# Aristotle on Whiskey

It has been some time since this column explicitly examined the great Philosopher or explicitly cited his philosophy. And while his approach to thinking and reflecting on various problems has never been far from the matters usually discussed here, I’ve not actually invoked his name for many columns. So, it may seem to be a bit of a surprise to start the new year by mentioning Aristotle and whiskey together in this month’s title. To some it may even be viewed as an unforgivable irreverence to one of the world’s greatest thinkers. But, as I hope to show, there is nothing irreverent or surprising in linking Aristotle to alcoholic spirits, beyond the usual association that many have about the ancient Greeks – an expectation, no doubt, largely set by Plato’s *Symposium.* At issue is the Aristotelian concept of virtue, the sloppy practice of equivocation (double-speak) in logical arguments, and a somewhat famous speech about whiskey made by Noah ‘Soggy’ Sweat Jr.

In 1952, a Mississippi’s law-maker by the name of Noah ‘Soggy’ Sweat Jr., was asked about his position regarding the state’s continued prohibition on selling alcoholic beverages to its citizens. Soggy’s speech, which has since become immortalized due to its colorful language and its terseness, reads as

<My friends, I had not intended to discuss this controversial subject at this particular time. However, I want you to know that I do not shun controversy. On the contrary, I will take a stand on any issue at any time, regardless of how fraught with controversy it might be. You have asked me how I feel about whiskey. All right, here is how I feel about whiskey:

If when you say whiskey you mean the devil's brew, the poison scourge, the bloody monster, that defiles innocence, dethrones reason, destroys the home, creates misery and poverty, yea, literally takes the bread from the mouths of little children; if you mean the evil drink that topples the Christian man and woman from the pinnacle of righteous, gracious living into the bottomless pit of degradation, and despair, and shame and helplessness, and hopelessness, then certainly I am against it.

But, if when you say whiskey you mean the oil of conversation, the philosophic wine, the ale that is consumed when good fellows get together, that puts a song in their hearts and laughter on their lips, and the warm glow of contentment in their eyes; if you mean Christmas cheer; if you mean the stimulating drink that puts the spring in the old gentleman's step on a frosty, crispy morning; if you mean the drink which enables a man to magnify his joy, and his happiness, and to forget, if only for a little while, life's great tragedies, and heartaches, and sorrows; if you mean that drink, the sale of which pours into our treasuries untold millions of dollars, which are used to provide tender care for our little crippled children, our blind, our deaf, our dumb, our pitiful aged and infirm; to build highways and hospitals and schools, then certainly I am for it.

This is my stand. I will not retreat from it. I will not compromise.>

The standard analysis found at [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/If-by-whiskey) or at [Bo Bennett’s Logically Fallacious](https://www.logicallyfallacious.com/tools/lp/Bo/LogicalFallacies/107/If_By_Whiskey) website is that Soggy’s rhetoric is an amusing example of double-speak. Bennett has the following to say about this speech:

<his is an amazing insight to the human mind and the area of rhetoric.  We can see how when both sides of the issue are presented through the same use of emotionally charged words and phrases, the argument is really vacuous and presents very little factual information, nor does it even take a stance on the issue.>

On the surface, Bennett’s analysis seems to be spot on; Soggy’s speech suggests double-talk of the highest order uttered, most likely, with that old, rolling, Southern voice best exemplified by Foghorn Leghorn. But there is another interpretation that is equally valid and should be explored, in the spirit of fairness.

To understand this more charitable interpretation, we need to step back and understand the Aristotelian concept of virtue; a concept discussed by Aristotle in many places, most notably in Book II of the Nicomachean Ethics.

The concept of virtue coincides with the proper balance between an excess or a deficiency of trait. In the case of courage or bravery, Aristotle would say that the virtue of courage is having the proper mix between the two extremes of courage. On one side, the soldier who possesses too little courage is timid and is incapable of performing his function in battle or even, most probably, even incapable of saving his own life. On the other, the soldier who jumps into danger with no thought whatsoever for his safety or those of his compatriots serves no useful purpose due to his rashness and foolhardiness.

The Aristotelian notion of virtue as the balance between two extremes can be applied to Soggy’s speech as well. At one extreme, is his first meaning of ‘by whiskey’: the overindulgence in alcohol that weakens character, causes lapses in judgement, and dissipates wealth, prosperity, and family cohesion. This extreme is drunkenness indulged in by the alcoholic and should be avoided.

The other extreme is a bit more difficult to identify precisely because Soggy refers to it obliquely by noting all the advantages that result from its avoidance rather than discussing all the ills that follow by its pursuit. This extreme, which may be called prudishness or uptightness, is often the province of the teetotaler, who deprives himself of the benefits that follow from the proper use of wine and spirits. History shows that almost all cultures reserve an honored spot for ‘adult beverages’ because of the good effects they bring to both the body and the soul of its citizens. In addition, Soggy points out that their production forms a significant sector of the modern economy, resulting in gainful employment and ample tax revenues that are also beneficial to society.

So there are at least two readings of Soggy’s speech: the first looks at it as a crass example of political jibber-jabber, the second credits it as a colorful explanation, in layman terms, of the virtue of alcohol. Personally, I prefer the latter interpretation as it brings the great philosophical thought of ancient Greece to the everyday political doings of the modern world.