

## **A Comparison Of Plato And Aristotle's Ethical Thoughts**

**Joseph Nietlong<sup>1</sup>, Gideon Kato<sup>2</sup>**

Benue State University Makurdi,  
Km 1, Gboko Road, PMB 102119,  
Benue State, Nigeria.

\*e-mail: [jnietlong@bsum.edu.ng](mailto:jnietlong@bsum.edu.ng)<sup>1</sup>

### ***ABSTRACT***

Many thinkers tend to glide over the differences between the ethical thoughts of Plato and his protégé Aristotle. This study is a critical discourse on whether and how Aristotle's ethical thought seems to differ from Plato's. Most contemporary ethicists regard both as virtue-ethicists. This is equally applicable to pre-modernist ethics. As such, ethics for the most part lays much emphasis on elements of character. However, it would seem that there are deep crevices between Plato's and Aristotle's ethical positions. These differences arise from fundamentally different metaphysical positions regarding the unity of being especially as adumbrated in the sixth chapter of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle applies this doctrine to his *Ethics*. For Plato, on the other hand, all knowledge comes from knowledge of a Form, which is a universal or genus in which individuals or species share or participate. The possibility of a Philosopher King depends on the fact that there is one Form (Being as such) which encompasses everything else. Therefore, one who has knowledge of this form is in possession of the master science that subsumes all other knowledge. For Aristotle, the universality of being is not the same as that of other universals, and so cannot be the subject of a supreme science, except to show why it is not possible in the way we see in Plato's *Republic*. Understanding this shows how philosophy relates to everyday life.

Keywords: Ethics; Forms; Knowledge; Being; Good.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Plato's mentor and philosophical mouth-piece, Socrates had in the Platonic *Dialogues* concerned himself with ethical matters following the injunction inscribed on the frontispiece of the Temple of Delphi, and taken to heart by him (σεα αὐτῶν) for man to *know himself* (Griswold 2002). In this sense *knowledge* and *virtue* are two sides of the same coin, for they are so intimately related. For Socrates, to *know* the good is to *do* the good. Vice is ignorance, the absence of knowledge, conversely knowledge is virtue. As such for Socrates, no one performs an evil act knowingly, or voluntarily. Wrong doing is

always the product of ignorance or forgetfulness. In linking virtue to knowledge, Socrates understood by virtue the fulfillment of one's function as a rational being. For a person's function is to behave or act rationally. Concurrently, every person is imbued with the inherent desire for happiness, the well being of his/her soul. The soul's happiness is achievable, but only through certain types of behavior. Other, contrary types of behavior do not lead to happiness. Even though thieves steal, knowing that stealing is wrong, do so with the hope that it would bring them happiness. Likewise, we crave power, sensual pleasure, material possessions as signs of success and happiness, mistaking them for the real and true ground of happiness. Outside the dialogues of Plato we find confirmation of Socrates' position in Aristotle:

Socrates, however, was busying himself about ethical matters and neglecting the world of nature as a whole but seeking the universal in these matters, and fixed thought for the first time on definitions. Plato accepted his teaching, but held that the problem applied not to any sensible thing but to entities of another kind—Idea (Taylor *et al.*, 1997, p. 357).

As Aristotle noticed, Plato in his dialogues seems to follow Socrates rather closely. Plato's treatment of ethics is further marked by a passionate strongly held belief in the unity and interdependence of all the different branches of human knowledge. In the adumbration of Plato's philosophy, there is a natural progression from his theory of Forms (Ideas) to his ethical thought (Pappas 2004). Just as we can be led astray by appearances in the world of nature in the physical realm, so are we easily deceived by appearances in the domain of Ethics. And for Plato, there is a special type of knowledge that helps us to navigate between shadows, reflections, illusions and the real objects in the visible world. It is also the kind of knowledge that is needed to sort out the shadows and reflections of the genuinely real in the face of the skepticism of the skeptics. In *The Republic* Plato saw the link between knowledge and morality. The skeptic's denial of permanent universal moral standards led Plato to elaborating in detail Socrates' ethical thought: that *Knowledge is virtue*, that the *soul is a tripartite entity* modeled on the internal conflict and confusion shared by all human persons, and the concept of *virtue as function*.

## CONCEPT OF THE SOUL

In the fourth book of *The Republic* (1961), Plato depicts the souls as having three parts (tripartite); *Appetite*, *Spirit* and *Reason* (Kaufman 2017). The first is the *Appetite*: It is laden with, and marked by the desire for corporeal things such as safety, food, drinks, sex, and money. The second, *Spirit* (will and volition): an impulse towards action. It seeks honor as its excellence. Primarily, this is neutral, but responsive to being led and guided by *reason*. The third, *Reason*: the realization of a goal or value. Reason seeks the truth as its excellence. The soul, as Plato understands it, is the principle of life and movement, as the body is inanimate, and is only moved by the principle of life. *Reason* could indicate and suggest a goal for behavior, but sensual *appetite* could overcome it. Thus the power of *Spirit* could be drawn in either direction by sensual powers. Plato illustrates this (human condition) in *The Phaedrus* (1961) with the figure of the charioteer drawn by two horses. The cause of evil is ignorance or forgetfulness. Plato locates the cause of evil in the soul's very nature in its relation to the body. According to him, the soul had, before

entering the body, a prior, independent existence from it. Composed of two parts: *rational* and *irrational*, the irrational part is further divided into two: the spirit and the appetites each having a different origin. The soul has an unruly and irrational part before it enters the body (Büttner 2017). The cause of evil is present even in the soul's *pre-existent* state (Martens 2015). The soul alternates in its vision and remembrance of truth and also the forgetfulness of this vision. In this view, evil is not a positive thing. It is a characteristic of the soul in its forgetfulness.

## RECOVERING LOST MORALITY.

Morality is the recovery of lost inner harmony, a reversal of the process of reason having been overcome by appetites and the demands of the body. This reversal can only take place when we become aware that we are in a state of ignorance. We must, as it were, awaken from our slumber, become self aware, thus *know our selves*, since knowledge is lodged deep within us (Gulley 2013). The soul recovers in *recollection* what it knew before in its *pre-existent* state. Recollection is jumped-started by the mind encountering difficulties in the bewildering, contradictory experiences of sensory perception. The attempt to make sense of these experiences leads us beyond the illusions and shadows, beyond the multiplicity of things themselves to the realm of *forms*, *ideas*. This can be achieved through a teacher, as guide. Such a function as teacher and awakener was bestowed upon Socrates, the most effective of teachers and awakener who helped to shift the prisoner's gaze from shadow to reality after the chains had been broken.

## VIRTUE AS FULFILLMENT OF FUNCTION

Running through Plato's ethical thought is a thread that holds it together. The good life is one of inner harmony, well-being and happiness. He likens it severally to the efficient functioning of things, especially when things fulfill the function for which they are. The soul's function is living; it is like an art, comparable to music, and to musicians' fine tuning their string instruments to the exact and perfect pitch. The art of living requires knowledge of measures and limits. The soul has various functions which operate by the limits set by intelligence and knowledge. The different parts of the soul each carries out appropriately their functions. Moderation in pleasures leads to the virtue of temperance. The spirited part of the soul is kept in check, leading to courage. Reason leads to wisdom as each part carries out its function in the right measure and proportion, Justice is achieved. Justice: being the general virtue that mirrors a person's attainment of inner harmony and well-being.

Plato's moral philosophy is closely linked to his political thought. In *The republic* (1961) he says that the different classes of the State are like different parts of an individual soul, and the different types of states are analogous to different types of people with their characteristic virtues and vices. Their health, as that of the State are measured as to whether they are performing well and accordingly their functions in proper relationships to one another. As former student of Plato, Aristotle, despite the changes, modifications and development of his creative genius away from that of his teacher; his ethical teaching remains basically the same except for some few marked differences arising no doubt from

temperamental dispositions and divergence of outlook. That said, I shall try to show that of Aristotle's contribution to ethics, the most original and most important is his doctrine of the mean. It is found adumbrated in the second Book of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, chapters 5-9, and at the tail-end of Book five.

Aristotle was perhaps Plato's brightest pupil, but he was also his most scathing critic (Ameriks & Clarke 2000). The Stagirite had a penchant for analysis. He makes fine distinctions, separates and analyses reality into its constituent parts in the most minute and painstaking detail. Aristotle delineates one branch of learning from another,--by finding what differentiates and what is peculiar to each. '*Being is said in many ways*' (Castelli 2010, p. 56). In the fourth book of the *Metaphysics* for instance, Aristotle says that other sciences [in contrast to the science of *being qua being*] cut off a part of being and investigates the attributes of this part. That gives them their domain. The science of Ethics is such a science that cuts a part of *being*; in this case ethics is a *practical* science which is different in both its aim and its method from the *theoretical* sciences. For Aristotle, the aim of ethics is to act in a certain manner. A major difference here is that ethics is not 'scientific' like mathematics. It is practical as opposed to contemplative. This of course raises the question of how to theorize about that which is so different from theory? Again and again Aristotle scores the point that ethical theory must always be subordinated to practice. For Aristotle, moral behavior is something attained by the formation of a habit (Mintz 1996). According to him this pre-occupation with action is not just to action as being right in itself regardless of other considerations, but rather action as conducive to the good of man. What makes an action good is that it is conducive to the good man. Conversely a bad action is that which is opposed to the attainment of the good of man.

It could be said therefore that Aristotle's ethics is *teleological*. "Every action is seen to aim at some good" (Oderberg 1998, p. 76). But there are different goods pertaining to different arts and sciences; as health to the medical art, shipbuilding to a ship, strategy to victory, economics to wealth. These ends may have further supervening ends in sight. But if there is an overarching good as end, an ultimate end to which all these other ends aim, then we have to discover what that good is, and what science it is that corresponds to it. Plato's response had been that people aim at knowledge of the *form* of the good. And for him, the supreme principle of the good is separate from the world of experience, and from individuals. We arrive at it by ascending from the visible world to the intelligible world. For Aristotle, on the other hand, the principle for good and right is embed in every person and this principle could be discovered by studying human nature and could be attained through actual behavior in daily life.

According to Aristotle, it is political science which studies the good for man. For him, the *Politeia* and the individual, have the same good, though as found in the State is greater and nobler. Compare this with Plato's *Republic* [.....] where justice is writ-large, in the *Ideal State*. Aristotle categorizes ethics as practical philosophy. He would then go on to treat of individual ethical sciences. As regards the good of man, Aristotle says it cannot be answered with mathematical exactitude--owing no doubt to the nature of its subject-matter. For one cannot determine human action and plot it as it were with precision on a graph (Sachs 2011). It could be said that Aristotle's ethics is his *ontology* of the human being. For Aristotle; even more so than for Plato's Socrates, the highest

good is happiness. The distinction made between *eudemonia* and pleasure is only a supervening end, that is, something that cannot be really desired and sought after most directly, but rather only with accompaniment to the fruition of life. Pleasure is like an ornament, a decoration.

Happiness is fruition of a man's life, in the truly human aspect of that manner of life the good of each thing is its function., its way of being, which is at the very same time its realization; as sight is the good of the eye, walking, the good of the foot. Just as there is a proper activity to the carpenter, "what?" asks Aristotle "is the activity proper to man *qua* man?" Aristotle delineates the outline of his ethics with an illustration: first that all actions aim towards an end, then, he distinguishes between two kinds of ends: *instrumental* and *intrinsic* ends. The first are means; acts done for the sake of other ends, while the second are acts done for their own sake. When we discover what people aim at, not as carpenters, doctors or generals, but as humans, we arrive at action for its sake, and for which all other activities will be means, and this, must be the good of humanity.

## THE FUNCTION OF HUMAN BEINGS

Like Plato, Aristotle links the *good* to the special *function* of a thing. He examines the hypotheses that it is life i.e. living. But this is common to plants and animals. So he makes up his mind that it is a certain activity of life proper to *rational* man, hence human happiness. This mode of life is the theoretic life of Contemplation. It transcends the life of pleasures. It also is better, higher than the life of production: *Poiesis*, and the merely practical life for instance politics. Since, as Aristotle observes one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day, neither does a brief time of pleasure make a person fortunate and happy. The life of the theoretician, the contemplative is the most excellent first, because our intelligence is the most excellent faculty, and the things known through them are the most excellent among objects of knowledge. Second, the contemplative life is the most continuous way of life, the most enduring. It does not cease when its goal is obtained. Third, pure and stable pleasures accompany this mode of life. And it is these that are necessary ingredients of life (Sachs 2011).

Finally, for Aristotle the life of contemplation is the only way of life that is sought-after for its own sake (Sachs 2011). While in the life of action humans seek for something outside of their activity itself, the contemplative life in a sense transcends the human condition. The best in us, even if it is the smallest part of our reality is enough to divinize us, make us immortal as it were. The best that is in us is what is most characteristic of us, besides it would be absurd if we do not choose our life, but someone else's.

## HAPPINESS AS THE END

Human nature should aim at its proper end. People aim for pleasure wealth and honor, but they are not the chief good for which people should aim. To be ultimate end, an act should be self sufficient, and final. It is always desirable in itself, and never for the sake of something else, and it must be attainable by people. Aristotle says all people will agree that this is happiness, the end that alone meets all the requirements for the ultimate end of human action. Health, wealth and honor are chosen for the sake of it. Happiness is

another name for good. It is a working of the soul in the way of excellence or virtue. How does the soul attain happiness? The general rule is: to act in accordance with right reason i.e. that the rational part of the soul should control the irrational part. The irrational part requires guidance, considering its nature and its mechanism; its make-up, its nature. We do not automatically act the right way. None of the moral virtues rise in us by nature. Morality has to do with developing habits, the habit of right thinking, right choice, and right behavior, as nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to that nature (Sachs 2011).

## VIRTUE AS THE GOLDEN MEAN

In his treatment of virtues Aristotle manifests his originality. First, his penchant for distinctions divides the virtues into, *dianoia*, i.e. of the *nous*, and the ethical or *moral* virtue he says lies in the middle, a mean between two opposed human inclinations (Rowe & Broadie 2004). As in Plato's *Republic*, the content of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is mainly a study of character, an exposition and evaluation of human modes of being, different types of souls and their virtues and vices. Man with his reason and his hands, can make for himself instruments of an infinite variety, and for any number of purposes. Human passions are capable of a wide range of action, from way too little to too much. Whether in regards to our appetite for food, or other things, we can have excessive desire or a deficiency in our appetite. The proper course of action is the virtuous course, a middle ground or *mean* between excess and deficiency. We should seek out a middle ground with all our passions: such as those of fear, confidence, lust, anger, compassion, pleasure, and pain. When we fail to attain the middle ground, we expose ourselves to these excesses of vices of excesses or of deficiency. Virtue is a habit of choosing in accordance with a mean. The mean is not the same for everybody. Virtue is a state of being, determined by reason. Moral virtue consists in cultivating habits which will spontaneously incline us to take the middle course of action. Plato lists four virtues: *courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom*. Aristotle endorses them, but goes on to add *magnificence, liberality, friendship, and self-respect* (Curzer 2012).

## DELIBERATION AND CHOICE

For Aristotle, there are two kinds of reasoning within the rational soul. The first, *theoretical*, gives us knowledge of fixed principles or philosophical wisdom. The second, *practical*, which provides us with a rational guide to moral action. Under the particular circumstances we find ourselves. This is practical wisdom. This is the important role of reason. Without this rational element we would not have any moral capacity. According to Aristotle, although we have natural capacity for right behavior, we do not act rightly by nature. Our lives consist of an unfixed number of possibilities. Goodness is in us potentially (Ubiali 2017). While a mango seed will grow into a mango tree and bear mango fruit with mechanical certainty, with people however we must move from what is potential in us to its actuality by knowing what we must do, deliberating about it, and then choosing in fact to do it.

While for Plato and Socrates, knowing the good was sufficient to doing the good, for Aristotle, there must be, in addition to knowledge, deliberate choice. So that *the origin of moral action—its efficient, motifs final cause—is choice, and (the origin) of choice is desire and reasoning with a view to an end* (Ubiali 2017). There is an inherent connection between free choice and human responsibility. People are responsible for their conduct.

## CONTEMPLATION

For Aristotle, human nature does not simply consist in rationality, but of the full range covered by the *vegetative*, *appetitive*, and the *rational* soul (Mix 2018). Virtue does not negate any of these natural capacities. The moral person employs all his/her capacities, physical, and mental. To the two broad divisions of human nature, are two corresponding functions of reason; *moral* and the *intellectual*, each having its attendant virtues. We have seen Aristotle's moral virtues. The intellectual virtues, by contrast, focus on our intellectual rather than bodily nature. Chief among these is philosophical wisdom (*Sophia*) which includes scientific knowledge and the ability to grasp first principles. Aristotle rounds up his work on ethics with a discussion of philosophical wisdom and the act of contemplation of intellectual truths. So if happiness is the result of our acting according to our distinctive nature, then it is reasonable to assume that we are most happy when acting according to our highest nature, which is contemplation. "*This activity is the best, since not only reason*", says Aristotle "*is the best thing in us, but the objects of reason are the best of knowable objects, the activity of philosophical wisdom is admittedly the pleasantest of virtuous activities*" (Stumpf 1966, p. 109).

## CONCLUSION

For Plato, people must be schooled to acquire certain kinds of knowledge. This kind of formation or training give them the capacity to know the nature of the good life, since evil is due to ignorance, the nature of the good life is an intellectual task similar to mathematical truths. Not all people however have the mental ability to learn what the good life is, therefore they need to be trained or formed to emulate the brighter people's action. And these elites are meant to be leaders in society. For this reason, according to Plato, censorship is necessary to prevent certain kinds of experiences by young people. There is one and only one good life for all to lead. Goodness is absolute and exists independently of humankind.

Aristotle's account of the soul sets out to explain the most wonderful phenomenon of the natural world which is life. His account of the soul as the *entelechy* that is the first actuality of a body with organs makes of the soul a set of capacities. A living thing therefore, has certain power or capacities that inanimate things do not have. Living things can do things than non-living things cannot. The powers of living things consist of nutrition, reproduction, location, perception and thought. Aristotle's description of the soul are attempts at explanations of how living things function the way they do, so that his *De Anima* is taken up largely with causal and physiological explanations of the powers of the soul

Aristotle's argument about the *good life* shows that the good life for people is a life of happiness. Plato however, does not believe so. For in his case, living the good life need

knowledge. Aristotle's solution to the good life is, in this instance, a better answer than Plato's. But Plato's absolutism will work well, for instance, in the context of keeping or breaking a promise. Here, his *absolutism* would be more appropriate than Aristotle's *relativism*.

In general, human behavior flows from three main sources, desire, emotion, and knowledge. What is moral is decided by the person and not rules or by consequences. The human soul has three parts, first, appetite: which is our desires. Second, Spirit: our emotional abilities to feel empathy. Third, Reason: thinking ability to judge. When we balance these three parts of the soul, we are able to make good decisions and moral choices, when any one part takes control over the others in our minds, it leads to bad decision making. Knowledge creates awareness and plays an important role in developing ethical principles.

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