

Phil 3—Topics for Paper #1—Aristotle

Choose ***one*** of the topics below. A hard copy of your paper is due in class on **Friday, Nov. 1st**. You ***must*** also upload a copy of your paper to Turnitin (through CCLE). You will not receive a grade for your paper until you do so. The papers should be 3-4 pages, with standard formatting (double spaced, 12 pt font, 1.25" margins, page numbers, single-sided and **with the topic number in the title**).

In writing your paper, you may use anything from your notes or the text, but you may **NOT** (for any reason or to any degree) use any other material, especially internet research. (This restriction is for your own benefit. The answers are *not* to be a research paper—i.e., *not* to show that you can extensively research and explain other's opinions, ***but to formulate your own.***) Everything you need to know in order to answer the questions are in your notes/text, *but you will have to do something with that material to develop your answer*. This means you will have to be creative—i.e. say ***how*** you think Aristotle's theory would apply in this new context, and ***why*** you think it would end up with this result and not something else. The ***why*** will be the most important part of your answer. If you need to make up a scenario, make up terms, make up a character, feel free to do so. Just be sure to describe it well enough for your TA to follow it.

I will remind you (once again!) that I take plagiarism, and academic misconduct of any sort, very seriously. If you need help, we are always available.

1. Practical rationality is generally described as “reasoning about the practical good, what is good or best to do”. But what the “good” is that we reason about is a significant philosophical issue. Aristotle's answer is the good life, happiness or *eudaimonia*, and this life is a life of virtue, or a life of reasoning and acting well. But there is an ambiguity in his understanding of “the good” that seems to create a tension in his account. On the one side, he wants his account to provide a ready answer to the question, “why be moral?” The answer—to make *one's own* life go well. Practical rationality is thus a form of prudence, or maximizing one's own best interests. (Thinking of practical rationality in this way thus makes failing to act virtuously when one knows what virtue requires a form of irrationality.) On the other side, Aristotle seems to describe virtue as aiming at “the good *overall*”, reasoning and acting in such a way as to bring about the good for society (since the study of and training in virtue is a form of *political* science—how to act in relation to one another for the good of society). Does thinking of the good in these two ways, as being the good for the individual and as being the good for society overall, generate a problem for Aristotle's account? **If so, why?** What is the problem? Why does Aristotle's account fail to answer it? And why does his account *need* to answer it in order to explain what morality is? **If not, why not?** What might the problem be (what might someone raising an objection say the problem is), and why does this claim fail to apply to Aristotle? (Helpful hint: Aristotle needs to do two things—explain what morality is, and explain how we might be motivated to do the right thing. Does his account do both successfully using a single conception of the good, either “good for me” or “good overall”? Or is there really no difference between these two understandings because what is good for me will always and in all cases be good for society and vice versa?)
2. We discussed two virtues of character in class—courage and temperance. Using the doctrine of the mean, give a *full* account of ***either*** (i.e. ***not both***) the virtue of *generosity* (being charitable/generous with one's money), or of the virtue of *mildness* (anger towards an offense/injustice). Aristotle's structure of virtue requires that there always be the possibility of an excess and

deficiency in the underlying emotion/desire. But can you ever be *too* generous—i.e., can it ever be wrong to help someone in need? Or can it ever be wrong to stay calm and avoid getting angry? In answering, be sure to include a description of the virtue itself, the two associated vices, and the underlying emotion/desire that accounts for the three states. Also be sure to explain what it might be to hit the mean, and what it might be to miss it (you'll need to explain how the 5 conditions apply in order to do this). Why are the extreme states bad? Why is the mean good? You can create your own scenario to use in your discussion. NOTE—you do not need to give the *actual* account Aristotle gives (because you do not know it!)—what I want is *an* account that Aristotle *could* give based on the structure of his theory. So there is some flexibility in what you could say here. You can also make up your own terms as needed to explain the structure (but be sure to define them if you do).

3. Consider the following true story:

Malala Yousufzai was (at the time) a 15-year old Muslim girl who had, until 2007, attended school in Pakistan. But when the Taliban took over her village, they began to implement their interpretation of sharia law, which included a ban on the education of girls. To enforce this ban, they destroyed all the schools for girls. When Malala was 11, she began speaking out about her experiences on a blog to protest what was going on and to advocate for the rights of girls to an education. This was especially impressive because she did it at a time when few adults were willing to do the same because of threats coming from the Taliban. The Taliban eventually acted on these threats. Malala nearly died after being shot in the face by a masked man while riding home on a school bus. After multiple surgeries and years of physical therapy, she has (thankfully) almost fully recovered. In 2014, at the age of 17, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, making her the youngest Nobel laureate in history.

Malala has been praised for her bravery because she faced extreme danger in order to make a stand for her right (and the right of other girls) to an education. Aristotle's account of courage, however, seems to focus on facing danger in combat on the battlefield. Would, or could, Aristotle also describe Malala's action as courageous? If so, how? In answering, be sure to give a full description of Aristotle's account of virtue (the two vices, the mean, the 5 criteria for hitting the mean, etc.) Then, show how it applies (or fails to apply) to Malala's case. If Malala faced the Taliban's threat in order to help other girls like herself, how could her actions be said to make *her* life good/happy (i.e. to go well), especially if she never fully recovers (or recovers but also has to face a lifetime of threats)? If it does, how? If it doesn't, then what, according to Aristotle, could motivate her to face such danger? In addition, how does Aristotle account for the actions of the adults who failed to stand up against the Taliban? In what way did they fail? And is it right to describe them as fully *vicious* (immoral) for failing to act, especially given the nature of the threat they faced and the likelihood of making any difference in the end? Or would it be better to see their failure to act as understandable (i.e., not *required*) given the circumstances, and instead see Malala's action as a case of extraordinary/heroic virtue (going beyond what is minimally required by morality)? (*For this question only*, you may do a *small* amount of background research on Malala.)