cooperation between co-workers and fellow citizens. We might be able to cope alone, but why would we ever choose isolation? Moreover, you need no ‘natural talent’ at virtue, indeed Aristotle says that we are *not* born either good or bad. Nor is it ever too late: you can decide to retrain yourself morally at any point in your life. Most appealing of all, Aristotle insists that individuals who want to treat others fairly need to love *themselves*. There is no room for self-hatred, self-flagellation or self-deprivation in his humane system. Aristotle saw long before Sigmund Freud that our biological instincts are natural rather than morally despicable. This makes his ethics compatible with modern psychoanalysis.

An innovative Aristotelian idea is that supposedly reprehensible emotions – even anger and vengefulness – are indispensable to a healthy psyche. In this respect, Aristotle’s philosophy contrasts with the Stoic view that, for example, anger is irrational, and a form of temporary madness that should be eliminated. It’s just that such emotions need to be present in the right amount, the ‘middle’ or ‘mean’. Sexual desire, since humans are animals, is excellent in proportion. Either excessive or insufficient sexual appetite is conducive to unhappiness. Anger is also essential to a flourishing personality. An apathetic individual who never gets angry will not stand up for herself or her dependents when appropriate, and can’t achieve happiness. Yet anger in excess or with the wrong people is a vice.

Aristotle’s ethics are inherently flexible. There are no strict doctrines. *Intention* is always a crucial gauge of right behaviour: he writes penetratingly about the problems that arise when intended altruistic ends require immoral means. But every ethical situation is different. One person might jump on a train without a ticket because he is rushing to see a child who is in hospital; another might methodically dodge fares when she’s commuting to a well-paid job. Aristotle thought that general principles are important, but without taking into account the specific circumstances, especially intention, general principles can mislead. This is why he distrusted fixed penalties. He believed that the principle of equity needed to be integral to the judiciary, which is why some Aristotelians call themselves ‘**moral particularists’**. Each dilemma requires detailed engagement with the nuts and bolts of its particulars. When it comes to ethics, the devil really can be in the detail.

**[Brendan: Theories like utilitarianism and deontology DISAGREE with moral particularism. Can you see why?]**

Politically speaking, a basic education in Aristotelianism could benefit humanity as a whole. Aristotle is positive about democracy, with which he finds fewer faults than other constitutions. Unlike his elitist tutor Plato, who was skeptical about the intelligence of the lower classes, Aristotle believed that the greatest experts on any given topic (eg zoology, of which he is the acknowledged founding father) are likely to be those who have accumulated experience of that topic (eg farmers, bird-catchers, shepherds and fishermen), however low their social status; scholarship must be informed by what they say. The trust that Aristotle felt in humanity’s general good sense enabled him to conceive a prototype of the ‘smart mob’ – a group that, rather than behaving in the loutish manner often associated with crowds, draws on universally distributed intelligence to behave with maximum efficiency. The idea, introduced by Howard Rheingold in *Smart Mobs* (2003), was anticipated in Aristotle’s *Politics*: where many people come together to deliberate, and become ‘a single person with many feet and many hands and many senses, so also it becomes one personality as regards the moral and intellectual faculties’.

Aristotle was the first philosopher to make explicit the distinction between doing wrong by ***omission***and by ***commission*.** Not doing something when it is right to do it can have just as bad effects as a misdemeanour. This vital ethical principle has ramifications for the way in which we assess public figures. We *do* ask whether politicians have ever slipped up. But how often do we ask what they have *not done* with their power and influence to *improve* societal wellbeing? We do not ask enough what politicians, business leaders, presidents of universities and funding councils have *failed* to do, the initiatives that they have never launched, thus abnegating the duties of leadership. Aristotle was also clear that rich people who do not use a significant proportion of their wealth to help others are unhappy (because they are not acting according to the virtuous mean between fiscal irresponsibility and financial meanness). But they are also guilty of injustice by omission.

Aristotle is a utopian. He imagines the possibility that everyone will one day be able to realise his potential and make full use of all his faculties (the distinctive ‘Aristotelian principle’ according to the political philosopher John Rawls). Aristotle envisages a futuristic world in which technological advances would render human labour unnecessary. He remembers the mythical craftsmen Daedalus and Hephaestus, who constructed robots that worked to order: ‘for if every tool could perform its own work when ordered, or by seeing what to do in advance, like the statues of Daedalus in the story, or the automatic tripods of Hephaestus … if shuttles could weave like this, and plectrums strum harps of their own accord, master-craftsmen would have no need of assistants and masters no need of slaves’. It is almost as if he anticipated modern developments in artificial intelligence.

Aristotle’s political theory is flexible. You can be a capitalist or socialist, a businesswoman or a charity worker, vote for (almost) any political party, and still be a consistent Aristotelian. However, Aristotelian capitalists need to find indigence among their fellow citizens intolerable. Aristotle knew that humans come into conflict when commodities are scarce: ‘poverty is the parent of revolution and crime’. In his insistence on grounding political theory in humanity’s basic needs, Aristotle conceived the most advanced economic ideas ever to have appeared in his time, which was why Karl Marx admired him. Aristotle agrees with the recommendation in Plato’s *Laws* that gross inequality in assets owned by citizens produces divisive litigation and revolting obsequiousness towards the super-rich. Yet Aristotelian socialists need to acknowledge that extending compulsory public ownership to domestic accommodation does not work. People look after things because they enjoy the sense of private ownership, and because the things have value for them; both these qualities are diluted if shared with others. Aristotle thinks that ‘everybody loves a thing more if it has cost him trouble’.

**[Brendan: Aristotle’s theory is flexible, and has been adapted to all sorts of different lifestyle (from Christian monks to soldiers to medical professionals to ….), each of which emphasize different virtues. Do you think this is a strength? A weakness? A bit of both?]**

Scientists and classicists agree: Aristotle would be an environmental campaigner today

A climate-change denier could find no encouragement in Aristotle. As a natural scientist who believed in meticulous research based on repeated acts of empirical observation and rigorous examination of hypotheses, he would be alarmed at the current evidence of human-caused environmental damage. The first reference to the extinction of a species by human activity (over-fishing) occurs in Aristotle’s *The* *History of Animals*. By seeing humans as animals, he effected a transformation in the ethical relationship between us and our material environment that has unlimited significance. His commitment to living planned lives in a deliberated way, taking long-term and total responsibility for our physical survival as well as our mental happiness, would, scientists and classicists agree, make him an environmental campaigner today. Only humans have moral agency, and therefore, as co-inhabitants of planet Earth with an astounding number of plants and animals, have the unique responsibility for conservation. But humans also have the capacity, because of their unique mental endowment, to cause terrible damage: as Aristotle said, drawing a chilling distinction, *a bad man can do 10,000 times more harm than an animal.*

**[Brendan: Aristotle is an “ethical naturalist”, in that he thinks the truth about ethics come from the way our world is put together. So, science (and philosophy) have a special place for him. What do you think about the argument above—basically, the climate chance denial is NOT something Aristotle would tolerate.]**

The applicability of Aristotle’s holistic ethical and scientific outlook to our 21st-century problems such as theocracy and pollution prompts the question of why is there so little public awareness of his ideas. One is certainly his much-cited prejudices against women and slaves. He was a well-to-do male householder, and in his *Politics* he endorses slavery in the case of Greeks enslaving non-Greeks, and pronounces that women are incapable of reasoned deliberation. Yet he would have entertained reasoned arguments to the contrary, if backed up by empirical evidence. In every field of knowledge, he argued that all beliefs must be perpetually open to adjustment: ‘medicine has been improved by being altered from the ancestral system, and gymnastic training, and in general all the arts and faculties’. The laws the Greeks used to live by ‘were too simple and uncivilised’: he cites as examples the obsolete practices of purchasing wives and bearing of arms by citizens. He insists that law-codes need revision, ‘because it is impossible that the structure of the state can have been framed correctly for all time in relation to all its details’.

**[Brendan: Aristotle’s defense of slavery was, unfortunately, quite influential in the “West.” However, it was very much typical of the time (though its worth noting his teacher, Plato, does not endorse it). How do we, as modern readers, deal with this?]**

Yet the most important reason why Aristotle is so unfamiliar is that his surviving works are advanced treatises, written in specialist academic language for his colleagues and students. In fact, he did write several famous works for the public, in accessible, flowing prose that encouraged many thousands of ancient Greeks and Romans, over 10 centuries, to become practising virtue ethicists. They included peasant farmers and cobblers as well as kings and statesmen. This is because, as Themistius, one of the greatest ancient commentators on Aristotle, insisted, he was simply ‘more *useful* to the mass of people’ than other thinkers. The same still holds. The philosopher Robert J Anderson wrote in 1986: ‘There is no ancient thinker who can speak more directly to the concerns and anxieties of contemporary life than can Aristotle. Nor is it clear that any modern thinker offers as much for persons living in this time of uncertainty.’

One of the reasons why Stoicism is enjoying a revival today is that it gives concrete answers to moral questions. Aristotle’s ethical writings, however, contain few explicit instructions about how to act. Aristotelians need to take full responsibility in deciding what is the right way to behave and in repeatedly exerting their own judgment. The chief benefit that Aristotle can bestow on us today, which makes him so useful and practically applicable, is his alternative conception of ‘happiness’. It cannot be acquired by pleasurable experiences but only by identifying and realising our own potential, moral and creative, in our specific environments, with our particular family, friends and colleagues, and helping others to do so. We need to review both what we choose to do and what we avoid doing, because wrongs caused by omission can be just as destructive as those we commit. This involves embracing emotional impulses but also ensuring that we are using them as guides to what is good rather than letting them dictate our actions. And we need to do these thing continuously, since cultivating virtue, and the happiness that comes with this approach to life, can never be anything less than a lifelong goal.

# Reading: Life on the slippery Earth (by Sebastian Purcell)[[3]](#footnote-3)

*Aztec moral philosophy has profound differences from the Greek tradition, not least its acceptance that nobody is perfect*

When Halloween rolled around last year, my wife and I were prepared to be greeted by scores of eager trick-or-treaters. Guided by the thought that too much candy was better than too little, we bought *entirely* too much, and simply poured the excess on to a platter in our living room. The problem is: I have a sweet-tooth. ‘I can’t stop eating these!’ I said to my wife, peevishly, a few days later. Nearly every time I passed the coffee table, I succumbed to my cravings for a sugar rush, and then I’d feel frustrated and irritated.

When I returned from work that evening, I noticed the platter was empty. ‘Oh, I just took it to work and gave it away to the students,’ my wife said, when I asked. Just like that, my cycle of transgression and guilt was broken.

**[Brendan: Do YOU have any stories like this?]**

This little episode illustrates two aspects of Aztec virtue ethics that distinguish it from ‘Western’ forms, such as Plato’s or Aristotle’s. The first is that I did not overcome my vice so much as manage it. The second is that I didn’t manage it on my own, but rather did so (almost entirely) with the help of another person.

While Plato and Aristotle were concerned with *character*-centred virtue ethics, the Aztec approach is perhaps better described as *socially-*centred virtue ethics. If the Aztecs were right, then ‘Western’ philosophers have been too focused on individuals, too reliant on assessments of character, and too optimistic about the individual’s ability to correct her own vices. Instead, according to the Aztecs, we should look around to our family and friends, as well as our ordinary rituals or routines, if we hope to lead a better, more worthwhile existence.

This distinction bears on an important question: just how bad are good people allowed to be? Must good people be moral saints, or can ordinary folk be good if we have the right kind of support? This matters for fallible creatures, like me, who try to be good but often run into problems. Yet it also matters for questions of inclusivity. If being good requires exceptional traits, such as practical intelligence, then many people would be excluded – such as those with cognitive disabilities. That does not seem right. One of the advantages of the Aztec view, then, is that it avoids this outcome by casting virtue as a cooperative, rather than an individual, endeavour.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

At its core, Aztec virtue ethics has three main elements. One is a conception of the good life as the ‘rooted’ or worthwhile life. Second is the idea of right action as the mean or middle way. Third and final is the belief that virtue is a quality that’s fostered socially.

When I speak about the Aztecs – the people dominant in large parts of central America prior to the 16th-century Spanish conquest – even professional philosophers are often surprised to learn that the Aztecs were a philosophical culture. They’re even more startled to hear that we have (many volumes of) their texts recorded in their native language, Nahuatl. While a few of the pre-colonial hieroglyphic-type books survived the Spanish bonfires, our main sources of knowledge derive from records made by Catholic priests, up to the early 17th century. Using the Latin alphabet, these texts record the statements of *tlamatinime*, the indigenous philosophers, on matters as diverse as bird-flight patterns, moral virtue, and the structure of the cosmos.

To explain the Aztec conception of the good life, it’s helpful to begin in the sixth volume of a book called the *Florentine Codex*, compiled by Father Bernardino of Sahagún. Most of the text contains edifying discourses called *huehuetlatolli,* the elders’ discourses. This particular section records the speeches following the appointment of a new king, when the noblemen appear to compete for the most eloquent articulation of what an ideal monarch should be and do. The result is a succession of speeches like those in Plato’s *Symposium*, wherein each member tries to produce the most moving expression of praise.

‘Perhaps at one time, one was of good life; later, he fell into some wrong, as if he had slipped in the mud’

At the end of the noblemen’s speeches, the king himself turns to address his people. He tries to articulate the character of excellent men and women, the standard he expects from his subjects. Of men, he says:

And he is revered; in truth [nelli], he is taken to be a defender and sustainer. He becomes like the silk cotton tree, like the cypress tree, by which everywhere people take refuge … [Yet] this same [virtuous] one weeps and sorrows. Is there anyone who does not wish for happiness? [Translations my own.]

The passage is striking because it highlights a fundamental difference between the Ancient Greek and the Aztec approaches to the good life – namely, that the Aztecs did not believe there was any conceptual link between leading our best lives on the one hand, and experiencing pleasure or ‘happiness’ on the other. This image of the virtuous man finds its closest Greek analogue in the *Iliad*’s Hector, the person to whom everyone flocked for refuge, the one who supported his whole house, but was nevertheless undone by Achilles.

A common saying among the Aztecs was that ‘the earth [*tlalticpac*] is slippery, slick’. Elsewhere, the meaning is clarified: ‘Perhaps at one time, one was of good life; later, he fell into some wrong, as if he had slipped in the mud.’ The Aztecs held, in short, that it’s unrealistic to think that anyone can lead a perfectly good life, one in which you never slip up. A better goal, then, is to try to lead a rooted life, which they called *neltiliztli*: literally, rootedness. In this kind of life, one is able to manage the mistakes and slip-ups well, rather than avoid them altogether. The reward is not happiness necessarily, but the promise of a [worthwhile](https://aeon.co/ideas/what-the-aztecs-can-teach-us-about-happiness-and-the-good-life) life.

If we’re convinced by this line of reasoning – that the good life consists in doing what is worthwhile, regardless of whether it makes us happy – the next question becomes: what does it take to lead a rooted life?

**[Brendan: In your own words, how does the goal of leading a “rooted life” differ from pursuing “eudaimonia”? Which do you prefer? Why?]**

For the Aztecs, a rooted life is one that is lived well, with excellence. The traditional word used for this concept in English is ‘virtue’. Our word finds its origin in the Latin *virtu*, a metonymic expression that aims to capture what is best about a man (*vir*) – manliness, in brief. The Aztecs also used a poetic expression for virtue: *in qualli in yectli*, meaning ‘the good and the straight’. For example, in the confessional rite, which is also recorded as an edifying discourse in the sixth volume of the *Florentine Codex*, the confessor tells the penitent that before committing wrongs:

You were excellent [*ca ti-qualli, ca ti-yectli*] when you were sent here … You were cast, perforated like a precious green stone, a bracelet, a precious turquoise.

The idea itself is clear: before vicious actions, one is virtuous, one is like the most precious of things, turquoise and jade. Afterwards, the confessor tells the penitent, one is unbalanced, filthy. Thus, when one’s actions are virtuous, one maintains balance, is rooted like the tree to whom others flock for cover. These virtues include: moderation, justice, prudence and courage.

For nobles, the penalty for public drunkenness was death. But at a wedding, the elderly were expected to get drunk

What the list of virtues doesn’t answer is: just what is it that makes an act courageous rather than rash? Why would my own inability to control my craving for sugar be considered immoderate? The Aztec’s answer is that virtuous actions follow the middle path, they strike the mean. In an edifying discourse, a mother tells her daughter about the difficulties of living on the earth (*tlalticpac*):

On earth we live, we travel along mountain peaks. Over here there is an abyss, over there is an abyss. If thou goest over here, or if thou goest over there, thou wilt fall in. Only in the middle [tlanepantla] doth one go, doth one live. Place this word, my daughter, dove, little one, well within the chambers of thy heart.

As the passage suggests, the mean or middle way (*tlanepantla*) is not so much an exact middle of something as it is a metaphor for the apt expression of a choice, action or feeling. In other passages, the middle choice is the one that represents the right form of dress, with clothes that are neither too shabby, nor too formal. For example, the text presents as bad the case of an overly carnal woman, who conducts and presents herself sexually even when shopping in the marketplace.

Our actions are virtuous, then, when they are aptly expressed. This aptness of expression turns on the circumstances (eg, how formally we should dress), our social position (eg, male or female, commoner or noble), our social role (eg, warrior or physician), and whether we are performing a rite of a specific sort. A memorable example of this last kind concerns drunkenness. Public drunkenness was severely punished in Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec empire; for nobles, the penalty was death. But the elderly at a wedding were not only permitted, but expected to become drunk.

There was, then, no formal test for the apt expression of an action, but one could learn to develop a sense for it in the way that we might speak today of a person’s aesthetic sensibilities. Just as we might say that our co-worker’s sense of style is impeccable, we also know of some people who are just good at understanding human relations in a nuanced way, who always seem to know what to do. How we develop this understanding of virtuous action leads us to the final pillar of Aztec ethics.

**[Brendan: How does the Aztec idea of the “apt expression of an action” compare to Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean?]**

Recall that for the Aztecs, our lives are led on the slippery earth. Moral education, then, is not something that one completes in childhood or adolescence. Rather, it is something that’s needed throughout life. This is why even the king is admonished by the old, and the elderly admonish each other. The virtues, as a result, are sustained and retrained throughout life.

This training can occur in at least three ways. The first of these is a sort of moral education that parallels what happens in Plato’s *Republic* (books 3-4) or Aristotle’s *Politics* (book 8). In the third volume of the *Florentine Codex*, for example, there’s a detailed set of passages that address education among the young and adolescents. Early in life, up to about the age of six, children are taught at home by their parents, and are to be given a practical education as well as instruction on basic moral teachings. When the children go off to school, they’re divided into two groups: those who go to learn a specific trade or become warriors, and those who would go to learn the arts suitable to the noble courts, such as law, astronomy, history, philosophy and religious matters.

Of those students who pursued a ‘noble’ education, the development of virtues was a primary focus. The reasoning was that a greater level of virtue, especially of moderation, would be required if they ever became a lord. The students would thus have to get up very early in the morning to perform tasks, to gather items in thorn bushes, to sleep in the cold, and to go on fasts. All of these practices, and others, were set up to enable the students to practise and habituate to moderation in its various forms. Comparatively, one priest remarks, ‘the manner of life of the [other] youths was not very good’, since they were not held to the same standards of excellence.

After this schooling, virtues were fostered via rites that weren’t strictly religious – what might best be called social rituals. For example, when merchants were preparing to travel to another city, they made special preparations. An auspicious day would be selected by a day-sign reader, and the merchants would make a burnt offering to the appropriate divinities the night before. Then, on the dawn of the day of departure, they would ask the leaders of their neighbourhood to appear. Seated in a circle that reflected their stature, they would describe the details of their travel, and the leaders would respond with advice about the journey, contingency plans, and urge certain moral virtues so as not to offend others in foreign lands.

Rather than weigh all advice evenly, the Aztecs gave greater weight to those with most practical experience

While this was a ritualised matter, the practice allowed merchants to put their affairs in order before undertaking what was often a dangerous exercise. This risk explains why they wanted to make their peace with the divine and their community before venturing out. Yet the practice also provided a socially acceptable means to exchange relevant information about the journey, as well as urge certain virtues of character, including moderation and circumspection. It served, in short, as a sort of ‘refresher course’ in moral virtue.

Yet the groups themselves were arranged in ways that enabled the merchants to support each other. Mothers and fathers would arrange for their children to travel with others, reasoning that ‘perhaps, with their help, he will become prudent, mature, understanding’. The young, however, carried no heavy merchandise (the Aztecs did not have horses, and so carried much of the burden themselves). The most experienced would lead the group, the others would carry what was appropriate, and each encouraged the others so that they could remain moderate and circumspect.

Finally, the merchant ritual highlights something that has been implicit in my argument so far: namely that the excellence of practical reason or prudence (Greek: *phronēsis*) was not primarily a quality that individuals possessed. For Aristotle, for example, the *phronimos* is a rare person who could discern the right means of achieving ends. This explains why Aristotle thought that the best society was a monarchy that was ruled by a single and most wise man. The Aztecs, by contrast, thought that practical reason was best exercised in groups – and one finds evidence for this everywhere, from the merchant rites, to the choice of school for children, to the decisions of the king himself. Moreover, the Aztecs weren’t democratic about the matter. Rather than weigh all advice evenly, they gave greater weight in the deliberative process to those with the most practical experience (*ixtlamatiliztli*), who were often the elderly. This explains why the leader of the merchants asks the elderly men and women for advice, even though he is thought to be the principle trainer of the young.

Virtue is thus fostered socially among the Aztecs throughout life. This begins in one’s early childhood, continues through formal education, advances in one’s profession where one is ‘refreshed’ by one’s peers, and is sustained by social rituals. Even the assessment of ‘the middle way’ remains a collective rather than personal effort, since it was believed that practical wisdom worked best in groups that placed a high value on the opinions of the most experienced members. The Aztecs thought all this because they believed that we humans lead lives on the slippery earth (*tlaticpac*). The best guard we have against this eventuality, then, is each other.

**[Brendan: What do you think of the idea that our ability to be “virtuous” depends much more on other people than on ourselves? What might be some consequences of accepting this view?]**

Plato’s *Republic* ends with the myth of Er, a warrior who dies and returns to Earth to tell others about the afterlife. Like many of the myths in the Platonic corpus, this one expresses not something that Plato holds, but something for which we might hope. In Er’s transcendent experience, he sees that in the afterlife the virtuous are rewarded and the bad are punished for 1,000 years. After this term, they draw lots to determine how they will be reincarnated, and their choices are informed by the states of their character (that is, whether they are virtuous or vicious). Odysseus has bad luck and is given the last pick of lives, after everyone else has been able to go in front of him. Yet he chooses the same life he would have picked if he’d been given first choice. The *Republic* thus ends with a message: if you are virtuous, not only will you be rewarded in the afterlife, but above all, you can beat chance itself.

The Aztecs would never have written such a story. Plato, of course, is replacing the heroic warrior Achilles with the thinking man Odysseus. We saw above that the Aztecs would likely have preferred Hector – the supporting beam for the house of Troy, despite being on the losing side. But this preference suggests a stronger disagreement, since the Aztecs would have held that it is an error to think that virtue can save one from the vicissitudes of chance. No matter how virtuous you are, there’s always a possibility that a younger, more skilled, and more impetuous man with a sword will strike you down. And we ourselves are always prone to slipping up, despite our better upbringing. Wisdom in human affairs consists in the recognition that the best that we can do is to learn to stand with the help of others, to alter our circumstances for the better, and to clasp hands so that we can pull ourselves back up when we fall. This is the fundamental insight behind the social dimension of Aztec ethics. As challenging as it seems to ‘Western’ sensibilities, perhaps there’s enough that’s right about it to help us lead better, more worthwhile and rooted lives.

**[Brendan: Just as was the case with Aristotle—and the Greeks generally—there are aspects of Aztec society we would obviously NOT want to bring back (such as human sacrifice). Again, how should we deal this problem as modern readers?]**

# Case Study: Wholesome Discipline (Ethics Bowl)

*From NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL ETHICS BOWL, Case Set for 2020-2021 Regional Competitions, Authors: Prepared by: Becky Cox-White, Raquel Diaz-Sprague, Michael B. Funke, Rhiannon Dodds Funke, Gretchen A. Myers, Annemarie Spadafore*

The aim of punishment is often framed in terms of retribution for past wrongdoing and deterrence of future wrongdoing. A rapidly spreading alternative to these traditional conceptions of punishment is known as restorative justice, which does not primarily aim to “inflict punishment on the offender, but rather, to restore all parties to a prior state of ‘wholeness.’”[[4]](#footnote-4)

In response to dissatisfaction with zero-tolerance policies in schools and their disproportionate impact on disadvantaged students, educational leaders have turned to restorative discipline. Many use mediation between victims and offenders, between a group of offenders, or between the community and the offender as a vehicle for healing and growth. For example, if a student is guilty of bullying, school leaders might facilitate a conversation between the bully and their victim(s), or a discussion among a group of bullies in order to unearth their motivations, to educate them on the harms of bullying, and to repair injuries caused.[[5]](#footnote-5) While a more punitive model of discipline in schools would use familiar modes of punishment (detention, suspension, shaming, legal citations), restorative practices aim for reconciliation, reform on the part of wrongdoers, and collaborative problem-solving to address infractions and their causes.

Advocates argue that such restorative practices lead to increased accountability, more supportive school environments, positive social and emotional learning, and a more equitable distribution of punishment in schools. There is a distinctive educational value, too. Restorative practices present opportunities for students to learn the sorts of social skills and character traits necessary for students to flourish as adults. However, restorative practices in schools are not yet well understood by researchers. One study found that restorative practices in Pittsburgh public schools improved school climate and decreased the average suspension rate, but also that those same programs led to a worsening of academic and disciplinary outcomes.[[6]](#footnote-6) Another study found that restorative intervention “did not yield significant changes in the treatment schools,” but self-reports by participants showed signs of positive impact on school climate for the future.[[7]](#footnote-7) Yet another study found that “students attending schools with collaborative climates and less punitive approaches to discipline have lower risk of being suspended and better academic outcomes.”5

Some take the widespread support for such practices in the absence of a solid body of research to be a sign that moral sentiment has moved ahead of demonstrable results.[[8]](#footnote-8) Critics also worry that leniency in punishment does not sufficiently penalize students who misbehave and fails to deter future misbehavior. Some also see restorative practices as a way of artificially driving the number of reported school suspensions down, thereby papering over underlying problems among students and within schools. When minor behavioral problems are ignored, they may turn into serious infractions, thereby exacerbating the school-to-prison pipeline.

1. **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**
2. Is there a morally significant difference between the use of restorative disciplinary practices on young children in schools as opposed to adult offenders?
3. What obligations do victims (whether individuals or communities) have to offenders?

# Case Study: Dating After Prison (Ethics Bowl)

*From NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL ETHICS BOWL, Case Set for 2020-2021 Regional Competitions, Authors: Prepared by: Becky Cox-White, Raquel Diaz-Sprague, Michael B. Funke, Rhiannon Dodds Funke, Gretchen A. Myers, Annemarie Spadafore*

Recently, Antoine and Jack sat down with a few other men to talk about what dating might be like, now that they’ve been released from prison.

Antoine went to prison when he was 18 for a crime he didn’t commit. He wasn’t able to afford a good lawyer, and the court appointed one did a terrible job at defending him. Antoine had a couple of casual relationships in high school before coming to prison, but he’s never had a serious sexual or romantic relationship. He is now 26 years old and eager to start dating.

Jack is 45 years old now. He was also 18 when he was convicted of murdering someone. Jack freely admits to committing the crime he was charged with, but feels like he is a completely different person now. He was young then and he didn’t know himself; his tough childhood didn’t leave him with a lot of coping mechanisms aside from alcohol. His sense of belonging came from a gang he was part of, which provided him with support, friendships, food, and a roof over his head. But it also got him in trouble. After 27 years in prison, over two decades of being sober, a lot of selfreflection, learning, therapy, and maturing, he doesn’t even feel like he is the same person as the young Jack that committed that crime.

As Antoine and Jack sit down with some friends to talk about what life might be like after prison, dating quickly came up. While dating is difficult and confusing under any circumstances, dating for the formerly incarcerated has an extra layer of complexity. They both agree that it is important to be open to the people they date about the time they served. But when should they disclose this information? On a first date? That seems like the most honest approach, but it’s unlikely to lead to a second date. Could they wait a bit? After all, nobody ever reveals that much on a first date; people rarely talk about having problems with addiction, financial difficulties, or mental health issues. And Antoine and Jack certainly don’t consider their incarceration a defining part of their identities. So, could Antoine and Jack also wait to talk about the time they served in prison? If they wait, how long can they wait?

## Discussion Questions

1. When should Antoine and Jack tell someone they are dating that they served time in prison?
2. Is there a moral difference between Antoine and Jack? If so, what might the difference be: their guilt/ innocence, the type of crime they were incarcerated for, the amount of time served, the experience they’ve had dating, etc.?
3. If instead of dating we were discussing friendships, would your answer be different? Why or why not?
4. When do people have obligations to disclose other important information about themselves when to their dates (for example, mental health issues, difficulties with commitment, addictions, traumatic experiences, having children, or having financial difficulties)?

1. Probably thee best scholarly introduction to virtue ethics is: Rosalind Hursthouse, “Virtue Ethics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2013, 2013, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/ethics-virtue/. This lesson is based on {Citation} [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Edith Hall, “What Can Aristotle Teach Us about the Routes to Happiness?,” Aeon, 2018, https://aeon.co/essays/what-can-aristotle-teach-us-about-the-routes-to-happiness. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sebastian Purcell, “Life on the Slippery Earth,” Aeon, July 3, 2018, https://aeon.co/essays/aztec-moral-philosophy-didnt-expect-anyone-to-be-a-saint. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. "Prisons Today and Tomorrow" [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Colorado School Safety Resource Center, "Examples of Restorative Justice Actions in Schools" [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. RAND, "Can Restorative Practices Improve School Climate and Curb Suspensions?" [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Evaluation of a Whole-School Change Intervention: Findings from a Two-Year Cluster-Randomized Trial of the Restorative Practices Intervention 5 Discipline in Context: Suspension, Climate, and PBIS in the School District of Philadelphia [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Cart Before the Horse: The Challenge and Promise of Restorative Justice Consultation in Schools [↑](#footnote-ref-8)