

KNOWLEDGE, VIRTUE, HAPPINESS: READINGS FROM PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

The Greek philosophers were not primarily concerned with the question what sorts of actions one should do or what external consequences one should aim for, but rather with the question what sort of person one should be. For this reason most Greek philosophers, including Socrates and Plato and Aristotle, develop a sort of ethics focusing on the virtues of the good moral agent. (We usually call this sort of ethics virtue ethics). An important feature that they share in common is that they attribute to knowledge (epistêmê) a predominant rôle with regard to virtue (aretê). Sometimes Plato's Socrates defines virtue or a virtue in terms of knowledge, whereas other times he determines the latter as the most important constituent of the former; something similar holds for Aristotle as well. However, not every kind of knowledge is relevant to virtue. For Plato as for Aristotle the knowledge essential to virtue is of a special kind and it is difficult to come by. And although these two philosophers conceive of it in different ways, nonetheless both of them agree that one's engagement with that sort of knowledge involves one's highest mental capacities as well as a sort of transcendence of one's human condition. Moreover, Plato's Socrates explores the relation between self-knowledge and virtue, and both Plato and Aristotle highlight different ways in which the knowledge pertaining to virtue is related to first order scientific or even technological knowledge. Regardless of their differences, Plato and Aristotle consider virtue and knowledge essential to happiness (eudaemonia). In fact, Aristotle pursues Plato's lines of thinking by setting out to enquire what is the supreme human good (telos) and tries to determine the rôle of virtue and knowledge in the achievement of the telos. As he suggests, the supreme good has to do with the cultivation of peculiarly human excellences and lies in action. Therefore, a crucial aspect of Aristotle ethical investigation is to determine the criteria for voluntary action, discuss the relevance of knowledge to deliberation and choice, and raise issues pertaining to moral responsibility.