

Aristotle and the Classical Greeks

Work and the Human Condition: Fall 2008

I. Historical Context

II. Aristotle's Life and Works

III. Ethics vs. Morality

IV. Happiness and Virtue

V. Aristotle's Account of Virtue

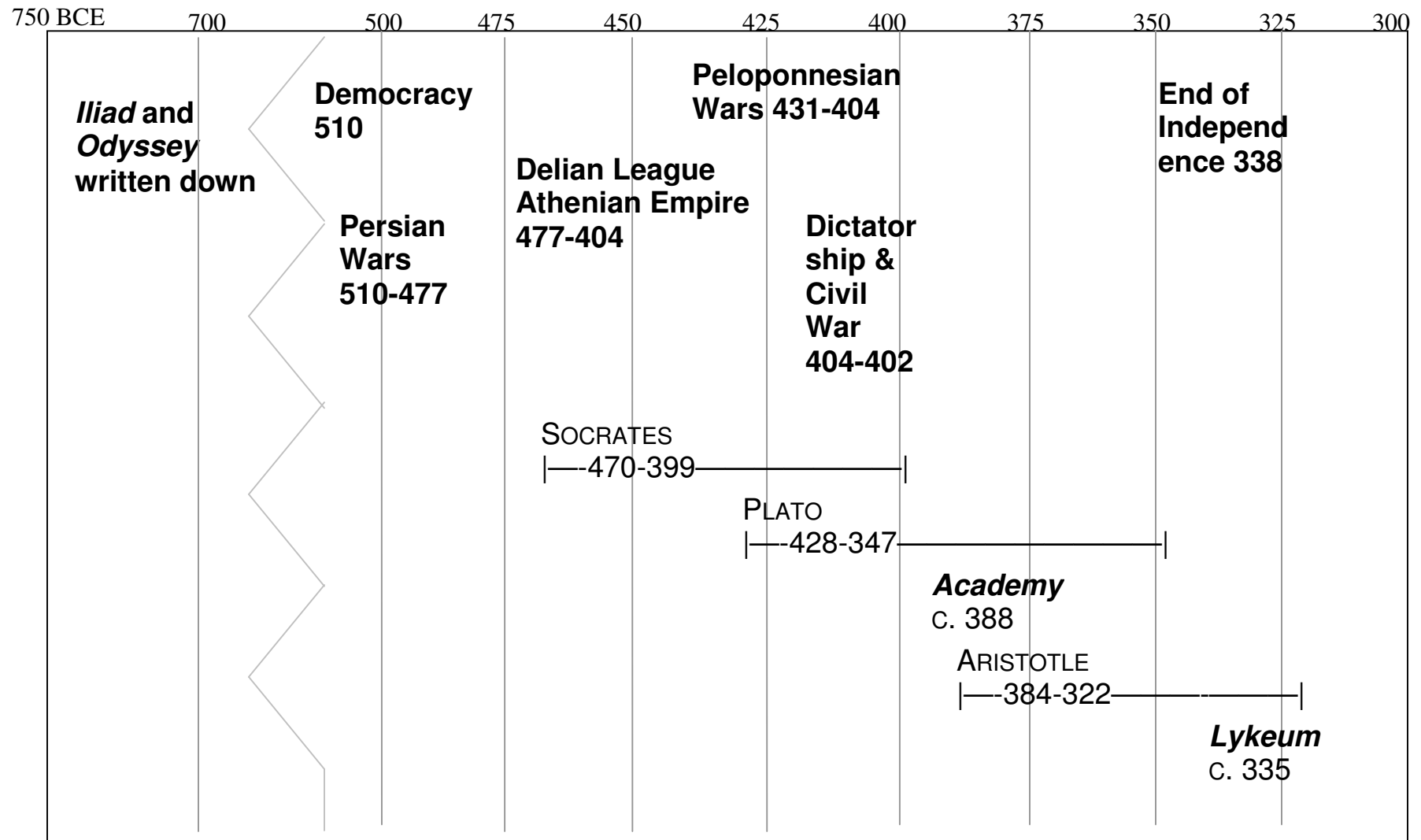
A. Human Beings and Virtue

B. Virtue and Action

C. Doctrine of the Mean

D. Habituation

I. Historical Context of Athens



II. Aristotle's Life and Works

384-363/2	born, raised in court of King of Macedon
363/2-347	at Plato's Academy — becomes leading student and teacher
347-342	several philosophical gigs at Greek courts
342-335	tutor to future Alexander the Great
335-323	founds Lykeum after Athens falls under Macedonian rule writes various texts, including <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
323/2	Athenians turned against Aristotle; flees

Philosophical works = lecture notes

A lawyer not a poet

III. Ethics and Morality

Ethics — character

(Greek — “Ēthos,” “ēthikos”)

Ethics — broader:

“How ought we to live?”

Focus: Human excellence

Political science — both words mislead us!

Aimed at those “brought up in fine habits”

Morality— custom

(Latin — “moralis”)

Morality — narrower:

A particular way of answering

Focus: Law (first Roman, then God’s)

1. Decidable
2. Consistent
3. Complete

IV. Happiness and Virtue

Human function = Activity of the soul in
accord with reason.

Human good = Happiness
Happiness (eudaimonia) is not a *feeling*.
“Living well and doing well” (1095a19)

Human good is achieved when the human
function is performed well.

Human function is performed well by being
performed in accord with virtue.

Therefore,
Happiness = Activity of the soul in
accord with virtue.

Happiness is activity of the soul in accord with virtue.

Consequence: Happiness is in part *constituted* by virtue.

Virtue is an *internal good*.

Internal vs. External Goods

Internal

- partly definitive of activity
- not comprehensible independent of activity

Example: a perfect game in baseball

Example: a masterpiece of oil painting

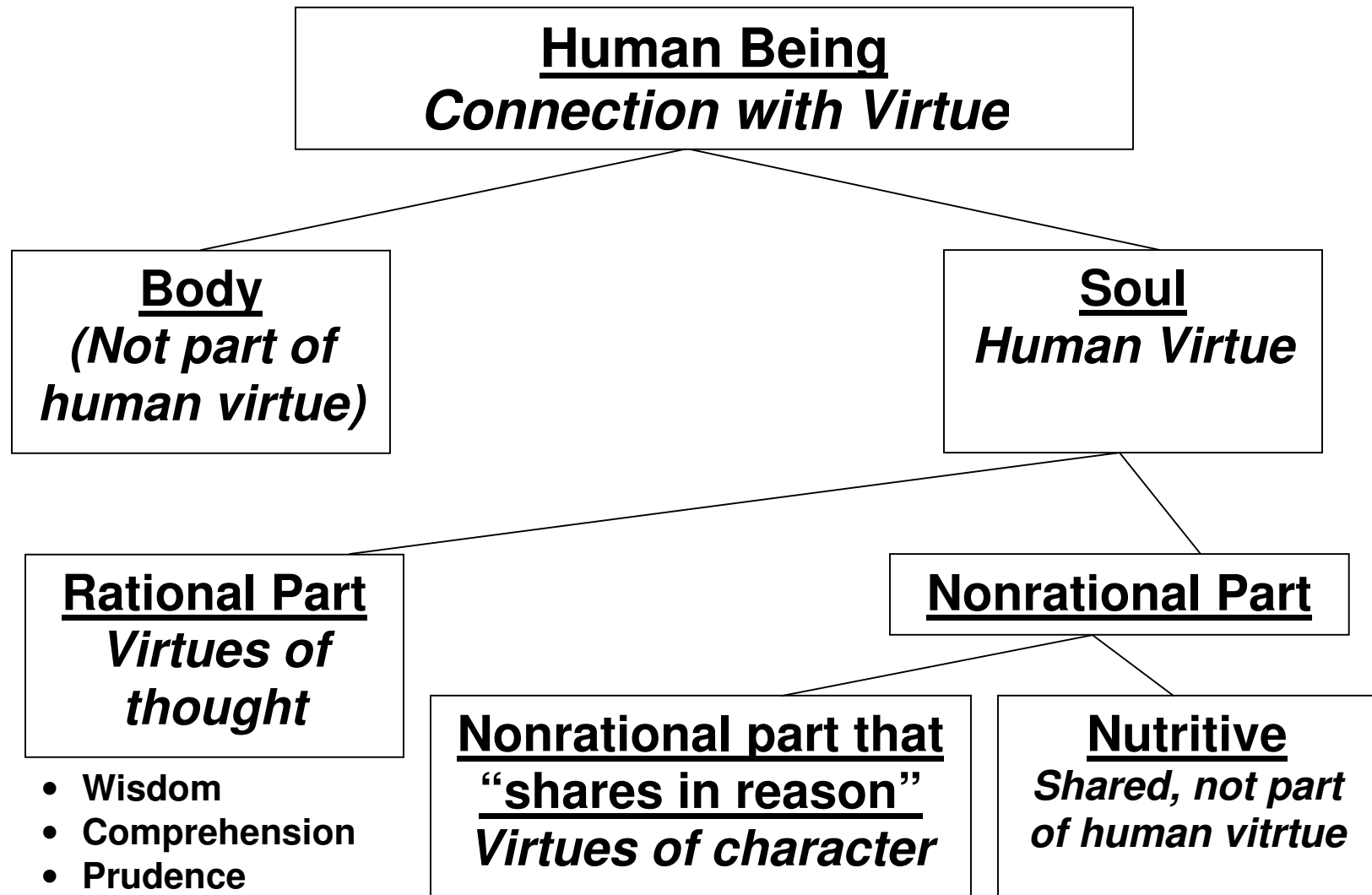
External

- contingently attached to activity
- can be separated from the activity

Example: the fame that the pitcher enjoys

Example: the money the painting fetches at auction

V.A. Human Beings and Virtue



V.B. Virtue and Action.

A ***virtue*** is a state of character.

An ***action*** can be virtuous, or exhibit a virtue.

For S's action to be virtuous:

- the action must accord with virtue,
- S must know that the action is virtuous,
- S must decide to act “for itself,” and
- S must act from a “firm and unchanging state”

(1105a29-35)

V.C. Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean

Every virtue concerns a particular feeling or kind of activity.

Within its scope, the virtue is the state of the soul that is *the mean between two extremes — vices*.

Mean is defined “relative to us” — not the exact middle between the extremes.

The mean is defined by how “the prudent person would define it.”

V.D. Habituation, or Aristotelian Target Practice

We become virtuous by performing virtuous actions.



How do you improve your aim?

How to Become Virtuous in Three Difficult Steps

1) Aim away from the worse vice.

Generally, one vice is worse than the other.

2) Correct for your own natural tendencies toward one or the other vice.

We have to know ourselves and correct for our natural drift towards a vice.

3) Avoid the natural human bias towards pleasure.

Our bias towards what is pleasurable will lead us into vice unless we correct for it.