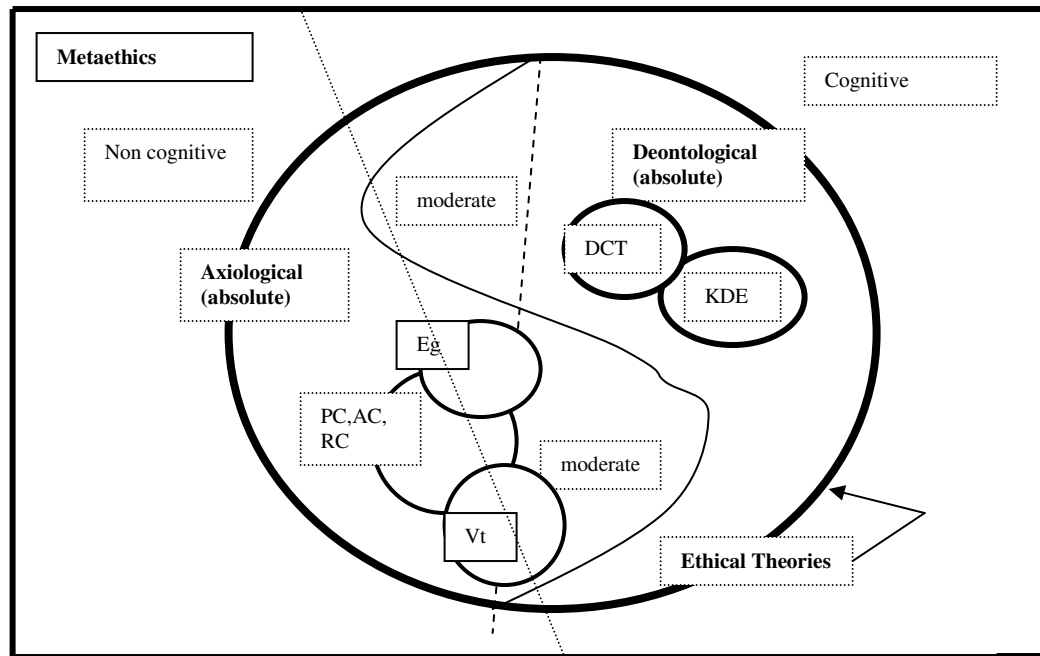


Notes Dec 8 – Nichomachean Ethics (Aristotle) & Folk Based Practice
Consequentialism (SJ Odell)

IMPORTANT:

- **COURSE EVALUATIONS ARE AVAILABLE ON-LINE (YOU SHOULD HAVE RECEIVED AN E-MAIL FROM THE REGISTRAR). PLEASE FILL THEM OUT AT YOUR SOONEST CONVENIENCE**



- Legend:**
- Eg:** Ethical Egoism
 - PC, AC, RC:** Practice, Act, Rule Consequentialism
 - DCT:** Divine Command Theory
 - KDE:** Kantian Duty Ethics
 - Vt:** Virtue Ethics

As we go full circle in this course, I write my last bit of course notes supplying a diagram (recall the first handout had a diagram). The above depicts how the various ethical concepts introduced in Odell’s handout interrelate. The large rectangle is the discipline of metaethics, which, similar to metaphysics (the study of kinds of being or ultimate reality), is the study of the nature and kinds of ethical theories, and what constitutes them. I have divided metaethics, following Odell’s handout, into two categories: non-cognitive (the view that all ethics is based on emotional expression) versus cognitive (i.e., the view that ethics has some rational or logical content.)

Within the circle of the domain of ethical theories proper, we have Axiological Theories (ethical theories based on value concepts) and Deontological Theories (based on character, duty.) The reason why it's 'yin/yang' shaped is to illustrate that the moderate positions overlap, to an extent. (The moderate Axiologist will admit that ethics contains some Deontological aspects and vice versa).

Nichomachean Ethics and FBPC

Before discussing the Nichomachean ethics in detail, it's useful to draw some comparisons with FBPC (though Odell is no 'Aristotelean'). Both positions lay primary emphasis on *practice*, and both view rules in terms of a body of complex activities that should be continuously modified, based on how the circumstances dictate. The model, in other words, is one of *adaptation*. For Aristotle, this is achieved by the Golden Means principle. For Odell, this is achieved by a complex kind of 'hypothesis testing' similar to what one sees in the case of the confirmation of scientific theories. For more details on FBPC, see Matt Barker's postings, that I linked in the Dec. 8 cluster

- Nichomachean Ethics

Where would Aristotle fit in? Certainly in the Vt bubble (he was a virtue ethicist) and certainly on the cognitive side of the dashed line. Why? Because (recall Sept 29-Oct 6 notes) his specific notion of *final cause* is the conceptual machinery driving the whole engine of the Nichomachean Ethics. Consider the following passages:

Every art and every inquiry...is thought to *aim* at some good...the good has been rightly declared to be that *which all things aim*. (Bk I, p 564)

The chief good is evidently something *final*. Therefore, if there is *only one final end*, this will be what we are seeking...the most *final* of those will be what we are seeking. (Bk I, 566)

- **Remark 1:** It's precisely the notion of *final cause* that makes Nichomachean Ethics emphasize a practical, situation-based approach. Though we're all endowed with a soul that seeks to fully achieve its optimal potential, like an acorn that 'seeks' to grow into a huge leafy acorn tree, the 'particular soil' of our circumstances determine how and in what manner this is possible.
- **Remark 2:** Aristotle's notion of the Good being an ultimately final cause towards which all things strive¹ goes a long way to temper Odell's first critique against the arbitrariness of character-based ethics. (Recall: one moral exemplar may be pro-choice, the other pro-life) For Aristotle, perhaps, such difference would not make a substantial difference. The quality of one's character, determined whether or no one has achieved *arête*, i.e., striven to achieve one's

¹ As opposed to Plato's notion of the Good being a transcendent archetype

optimal potential, is a recognizable *essence*. On the other hand, one's political beliefs are contingent *accidents*². For example, to use the tree analogy, no two optimally full-grown and healthy trees appear alike, though we recognize immediately their essential quality of strength and health.

Hence, where his mentor Plato thought contemplation was necessary for virtue (*arête*), Aristotle felt contemplation was sufficient (Bk X), but not necessary. *Mindful action/practice* (*praxis*) was necessary:

[F]or all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so it would seem to be for man, if he has a function. (Bk I, 567)

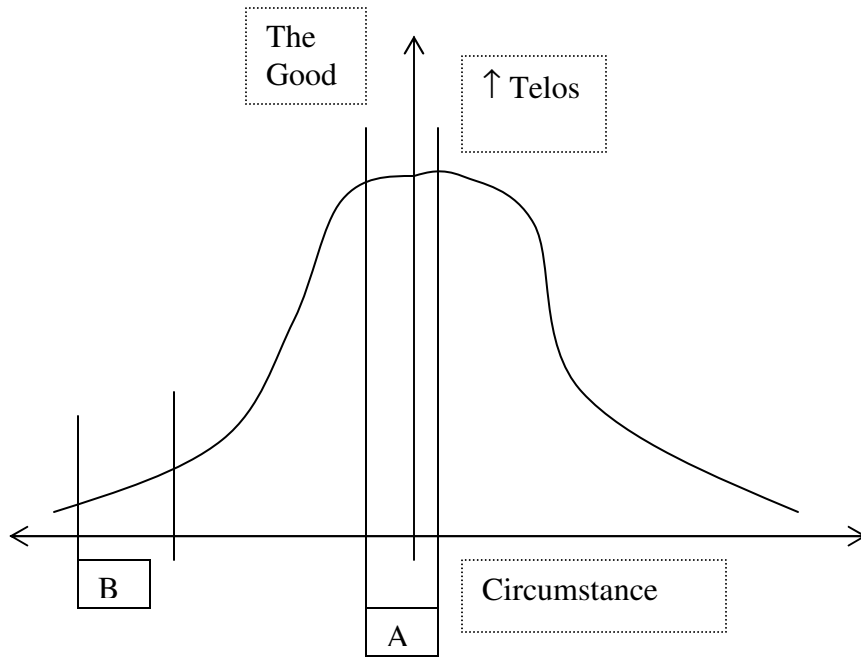
It is well said, then, that it is by doing just acts that the just man is produced, and by doing temperate acts the temperate man; without *doing* these no one would have even prospect of becoming good. (Bk II, 572)

It is through *practice* that we learn to aim for the *golden mean* between extremes

(Overindulgence ← Temperance → Self-Denial)
(Deficiency ← Courage → Foolhardiness)
(Miserliness ← Generosity → Wastrel)
Etc.

- **Remark 3:** Perhaps one way to consider *arête*, as the achievement of the 'golden mean' through *praxis*, is to consider the poetic metaphor (as expressed by the 12th century Persian Rumi) of optimally tuning a lute string so that it sings a perfect note: There's a precise and delicate balance, tightening the string further may make it snap, while loosening would corrupt the purity of its emitted tone. Athlete sometimes speak of the 'zone' in such terms: being in a rarely achieved and experience state in which one is functioning optimally, due to a kind perfect balance

² Recall their definitions, March 10 notes



- **Problem/questions**



This says it all: Plato points heavenward, Aristotle to the ground. There's a Plato and an Aristotle within us all, and across all cultures, there exist these tensions.