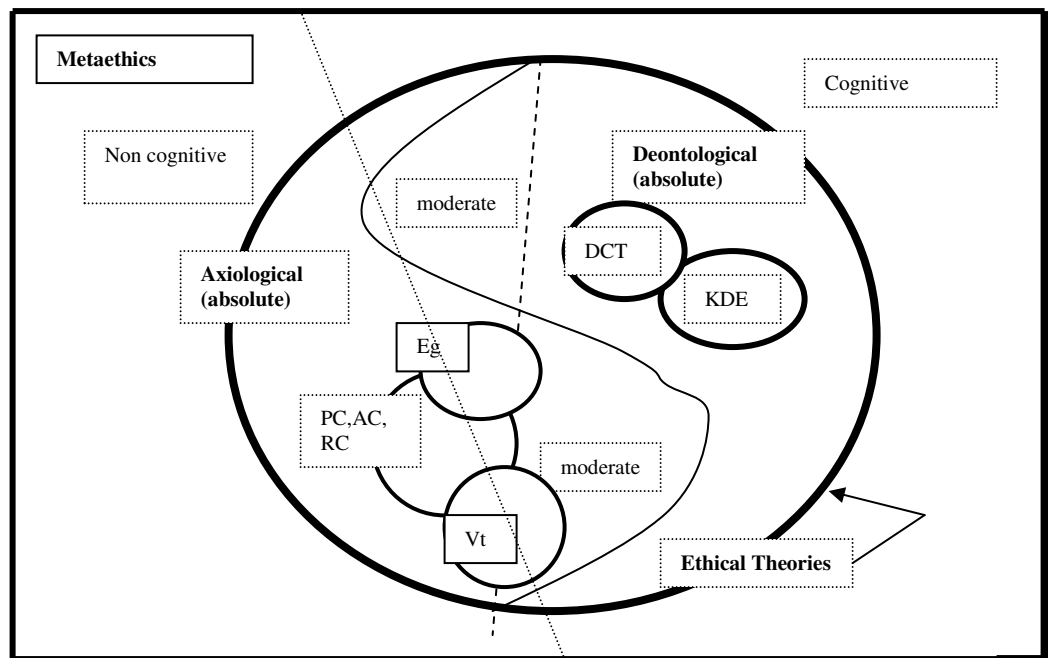


Notes for May 5

**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**
- **FINAL PAPERS ARE DUE DURING LAST DISCUSSION SECTION (May 5). YOU MUST INCLUDE YOUR (MARKED, WITH MY COMMENTS) ROUGH DRAFT WITH YOUR FINAL PAPER. FAILURE TO DO SO WILL RESULT IN AN UNGRADED FINAL PAPER (IN WHICH YOUR ‘TENTATIVE GRADE’ WILL BE YOUR FINAL PAPER GRADE.) IF YOU DID NOT SUBMIT A ROUGH DRAFT, RECALL MY COMMENTS (NOV 18) DURING DISCUSSION SECTION.**



- 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 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).

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 Handout 1 Feb 17) 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)

- **Remark1:** 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 (immanent, not transcendent) towards which all things strive<sup>1</sup> 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 optimal potential, is a recognizable *essence*. On the other hand, one's political beliefs are contingent *accidents*<sup>2</sup>. 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.

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<sup>1</sup> As opposed to Plato's notion of the Good being a transcendent archetype

<sup>2</sup> Recall their definitions, March 10 notes

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 Middle Eastern poetic metaphor (as expressed by the 12<sup>th</sup> century Persian Mevlana jal-Alludin 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

- **Problem/questions**

Consider a real-life situation in which you and your friend are accosted by one small aggressive (non-rabid) dog, or another scenario in which you and your friend are chased by a whole *pack* of huge ferile dogs . What’s Aristotle’s take here?

In the first scenario it’s easy to define the excessive (foolhardy) and defective (cowardly) extremes: The foolhardy thing might be to physically attack the dog, the cowardly extreme might be to flee in terror—hence the courageous golden mean would entail, perhaps, standing your ground and shouting “No!”, or something to that effect.

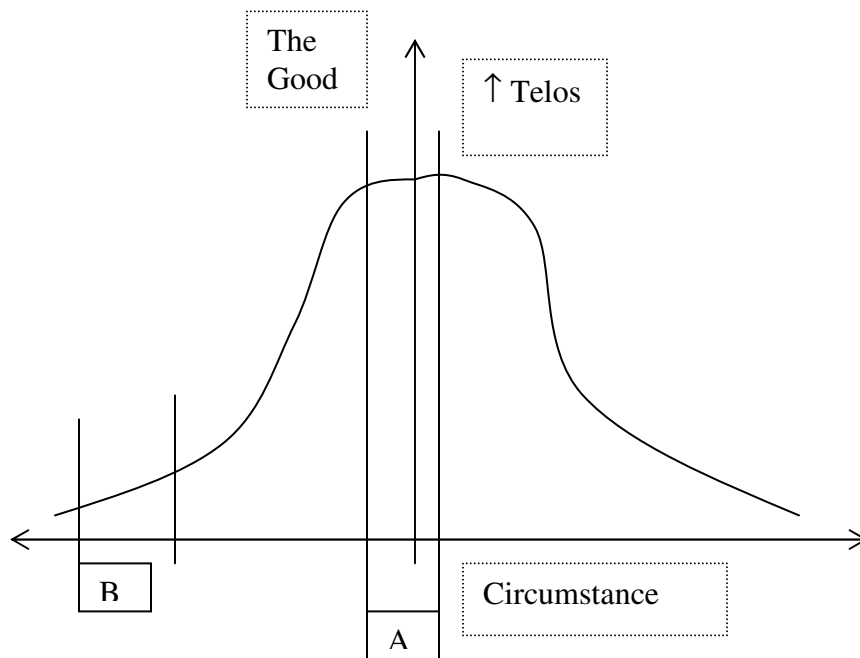
In the second scenario, on the other hand, the ‘courageous’ ‘golden mean’ is strongly skewed to the cowardly extreme. (You and your friend run like hell-what else can you do? But it’s not clear in this ‘fight/flight’ response, governed by self-preservation, that there’s any *positive* quality associated with virtue here.)

In other words, this second scenario reflects a limitation of the Nichomachean Ethics: It's based on *successful performance*. Many conditions have to be met before one has the luxury to achieve this *eudaimonea* (as mentioned in Bk X, the political state must be stable, there must be enough food, and adequate leisure *schola*.) But only the privileged few enjoy such! Most humans, most of the time, lead lives that are “nasty, brutish, and short.” (Thomas Hobbes.) That is to say, the Nichomachean Ethics don't seem to easily extend to dire situations (poverty, famine, war, etc.)

Though granted, as Brian Carman (section 0203, 10:00) pointed out, Aristotle's situation-based ethics could be construed as 'pragmatic' in today's terms (insofar as emphasizing practice). Hence, for dire situations, there is no contradiction in applying the golden means approach, insofar as one can always strive to exercise one's best judgment.

Perhaps.

But, at the risk of oversimplifying, consider the following diagram:



The horizontal axis represents one's immediate circumstance, the vertical axis represents the tendency toward maximal achievement of one's potential. Circumstances dictate the extremes in a situation. Consider scenario A: a wealthy Athenian trains in the upcoming Olympic Games. Surely, he has plenty of opportunity to achieve the optimal middle ground depicted, for instance, in the case of achieving courage. His circumstances permit thus. But what about scenario B, consisting of, for example, a peasant living outside the walls of the city of Athens, and trying to hide himself and his family from a band of

marauding thieves and thugs. Surely it's easy to identify the foolhardy extreme, but the other extreme of 'cowardice' becomes conflated, as in the case of the pack of dogs case, with what is 'courageous.' In other words, one may always rise in one's circumstance, but it's seldom that circumstances even *permit* us with the possibility of achieving this golden means.

Rebecca Kass (section 0207, 1:00) also pointed out that this measure of virtue-through optimal performance seems to miss often the genuinely substantive ethical dilemmas we often face, in which *no* good decision seems possible, insofar as we may feel we're 'damned if we do, damned if we don't.' But we're still condemned to act. The example she used consisted of struggling with the dilemma of helping a friend a cheat. Granted, Aristotle would quickly respond with the retort that 'helping' someone cheat is enabling, not helping. For in such a situation one is certainly not aiding one to achieve their potential. But one could easily modify the example to depict a moral dilemma in which one is impaled on.

So there seems to be something lacking when one tries to define character virtues through performance. We'd tend to think, perhaps, that character qualities should be defined *intrinsically*, like Kant's *intentions*. This would lend credence to a notion of virtue as something more universal, not dependent on being actualized in any particular circumstance.<sup>3</sup>

In a nutshell, it bears noting that, as Richard Rubenstein writes in *Aristotle's Children*: In times of chaos, crisis, and calamity, Platonism seems to become the central world view. In times of peace, expansion, and prosperity, Aristoteleanism becomes the dominant world view, on the other hand. This makes intuitive sense. The Platonist speaks of the world of sensory experience as a facsimile 'shadow' to some True World transcending time and space. Aristotle rejects such moves. For Aristotle, the True World is *this* world. And it's a *good* world, Aristotle would say! Consider the famous Raphael painting:

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<sup>3</sup> This was, more or less, the line that Paul took when arguing the Christian virtues of faith, hope, love, are superior to the Greek (Aristotelean) virtues of courage, prudence, temperance. For the latter require the particularities of circumstance to be actualized, whereas the former don't. Regardless of the circumstances, one can retain the *disposition* to remain faithful, hopeful, and compassionate. Whereas prudence, temperance, and generosity are defined performatively, not dispositionally, in Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics.



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.