

# *The Platonic and Aristotelian Conceptions of the Good*

Tianyu Zheng<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Philosophy, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 90015, United States*

*a. zhengtia@usc.edu*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** Numerous scholars often overlook the disparities in ethical perspectives between Plato and his student Aristotle. This research critically examines whether and how Aristotle's ethical ideas diverge from Plato's. Contemporary ethicists and pre-modernist ethics generally classify both philosophers as virtue ethicists, whose focus lies primarily on character traits. However, significant differences emerge between Plato's and Aristotle's ethical positions, rooted in their fundamentally distinct metaphysical stances concerning the unity of existence. Aristotle explores this concept in the sixth chapter of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he applies the doctrine to his ethical framework. Plato, in contrast, asserts that all knowledge originates from awareness of a Form, an abstract universal or category in which individuals or species partake. The feasibility of a Philosopher King relies on the existence of a single Form (Being itself) that encompasses all other forms. Consequently, one who possesses knowledge of this Form includes the supreme science that consists of all other forms of knowledge. Aristotle, however, views the universality of existence differently from other abstract universals, rendering it incapable of being the subject of a supreme science, unlike Plato's depiction in the *Republic*. Comprehending these disparities illuminates the connection between philosophy and everyday life.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Forms, Platonism, Aristotelianism

## 1. Introduction

Plato and Aristotle were two of the most influential ancient Greek philosophers whose works have continued to shape Western culture and society. Like other ancient philosophies of the Mediterranean region, Platonism and Aristotelianism are apt examples of virtue ethics that both great thinkers seek to identify the good for each human being. Grappled with the fundamental question of human existence of what constitutes the good life, Plato and Aristotle attempted to develop unique and distinct conceptions of the good respectfully. Both philosophers argue that happiness and well-being, achieved through the practice of a virtuous life, are the highest goals of moral thoughts and behavior. This essay will compare and contrast Plato's and Aristotle's conceptions of the good, exploring their similarities and differences with regard to their different approaches to the metaphysics of virtue.

## 2. Non-naturalist Nature of Platonism

In order to decode the Platonic notion of goodness, it is necessary to comprehend its apparently non-naturalist nature. Plato's conception of the good is essentially based upon his idea of the forms, and is first put forward during his conversation with Glaucon while addressing the definition of justice. It

is important to note that, unlike the religious or spiritual paradigms of non-naturalism like Judeo-Christian, where G-d, as the creator, is actively engaged with his artifacts which are natural entities, Platonic forms are non-active in their relation to the world but still instantiated by abstracts that particularized them. Consider the mathematical forms displayed in *Meno*: Socrates proposes an experiment to show that Meno's slave boy already "knows" a complicated mathematical proposition. However, as educated human beings with knowledge of mathematics, we could easily deduce the length of the diagonal of right-angled plywood by referring to the abstract mathematical form of the Pythagorean theorem without Socrates's lengthy, tedious guidance. By this example, Plato aims to prove the significance of forms that enables us to subsume individual matters under such universal abstraction. Plato conceives forms to be eternal and unchanging realities fundamental to our characterization of right and wrong, justice, wisdom, and earthly everything. According to Socrates, philosophers should not overly pay attention to "every kind (form) of difference and sameness in nature" but "keep eyes only on the kind (form) of difference and sameness that was pertinent to the pursuits themselves", which is the form of the good [1]. This indicates the form of the good to be the highest form and the source of all other forms, and, more importantly, the ultimate goal of human life and the object of all knowledge.

## 2.1. Deficiencies of Platonic Form

Nonetheless, certain difficulties arise in applying Plato's non-naturalist 'good' to moral judgment about character and action. On the one hand, consider the Platonic methodology of argumentations: Plato constantly applies analogies to reveal the truth; thus, there is no valid and comprehensive philosophical system to rely upon when handling such inaccessible metaphysical mysterious concepts with merely storytelling and parables. For instance, Socrates uses the allegory of the sun to understand the form of goodness. Just as the sun is in the "visible realm in relation to sight and visible things", the good is in the "intelligible realm in relation to understanding and intelligible things" [1]. This non-didactic demonstration implies that all knowledge depends upon the form of the good but is somehow vague and lacks certain credibility. On the other hand, the unity and interdependence of all different branches of human knowledge on a single form of the good seem problematic and incomplete. According to Socrates, the possibility of Philosopher-Kings, who "becomes as divine and orderly as a human being can by associating with what is orderly and divine" depends upon the existence of the form of the good that encompasses everything else. However, the one-fits-for-all scenario raises a severe problem when applying the good differently to various things and expecting such forms to make sense automatically. In this sense, Plato is "busying himself about ethical matters and neglecting the world of nature as a whole but seeking the universal in these matters" and is of course, a criticism due to Aristotle [2].

Again, instead of dealing with these problems directly, Plato considered the analogy between individuals and the city to find the common grounds of good by applying this form to different levels. We say rightly that an individual, a soul, can be just or unjust, but does this show that justice in the individual is 'writ large' upon the city? Therefore, Plato states that when we ask ourselves what makes a person suitable, we also must ask ourselves what makes a city-state good. Plato identifies three forms of desire: for the satisfaction of bodily appetites, for honor, and for truth. Desires naturally divide humans into three classes, and the trick of organizing a just city is to formulate the rules or constitution by which those classes of people can get along with the others and thereby prosper. Therefore, the state of harmony prerequisites the good of the city: "in establishing our city, we are not looking to make any one group in it outstandingly happy, but to make the whole city so as far as possible" [1]. In this sense, to achieve the well-being of the city, it is necessary to assign each social class a role that aligns with their innate characteristics and benefits the overall society. Hence,

individual good and civic good are actively associated, which validates the universal property of the good.

However, Plato's explanation seems inadequate because he only compared two things, individual and society, to find out what is in common with the concept of good. In contrast, the application problem still exists when a variety of matters are concerned. If we want to determine the good of certain kinds, such as a book or a pen, Socrates's redundant complex analogical comparison must be run repeatedly. In fact, Aristotle might be Plato's most brilliant student but also his most profound critic [3], who criticized the Platonic Forms of Good harshly in his major ethical work, *Nicomachean Ethics*, for that Platonic conception of goodness being too abstract, too neat, and all-encompassing.

### 3. Aristotelian Teaching of Goodness

Aristotle observed that Plato's dialogues reflect a close adherence to Socrates. Moreover, Plato's exploration of ethics is characterized by a fervent conviction in the interconnectedness and unity of various fields of human understanding. When examining Plato's philosophy, one can observe a seamless transition from his theory of Forms (Ideas) to his ethical ideas [4]. The Aristotelian teaching requires us to forget about Plato's universal and indifferent abstraction of the good that applies to every subject matter because, otherwise, philosophers need to research extensively, such as completing the whole *Republic* project only to figure out whether or not the good in the level of individual and society remains the same. At the very beginning of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle points out the logical fallacy of Plato's reasoning of the form: "Every craft and every line of inquiry, and likewise every action and decision, seems to seek some good; that is why some people were right to describe the good as what everything seeks" [5]. On the contrary, Aristotle insists that we should think systematically in a way that biologists might because good is overall a characteristic relative to certain kinds of things. From a naturalistic perspective, it is believed that the conception of good should be relativized to different things because good things do not occupy the same properties in common. Aristotle emphasizes that something is considered "good" about its kind. For instance, a good lion would exemplify the characteristics of a typical lion. Hence, the goodness that every object strives for is to be an excellent representative of its category, such as a well-written philosophy book or an outstanding violin performance. In this sense, Aristotle had a strong inclination for analysis, and he excelled at making subtle differentiations and meticulously breaking down reality into its elements. Aristotle skillfully distinguishes one field of knowledge from another by identifying their unique characteristics and peculiarities. As Castelli states, Aristotle recognized that the concept of "being" can be expressed in various ways [6].

#### 3.1. Conceptual Role of "Eudaimonia"

According to Aristotle, "If happiness (*eudaimonia*) is in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue", by which he means that the highest good for a man at which everything else aims is well-being (*eudaimonia*), achieved through the practice of moral virtue [5]. But how to achieve *eudaimonia* for human beings? Likewise, the good in the case of human beings is to become a good example of mankind. To grasp what is good for human beings, we must first decide the nature of them. A human being is a creature that has the capacity to choose what to do on a rational basis. It is the "activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle" that separates human beings from plants and animals [5]. Therefore, the good for man lies upon the rational activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, whether deciding to take up certain courses of action or affirming a belief. In this sense, the conception of *eudaimonia* is especially important when attached to the soul rather than the entire human body since a rational soul that governs thoughts distinguishes human beings from all living creatures. Consider Stephen Hawking, whose body was a

total wreck yet achieved a state of well-being by being remembered and admired for his remarkable scientific contribution. Therefore, the conceptual role of *eudaimonia* lies in how it shows what it would be like for human beings to achieve well-being with respect to the soul.

If human beings want to become good examples of their kind, they must first show that they are rational beings during their actions and beliefs, which is to choose the best course of action or decide wisely what is right or wrong. According to Aristotle, “Misfortune can blemish even a happy life, but virtue is always sufficient to avoid misery”. We are miserable when we have become aware that we are responsible for our failures because we did not choose wisely, which is to say, in accordance with reason. However, it is not yet complete only to achieve the state of well-being for the soul because human nature has two dimensions, which are rational/animals, that do not simply consist in rationality but of the full range covered by “the vegetative, appetitive, and the rational soul” [7]. Therefore, the well-being for our body is also significant and, thus, for ancient Greeks, physical health and fitness were highly valued. Consider the Statue of David located in Florence. The statue represents the appreciation of ultimate masculinity and bodily strength, where Michelangelo sought to depict the power given by God to the young David to slay the Philistine.

Then, the question arises of how should human beings achieve bodily well-being. In fact, the methodology of achieving physical health and fitness is like how we appropriately deal with moral virtues. Firstly, knowing how to acquire well-being depends upon knowing what the correct practice is, which is to do what is right. Aristotle does not link the cardinal virtues (justice, courage, temperance, and wisdom) to natural tendencies in the way that Plato did. Rather, Aristotle locates not only the cardinal virtues but all others within a matrix, that is defined by identifying the mean between extremes: “With regards to justice and injustice, we must consider what kind of actions they are concerned with, what sort of mean justice is, and between what extreme just act is intermediate” [5]. For example, Aristotle conceives the virtue of courage to be the mean between the extremes of recklessness and cowardice “the coward, the rash man, and the brave man...for the first two exceed and fall short, while the third holds the middle, which is the right, position” [5]. Similarly, Aristotle draws a comparison between virtue, a mean between extreme, and health, which is also a mean between extremes. For instance, how much is right to eat depends upon one’s overall stature (short, “average”, or tall); it also depends upon the level of physical activity (none, “average”, or over-exercise) that characterizes one’s life. Therefore, physical health is the mean between the extremes.

In addition to the similar approach of avoiding the extremes, the resemblance between fitness and moral virtue also lies in the fact that they both involve habituations or dispositions that are developed through practice and repetition. In the dialogue with Meno’s slave, Socrates raises a significant presumption that if some knowledge is innate, could it be that moral knowledge is also innate? Aristotle suggests otherwise that “moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (ethike) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word ethos (habit)” [5]. Likewise, just as a person must practice virtue regularly to develop moral character, one must also exercise regularly to maintain physical fitness. In both cases, according to Aristotle, patient but firm teachers are needed who teach the right concept, rehearse with you repeatedly, or force you to learn by exercising. Only in this way could human beings achieve a long-term state of well-being in the sense of physical health and morality that encompasses their entire life.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the differences between Platonic and Aristotelian ethics depend essentially upon their distinctive metaphysical approaches to virtues: Plato adopted a non-naturalist perspective stressing the importance of the Form, whereas Aristotle, in a naturalist tone, stated that the good should be relativized to the certain kind of things. This essay also elaborates on the Aristotelian notion of *eudaimonia*, the state of well-being, which is the ultimate goal of the good, and similar methodologies

to achieve physical health and moral ethics, which are important natural dimensions of human beings. As two of the greatest moral philosophers in history, both Plato's and Aristotle's take on ethics, though vary in conceptions, significantly impacted Western philosophy in the development of contemporary ethical theories.

## References

- [1] Plato, and Reeve C D C. *A Plato Reader: Eight Essential Dialogues*. Hackett Pub. Co., 2012.
- [2] Taylor, et al. *From the Beginning to Plato*. Routledge, 1997.
- [3] Ameriks, K., & Clarke, D. M. (2000). *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*. Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Pappas, N. (2004). *Routledge philosophy guidebook to Plato and the Republic*. Routledge.
- [5] Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Batoche Books, 1999.
- [6] Castelli, L. M. (2010). *Problems and paradigms of unity: Aristotle's accounts of the One*. *International Aristotle Studies*. V. 6.
- [7] Mix, Lucas John. "Strangely Moved: Appetitive Souls in Plato." *Life Concepts from Aristotle to Darwin*, 2018, pp. 29–41., <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96047-03>.