

Applied Ethics: Aristotle

Key Terms

Simulated killing: The dramatisation of killing in a fantasy setting, this can be in video games, films, the theatre

Cathartic: providing psychological relief through the open expression of strong emotions

Telling lies

In his analysis of truthfulness, Aristotle describes it as a mean between someone who boasts and someone who is too self-deprecating. Here Aristotle is thinking of 'truthful' about ourselves.

But when we are discussing the morality of lying we are usually interested in dishonesty when talking about the world.

He believed we flourish as a character if we are honest and we flourish together as a community if we are honest and can be trusted in the information of exchange and trusted in the promises we make.

Every day we should build our moral character by practising honesty and avoiding dishonesty and telling lies. Aristotle sees virtue as habits emerging from actions that are 'voluntary' (intended). If our understanding of the situation is based on lies, then it is more difficult to make an action that is voluntary.

On occasion, the right thing entails telling a lie. Practical wisdom will enable us to determine when the general rule can be bent or broken. The Kantian example of your neighbour the axe-murderer is easily solved by virtue ethics. In this situation, the virtuous thing is to tell a lie, so long as it doesn't become a habit.

Stealing

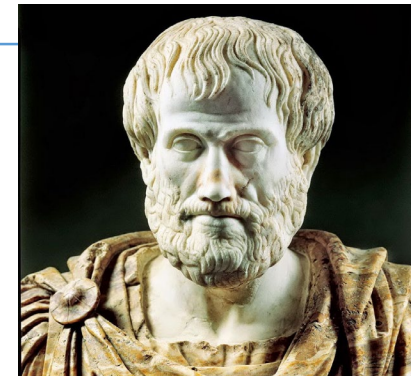
In every action, Aristotle thought a virtuous person should consider the mean between excess and deficiency and believed we should judge the appropriate thing to do on a case-by-case basis.

However, in the case of stealing, Aristotle said that there is no right time for stealing. Theft is never in the mean. It contradicts one of Aristotle's virtues of justice as it deprives other people of what is their fair share. As a result, stealing is never just.

A more modern virtue ethicist might address the issue of theft with more flexibility, however. They might be inspired by Aristotle's comments that we should judge the appropriate thing to do on a case-by-case basis and that sometimes even the mean (appropriate) thing to do can be an extreme.

If we take the case of stealing in order to provide a loved one with much-needed medical treatment, they steal as an act of benevolence to help your loved one. However, a single action is not enough to judge whether you are benevolent - a virtue ethicist would want to know whether benevolence is part of your character, whether it is habitual. It is possible that they are acting benevolently in this case because it is their partner who is at risk, but generally they are thoughtless and inconsiderate.

A person's honesty and thoughtfulness (consideration of those who would be affected by the theft) are competing with your disposition for benevolence. Partiality is accepted in virtue ethics, but should it outweigh consideration of other people in the community? They may have to utilize practical wisdom to avoid needing to steal.



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Eating animals

In every action, Aristotle thought a virtuous person should consider the mean between excess and deficiency and believed we should judge the appropriate thing to do on a case-by-case basis.

In the case of eating animals, however, his answer is quite straightforward. Although he recognized a continuum between humans and other animals (like animals we grow, eat and perceive, unlike animals we have the capacity for reason and virtue. So, in his hierarchy of living things, he places humans above other animals and argued that, "plants exist for the sake of animals, and other animals for the good of humans... for our service and food."

A more modern virtue ethicist, Hursthouse, argues that the practice of factory farming is cruel and our failure to show compassion in this case is a vice, as is this greed behind it. So, for Hursthouse, eating factory-farmed animals is not a virtue.

Aristotle's hierarchy of being



Simulated Killing

In every action, Aristotle thought a virtuous person should consider the mean between excess and deficiency and believed we should judge the appropriate thing to do on a case-by-case basis.

In some ways, we might imagine that watching characters die on screen or on stage does not develop courage. In real life (e.g. in war) courage is needed to kill enemies. In video games, however, courage is not required. Maybe martial arts or sport might better develop courage and self-discipline.

However, Aristotle wrote that watching a tragedy is cathartic for the audience. Emotions in the audience build up throughout the play until there is a climatic scene triggering a cathartic release and the emotion is gone. This safe 'cleansing' of negative emotions is seen by Aristotle as part of the education of our character. By watching tragedy and killings on stage/screen we can practice feeling the right emotion, at the right time and so help the development of virtue.

Other virtue ethicists, however, might argue that playing and enjoying violent video games is morally problematic. As computer games have become more realistic, the possibilities for simulated killing have become more graphic, more numerous and for many people, more upsetting. They might argue that the approaches of Kant and utilitarianism are inadequate, as they only focus on the real-world impact of simulated killing, rather than the impact of such activity on one's character. In virtue ethics, building a virtuous character requires careful cultivation and the habitual, cruel or callous behavior of killing in video games moves people away from virtue, not towards it.