

Discussion Guide, Advanced

Episode 10

Aristotle, one of the most important philosophers ever to write about justice lived in ancient Greece, some 2400 years ago. He thought that justice means giving each person his due, or what he deserves. But how do we know what people deserve? What goods and opportunities should go to which persons?

Aristotle's answer is that we have to consider the "*telos*"—the point, the end, or the purpose—of the good in question. Say we have some nice flutes. Who should get them? According to Aristotle, it's not the rich person, since playing flutes has nothing to do with money. Nor is it the person who will be made most happy, since making good music is different than being happy. The purpose of a flute is to be played, and to be played *well*

. So, Aristotle thinks, the flutes should go to the best flute players.

Aristotle's method is to think about justice by thinking about the purpose of a good, an institution, or even a person. If the purpose of a tennis court is to play tennis, then the best tennis players should get priority. If the purpose of universities is to pursue and reward scholarly excellence, then the students with the best academic records should be admitted. If the purpose of a human being is to live a good life, then society should promote the good life by ensuring that citizens have the resources necessary for living a good life, and by encouraging them in the pursuits that make for a good life.

Is this the right way to think about justice?

What is the purpose of an institution?

If we want to use Aristotle's "teleological" method to think about the justice of a particular institution, we need to determine the point or the purpose of the institution. But how are we to know the purpose?

Consider the practice of golf. Is the purpose of golf merely entertainment, or is it athletic excellence? The question is important because the answer will help to determine how golf should be played. If the purpose of golf is mere entertainment, then it shouldn't matter if players ride golf carts from one hole to the next. The use of golf carts does not conflict with the purpose of entertainment. Indeed, allowing golf carts may even serve this purpose better than making everyone walk the long course, by hastening the pace of play. However, if the purpose of golf is not mere entertainment but athletic excellence, then perhaps players should be required to walk the long course, or else forfeit the game.

How do we know the purpose of golf or any other practice or institution? Should we say that the purpose of an institution is given by what most people believe it to be? The problem with this answer is that people tend to disagree about the purposes of institutions. Does the purpose of an institution lie in its beneficial consequences? Does the purpose lie in the values that the institution promotes, honors, and rewards? Consider each of these alternatives as you think about the following questions.

1.

Suppose there are some very good, public tennis courts in your town. Who should get priority to use the courts? Should priority be given to the tennis players who are willing to pay the most? Should court-time be assigned on a first-come, first-served basis? Should priority be given to the worst tennis players, who most need the practice? Should it be given to the best tennis players, who will play the best tennis? Which of these arrangements would be fair or just? What is the purpose of tennis, and does it help you to answer this question?

2.

Who should be admitted to colleges and universities? Should admission decisions be made strictly on the basis of academic merit? Or should colleges and universities admit students with a variety of academic and other backgrounds, and to strive for diversity? What would be fair? What is the purpose of higher education, and does it help you to answer this question?

3.

For much of its history, the US military did not permit women to serve in its ranks. Was this unjust? What is the purpose of the military, and does it help you to answer this question?

4.

“Hooters” is a restaurant that hires only female waitresses who are willing to wear revealing clothing. However, some men want to work there as waiters, too. Is it unfair that “Hooters” hires only women? Consider the purpose of the restaurant. Is it merely to serve food? Or is it to entertain men? Who should get to decide the purpose?

Reasoning from the purpose

Aristotle’s method of reasoning about justice asks us to reason from the purpose of an institution to a conclusion about how the institution should function. In other words, we start with the purpose and ask how the institution can best serve this purpose. However, can’t the purpose of an institution itself be questioned?

1.

Think of the Ku Klux Klan—an association founded with the intention of harassing and even killing African American, Jewish, Hispanic and other minority citizens. This purpose seems clearly unjust. How should we proceed if we want to use Aristotle’s method of thinking about justice? Try to construct a teleological argument against an association such as the KKK. Is it possible to argue against the KKK by reflecting on the purpose of voluntary associations generally?

2.

How do we know whether the purpose of a given institution is just or unjust? Try to find a teleological method of answering this question. Perhaps we should ask whether—and how well—the institution contributes to a good society, or to a good human life. But what is a good society, or a good human life?

3.

Aristotle thought that human beings were by nature meant to use their reason to deliberate about important moral questions, and to share in the political life of the community. He also thought that government should promote this purpose, by helping people to become better informed, and more virtuous. Do you agree?

4.

Think of a law designed to promote civic virtue. Does this law run the risk of unfairly imposing the majority’s values on everyone? Can you think of a law that promotes civic virtue but escapes this objection?

5.

Aristotle thinks that the reasoned life of an engaged citizen is a necessary part of a good human life. Is he right? Suppose someone chooses to live alone in the woods, away from the hustle and bustle of communal life. Is there something less good, and less fully human, about a life spent in solitude and isolation? Would it be better to spend one’s life living in a community of equals?

6.

Consider this challenge to Aristotle: “Even if it is better to live in a community of

equals than to live an isolated life, people should be free to choose for themselves what kind of life to live.” Do you agree?

7.

Is Aristotle’s method of reasoning about justice and individual rights in tension with the modern emphasis on individual freedom? Or can his approach make adequate room for the value of individual freedom?