

# **Philosophical Perspectives on Work**

**Ancient Greek Perspectives: Pre-Socratic, Plato, Aristotle**

# Philosophy of Work

- What *is* work?
  - Generating goods and services of human value (wider than “job”, “career”)
  - Ayn Rand: “...productive work is the process by which man’s consciousness controls his existence, a constant process of acquiring knowledge and shaping matter to fit one’s purpose, of translating an idea into physical form, of remaking the earth in the image of one’s values...”
- Work vs Labor
  - Work as general productive activity
  - Labor as employment (including self-employment)/economic emphasis
- Leisure: Activity that is for the sake of its own enjoyment rather than economic value or exchange

# Why Study Philosophy of Work?

- How people think about work today
- Appreciating Ayn Rand's perspective
- Enriching your own perspective
- Philosophical detection:
  - Living for the weekend
  - Neo-Marxism
  - Neo-Stoicism

# Ancient Greek Perspectives

- Historical Context:
  - Late Bronze Age Collapse: Mycenaean palace-economy gave way to city-state organization.
  - Land-owning gentry/warrior elite class became central to the concept of a citizen:
    - With sufficient wealth/land you have time and independence to participate in political life, or indeed philosophy. Importantly distinct from merchant class.
- Pre-Socratic:
  - Hesiod, *Works and Days*
    - The concept of a King as a shepherd
    - Work as punishment (see also *Genesis*)

# Ancient Perspectives on Work

- Hesiod, *Works and Days* (written 700 BCE)
  - Story: Hesiod and Perses (his brother) are bequeathed a farm. Perses squanders his share of the wealth and comes back for Hesiod's, using the help of corrupt judges. Hesiod instead teaches Perses the virtue of working and living wisely.
  - Historical context: agrarian crisis in Greece (lack of arable land) which led to Greek colonization of Mediterranean coasts during 8th-6th centuries BCE
  - Idea of need for work/toil as divine punishment - inflicted by Zeus

# Plato

## *Laws*

- Laziness and idleness are looked down upon as cowardly, and expert craftsman is held as model of carefulness and diligence (see 901e-903)
- In general, merchants and money-makers have an important role, as we see in the discussions of laws about them: 918a (nb: **this is not the ideal state**):The natural purpose for which all retail trading comes into existence in a State is not loss, but precisely the opposite; for how can any man be anything but a benefactor if he renders even and symmetrical the distribution of any kind of goods which before was unsymmetrical and uneven? And this is, we must say, the effect produced by the power of money, and we must declare that the merchant is ordained for this purpose.
- However, there is a wariness of seeking too much profit for oneself as an end, and a consideration of the danger of “desiring without end.” 918d and this is what often subjects merchants and traders to censure and suspicion.
- Retailing and trade are proper when in view of the good they provide to human beings, and not as a way of making a potentially limitless amount of money, which corrupts them. (919a)
- Solution: design the laws so that the trades have as little corruption as possible, and when they do, minimize its effect on the State (919d-e, 920).

Amongst the Magnesians,<sup>1</sup> whom the god is restoring and founding afresh, none of all the landholders who belong to the houses shall, either willingly or unwillingly, become a retail trader or a merchant, or engage in any menial service for private persons who do not make an equal return to himself, save only for his father and mother...If any citizen in any craft engages in ungentlemanly peddling, whoso will shall indict him for shaming his family before a bench of those adjudged to be the first in virtue, and if it be held that he is sullyng his paternal hearth by an unworthy calling, he shall be imprisoned for a year and so restrained therefrom...Now comes a second law:—Whosoever intends to engage in retail trade must be a resident alien or a foreigner. And thirdly, this third law:—In order that such an one may be as good as possible, or as little as possible bad, he being a resident in our State, the Law-wardens must bear in mind that they are guardians not only of those who, being well-trained both by birth and nurture, are easy to guard from lawless and evil ways, but also of those who are otherwise,

# Plato on Productive Activity

- Plato says little about labor / productive work directly. But clearly, for Plato, as we see in *Laws* and *Republic*, productive activity is central to the identity of the Polis and its *raison d'être*. (Plato, *The Republic*, 369, in *Dialogues*, ed. B. Jawett, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1892), vol. 3, p. 49)
- Mixed perspective:
  - On the one hand: craftsmanship is held as a model of knowledge, and there is a virtue (temperance) associated with productive activity in the city (see *Republic*)
  - The producers (craftsmen, farmers, laborers, etc.) are essential to the city: they are just not able to rule the city
  - On the other hand: the material world is less real than the world of forms. And in effect, people who make crafts/objects are simply engaged all day with imperfect copies of real Forms, which only mathematicians and philosophers can grasp and understand.

# Aristotle

## Nicomachean Ethics, Book I

- Overview:
  - All human actions/activities have an end, and these ends are structured into systems of ends
  - Human life as aiming at happiness (everyone seeks it by nature)
  - Basic questions:
    - a) What kind of life is best/happiest? (Answer: life lived in accordance with virtue)
    - b) Given answer to a), what is the nature of virtue? (Answer: character - state in accordance with proper feeling, intellectual (practical wisdom) - state from which one deliberates well)

# Aristotle

## Nicomachean Ethics, Book I, Book X

- Aristotle's reasoning about ends involves two central premises (and a set of what we might call "formal constraints"), which together shape how he thinks about the best kind of life for human beings.
- **Premise 1:** if a value is instrumental, the value that is achieved as the end is "better than" the activity required to bring about the value.
- **Premise 2:** The highest and most important values are those which are pursued for their own sake and not for the sake of anything else.
- Hence, the best kind of life is a life based around an activity (contemplation) which is intrinsically valuable and not sought for the sake of anything else.

# Aristotle on Productive Activity

## Nicomachean Ethics, Book I, Book X

- Three kinds of reasoning for Aristotle: practical, productive, theoretical.
  - Practical: for the sake of action (the noble/fine)
  - Productive: for the sake of a product (use)
  - Theoretical: for the sake of knowledge/truth (contemplation)
- Productive reasoning:
  - Paradigmatic example: you make horse saddles for the sake of horse riding, horse riding is for the sake of warfare, warfare is for the sake of protecting the city, protecting the city is for the sake of the citizens' happiness.

# Productive Reasoning: Craftsmanship

- Productive activity is for the sake of an object/product - hence it makes one dependent on that for which the object is sought/used.
- Craft (techne) is the knowledge that helps bring that about. Insofar as it is fully developed, it is exact and non deliberative; instead, it proceeds from a desire to bring about an object to instrumental reasoning about how to bring that object about.
- What does Aristotle think about craftsmanship? Consider ship-building.
  - At times, Aristotle makes allusions to craft that seem to speak of it highly (e.g. the philosopher as a craftsman of happiness 1152b1-3, 1101a1-6)
  - Craftsmen are knowledgeable individuals who have the ability to teach: “That is why we think craft knowledge to be more like scientific knowledge than experience is, since craftsmen can teach, while experienced people cannot” (Met. I 1 981b7–10).
  - Craftsmen understand causes, whereas people simply with experience do not. (Met. I 1 981a12–30).

# Productive Reasoning: Money-making

## Politics Book I, Book IX

- Why does Aristotle have a disdain for money-making?
  - Two Perspectives:
    - Philosophical: Structure of Agency/Virtue
    - Sociological: Elitism
      - Consider: Ideal of land-owning gentry: political life/philosophical life as approximating these ideals (see Gabriel Lear)
      - Relevant: justification of slavery (natural slaves), subjugation of women (Pol. 1.1254b)
      - See: (Greg Salmieri)

# Aristotle on Best Kinds of Lives

- Best life: life of contemplation (Book X)
- Second best life: life of political activity (approximates best life - see Gabriel Lear)
- Where does that leave life of productive activity?
  - As far as Aristotle's system goes, arguably open to interpretation
  - As far as what Aristotle says, clearly inferior and lacking in virtue/happiness

# Aristotle

## Moral Virtues

- Courage (choosing appropriately in face of fear/danger)
- Temperance (choosing appropriately in face of sensual temptation)
- Liberality (choosing appropriately in getting and spending money)
- Pride (aiming at the best for one's character and goods but not being overly ambitious or vain)
- Truthfulness (representing oneself neither too modestly nor boasting)
- Conspicuously absent: productiveness/industriousness

# Aristotle

## The Political Life

- Requires *some* leisure: time, resources (internal and external goods) to be able to engage in worthy action and political activity
- Roughly: an aristocratic lifestyle
  - Social engagement (magnanimity) and political discourse
  - Fighting battles/engaged in protection of the polis
  - Putting on festivals and organizing artistic events
  - Managing estate

# Aristotle

## The Life of Contemplation

- Requires leisure: time, resources (internal and external goods) to be able to engage in contemplation/study
  - Paradigm: scientific inquiry, philosophical discourse, enjoyment of music and poetry
  - 1177b1–4: “And this [activity, i.e. theoretical activity] alone would seem to be loved on account of itself; for nothing comes from it beyond the contemplating, but from practical affairs we obtain more or less beyond the action.”
  - Leisure (scholê) in Aristotle’s sense is not a time of relaxation (though it may be used that way); it is the condition of being free from the demands posed by our natural desire for the necessities of life. A leisurely life is one that is not driven by the need to satisfy necessary desires.

# Aristotle on Economic Value

- Use Value vs Exchange Value (NE 5.5, Pol 1 8-10)
  - Use value: wearing a shoe
  - Exchange value: making shoes to exchange them for money/food
- Why is this distinction important?
  - Aristotle is concerned with justice as proportionality of exchange; so he is concerned with how/if money can serve to make different goods commensurable such that they can be justly exchanged.
  - Ultimately, money represents demand or need (*chreia*) and a monetary exchange is just when the money accurately measures the demand by two parties for the respective goods. This means that not all contracts are fair even if voluntary.

# Aristotle

## Role of Producers in Society

- The city needs different kinds of food to exist, and therefore there are different kinds of lives of producers associated with each. (Pol 1256)
- In addition there is wealth-getting (since there is no limit to acquisition), which is different than (and unnatural relative to) the natural wealth-getting which is part of household management.
- This is where use value vs exchange value are importantly different. Exchange value is natural when it is based on use, unnatural when aiming at getting money.
- The natural ends are appropriate because they aim at getting “enough” for use, whereas the unnatural aim at limitless acquisition.
- “True wealth” for Aristotle is having enough for use; “spurious wealth” is simply wealth considered as acquisition.

# Aristotle on Productive Activity

- Where does this leave Aristotle's view of productive work?
  - Necessary for *polis*, but has slavish component (merely instrumental reasoning, and not about the whole or about intrinsically valuable ends)
  - In the case of money-making, doubly worse because then if people pursue it as an end in itself they make a fundamental mistake about the ultimate good (which cannot be something instrumental, or something dependent on the value of something else)
  - The lives of craftspeople and merchants, lacking in leisure, are clearly inferior and lacking in opportunities for virtue.

# In defense of Aristotle

- Scott Meikle:
  - Aristotle's views against moneymakers and traders is based on a principled philosophical argument about the nature of money (as a means that can't be properly made an end)
  - When he talks about best kind of polis it's a city that favors the middle class, not the aristocracy (which is the oligarchic type) (NE 1131a24)
  - He argues the polis should serve all citizens (Pol 1324a23-5)
  - His father was a doctor

# Discussion

- Questions?
- Task: relate Aristotle's view of work to contemporary perspectives you've encountered.
- Agree/disagree with Aristotle's view? What aspects?
- How do you think about contemplation and its relation to work?
- Do you think Aristotle's view makes sense given his historical context?