The notion of good and evil in the philosophy of Aristotle

A philosophical essay by
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The concept of good and evil is as ancient as the world itself. Every culture has its own perception of these ideas and these words are used daily by every human being, as well as their derivatives like goodness, evilness, good will, good-hearted, etc. However, what is good and what is evil? Moreover, is it possible for us to give an answer to such a complex question? In order to do it, the following approach will be used – the viewpoint of a philosopher, who to a certain extent has shaped our modern perceptions of the physical and spiritual world, will be discussed and analysed. His name is Aristotle.

The philosopher from Stagira was born in 384 BC. Initially, he was tutored by Proxenus of Atarneus, but, after reaching adulthood, Aristotle went to Athens, where he studied in Plato’s Academy. There he was educated by Plato himself, but to what extent their philosophy is intertwined is debated to this day. In 343 BC, he was commissioned by Philip II of Macedon to be a teacher to his young son – the future Alexander the Great. There, he also instructed the future Diadochi Cassander and Ptolemy Keraunos. The influence that Aristotle had on the formation of Alexander’s ideas and views is debatable. In 335 BC, he returned to Athens, where he founded his Lyceum. There he wrote his “Ethics” in 6 books, as well as a series of treatises, the most important of which are “On nature”, “Metaphysics”, “Nicomachean Ethics”, “Politics” and “Poetics”. There, he pondered on practically all of the spheres of knowledge that the Ancient world was interested in, which is why his works can often be thought of as compiling the knowledge of Antiquity. He wrote books on different subjects – psychology, philosophy, ethics, anatomy, botany, anatomy, theatrical art, geography, zoology, and physics. After Alexander’s death in 323 BC, anti-Macedonian sentiment grew and Aristotle was forced to leave the city, dying in his mother’s home in Chalcis in 322 BC.

To begin with, Aristotle established a link between the ideas of good and virtue. The last word comes from the Latin virtus (αρετή in Greek) and represents the virtues and qualities, possessed by all the gods. The different philosophical schools deal with different aspects of the concept of virtue, but Aristotle describes it in his “Nicomachean Ethics” as follows: “The middle ground between two incorrect ways of acting, one of which is evil by virtue of its lack, while the other is evil due to its excessiveness... Good is the middle between them and it should be discovered and understood”. Thus, we can conclude that he thinks of goodness as a correct measure, the so called aurea mediocritas. A main course should be neither too salty, nor without salt at all. A person should be neither prone to avarice, nor should he be profligate. One should obey the law, but not fear it. All these facts prove that goodness is a synonym of the measure between two evil alternatives, two extremes. Furthermore, one should comprehend that this measure is not innate, but should be searched for conscientiously. Although not impossible, it is very rare for a human being to find it by chance. According to Aristotle, the discovery of this aurea mediocritas should be the prime goal of everyone’s life. However, this middle ground is not a set point, which, when once discovered, can be exploited by everyone. This is due to the fact that it is individual for every human being and every action. There is not a common measure for all the deeds we commit because every person is different. A man can be defined as “good” only once they achieve this mediocritas in everything. In practice this is very difficult, as human beings are
prone to drift towards one of the two extremes. This middle ground can be also achieved through following the examples of other people’s good deeds. If one notices a beggar on the street, it is highly probable that he or she will only pass him or her by, but when they see another person giving the beggar a small amount of money, they will feel a twitch in their chest. Upon pondering on this disturbance for a second, they will follow the given example and also leave a small sum, while knowing that a just deed had been done. What that person does with the money is not of any concern, because for Aristotle it is the action itself that is important. And good can be discovered only through a conscientious process of thinking, deliberation, determination, and through the accumulation of knowledge, as only through knowledge can one distinguish right from wrong. It is a virtue and a good deed to act righteously, not only to think about doing so.

On the one hand, Aristotle’s teachings do provide an insight into the problem of what is good and what is bad quite well and by applying practical philosophy we notice that most things truly are good in their mean, not their extreme. Such is the case with human behaviour – a person should not be prone to anger, neither to apathy, nor sloth, nor overwhelming themselves with work. However, not always can we find a mean between two opposites. One cannot apply Aristotle’s philosophy to all situations, especially when tertium non datur (est) – when a third option is not given. There is an old Latin saying: “Quid licet lovi non licet bovi”. Here there is no exit from the situation – either the bull is to be killed, or Jupiter will be angered and cause a plague or another natural disaster. There is no middle ground between these opposites. How can we discover a mean when one of these two evils is to be committed? It appears that we must fall back on the example of other heroes, who have failed to heed the divine demands and were punished with many perils and agonising sorrows, or replicate what other people in our society do – kill the bull. Thus, we are faced with a moral dilemma. One can argue that what the whole society does not always automatically qualify as just. Now we start searching for a way to break this gridlock. Human beings, according to Augustine of Hippo, were created to sit at the top of the pyramid of the Lord’s creations due to their intellect. Furthermore, if we have been able to gain so much experience in these many centuries and have been able to develop a tool, unique only to us, then we should be able to reach this aurea mediocritas via our logical thinking, or at least come up with a decision about which of the two actions is right. So, we begin to think and reach a dead end, a regressus ad infinitum. Finally, we are unable to decide which of the two actions is right and which one is not, but we are forced to do one of them. In the end, we realise that the lesser evil is to kill the bull and for Jupiter to be content and thus preserve our friends and family. In this instance, Aristotle’s opinion is invalid. It appears that only some actions have an aurea mediocritas, while others do not have it and cannot be resolved through compromise. It is the same with people – if one considers a dress to be red and the other black, one of them must be wrong.

The aim of this essay was to discover what is good and what is evil by analysing the works of Aristotle. We came to the conclusion that his philosophical concept of the aurea mediocritas as the middle ground between two extremes is not universally applicable to all situations and deeds in the world. After examining other philosophers and thinkers, who have come up with their own definitions of good and evil, one finds a plethora of descriptions. This can be put down to the
perpetual change of the human species and its culture and history. It may sound like a paradox that a concept as old as the world is subject to change, but even today we may ask ten different people the question “What is it to be good?” and we would receive ten different answers. Due to this fact, we can conclude that good and evil are dependent on one’s moral compass and culture, as what is good for one is not always good for another. Aristotle’s ideas are applicable to some situations, thoughts and actions, but for others, they are not. In order to achieve the aim of the essay, we may formulate the following definition of what is good: To be good is to perpetually steer the middle course between two evils and this *aurea mediocritas* should be searched for through knowledge and following other people’s examples. This way of conducting oneself can be used in a number of situations, especially in regards to the proportion of one’s reaction to situations with multiple solutions. However, there are also moments when this concept cannot be applied. In these instances, one should try to benefit themselves or their society and strive to achieve his or her own happiness without impeding the happiness of others and the interests and prosperity of that society. Evil is contrarily a conscious or latent harming of other people in order to achieve a goal, no matter what that goal is. In conclusion, good and evil are both utopias, understood differently by every human and every culture. On the flip side, notwithstanding their subjectivity, it is the duty of every human being to ask themselves: “Am I a good person”? Then, they should strive to attain that knowledge and to be good. Most of all, they should not harm others, because all the moral values teach us that it is evil to cause pain to somebody and that it is good to live together in friendship, compromise and mutual understanding.

**Teacher’s evaluation:**

A very high level of understanding of the philosophical problem, skilful use of adequate philosophical terms, as well as their Latin names, coherent construction of the philosophical analysis and masterful use of linking words and phrases, persuasive argumentation, profound knowledge of the ideas and philosophical teachings of Aristotle concerning the “aurea mediocritas” to the level of analytical breakdown and analysis, originality of the presentment of ideas have been demonstrated in this essay.

Excellent/6/, Orlin Yordanov signature (not readable)