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PHIL102

4.2.2018

Ethics Final Paper: Plato’s virtue theory vs. Aristotle’s virtue theory

The ancient Greeks Plato and Aristotle were two of the most famous philosophers in human history. Plato was a student of Socrates, and Aristotle was a student of Plato. However, their minds did not think exactly alike and both had different ideas and views on a number of subjects. One such subject they had different ideas on was the concept of virtue theory. Plato and Aristotle had differing views on how it affected goodness, the human person, and thinking vs. doing. In general, we define virtue ethics as a normative theory that maintains that the focus of morality is habits, dispositions, and character traits. So how does this associate with Plato and Aristotle?

I will begin listing differences between the two philosopher’s definitions of virtue theory. I will start with Plato’s. For Plato’s understanding of the human person, he believed in the cardinal virtues: wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. To be more illustrative, he uses the Republic as a metaphor for the four cardinal virtues and how they work in the human person. The Artisans represent temperance, the guardians represent courage, and the rulers represent wisdom. But where is justice? That virtue alone is achieved through all city residents working together as a whole for the greater good. Plato believed that there are also three parts of the human soul, which are reason (wisdom), spirit (courage), and passion (temperance). Like the city, justice comes when all three parts of the human soul work together for the greater good. As for how a person can become virtuous, Plato believed that we will become virtuous just by simply thinking alone. He believed that if we think about the ideas and habits that define courage, wisdom, and temperance, we can become virtuous people. And thus, we have Plato’s objective sense of justice and his understanding of knowledge and the human person. He believed that moral truth is the function of the four cardinal virtues.

Now let’s talk about the meaning of virtue ethics from Aristotle’s point of view. First, Aristotle defines virtue as excellence. For him, there are two basic virtues. They are intellectual and moral virtues. Intellectual virtues are excellences of the mind, such as reason and willpower. Moral virtues are learned from repetition and dispose us to act well. To become something better, we have to practice at becoming better, according to Aristotle. He believed that all actions have goals and that we act with our own interpretation of what is good. So what defines what is good? Aristotle lists two types of good, which are intrinsic and instrumental. Intrinsic is good in and of itself, such as happiness. Instrumental good is used as a tool or mean to make others happy, i.e. food, games, clothes, etc. We know that living well or being happy is the goal of moral philosophy, and Aristotle believes there is an absolute good which is the cause of all good. But to determine what it means to live well, we must know what it is to be human. Aristotle believes that the function of man is for the soul to act in accordance with reason. Thus the virtuous or excellent life is in accordance with the virtues. Aristotle calls this Eudaimonia, which is happiness as an end in itself.

I am going to dive into the differences between Plato and Aristotle’s understanding of virtue ethics. This is going to serve as one big recap of everything this essay has covered so far. One big difference between the two is the understanding of the human person. For Aristotle, the function of the person is rationality, but for Plato, he believes in three parts of the person: reason, spirit, and passion. Another difference is the idea of the virtues. For Aristotle, he had a two-fold idea. For him, there were intellectual and moral virtues. For Plato, there were the four cardinal virtues, which are courage, temperance, wisdom, and justice. A third big difference between the philosophers is virtue defined as a golden mean. For Plato there are only four cardinal virtues, but Aristotle takes it a little further. Aristotle identifies virtues as a mean between deficiency and extreme. Too little courage makes one a coward, and too much makes one foolhardy. Too little wisdom makes one idiotic, and too much makes one a know-it-all. Too little pride makes humility, and too much makes vanity. The list goes on. There is another and final difference between Aristotle and Plato: what makes us virtuous. Plato believed that just by thinking alone, we will become virtuous. He thought that if we thought about being courageous and wise, we would become courageous and wise. But Aristotle thought differently. He believed that by thinking and DOING the act, we would become virtuous. We must go out and perform a virtuous act to become virtuous. But no one would be a noble hero just by doing one small act of kindness. We would need to practice the act repeatedly to become a virtuous person. In summary: for Plato, he builds the Republic to show how virtues are both intrinsic and instrumental. And by ordering our internal life, we can be considered virtuous. For Aristotle, there is a wide variety of virtues according to the golden mean. And thinking and doing is what defines a person as morally good.

Now that I’ve covered the basics pertaining to Plato and Aristotle’s definitions of virtue theory, you might ask yourself about my stance on this topic. First off, I need to explain that no two people on Earth are exactly the same. So not all of my opinions and ideas will match up with either Plato’s or Aristotle’s 100%. Personally, I agree with a few of the philosophers ideas in the general sense of philosophy. I think that both Plato and Aristotle were both great people and great philosophers who deeply wanted to achieve what they thought was right and the greater good for all of mankind. But if it was up to me, I would have to side with Aristotle on his definition of virtue theory. Plato believed in the four cardinal virtues: courage, temperance, wisdom, and justice. He believed that justice was achieved through a combination of the three previous virtues, which are the three parts of the human soul. When we order our own lives, we are considered to be good, virtuous people, and moral truth is a function of the four cardinal virtues. These are good guidelines, but I like Aristotle’s teachings a little more. And I’ll explain why.

To explain why I like Aristotle’s definition of virtue ethics, he states that virtues are a golden mean between a deficiency and an extreme. While I believe that courage, temperance, wisdom, and justice are all great virtues, I personally believe that these four virtues act as a tree. The tree itself is the human soul, and four major branches that grow out from it are the four cardinal virtues. And from these branches there are more branches that represent more moral virtues, like kindness, consideration, humility, love, trust, integrity, etc. The ones that break off and fall to the ground represent vices, like lust, greed, envy, anger, etc. That is my interpretation of it. And I think this ties into Aristotle’s definition of virtue as a golden mean. The branches that are moderate and sufficient enough will remain and keep growing on the tree, while the ones that are too extreme or not sufficient enough will break off, fall to the ground, and die, unless the person allows that particular vice to dominate his/her own life. Then it will grow a tree all on its own in place of the other. But enough of that. Now I will talk about why I like Aristotle’s teaching on how to be virtuous. Aristotle believed that thinking about a particular virtue and practicing it will help us to become virtuous. And I agree. I think actions speak louder than words and you should do something helpful if you think it will make someone a better person. If I walked by a homeless man in the street and said I hope he gets help soon but I don’t do anything, he would not get any better. I think by thinking of helping him and actually helping him, by giving him food, money, or even a pack of cigarettes (I don’t smoke), and he thanks me for it, then I think I would be a better person for making him a better person.

In conclusion: Plato and Aristotle were two very wise philosophers who had different ideas about virtue ethics and how we would be better people. Plato believed in four cardinal virtues and Aristotle believed in intellectual and moral virtues. Plato believed in goodness being achieved through thinking alone, while Aristotle believed in goodness achieved through thinking and doing. At the end of the day, everyone has different ideas of what they consider to be moral. But I personally think that actions speak louder than words and you should practice an act of virtue to become a virtuous person. And for this, I am going to side with Aristotle and his definition of virtue ethics.