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Paper 2: Ethics

For this essay, I decided to talk about Aristotle. He was a Greek philosopher and scientist who lived between 384 BC and 322 BC. He was a student of Plato and tutored Alexander the Great. His contributions to philosophy have been immense and his ideas have been passed down over the years; so much so that to this day they continue to be studied and debated among students and scholars all over the world. Aristotle wrote on a wide range of topics in philosophy, science and other fields. Some of his most prominent works include metaphysics, ethics, politics, physics, etc. but today I will focus on his virtue ethics theory. In this paper, I will attempt to go over the theory and explain how it changes our perspective on life.

For Aristotle, the concept of ethics was more than just a theoretical study; it was also more practical. He defended what is today known as a virtue of ethics. Aristotle saw ethics as stemming from human nature (how we are built or developed as human beings). He questioned what was the ultimate goal of human life. For him, everything was reduced to the pursuit of happiness, which he referred to not as a feeling, but as a state of well-being. But what is the telos of a human being? According to Aristotle, it is to achieve eudaimonia, the supreme happiness, and it is achieved through the cultivation of virtues and the fulfillment of one's potential. "Aristotle was in no doubt that the life of virtue, informed by reason, constituted the good for mankind" (Cottingham, page 492).

Aristotle defined happiness as wisdom, while evilness was defined as a certain form of ignorance regarding the activities that one should take. To return to the idea of how we might excel at our telos through our acts, we must introduce the concept of virtue. A "virtue" is an "excellence" of your character... a character quality required for something to excel and flourish in its purpose (telos). Virtues are not just feelings or capacities, but also dispositions of character. We can practice, cultivate, and even ingrain virtue. Our virtue describes how we normally deal with our emotions and capacities when confronted with specific situations; it expresses our personality. We, as humans, can learn about virtue through education and observation of how other people behave. However, the only way to improve our own virtue is via practice. We must become accustomed to it and make it a habit.

Virtue is like a "mean" between extremes... a balance point in a characteristic that enables flourishing. It is the perfect balance point between deficiency and excess, both being dangerous and negative for our telos. Excess is just as bad as deficiency; both extremes are vices. The best course of action is to try to find an even point in between (the balance point) or to get as close to it as possible. "Here Aristotle introduces his famous doctrine of the mean: courage is a disposition (to act and react in certain ways) that lies in between two extremes — the vice of excess (foolhardiness), and the vice of deficiency (cowardice)" (Cottingham, page 492).

Some examples Aristotle gives about virtues are courage, dignity/humility, generosity, and temperance. All these are the mean points of them, they all have their excesses and deficiencies. For example, temperance would be the mean between asceticism (deficiency)

and gluttony (excess); and generosity would be the mean between miserly (deficiency) and spendthrift (excess).

Examples of virtues appear countless times in everyday life. It often happens to me that many problems pile up together, whether they are from college, from work, from my relationships or simply personal problems. Many people would think that in a situation like this, someone with courage would be fit enough to deal with it all on their own. But the truth is that a courageous decision in this case would be to ask for help. Many times asking for help is the best thing to do. Personally it took me a long time to understand this; but when I did my life took a turn for the better. This is just one example, but Aristotle believed that all virtues functioned similarly and that the only way to learn about them was via practice and experiences. According to him, there are four main virtues that are fundamental; they are known as the cardinal virtues and are courage, wisdom, temperance, and justice.

I found this theory really interesting. It was the first time I read about it, and I agree with every point that Aristotle makes. I believe that seeing how you advance and improve your own virtues is the most rewarding sensation a person can have. This is arguably one of the most difficult things to learn because there is no book that tells us how to do it; we must learn through time and experience. "Aristotle argues, in this respect like musical excellence: you become good by constant practice" (Cottingham page 492). This quote makes a lot of sense, as no one is born "good" at anything, whether it's playing an instrument or being courageous. One of the things I find that can be debated about the theory is that all people are different, so we all have a different telos. This, in my opinion, makes the theory somewhat subjective because it is dependent on Aristotle's thoughts and opinions rather than actual facts. That is, not everyone will agree with it or attempt to follow it. Perhaps not everyone's main purpose

would be to reach ultimate happiness. Or, if they so desire, happiness can be found through other means than virtue. Overall, I had a really good time reading and investigating about Aristotle and his virtue ethics theory. I feel like I learnt a lot writing this paper.