

MORAL THEORY BEFORE ARISTOTLE

1. Traditional virtues

The traditional virtues in Greek society were expressed in Homer's poems. They were mainly military, involving honour and revenge, but also required a combination of self-interest, friendship and good citizenship. It was widely agreed that people should help friends and injure foes. The four traditional 'cardinal virtues' were wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. [M 71e, R 332d, R 427e]

2. Nature and Convention

The first attack on traditional morality seems to have come from relativists (such as Protagoras, with his "Man is the measure of all things"). They said morality was merely human convention (*nomos*), not a feature of nature (*physis*) [G 483a]. In the 'Republic' an opponent of Socrates says we only follow morality for fear of criticism and punishment, and if we had a ring of invisibility (the 'Ring of Gyges') we would all just pursue our own selfish ends, as nature dictates [R 360c].

3. Hedonism

Once it was suggested that morality is merely *nomos*, more aggressive thinkers said that the aim of life was merely selfish pleasure [G 492c]. Callicles (in Plato's 'Gorgias') says that strong people should use their strength and skill in rhetoric to achieve pleasure [G 491e], and that so-called morality is merely a conventional conspiracy by the weak to try to restrain the strong [G 483b]. The Cyrenaic school of philosophers (e.g. Aristippus) taught that there is no final end to life, only the pursuit of passing pleasure.

4. Defence of virtue against pleasure

In 'Gorgias' Plato depicts Socrates as giving sustained arguments to show that we should aim at virtue, not pleasure. He compares **cooking** (pleasure) with medicine (benefit), and gives a series of examples to show the absurdity of pleasure-seeking. It is like preferring to own a **leaky jar** which has to be constantly refilled, or it is like wanting a continual **itch** so that you can have the pleasure of scratching, or it is like admiring **cowards** in battle because they get more pleasure. He points out that when we **drink** water the pleasure decreases as the benefit increases. [G 465a, 493b, 494c, 498b, 497c]

5. Eudaimonia

The Greek word *eudaimonia* translates as flourishing/fulfilment/happiness. It is not a state of mind, but a situation. A person drinking themselves to death could be happy, but not *eudaimon*. Socrates made it the central aim of morality. The reason we should pursue virtue rather than pleasure is in order to have a successful life, not just a nice one. Of each action we should not ask 'will I enjoy it?', but 'how will it benefit my life?'. [G 507c, S 205a, R 402e]

6. Intellectualism

Socrates held that knowledge and understanding are the keys to virtue. He held the unusual view that *akrasia* ('weakness of will') is impossible. This means we can never truly know what is right (e.g. give up smoking), and then deliberately choose wrong. All evil must be the result of ignorance. This 'intellectualism' implies that reason and philosophy are needed for a good life. [M 77e, P 357d]

7. The nature of virtues

Socrates was certain that we should aim at virtue, but he was famously unsure about what virtue is. He felt that it must be part of reason, rather than of desire. The main debates he began were i) whether virtue is one thing, or many things, or whether there are crucial virtues that make the others possible [M 72c, M 79c, P 349b], and ii) whether it is possible to teach someone to be virtuous. The difficulty seemed to be that if virtue is intellectual it ought to be teachable, but if it is part of nature rather than convention it should be unteachable. [M 87c, M 99e, P 361b] The other debate was whether anything matters apart from virtue; a famous but controversial proposal was that "a good man is happy even on the rack". [A 30b, A 41d]

8. Love leads to virtue

In his 'Symposium', Plato adds a new element to the life of virtue, which is love. Nature gives us a vision of goodness in love, which starts in sexual desire, but then ascends through stages of intellectual understanding to the point where it rises above life into a world of ideals. A possible way to learn virtue is to be open to love, and it leads to a desire for immortality. [S 205d, S 207a]

9. Harmony of society

In the 'Republic' Plato explores the nature of justice by first examining it on a big scale, in an ideal society. An ideal society starts by fulfilling ordinary human needs, but its aim is perfect harmony, which is achieved by having the most intellectually able citizens in charge. Then, if each part of society just plays its role correctly, the whole society works like a well-oiled machine. He says society will have three parts: the workers, the 'Auxiliaries' (soldiers), and the 'Guardians'. The Guardians are an elite group of soldier-philosophers, who are in full possession of the kind of knowledge that makes a virtuous life possible. [R 433a-434d]

10. Harmony of the soul

Having investigated justice in society (which is harmony of the three social groups, with the Guardians fully in control), Plato then investigates the just or good soul. He says that just as society has three parts, so does the soul: the appetite (like the workers), the spirit (Gk. *thumos*, like the Auxiliaries), and reason (like the Guardians). He concludes that a good soul (and hence a good person) will have the same harmony. The reason will rule the appetite, and the spirit will be obedient to reason. [R 443c-e]

11. Higher reality

In this world a good person is one with a harmonious soul, but Plato believes the source of goodness is a higher reality. He describes reality as a four-sectioned line, rising from shadows, through physical objects, to principles, and then pure ideas. [R 509d→] In the famous simile of the Cave [R 514a→] he says the visible world is just like shadows on a wall which are mistaken for real things. True reality is not fluctuating like shadows, but is eternal and unchanging, and consists of pure ideas.

12. The Form of the Good

Having established that true reality is not physical objects but the ideas behind them, he says morality is also like that. He presents the Good as the single supreme idea, which gives rise to all the others. It is the source of reason, beauty, harmony and motivation. Plato sees morality as not just the aim of a good human life, but as the ultimate purpose of the whole of existence. [R 504d-506e]

Works by Plato - G: *Gorgias*, R: *Republic*, P: *Protagoras*, M: *Meno*, S: *Symposium*, A: *Apology*

Basic Reading: *Gorgias* 465a-477c, 482d-484a, 491e-492c, 506c-508a. *Republic* 354b-376c, 441c-444e, 504d-521b