

rational and authentic, recognize they're outnumbered. Therefore, they must often take the pragmatic approach of finding common ground with religious believers when possible.

Religious believers, conversely, often recognize that ethical and other principles they hold need to be couched in terms of rational arguments that can be debated in the secular public arena of modern society. The appeal to reason as a way of understanding and expressing religious belief isn't foreign to most major faith traditions. To cite one representative figure, Pope John Paul II, "The Church remains profoundly convinced that faith and reason 'mutually support each other'; each influences the other, as they offer to each other a purifying critique and a stimulus to pursue the search for deeper understanding."¹⁴ The recognition that human beings are essentially *rational animals* motivates many religious believers to engage in secular, and not merely faith-based, discourse. At the same time, however, religious believers hold that there are limits to pure rational inquiry, and so faith must take over at those junctures to further our knowledge.

Hence, the litmus test for the validity of religious beliefs may be, as Roslin asserts, whether they "hold real-world relevance" ("Lay Down Your Burdens, Part 2"). To the degree that religious believers acknowledge rational, scientific inquiry as a means to truth, and atheists recognize that there are limits to the knowledge such inquiry can deliver to answer some of the ultimate questions of human concern, the ground is fertile for mutually respectable and fruitful dialogue as humanity continues its "lonely quest" on this "shining planet, known as Earth."¹⁵

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (1998), §100: www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0216/_INDEX.HTM.

¹⁵ We're grateful to Bill Irwin and Jessica Vines for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

Part V

Ethics

Introduction

Ethics is the study of morality – the concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, virtue and vice. How can we live a good life? Is the virtuous life the best life, or is an immoral life more rewarding? When confronted with ethical dilemmas, how can we decide what is the right thing to do?

This Part begins with the television show *Heroes*, in which ordinary individuals discover that they have extraordinary powers. Nathan can fly, Hiro can manipulate time and travel through space, Claire can heal from any wound, and Peter and Sylar can steal the powers of others. Such people could, quite literally, get away with anything. What motivation could they possibly have for being morally good? Long ago, Plato (429–347 BCE) told a related story in which Gyges finds an invisibility ring and takes advantage of his new power to usurp the king and steal his wife. Gyges was able to get away with behaving badly and so he did. Do the rest of us behave morally simply because we couldn't get away with behaving badly? In his chapter, Don Adams uses the world of *Heroes* to explicate Plato's virtues and show us that the answer is no. In order to be virtuous, the parts of our soul – our *thumos* (spirit), *logistikos* (reason), and *epithumetikon* (appetite) – must be properly ordered. If they are not, we will pay the consequences and the more powerful we are, the worse those consequences will be.

The NBC television show *The Office* is modeled on a British show by the same name. Both shows contain a buffoonish boss (Michael/David) who tries to be funny but never is, a boorish assistant (to the) regional manager (Dwight/Gareth) who doesn't seem to understand jokes, and a witty salesman (Jim/Tim) who is genuinely funny. In his chapter, Sean McAleer uses the British version of the show to illustrate how Aristotle (384–322 BCE) teaches us that living a virtuous life is the key to happiness. Examining the nature of humor on *The Office*, McAleer argues that virtue is "really about acting and feeling appropriately."

Although Batman has had many opportunities to kill the Joker and thus stop him once and for all, he always resists the temptation. Instead, Batman continually sends the Joker back behind the revolving doors of Arkham Asylum, knowing full well that he will probably escape and kill again. Why doesn't Batman just kill the Joker and save thousands of future victims in the process? In his chapter, Mark White explains what utilitarians and deontologists would say on the matter. Using a Bat-version of Philippa Foot's trolley example, White develops a deontological, duty-based, argument for why Batman is right not to kill the Joker. The end doesn't necessarily justify the means.

Finally, we turn to *Watchmen*, the most acclaimed graphic novel of all time, brought to life on the big screen in 2009. Set in the 1980s, *Watchmen* depicts Ozymandias and his plot to save billions of lives by ending the cold war. The catch is that his plan involves killing millions of New Yorkers – the ends, he argues, justify the means. The character Rorschach is determined to stop him, declaring “evil must be punished, in the face of Armageddon, I shall not compromise this.” Ozymandias appears to be a utilitarian, and Rorschach appears to be a deontologist. However, neither ethical theory comes off in a positive light in *Watchmen*. In his chapter, Robert Loftis argues, if *Watchmen* is trying to critique utilitarianism and deontology, it doesn't do an adequate job. Neither Ozymandias nor Rorschach truly adhere to either theory. So perhaps *Watchmen* aims at a different point. The mantra, “Who watches the watchmen” gives us a clue. Should anyone, regardless of what theory they embrace, have the power that the Watchmen, or governments, have?

14

Plato on Gyges' Ring of Invisibility

The Power of Heroes and the Value of Virtue

Don Adams

Summary

What if you had the ability to commit the perfect crime — say, steal money from any bank without leaving behind any clues to link you to the robbery? It would be ideal right? You would be richer, and you wouldn't have to suffer any consequences for your action. Or would you? The ancient Greek philosopher Plato thought about such situations and argued that there are always consequences. Relying not on the Christian Golden Rule, but on the Pagan Golden Rule, Plato argues that the corruption of your own soul isn't worth all the gold in the world.

In the *Heroes* universe, evolution has given select individuals special powers. But it is up to those select individuals to decide how to use them. Many have opted to use them for good, but Sylar is not the only exception to that rule. Daphne Millbrook, the blond Speedy Gonzales, opts to use her super-speed for super-theft, hiring herself out to Pinehearst, because no one can ever catch her moving that fast. Micah steals money from an ATM (“The Fix”) and even steals pay-per-view wrestling (“The Kindness of Strangers”) and doesn't get caught. (How could he? He can always tell whatever security system he is up against to “look the other way.”) In Vegas, Hiro Nakamura freezes time to cheat at roulette and poker (“Hiro”). Although his opponents eventually catch on, if he had been more careful – if he had pulled cards only out of the untouched deck instead of his opponent's hand – they wouldn't have noticed. And Noah Bennet continually murders, kidnaps, tortures, and lies but then uses the Haitian to erase everyone's memories of his deeds. All of our heroes could do something similar – commit atrocities and never get caught.

The stories of our heroes aren't new, nor are the questions about them. They go back at least as far as Plato (c. 429–347 BCE), who considered the tale of Gyges, a man who finds an invisibility ring. Gyges uses the ring to viciously, but secretly, depose the king and take his wife. No one is ever the wiser; he is invisible while he does it. Such stories raise the question: do such “superpowered” individuals have

good reason to be virtuous, even though they can get away with being immoral? Or maybe their actions aren't even immoral? After all, isn't it "only natural" for people to use their own powers to their own advantage? But is that an excuse? Is human nature really that selfish, or is there a part of us that doesn't want to take advantage of others for our own aims, but instead wants to join with and help them? Do we want to be villains or heroes?

Plato argued that our nature is to be heroes and that there is good reason to be a hero. But to understand his argument, we have to understand what, for Plato, it meant to be virtuous and why virtue was so important.

Claire's Thumos Saved the World

According to Plato, being virtuous is important, because if you are not careful to develop the core virtues, then you will be doomed to suffer from their opposed vices. No superpower can free you from this dilemma. In fact, Plato would argue that the virtues become more and more important the more powerful you become. The more you suffer from the vices, the more your life begins to spin out of control. So if you have superpowers, your vices are super-vices and will make your life spin "super" out of control.

To see what it means to be virtuous for Plato, let's begin with one of the characters in *Heroes* whom Plato would admire: Claire Bennet. Think about one of the most important choices Claire ever made. In "One Giant Leap," the local police chief asks which cheerleader performed the daring fire rescue a day earlier. Even though he indicates that Claire looks like the hero, she chooses not to take credit. Good thing! The cheerleader who steps forward to take credit catches Sylar's attention and is eventually murdered for "her" powers. Claire's choice not to receive the accolades and glory for a heroic feat saves her life (and of course, since the cheerleader was saved, so was the world).

It's easy to understand why Claire might want to take credit for her heroic act: she did something noble and deserves to be honored for it. Plato would say that this desire comes from her *thumos* (thoo-MOSS).¹ Thumos is not a part of your brain (that's your "thalamus"); thumos is a part of the soul. There really is no good translation of the Greek word *thumos*, but look at Claire's face when Jackie Wilcox, the cheerleader standing next to her, takes credit for the rescue and you'll see the face of thumos.² Claire is surprised but also indignant and even a little angry. Jackie has done something shameful, and Claire thinks less of her for doing it. Our thumos reacts when we sense an insult to our dignity, our worth, and our honor. That is why Plato associates thumos with anger. When someone insults

¹ See Plato, *The Republic*, 4.439e–441c. All translations are made by the author.

² The closest translations would be "heart" or "spirit," but both of those have very different connotations in English from what *thumos* has in Greek. "Heart" is too romantic, and "spirit" is too spiritual.

you unjustly, you get angry, and out of that righteous anger you might hurl an insult or even throw a punch at the person who offended you.

Thumos and the acts it inspires are not necessarily bad, according to Plato; in fact, they can be very good. Thumos can help you develop the virtue of courage. A strong sense of dignity and personal honor guided by courage can protect you from people who try to take advantage of you and can also help you set the bar high for yourself. Expect more of yourself, and you might be surprised by how capable you are. But your thumos can also get you into trouble. If you throw a punch every time you think someone has insulted you, you are indulging in the vice of recklessness, and you will get into more trouble than you bargained for.

Claire Is Logical; Spock Is Not

We need to be thumotic, but, more important, like Claire, we need to be *logistikos* (log-IST-i-KOS) to develop the virtue of wisdom.³ The English words *logic* and *logistics* derive from the Greek adjective *logistikos*, and both are involved in its fundamental meaning. So let's call this the "logistical" part of the soul. Claire has thought logically about her situation. She concludes that if anyone finds out about her ability, it will ruin her life. She will either be a freak or a lab rat. All things considered, thinking coolly and calmly, rationally and strategically, it is best for her long-term good if the number of people who know about her special ability is very, very small.

ZACH: All right, besides the fact that it was so gross I almost fudged myself, this is the single coolest thing to happen to this town in, like, a hundred years.

CLAIRE: Not if nobody finds out, it's not.

– "Genesis"

But for Plato, being logistical doesn't necessarily contradict being thumotic. Today we often think that logic and emotion are opposed to each other. Perhaps we are too influenced by Mr. Spock and the Vulcans from *Star Trek*. But for Plato, anger and logistical thinking can go together perfectly and can even help each other. Long-term calculations for your best interest can include so much more if you have a passion for your own dignity and honor. Without a strong sense of self-worth, the logistical part of your soul might sell you short; after all, logistically speaking, it is easier to create a plan to accomplish something small than something great. Ando keeps urging Hiro to set his sights lower – on objectives that are more easily accomplished – but Hiro insists on accomplishing the daunting but truly great task of saving the world. If your thumos is strong, then you won't settle for less than you deserve; you will set the bar high for yourself and will have the driving passion to go for it.

³ See Plato, *The Republic*, 4.440ab.

But sometimes your thumos can become too strong and will start running your life. Claire has a strong thumos, but she doesn't let it control her. Even when she takes revenge on Brody Mitchum, the quarterback who tried to rape her ("One Giant Leap"), she doesn't simply lash out at him in anger. She carefully calculates what to do. She thinks logically and logistically about the situation and creates a good plan of action and executes it well.

This, in fact, is how Plato defines the virtue of courage and why he thinks the virtues of courage and wisdom go together. A courageous person is someone whose thumos is strong and daring but who is responsive to reason. Imagine a member of the cavalry charging to meet the enemy. His horse must be high-spirited and willing to face danger, but it must also be well-trained to respond to its rider's lead. If it gets too spirited and unruly, all may be lost. The same is true for your thumos: a courageous person is daring and willing to face danger, but only when led by reason, logic, and good logistical calculation. If you simply run into danger without thinking, you are not courageous but reckless; you are a fool, a danger to yourself and others. Wisdom and courage go together because a truly courageous person consults wisdom when deciding whether to attack or hold back, and a truly wise person knows when to stand up for oneself and boldly attack one's enemies.

If Claire has a moral problem in Plato's eyes, it is simply that she is young and her wisdom is not yet fully developed. Probably it was a mistake to get back at Brody in the way she did. But Plato would admire her because she has, to the extent possible for someone so young, two of the four core virtues: wisdom and courage.

The Virtue That Sylar Lacks

To understand Plato's third virtue, temperance, we will need to understand the third part of human nature recognized by Plato: *epithumetikon* (epi-thoom-AY-tee-KON).⁴ When you drink simply because you feel like drinking, that comes from *epithumetikon*; the same is true when you eat simply because you feel like eating or scratch an itch simply because you feel like scratching. So we can call this part of your soul "appetite." Your appetite doesn't have to bother your *logistikon*; doing something you feel like doing simply because you feel like doing it doesn't have to involve a whole lot of logistical planning. (It doesn't take a lot of thought to get up and get a drink when you are thirsty.) But it can. And just as the thumos can be good when it is responsive and obedient to the logistical part of the soul, but bad when it begins to take over and rule your soul, so, too, is the appetite good when it is obedient but bad when it tries to rule. Temperance is the virtue that you exercise when you keep your appetites under control.

The perfect example of intemperance is Sylar. Sylar's special power is intuitive aptitude: he can see how things work, including the special powers of others – if he examines someone's brain, he can see how it works and take the person's power.

⁴ Ibid., 4.439d.

This, of course, kills those whose power he steals – except Claire ("The Second Coming"). As we learned in Volume 3 of the *Heroes* saga, part of the curse of this power is a seemingly uncontrollable hunger – an appetite – to acquire the powers of others. (This hunger was also passed on to Peter Petrelli when he briefly acquired Sylar's power in "I Am Become Death" and "Angels and Monsters.") Since Sylar is unable to control this hunger – it rules him – Sylar is intemperate.

Plato argued that intemperance makes one immoral. Sylar, again, is a perfect example. As Arthur Petrelli points out in "It's Coming," Sylar is not simply a mindless killer. "That hunger you've got is not about killing; it's about power." Recall Sylar's disinterest in Peter when he had no powers. "I'm not going to kill you; you don't have anything I need anymore" ("Our Father").⁵ Remember also Sylar's lack of interest in killing Claire after he copies her power. Although he couldn't kill her even if he wanted to, he still doesn't want to; he even puts the top of her head back on after he is finished ("The Second Coming"). Sylar does not merely kill for killing's sake. He simply hungers for powers, and examining the brains of those who have them is the easiest way he knows to acquire them – it just happens that most people can't survive the process. So, because Sylar's hunger controls him, he ends up murdering everyone he can find who has powers. It is his intemperance – his inability to control that hunger – that makes him the villain he is. He does succeed in keeping that hunger under control for a while, and in "It's Coming" he learns to acquire abilities through empathy, as Peter did in Volumes 1 and 2 of the *Heroes* Saga.⁶ If Sylar had continued down this path, he would have become the temperate heroic family man we saw in the future of "I Am Become Death." That Future Sylar even specifically says that controlling the hunger is what enabled him to turn back into Gabriel. But it is when he gives in to his hunger again – most notably, when he kills Elle Bishop, the girl he supposedly loves ("The Eclipse: Part II"), thus losing his temperance – that he becomes a villain once again.

Just like Sylar, when we are intemperate – when we let our appetites rule our actions – we are immoral (villains) as well and suffer the consequences. As a trivial example, think about not being able to keep your appetite for food under control. If you get used to eating simply because you feel like eating, you can develop some very unhealthy eating habits, health problems, and flabby body parts. As a more extreme example, what would happen if, the next time you got really angry, you lost your ability to control your desire for violence? And how much longer would you be in your current relationship if you lost your ability to keep your appetite for sex under control?

This is not to say that appetites are a bad thing. It's important to enjoy life, and that involves doing things that you feel like doing. Plato's central point is that

⁵ Not to mention the poor scared kid in the elevator after Sylar acquired his ability to detect lies ("Our Father").

⁶ Arthur explicitly referred to empathy when he spoke of teaching Sylar to acquire his powers a different way ("It's Coming"). For more on Peter and how he acquires his abilities through empathy, see Andrew Terjesen's chapter, "Peter Petrelli: The Power of Empathy," in *Heroes and Philosophy: Buy the Book, Save the World*, ed David Kyle Johnson (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

there has to be balance and order in your soul. When appetite begins to take over and rule your soul, it turns into a kind of tyrant, like a spoiled child demanding whatever it wants. Instead of exercising wisdom and developing temperance by eating healthy, nutritionally balanced meals, people who suffer from the vice of intemperance will wolf down whatever they want, as much as they want, and will be very cranky if they don't get their way. Obviously, letting your appetites rule your actions is a bad way to go. Gluttony, after all, is one of the seven deadly sins.

Superpowers and Super-Vices

For Plato, the virtue of justice is to the human soul what health is to the body: as the various systems in the body need balance and harmony in order for you to thrive biologically, so you also need the various parts of your soul to be in balance and harmony with one another in order for you to thrive psychologically. Your thumos and your appetite should do their jobs, but it is the logistical part of the soul that should be in control. And just as a healthy diet and healthy exercise help to keep your body in good condition, wise, courageous, and temperate actions help to keep your soul in good condition. The more you give in to an unhealthy lifestyle, the worse your health will become; the more you give in to foolishness, intemperance, and cowardly or reckless actions, the more your life will spin out of control. The more unjust you become, the more miserable you will be.

This is why Plato would worry about Micah stealing from the ATM. Forget about the chances of getting caught. What about the consequences for Micah's soul? What if Micah gets used to doing whatever he feels like doing and becomes the sort of person who doesn't think logistically about his actions? Allowing his appetite to take control of his soul and ignoring or even suppressing his logistical planning would make Micah suffer from the vice of intemperance. Plato would say something similar to Daphne about her super-speed thievery.

This is why Plato would disapprove of Hiro's and Ando's behavior in Vegas ("Hiros"). Recall, Ando gambled away all of their money except for one last chip, which he bet on the roulette wheel. Because it was the last of their money, Hiro stopped time and cheated to win. Immediately, his thumos made him feel very ashamed. But Ando had no trouble convincing him that it was okay, so his appetite rejoiced at the opportunity to continue cheating to win. But when the thumos or the appetite gets out of control – when the soul is not balanced or harmonized properly by logistical planning – we are unjust, and bad things happen. Ultimately, Hiro and Ando cheat the wrong person and get beaten up, robbed, and dumped in the desert.

Unless you make choices in a balanced way, develop the wisdom to plan things out so that you enjoy things you feel like doing without becoming ashamed of yourself, and have courage and temperance to be able to stick to your plans, you will be unjust, and your indulgences will tear you apart. An overly thumotic person will become increasingly obsessed with other people's opinions, doing anything to

gain acceptance but never getting enough. An overly appetitive person will grow increasingly indulgent; his appetite will grow until no amount of money or superpowers will be able to satisfy him. At first, his thumos will continually make him feel ashamed, but if he practices ignoring the thumos, he may weaken or even kill it off. Then he will be utterly shameless and will have no ambition to amount to anything at all in life. Like a drug addict who cares about only one thing in life – the next fix – the intemperate and unjust person loses all self-respect and no longer strives for anything worthwhile in life.

This is part of Plato's problem with Gyges. Once Gyges gained his superpower, he handed control of his life over to his appetite. He allowed it to boss his logistical part around. The problem is that only the logistical part is good at logic and logistics. Thumos and appetite will inevitably make a mess of things, demanding more and more honors, as well as more and more pleasures. There will be more conflicts among the things he wants, and so there will be more dissatisfaction in his life.

Now we see why Plato thought that "superpowered" individuals do have good reason to be virtuous, even though they can get away with being immoral. To see what this implies about the way we should treat one another, let's turn to Claire.

Why Claire Apologized

In "One Giant Leap," Claire is attacked by Brody, the football quarterback. He tries to rape her but accidentally kills her. Of course, because of her healing powers Claire recovers – at least, from her physical injuries. She, however, finds out that Brody has raped another student and seems to have picked yet another victim. He appears to be a budding young serial rapist who is utterly remorseless, and she decides to take action. She gets him to give her a ride home after school, but instead she drives. She finds out from his own mouth that he does indeed seem set on this despicable course. So she steers a course directly for a wall and crashes the car into it, seriously injuring both of them. Of course, once again, Claire recovers.

Surely, there is a bit of revenge in her plan: she's getting back at Brody for what he did to her. But that is not all she is doing. In fact, it looks as if she might not have done anything if she hadn't discovered his serial rapist tendencies. So, it seems, she is exacting punishment on behalf of his other victim and trying to stop him from hurting anyone else. Who knows? Maybe part of him does feel bad about what he's done, and a serious injury will help wake him up and change his mind. Perhaps Claire was right to do this; perhaps not. But to discover Plato's fourth virtue, we need to focus on what Claire does afterward in the hospital.

Claire goes into the quarterback's room and apologizes to him. She says that what she did was wrong. But why does she think she was wrong and why does she apologize? She doesn't have time to explain herself because she is interrupted by the cheerleading squad chanting, "Brody, Brody, Brody," coming in to cheer him up. So we have to speculate. To do so, let's talk about Plato again. Before Plato brought up the idea of Gyges' superpower of invisibility, he discussed a principle

widely accepted by the Greeks. We might call it the “Pagan Golden Rule”: help your friends and harm your enemies.⁷

Unlike the Christian Golden Rule, which tells us to treat everyone according to the same benevolent standard, the Pagan Golden Rule advises us to use two different standards: one for our friends and one for our enemies. Obviously, you shouldn’t treat friends as if they were enemies; they deserve better than that. And you shouldn’t treat enemies as if they were friends; they will take advantage of you and perhaps even destroy you.

Plato pointed out that we need to be careful not to misinterpret the “Pagan Golden Rule.” It is not a license to attack your enemies or to show indiscriminate favoritism to your friends. The Greek tragedian Sophocles wrote what could be considered a footnote to the Pagan Golden Rule when he had the mighty hero Ajax say, “I have learned that my enemy is to be hated only so much, since he may soon be my friend; and the friend I help, I will help only so much since he may not always remain my friend.”⁸ This fits Plato’s view of interpersonal justice in *The Republic*, and it also fits much of what we see in *Heroes*.

It may sound sad to think of dealing with your friends in the realization that they may not remain your friends for very long, but it is good advice. Claire’s father (by adoption), Noah Bennet, realized it was good advice when he emphasized to her the importance of being careful after he saw that she was interested in Brody. When someone is friendly to you, as Brody was to Claire before he tried to rape her, it doesn’t mean that you can trust this person. This is even clearer in the case of Noah himself. Claire loves and trusts him as a father, but he is an employee of the Company, and his loyalties to it might possibly lead him to do something that would not be in Claire’s best interest. Of course, ultimately, Noah proves loyal to Claire – but even with her most trusted ally, caution is needed.

Yet perhaps an even more important part of the requirement to exercise caution with our friends is what Matt Parkman learns. In “Hiros,” after he has been reading his wife’s mind and working to fix their relationship, Matt points out to her that they have been taking each other for granted and living together more as roommates than as husband and wife. We need to treat our friends with caution in the realization that they might not be our friends for long, but if we start taking them for granted, we might lose their friendship. Friends and allies are so important in life that we need to live every day realizing how fortunate we are to have them and make sure that we don’t start to ignore them or assume that they will always be around and always support us. We need to keep the lines of communication open, we need to touch base with our friends and be sure that our aims and goals are still compatible with theirs. People grow and change, and often a healthy friendship needs to be renegotiated in some ways so that we continue to be good for one another.

There is a similar profound truth about enemies. Yes, you need to protect yourself and your friends against your enemies. When Plato developed his ideal form

⁷ See Plato, *The Republic*, 1.332a–335e.

⁸ Sophocles, *Ajax*, 678–82 (author’s translation).

of government, the military played a crucial role. We need to protect ourselves from danger. But we also need to remind ourselves that even enemies can become allies or friends. In “Hiros,” when Isaac Mendez and Peter realize that they need to work together to prevent the bomb from destroying New York City, they are able to set aside their hostility over Simone Deveaux, Isaac’s former girlfriend and Peter’s current love interest. Isaac was treating Peter as a total enemy, but when he saw that Peter would make a powerful ally in working toward a vitally important goal the two of them shared, he was able to set aside his anger and work with Peter.

It is a strategic mistake to treat an enemy as a *complete* enemy. We always need to be on the lookout for objectives we might share with our enemies, because people who work together for shared objectives are teammates, and teammates are allies. Yes, Brody deserved what he got, and perhaps Claire has no moral obligation to apologize. But it’s better to try to mend the relationship so that Brody may one day be an ally again. To not apologize is to guarantee that he will always be an enemy, and Claire may want (or need) him as a friend someday.

But Isn’t It Only Natural?

You are virtuous when you do justice to yourself as a human being; when you enjoy life and do things you feel like doing (you satisfy your appetite); when you don’t sell yourself short but live up to your full potential (you satisfy your thumos); and most of all when you actively think about your life, planning things out logically and logistically, restraining your ambition and your appetites wisely. And don’t forget to keep in mind that enemies can become friends if you are smart, and friends can become enemies if you take them for granted or treat them badly. Just as a healthy body is natural to us, so also a virtuous soul is natural to us.

This identifies our fundamental mistake when we think that it is only natural for someone with a superpower to take advantage of it to hoard the good things life has to offer. The core virtues of justice, wisdom, courage, and temperance are of value, according to Plato, because they are essential to living our lives as successful human beings. If virtue is to the soul what health is to the body, then virtues are not mere tools that we can use when they suit our purposes and ignore when they don’t help us get what we want. Virtues are not merely instrumentally good because of what they can do; the virtues are intrinsically good because of what they are: healthy states of our soul that allow us to live our lives as human beings. Virtue is its own reward.

Plato gave the analogy of sheepdogs bred to protect flocks of sheep.⁹ It would be unnatural and monstrous if dogs bred to protect the flock instead ripped the sheep apart. If virtue really is a crucial part of a healthy human soul, then it is horrendously unnatural and monstrous to turn on a friend and an ally, as Brody did to Claire. Instead of using his physical strength and athletic prowess to harm

⁹ See Plato, *The Republic*, 3.416ab.

enemies (defeat rival football teams) and to help friends (enhance the reputation of the school), he perverted his special talents to harm an ally and a friend.

Still more degenerate is Sylar's treatment of his own (adoptive) mother, Virginia Gray, in "The Hard Part."¹⁰ To show her how special he is, he uses a kitchen hose, his freezing power, and his telekinesis to turn her apartment into a big snow globe. She is frightened, and her grip on reality is questionable, but her subsequent refusal to accept that Sylar is truly her son, Gabriel, is based on a profound realization: the quest for power has destroyed Gabriel, leaving only Sylar. After killing Virginia – the only woman who ever loved him – with a pair of scissors, Sylar calmly paints the future with her blood. Nothing could be more contrary to human nature.

Heroes like Claire, Matt, Hiro, and Peter are able to form alliances and friendships with one another. Being a team player is not about mere conformity. From the perspective of simple conformity, you are foolish if you try to change things and ridiculous if you don't fit in. That's not the case with true heroes. Matt wants to change things because he wants to help others and make the world a better place. Peter has tremendous empathy for others and looks for opportunities to use his remarkable powers to help in ways he never could before. Hiro is a freak because of his unusual ability, but that doesn't make him embarrassed about not being like others, instead, it gives him a profound sense of responsibility. His ability brings something very powerful to the alliance. Our common aims can bring us together, and our distinctive differences enhance our capabilities as a united team.

These remarkable heroes face a choice that all of us unremarkable, ordinary people face. The core virtues of justice, wisdom, courage, and temperance are not simply a matter of "fitting in" or conforming to society's expectations. Rather, they allow you to help your friends and harm your enemies. They give you the intelligence to find common objectives that can turn enemies into allies and give you the insight to cultivate your friendships and not take them for granted. Mere conformity will make you try to hide what makes you unique and prevent you from rocking the boat or trying to change things. Virtue shows that what makes you unique can make you a great asset to the community and that your attempts to change things for the better can make a difference. Whether we have spectacular powers like the characters in *Heroes* or only the ordinary abilities of a normal human being, we all face the same choice: what will we do with what has been given to us? Regardless of what physical abilities you have or lack, you can still choose to be a hero. After all, it's only natural.

¹⁰ Of course, Sylar's biological mother was killed by his biological father, Samson Gray ("Exposed").

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The Virtues of Humor

What The Office Can Teach Us About
Aristotle's Ethics

Sean McAleer

Summary

The Office can teach three important lessons about Aristotle's ethics. First, three main characters illustrate the structure of an Aristotelian virtue of character by embodying the virtue of wit, which Aristotle regards as a mean, and the corresponding vices of buffoonery (excess) and boorishness (deficiency). Second, that wit is a virtue of character suggests a broader, more inclusive notion of morality than we moderns are likely to have. Third, that humor can't be captured by a set of rules mirrors the noncodifiability of Aristotle's ethics.

Early in the very first episode of *The Office*, David Brent is mugging for the camera as he introduces Dawn Tinsley, the receptionist. "Ah, Dawn," he muses. "I'd say that at one time or another, every bloke in the office has woken up at the crack of Dawn." Dawn is mortified (as is the viewer, on her behalf), while Brent cackles with delight at his own "wit." We're mortified not because the joke isn't funny (though it isn't – or at least hasn't been since junior high) but because it's so inappropriate. Its inappropriateness isn't just a matter of bad taste or a failure of etiquette (as is Brent's t-shirt and ball-cap ensemble at his presentation on "motivational techniques" in episode four of series two). The joke is *morally* inappropriate. As such, it tells us something about David Brent's character. Jokes can be funny that way.

Given the centrality of character and virtue to the ethics of Aristotle (384–22 BCE), it's not surprising that Aristotle can help us understand what's wrong with David Brent. But Aristotle can also help us understand humor generally. For Aristotle, ethics is not a matter of duty or promoting good outcomes, it's about being a certain sort of person – the sort of person who lives a life expressive of the virtues. In this, Aristotle's thought differs from most modern moral philosophy, which tends to take either notions of duty or the notion of a good outcome to be fundamental.¹ A *virtue ethics*,

¹ For example, the ethics of the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) centers on duty, while the utilitarianism of the great English philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–73) centers on outcomes.

