

Human Virtue in Plato and Aristotle

by
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In their philosophies Plato and Aristotle each develop a significant account of human virtue. Through comparing and contrasting the two formulations, a deeper understanding of the thinkers' ideas can be had.

Plato provides his account of virtue in two different works, the *Protagoras* and the *Republic*. In the *Protagoras* Plato, through Socrates, argues that virtue is knowledge. The argument begins with the premise that everyone wants what he or she believes to be good. From this it follows that when a person does something wrong or bad it cannot be because they want to do it, knowing it is bad, it must be that they want to do it, believing it to be good. What separates the virtuous person from the un-virtuous is not a desire for what is good, everyone desires what they think to be good, but rather the knowledge of what the good really is. On this account, Plato's conception of human virtue boils down to knowing the good, and being able to correctly choose the actions that bring about the most good.

Plato's other account of virtue, found in the *Republic* looks, upon first glance, to have nothing in common with the view offered in the *Protagoras*, but after further consideration, it can be seen to be in accord with the concept of virtue as knowledge. Plato begins with an argument concerning the human soul. He contends that there are at least three distinct components of the soul and calls them reason, appetite, and spirit. Appetite is the part of the soul that is animal like, lusting for bodily pleasures and itches, reason that which is concerned with calculation and rational thought, and spirit the part associated with emotions. After having established the various parts of the soul, Plato then makes the claim that virtue lies in keeping the components of the soul in the correct relations. Reason should guide the soul, making decisions and determining what is wrong and right, spirit should follow reason and provide motivation, and appetite should obey. Virtue on this account seems to be nothing but a magic proportion or some sort of balance of the soul, having nothing to do with knowledge or decision making. However, the *Republic*, more so than the *Protagoras*, seems to be a guide to the way in which one can actually become virtuous, as opposed to an abstract look at what it means to be virtuous. Taking this point of view it seems that Plato is suggesting that only through a state of the soul in which reason is ruling and which appetite and spirit are in their complying roles can knowledge of the good, and hence virtue, be acquired. Using the logic found in the *Protagoras*, it would follow that once anyone had the knowledge that the soul must be aligned in this manner to acquire virtue and had the knowledge that acquiring virtue is the best good, then they would align their souls in these proportions and become virtuous, because everyone does what they believe to be the best good. The only thing separating the virtuous from the un-virtuous, then is this knowledge, and again we find that virtue, according to Plato, comes down to consisting in knowledge of the good, only this time we find that the knowledge is of how to acquire it.

Aristotle spells out his account of virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Beginning with a discussion of what people mean when they use the notion of virtue in their everyday language and then expanding these ideas to the general case, Aristotle reaches several conclusions on virtue, and in particular what it means for a human to be virtuous. The virtue of something, Aristotle contends, is whatever makes the thing do its essential action or function, well. The essential function or action of a particular object is simply that which makes the object what it is. For a knife it is the ability to cut, for a house the ability to provide shelter and security, for a general the ability to win at war. Human virtue is therefore, that which makes humans perform their characteristic function or action well. Aristotle explains that the characteristic action of humans, the action that is unique an essential to being human, is living a human life in accordance with reason. He goes on to show that what enables a human to perform his action well, that is, what enables humans to live in accordance with reason well, is a certain state of being or of character. This state of character, according to Aristotle, has to do with a person's responses to pleasures and pains under various situations. The virtuous person knows the best course of action, takes this course of action, and feels pleasure, or at least no pain, as a result of taking this action. Human virtue then, for Aristotle, is this state of the human soul, that is, the state of the human soul such that the person in this state chooses the correct actions, at the correct times, for the correct reasons.

After considering each thinker's conception of virtue, a number of similarities can be drawn between the Aristotelian and Platonic theories. First of all we can see that for each philosopher virtue is thought of as a stable or unchanging facet of the individual. For Plato a person's virtue consists in his knowledge of the good. It's not that a person is knowledgeable about some things or at some times and is therefore virtuous in some aspects and un-virtuous in others. Someone possessing knowledge of the good is able to determine the good in all decisions, at all times, and will thus be virtuous unconditionally. Similarly for Aristotle, an individual must be thought of as either having virtue, or lacking it. Virtue is thought of as a state or condition of the soul. On this view people cannot merely be moved by virtue, or find themselves to be virtuous in certain situations. Someone possessing virtue is virtuous only as a result of their soul or character being in a particular state. Therefore, according to Aristotle virtue is also seen as an overall property prescribed to the individual who is virtuous. Another way in which there seems to be convergence among the two notions of virtue is in the practical way in which one goes about becoming virtuous. Plato believes, as we have already seen, that in order to gain virtue your soul must be in some sort of balance, reason guiding thought and action, with appetite suppressed. He says in the Republic that in order to achieve this correct balance one must have the correct upbringing. Plato believes that at an early age one must learn to control his appetite by avoiding bodily pleasures, and exercise his reason through abstract thought and contemplation of the forms. In this sense acquiring virtue for Plato requires practice and control which lead to the correct proportions of the soul. Aristotle's beliefs fall along these lines as well. Doing virtuous actions is a necessary, not sufficient, condition, for Aristotle. In order to truly become virtuous one must do the virtuous actions and also take pleasure in the virtuous action that they choose. Aristotle believes that it takes repetition of these actions before the correct responses, in terms of feeling pleasure or pain, are formed. He explains in the Ethics that exhibiting moderation in nearly every aspect of life and acting as though one were already virtuous, is the ultimate road to the virtuous state. Here we see that Aristotle, along with Plato, believes that virtue must be gained through practice and a form of self control.

Despite the fact that there are ways in which the two theories overlap, the Aristotelian and Platonic conceptions of virtue contain major, fundamental differences. To start with, the source of virtue for the two philosophers is completely different. For Plato virtue comes from the form of the good. Only in knowing the good, which is an independent self subsisting entity, can one be virtuous. Virtue is only thought of as a characteristic of the person inasmuch as they are close to, or come to know, the good. Plato leads us to the picture that virtue is an altogether separate existence from the virtuous person. For Aristotle on the other hand virtue is intrinsically intertwined with the virtuous person. Virtue actually is a state of being which aids the person living according to reason. Virtue in some sense is contained within the individual and thus for Aristotle is connected with the virtuous person on a basic level. The other area of crucial difference between the two ideas of virtue is in the limiting case. Plato's deep connection of virtue with the form of the good actually makes it impossible for a human being to become virtuous. The human soul only truly comes to know the forms, including the form of the good, after death. Although mental abstraction, restraint from bodily pleasures, and keeping the soul in the correct proportions will tend one to becoming virtuous, they can only truly become virtuous in the afterlife through direct contact with the forms. For Aristotle however, we find that the virtuous person is indeed possible. Once a person is in the state in which they are better able to live in accordance with reason they are, by definition, virtuous. The fact that human virtue can be actualized in a living human brings Aristotle's conception of virtue in sharp contrast to the Platonic formulation.

In the end we find that although on the surface the two accounts of virtue may appear to be similar, the underpinnings and implications of the two theories are completely inconsistent.