

Aristotelian Virtue

The Classical World: Spring 2010

- I. Aristotelian Teleology
- II. Several Virtues
- III. Consequences of Loss of Teleology
- IV. Understanding Our List of Virtues

References

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Nussbaum, Martha. *The Fragility of Goodness*.

Ross, David. *Aristotle*.

Aristotelian Teleology

Things are divisible into different *kinds*.

Every *kind* of thing has a distinct nature; a thing's nature is its *form*.

The *distinct function* of a kind is determined by the kind's *distinct nature (form)*.

Aristotelian Teleology

The *distinct function* of a kind is determined by the kind's *distinct nature (form)*.

The *distinct nature* of a human being is reason.

Therefore, the function of a human being is “activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason” (1098a7).

Aristotelian Teleology

The function of a human being is “activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason” (1098a7).

The ***state*** of a particular thing determines whether it can perform its function ***well*** or ***poorly***.

Therefore, when a human being is in a ***good state (eudaimonia)***, he performs his ***function well***.

Therefore, “the human good proves to be activity of the soul in accord with virtue, and indeed with the best and most complete virtue” (1098a17-9).

Aristotelian Teleology

The **function of a human being** is to live a certain kind of life, and the virtues are necessary for human beings to **live this kind of life well**.

Virtues are not merely ***means*** for achieving an ***external end***.

***Example:** Earning money to buy a car.*

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***Example:** Earning money to buy a car.*

It doesn't matter how the money is earned.

Further, there is no necessary connection between how the money is earned and how it is spent.

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- *Working on hitting curve balls so as to play baseball well.*
- *Developing one's vocal control so as to be a good actor.*
- *Studying Rome so as to become a European historian.*

Aristotelian Teleology

The **function of a human being** is to live a certain kind of life, and the virtues are necessary for human beings to **live this kind of life well**.

What kind of a life is the function of a human being, according to Aristotle?

Look to his account of virtues.

Aristotle's Chart of Virtues

<u>Feeling or activity</u>	<u>Virtue</u>	<u>Vice of excess</u>	<u>Vice of deficiency</u>
Fear	BRAVERY	Cowardice	(nameless)
Confidence	BRAVERY	Rash	(nameless)
Pleasures & pains	TEMPERANCE	Intemperance	Insensibility
Giving money (small)	GENEROSITY	Wastefulness	Ungenerosity
Taking money (small)	GENEROSITY	Ungenerosity	Wastefulness
Giving & taking money (large)	MAGNIFICENCE	Ostentation, Vulgarly	Stinginess
Honor & dishonor	MAGNANIMITY	Vanity	Pusillanimity
Small honors	(NAMELESS)	Honor-lover	Indifference to honor
Anger	MILDNESS	Irascibility	Inirascibility
Truth-telling	TRUTHFULNESS	Boastfulness	Self-deprecation
Pleasures in amusements	WIT	Buffoonery	Boorishness
Pleasures in daily life	FRIENDLINESS	Ingratiation, Flattery	Quarrelsomeness, Ill-temper
Various	JUSTICE	Doing injustice	Suffering injustice

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Aristotle's Virtues: Bravery

“Then what sorts of frightening conditions concern the brave person? Surely the most frightening; for no one stands firmer against terrifying conditions. Now death is the most frightening of all ...”
(1115a25-7).

“In what conditions, then, is death his concern? Surely in the finest conditions. Now such deaths are those in war ...” (1115a30-1).

Aristotle's Virtues: Bravery

Therefore, bravery is primarily concerned with the fear of death in war.

As a *logical argument* for the scope of bravery: **Lousy!**

- There is no reason why bravery cannot be concerned with *lesser as well as greater* fears (e.g., fear of falling).
- There is no reason why bravery cannot be concerned with fears of *harms other than physical* (e.g., fear of being shunned).
- There is no reason why bravery cannot be concerned with *fears of death in less than the finest conditions* (e.g., fear of death at work).

Aristotle's Virtues: Bravery

Therefore, bravery is primarily concerned with the fear of death in war.

As a representation of the scope of bravery *for the Athenian gentleman*: ***Revealing!***

- Living the right sort of life entailed taking up arms in war.
- Death in battle had a significant probability.
- Life in a *polis* required that the best men be ready to go to war.

Generosity

“Using wealth seems to consist in spending and giving, whereas taking and keeping seem to be possessing rather than using. That is why it is more proper to the generous person to give to the right people than to take from the right sources and not from the wrong sources” (1120a9-12).

Generosity

“Using wealth seems to consist in spending and giving ...”

Does use of wealth only consist in spending and giving? What of investing?

Why have a virtue that concerns using wealth and not a virtue for earning, managing or possessing?

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Investing was a matter for merchants – not the “best men.”

Magnificence

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What a giveaway!

Magnanimity

“The magnanimous person, then, is concerned especially with honors and dishonors. When he receives great honors from excellent people, he will be moderately pleased, thinking he is getting what is proper to him, or even less. For there can be no honor worthy of complete virtue; but still he will accept honors [from excellent people], since they have nothing greater to award him.

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The aristocratic virtue *par excellence*

“He is the sort of person whose possessions are fine and unproductive rather than productive and advantageous, since that is more proper to a self-sufficient person.

“The magnanimous person seems to have slow movements, a deep voice, and calm speech. For since he takes few things seriously, he is in no hurry, and since he counts nothing great, he is not strident...” (1125a13-5).

Truth-telling

Why is boastfulness considered an **excess** of truthfulness?

Isn't telling the truth the **maximal** state? Why isn't it?

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“The boaster seems to claim qualities that win reputation, though he lacks them.... The self-deprecator, by contrast, seems to disavow or belittle his actual qualities. The intermediate person is straightforward, and therefore truthful in what he says and does, acknowledging the qualities he has without exaggerating or belittling” (1127a22-6).

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Isn't telling the truth the **maximal** state? Why isn't it?

This virtue concerns talking about *oneself*!

Truth-telling

Truth-telling concerns one's status in the polis.

The virtue governs how one represents one's honors (and thus status) in speech and action.

Justice



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graph TD; Justice[Justice] --> General[General]; Justice --> Special[Special]; General --> GenDesc[Complete virtue<br/>Whole of virtue]; Special --> SpecDesc[Part of virtue]; Special --> Dist[In distribution]; Special --> Exch[In exchange]; Special --> Rect[In rectification]; Dist --> DistDesc[Dividing up goods<br/>within a political<br/>community]; Exch --> ExchDesc[Exchanging goods, in<br/>a market]; Rect --> RectDesc[Restoring an<br/>unjust/unequal<br/>situation to equality];
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General

Complete virtue
Whole of virtue

Special

Part of virtue

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Dividing up goods
within a political
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Restoring an
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Exchanging goods, in
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Justice In Exchange

An Aristotelian virtue for tradesmen and merchants?

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This is the perspective of the ***judge*** or the ***legislator***.

Scheme of Aristotelian Virtue

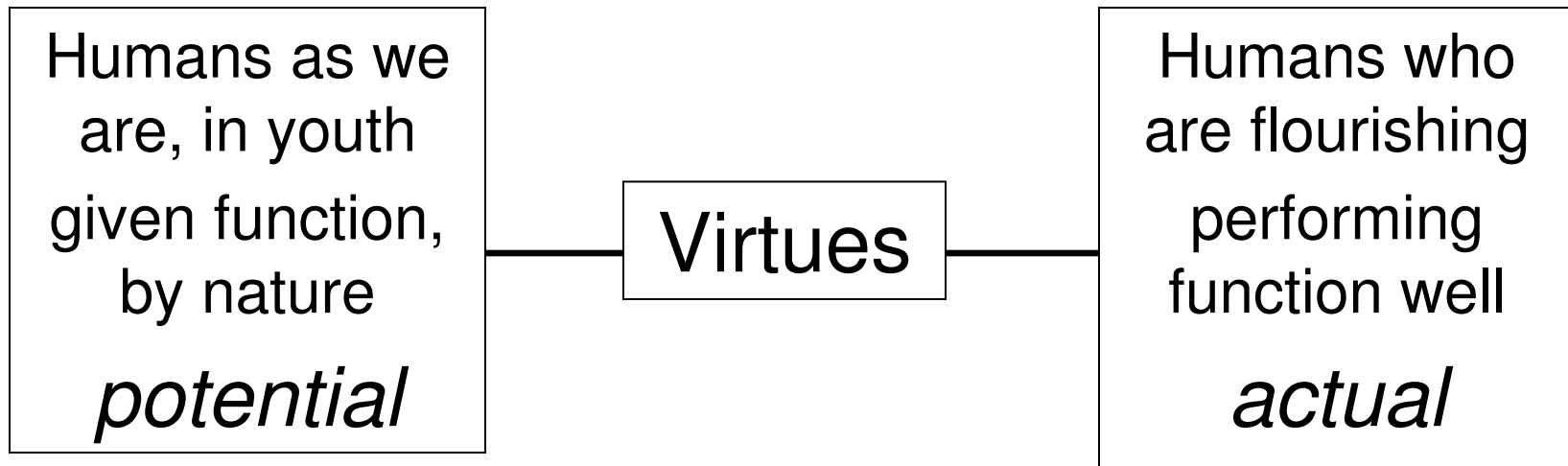
Humans as we
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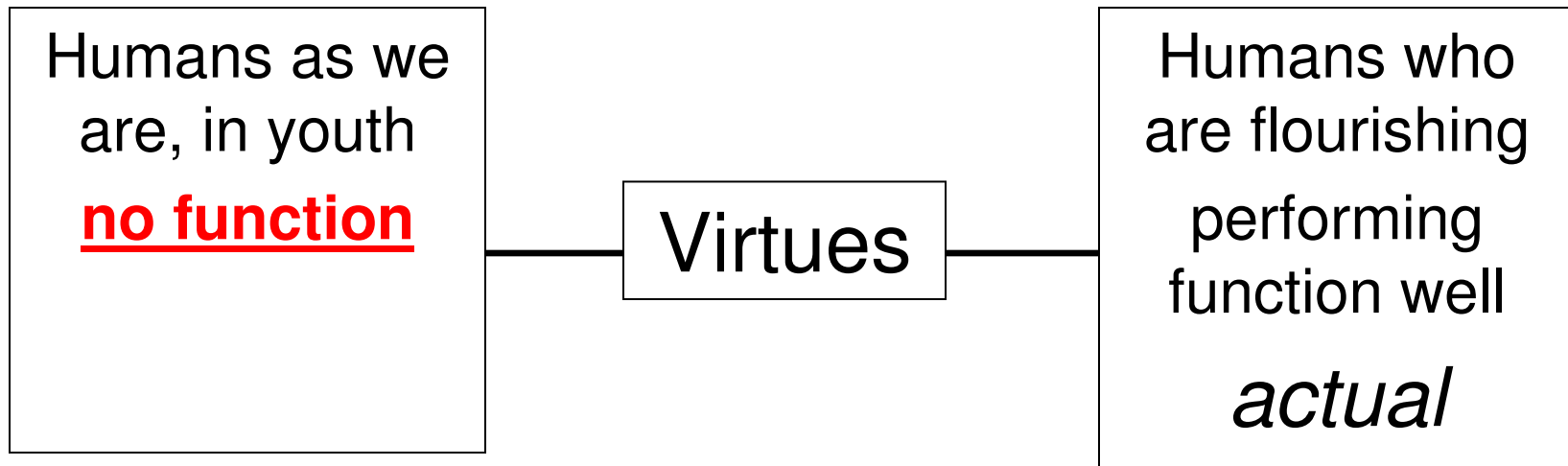
Humans as we
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Humans who
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performing
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actual

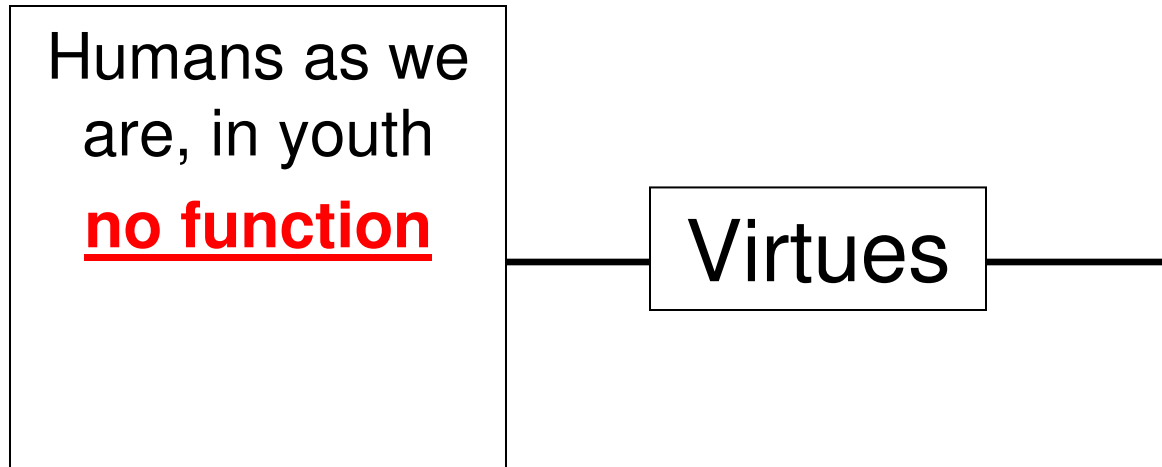
Scheme of Aristotelian Virtue



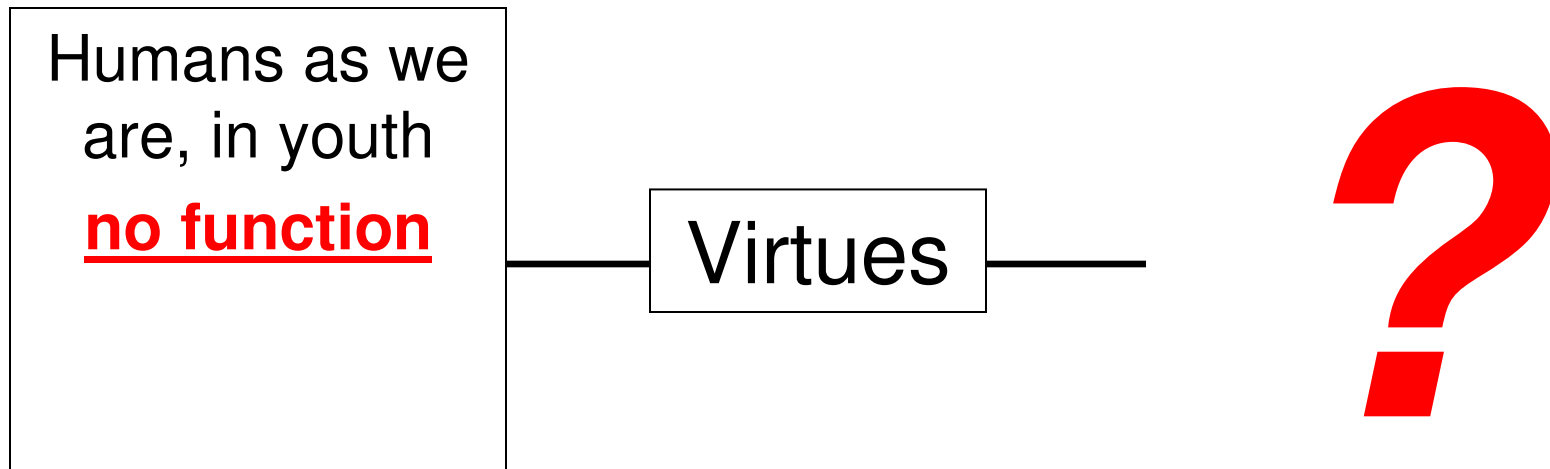
Scheme of Aristotelian Virtue In Question



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Our List of Virtues

On several lists (synonyms combined):

Bravery/Courage (6)
Kindness/Compassion (5)
Generosity (4)
Loyalty (4)
Humility (4)
Diligence/Persistence/Perseverance/
Tenacity (4)
Wittiness/Humor (4)
Integrity (3)
Honesty/Truthfulness (3)
Friendliness/Sociability/Amicability (3)
Adaptability/Flexibility (3)

Selflessness/Humanitarianism/
Philanthropy (3)
Determination/Strong-willed (3)
Ambition (2)
Mildness (2)
Temperance (2)
Individuality (2)
Efficiency/Organization (2)
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Missing Aristotelian Virtues:

Virtue of small honors Magnificence

Magnanimity

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Christian Virtues

Virtues that were transformed by, introduced by, or owe their origins to Christianity.

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Christian Virtues

Commercial Virtues

Virtues for building wealth (or success as a wage-earner) in a capitalist society – are means to external ends

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Christian Virtues

Commercial Virtues

Civic Virtues

*Virtues derived from a sense of duty -- important in modern, liberal
civic society*

Virtues on Only One List

Charisma

Cultured

Patience

Fitness-Minded

Unbiased

Creativity

Certainty

Discretion

Passion

Openness

Pride

Life-loving

Pragmatic

Class

Dignity

Unwaveringness

Reliability

Solidarity

Curiosity

Discipline

Responsibility

Obedience

Resourcefulness

Relaxedness

Grace

Protectiveness

What is Virtue Today?

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What is Virtue Today?

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and we have no unified conception of the
nature or purpose of a political community.

Questions on Aristotle and the Romans

Are the following Romans virtuous in Aristotelian terms (especially, magnanimity, magnificence, generosity)?

- o Crassus
- o Pompey
- o Sulla
- o Caesar
- o Cicero
- o Augustus

How does Cicero's *On Obligations* reflect Aristotelian virtue? How does it modify, augment or transform Aristotelian virtue?

What are the political benefits of assuming a virtue (as distinct from *having* the virtue)?