Aristotle’s Moral Opinion About God’s Presence

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Aristotle, Moral Life, and the Question of God

Aristotle’s philosophy does not present God in the same way as later Christian, Jewish, or Islamic theology. He does not begin with a personal creator who gives commandments, answers prayers, or intervenes directly in human history. His discussion of the divine grows instead from questions about motion, causation, contemplation, and the highest form of life. At the same time, his ethics cannot be separated completely from his metaphysics. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle asks what human beings ultimately seek and argues that the goal of life is *eudaimonia*, often translated as happiness, flourishing, or living well. Virtue makes flourishing possible, while contemplation receives an especially high status because it most closely resembles the activity Aristotle attributes to the divine (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*). God’s role in Aristotle’s moral philosophy is therefore indirect: the divine is not primarily a lawgiver but the highest model of actuality and intellectual activity.

Virtue, Habit, and Practical Wisdom

Aristotle defines moral virtue as a stable disposition to choose well. Virtue is not created merely by knowing a rule; it develops through repeated action. People become just by doing just things, courageous through practiced courage, and temperate through habits of restraint. Education and political institutions therefore matter because habits begin before people can fully explain the philosophical principles behind them. The doctrine of the mean describes virtue as an appropriate point between excess and deficiency. Courage lies between cowardice and recklessness, generosity between stinginess and wastefulness, but the mean is not a mathematical average. The correct response depends on the person, circumstances, motive, object, and timing. Feeling anger is not automatically wrong; the ethical question is whether anger is directed toward the right person, for the right reason, in the right manner, and for the right duration.

This flexibility is one reason Aristotle remains influential in virtue ethics. Moral life cannot be reduced to applying one quantity or formula to every situation. A generous action for a wealthy person may be impossible for someone with limited resources, and refusing danger may be cowardly in one circumstance but prudent in another. Virtue therefore requires *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which allows a person to recognize what a particular situation requires. Aristotle also emphasizes that fully

developed virtue reshapes desire. A person who performs the right action while continually resenting it has not developed the same character as someone who has learned to take appropriate pleasure in acting well. Ethical development aims to bring reason, emotion, and habit into a more ordered relationship rather than leaving morality as a permanent struggle between reason and appetite.

God, the Unmoved Mover, and Moral Independence

Aristotle does not argue that an action becomes good simply because God commands it. His ethics examines human function, reason, character, friendship, law, and the conditions required for flourishing. Courage, justice, generosity, and self-control can therefore be discussed without first proving divine command. This separates Aristotle from forms of ethics in which moral obligation depends directly on God's will. Nevertheless, the divine enters his system through the hierarchy of activities. Aristotle regards intellect as the highest element in human beings, and contemplation as its most complete activity. Because the divine life is pure intellectual actuality, human contemplation is described as the most godlike activity available to us (Sorabji). God's presence is consequently less like a moral police force and more like the highest model of self-sufficient rational activity.

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle develops the idea of the Unmoved Mover as the ultimate explanatory principle of motion. If every mover were moved by another in the same way without any first principle, the explanation would never reach a foundation. Aristotle therefore proposes an eternal, immaterial being that is fully actual rather than moving from possibility to completion. The Unmoved Mover does not push the universe mechanically. Aristotle describes it as moving things as an object of desire and thought moves them, and its own activity is perfect thinking—famously characterized as thought thinking itself (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*). This God is not clearly a creator of the universe from nothing and is not portrayed as supervising each individual human life. Later religious philosophers drew heavily on Aristotle, but they had to reinterpret his metaphysics to connect it with a personal and providential creator (Sim).

Justice, Friendship, and the Moral Community

Aristotle's ethics is not only about private character because flourishing occurs within relationships and political institutions. Justice can mean complete virtue exercised toward others, and Aristotle also distinguishes distributive justice from corrective justice. Distributive justice concerns how honors, wealth, or other social goods are allocated, while corrective justice attempts to restore balance after unfair gain or injury. His account remains important because it recognizes that laws and institutions shape character by distributing benefits and burdens and by encouraging some habits over others. Aristotle argues that the purpose of political community is not merely survival but living well (Sherman). At the same time, his own politics contains serious exclusions: he defended natural slavery, treated women as politically subordinate, and limited full citizenship largely to free men.

These positions reveal that a theory of flourishing can be morally compromised when the category of people entitled to flourish is defined too narrowly.

Friendship provides a more inclusive insight into Aristotle's moral psychology. He distinguishes friendships of utility, pleasure, and virtue. Useful relationships depend primarily on mutual benefit, pleasant relationships on enjoyment, and the highest form of friendship on reciprocal appreciation of character. Friendships of virtue take time because each person wants the good of the other for that person's own sake. They also complicate the idea of complete self-sufficiency. Aristotle says that a happy person needs friends because human flourishing is relational. People practice generosity, honesty, loyalty, patience, and judgment through shared life with others. Even if divine contemplation is perfectly self-sufficient, human beings are embodied and social. This makes friendship one of the strongest reasons not to treat solitary intellectual activity as the only measure of a good human life.

Contemplation and the Best Human Life

Aristotle compares lives organized around pleasure, political honor, moral activity, and contemplation. Pleasure alone cannot define the highest good because it does not distinguish the most developed human capacities, while honor depends greatly on the people who bestow it. Contemplation appears superior because it exercises intellect, can be sustained for long periods, and is valued for its own sake. It is also the activity Aristotle considers most similar to the divine. God does not display courage because a perfect being faces no danger, and divine generosity would be unnecessary if God lacks nothing. Intellectual activity therefore seems more appropriate to a fully actual and self-sufficient being.

Yet human beings are not pure intellect. They have bodies, families, communities, economic needs, friendships, and political responsibilities. Even a philosopher needs food, education, safety, and material conditions that allow time for thought. This creates a lasting tension in Aristotle's ethics between the practically virtuous citizen and the contemplative philosopher. The strongest modern reading does not require choosing one while discarding the other. Contemplation can be among the highest human activities without excusing injustice or neglect of others. A person who studies truth while acting dishonestly cannot reasonably be described as fully flourishing. Intellectual excellence and moral character should therefore be understood as complementary rather than competitive.

Aristotle's Relevance to Modern Ethics

Aristotle remains influential because virtue ethics asks what kind of person repeated actions are creating. Modern moral debates often emphasize rules or consequences, while virtue ethics adds questions about character: What habits are being formed? What emotions are being encouraged? What would a wise and just person notice in this situation? (Yu). In professional life, legal compliance does not settle every ethical question. A manager may satisfy the literal wording of a disclosure rule

while designing the disclosure to confuse. An organization can meet minimum requirements while cultivating fear, greed, dishonesty, or indifference. Virtue ethics examines whether institutional practices develop trustworthy judgment as well as formal compliance.

Aristotle's framework should nevertheless be used critically. The doctrine of the mean can become vague if it is applied without attention to power and injustice, and appeals to natural function can preserve assumptions that deserve challenge. Modern virtue ethics must therefore learn from perspectives that Aristotle excluded, including feminist, anti-racist, disability, and global ethical traditions. His philosophy is most useful as a set of questions about flourishing, character, friendship, justice, and judgment rather than as unquestionable authority. It offers no direct prediction of technologies such as the internet or e-commerce, but it can still help evaluate whether modern practices support human flourishing, truthful relationships, responsible choice, and just institutions.

Conclusion

Aristotle's moral philosophy does not depend on the continuous presence of a personal God issuing commands. Virtue develops through habit, choice, practical wisdom, friendship, law, and political life. God enters the system as the Unmoved Mover and as the highest model of perfect intellectual activity. This creates both unity and tension. Human beings are encouraged to become more godlike through contemplation, yet they flourish through embodied relationships and social responsibilities that a self-sufficient divine intellect does not share. Justice, friendship, and moral character therefore cannot be replaced by solitary thought. Aristotle remains valuable because he connects repeated action with character and asks what conditions allow people to live well, while his exclusions remind modern readers that any theory of flourishing must be tested against the people it leaves out.

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