

Aristotle's Moral Opinion About God's Presence

Posted on May 12, 2020

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 in history. Instead, his discussion of the divine grows out of questions about motion, causation, contemplation, and the highest form of life. This difference is important because it prevents us from reading later religious ideas back into his work.

At the same time, Aristotle's moral philosophy cannot be separated completely from his account of the highest reality. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he 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 that flourishing possible. Near the end of the work, however, Aristotle gives the life of contemplation an especially high status because it most closely resembles the activity he attributes to the divine. (Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics")

His moral opinion about God's presence is therefore indirect. God is not presented as a voice telling citizens how to act. The divine functions more as the highest object of thought and the model of self-sufficient intellectual activity. Human morality remains rooted in character, habit, practical judgment, friendship, law, and political life.

Virtue as a Habit of Choosing Well

Aristotle defines moral virtue as a settled disposition to choose appropriately. Virtue does not appear automatically because a person knows a rule. It is developed through repeated action. People become just by doing just actions, courageous by practicing courage, and temperate by acting with restraint. Education and the political community matter because habits begin before a young person can explain the philosophy behind them.

The famous doctrine of the mean describes virtue as a fitting point between excess and deficiency. Courage lies between cowardice and recklessness; generosity lies between stinginess and wastefulness. The mean is not a mathematical average. The right response depends on the person, circumstances, motive, and object. Feeling anger is not always wrong. The moral question is whether one becomes angry with the right person, for the right reason, in the right way, and for the right length of time.

This practical flexibility is one reason Aristotle remains influential. He understands that moral life is not solved by applying one quantity to every situation. A generous act for a wealthy person may be impossible for someone with limited means. Refusing danger may be cowardly in one case and sensible in another. Virtue requires *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which allows a person to perceive what the situation calls for.

The original discussion correctly notes that a virtuous person eventually takes pleasure in virtuous action. This is important. A person who does the right thing while constantly resenting it has not developed the same character as someone whose desires have been educated. Aristotle does not expect morality to remain a permanent battle between reason and appetite. The ideal is a person whose emotions and judgment have become better ordered through habit.

Does Virtue Depend on God?

Aristotle does not argue that an action is good because God commands it. His ethics examines human function, character, reason, relationships, and the conditions of flourishing. A person can discuss courage, justice, friendship, and self-control without first proving the existence of the Unmoved Mover.

This makes his theory different from divine command ethics. In a divine command theory, moral obligation may depend directly on God's will. For Aristotle, virtue is grounded in what enables a human being to live and act well as a rational and social creature. Law and education help form character, while practical wisdom guides particular choices.

Nevertheless, the divine enters the moral picture through the hierarchy of activities. Aristotle believes that intellect is the highest element in human beings, and contemplation is its most complete activity. Because the divine life is pure thought, human contemplation is described as the most godlike activity available to us. The presence of God is not a moral police force; it is an image of the highest and most self-sufficient form of being. (Sorabji)

This produces a tension. Much of the *Nicomachean Ethics* presents flourishing as a complete human life involving moral virtue, friendship, resources, and political community. The final books elevate contemplation so strongly that readers have debated whether Aristotle gives us one ideal life or two: the practically virtuous citizen and the philosopher devoted to contemplation.

The Unmoved Mover

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle argues that change and motion require an ultimate explanatory principle. If every mover were moved by another in the same way without any first principle, the explanation would never reach a foundation. He therefore proposes an Unmoved Mover: eternal, immaterial, and fully actual rather than a being moving from possibility to fulfillment. (Aristotle,

“Metaphysics”)

The Unmoved Mover does not push the universe like one object pushing another. Aristotle describes it as moving things as an object of desire and thought moves them. It is the final cause toward which the highest motion is ordered. Its own activity is thinking, and Aristotle famously characterizes it as “thought thinking itself.”

This God is not clearly a creator of the universe from nothing. Aristotle generally treats the cosmos and motion as eternal. Nor is the Unmoved Mover portrayed as attending to each human life. Its perfection consists in contemplating the most perfect object—its own thought. Later religious philosophers found Aristotle’s metaphysics powerful, but they had to reinterpret it when connecting it with a providential creator.

Calling Aristotle the spokesman for every religion would therefore be inaccurate. Plato and Aristotle influenced later theology enormously, but their concepts do not simply equal later beliefs. Aristotle’s God is philosophically specific and, to many modern readers, surprisingly distant. (Sim)

Justice, Politics, and Moral Community

Aristotle treats justice both as a personal virtue and as a quality of political arrangements. In a broad sense, justice can mean complete virtue exercised toward other people. In a narrower sense, he distinguishes distributive justice from corrective justice. Distributive justice concerns the allocation of honors, wealth, or other goods according to a proportion. Corrective justice attempts to restore balance when one person has wronged another or gained unfairly.

His discussion remains valuable because it recognizes that morality is not only private. Institutions distribute benefits and burdens. Laws shape habits. Political structures influence whether citizens have opportunities to develop and exercise virtue. Aristotle writes that the purpose of the city is not merely survival but living well. (Sherman)

Yet his politics also contains serious exclusions. He defended natural slavery, treated women as politically subordinate, and built citizenship around a limited group of free men. These positions cannot be excused merely because they were ancient. They reveal that a philosopher may describe moral excellence while failing to recognize the full humanity and political agency of many people around him. (Aristotle, “Politics”)

Modern readers can learn from Aristotle without accepting his social hierarchy. His account of habit, practical judgment, friendship, and institutional formation remains useful. His exclusions also teach a warning: a theory of human flourishing can be distorted when the category of “human” is defined too narrowly.

Contemplation and the Best Human Life

Aristotle compares lives organized around pleasure, political honor, and contemplation. Pleasure alone cannot provide the highest good because it does not distinguish the most developed human capacities. Honor depends too much on the people who give it. Contemplation, by contrast, exercises intellect, can be sustained for long periods, and appears to be valued for its own sake.

The contemplative life is also the point at which human activity most closely approaches the divine. God's activity is not courageous action, because God faces no danger. It is not generosity, because God lacks nothing and needs no wealth to distribute. Intellectual activity seems to Aristotle more appropriate to a perfect and self-sufficient being.

Still, human beings are not pure intellect. They have bodies, families, communities, needs, and responsibilities. Even the philosopher requires food, security, education, and friends. Aristotle acknowledges the need for external goods. This keeps his ideal from becoming completely detached from ordinary life, although he never fully resolves the tension.

I find the practical virtues more persuasive as a complete account of moral life. Contemplation may be among the highest human activities, but a person who studies truth while treating others unjustly cannot be considered fully flourishing. Intellectual excellence without moral character may increase a person's power without improving the use of that power.

Friendship and the Experience of the Good

One of Aristotle's most human contributions is his account of friendship. He distinguishes friendships of utility, pleasure, and virtue. Useful friendships depend on benefit, pleasant friendships on enjoyment, and the highest friendship on mutual appreciation of character. The first two are not necessarily bad, but they may end when the benefit or pleasure ends.

Friendship of virtue requires time and shared life. Each friend wants the good of the other for the other person's own sake. This relationship helps people see themselves more clearly and provides a setting in which virtue is practiced rather than merely discussed.

Friendship also complicates the image of complete self-sufficiency. Aristotle says that the happy person needs friends. Human flourishing is relational. Even if divine contemplation is solitary and perfect, human beings become morally complete through life with others. This may be one of the strongest reasons not to make the godlike life the only measure of the good life.

Can Aristotle Speak to Modern Ethics?

Aristotle's ethics remains attractive because it asks what kind of person one is becoming. Modern moral debates often focus on 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 here? (Yu)

In business, for example, compliance with law does not settle every question. A manager may technically disclose required information while designing the disclosure to confuse. A company may follow a rule while cultivating greed, fear, or dishonesty inside its culture. Virtue ethics asks whether practices develop good judgment and trustworthy character.

Aristotle should not be called the originator of the internet or e-commerce. That claim stretches his ideas beyond recognition. It is true that he viewed social exchange and cooperation as important parts of human life, but modern technologies need their own ethical analysis. His framework can help ask whether technology supports flourishing, friendship, justice, and practical wisdom. It cannot provide a direct ancient prediction of online markets.

His ideas are best used as tools, not as unquestionable authority. The doctrine of the mean can become vague without careful attention to injustice and power. Appeals to "proper function" can preserve social assumptions that need criticism. A modern virtue ethics must therefore learn from feminist, anti-racist, disability, and global perspectives that challenge Aristotle's exclusions.

Conclusion

Aristotle's moral philosophy does not depend on the constant presence of a personal God who commands human action. Virtue arises through habit, choice, emotion, practical wisdom, friendship, law, and political community. God enters the system as the Unmoved Mover and as the model of perfect contemplative activity.

This gives Aristotle's philosophy both unity and tension. Human beings are encouraged to become godlike through intellectual contemplation, yet they flourish through embodied and social life. Justice and friendship cannot be replaced by solitary thought. The strongest interpretation is therefore not that morality exists only because of God, but that Aristotle places human ethical development within a cosmos whose highest principle is rational actuality.

His account remains valuable when it helps us think about character and living well. It must also be criticized where it excludes women, enslaved people, and others from the flourishing it praises. Aristotle's enduring importance lies not in giving the final answer about God or morality, but in forcing readers to connect the kind of actions they repeat with the kind of people and communities they become.

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