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Classical ethics begins with this fundamental question: What must one do to live a worthy life? Socrates undoubtedly began with the same question on his quest to uncover his deepest convictions and to live according to the principles of morality. Though distinguishing the "real" historical Socrates from the Socrates of the writings of different authors is extremely challenging and nearly impossible, the "theoretically possible" Socrates sheds light on impactful perspectives on ethics through Plato's philosophical dialogues.[1]

Having lived in a politically turbulent Athens, Socrates was charged with corrupting the minds of the Athenian youths and of showing irreverence to the gods, and he was executed in 399 B.C. by the Athenian authorities.[2] As depicted in the dialogues in the prison cell of Socrates from *Crito*, Socrates ultimately rejects Crito's plea to escape and chooses to accept the sentence. As contemporary readers, we question Plato's intention behind his depiction of the "theoretically possible" Socrates in this particular dialogue. Socrates presents a compelling argument built on this principle on why he must accept the condemnation of the Athenian authorities before Crito until he relents: "Neither injury nor retaliation nor warding off evil by evil is ever right."[3] Socrates carefully applies this principle by examining the possible outcomes of escaping as Crito plead, and Socrates concludes if he were to choose to escape, he would be "a doer of evil for evil."[4]

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1. Debra Nails, "Socrates," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 06, 2018, , https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/socrates/.

2. Neal Riemer, Joseph Romance, and Douglas Simon, *The Challenge of Politics: An Introduction to Political Science* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, SAGE Publications, 2019), 37.

3. Dennis Arjo, Omar Conrad, Nancy Dumler, and Dawn Gale, *From Wonder to Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 2005), 41.

4. Arjo, Omar, Dumler, and Gale, 42.

Furthermore, Socrates describes the law of Athens—the city he never left in spite of criticizing its system of governance—as the ones "who have brought [him] up" throughout his arguments.[5]

An inference can be drawn that Plato wanted to make a point through his characterization of Socrates that to live a life worth living is to fulfill one's political obligation by being a virtuous citizen especially in instances when one faces adversity and injustice. The ethical story of Plato through the characterization of Socrates lays the foundation for Aristotle's virtue ethics. Though Plato's outlook on human nature is pessimistic in comparison to that of Aristotle, Plato's work plays a fundamental role in shaping Aristotle's views concerning what constitutes a life worth living.

Aristotle expanded upon Plato's perfectionist theory. As a systematic thinker, Aristotle presented the Function Argument to explain nature, its function, and its purpose. Using an example of a stone, he explained that an object is what it is according to its nature.[6] Following this argument, Aristotle reasoned virtue, therefore, is a quality of a thing, which enables it to serve its function well. He also defined virtue as a mean between excess and deficiency, which one exhibit as a characteristic.[7] Therefore, Aristotle believed what it meant to be a worthy human being is to live virtuously. Yet, virtue was not an intrinsic quality that only manifested in exceptional persons; rather, virtue was developed through rational efforts. Aristotle compared the process of acquiring virtue to "what those who straighten warped lumber do."[8] In other words, it was not naturally or

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5. Arjo, Omar, Dumler, and Gale, 42.

6. Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, Book 2, translated by Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins in Dennis Arjo, Omar Conrad, and Dawn Gale, *Ethics Introduced: Readings in Moral Philosophy* (Cognella, 2019), 60.

7. Arjo, Conrad, and Gale, 60.

8. Arjo, Conrad, and Gale, 60.

easily done. By placing emphasis on one's capability to choose in leading a virtuous life, which is correlated with a good life, Aristotle's metaphysical perspective has impacted ethics for centuries.

In contemporary ethics, Aristotle's virtue ethics has inspired a new ethical theory that emerged out of the Social Contract theory: Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach. Aristotle's ideas on human capability and function are the foundation of her theory.[9] Moreover, Nussbaum takes an ambitious step in philosophy of ethics by adapting elements of Aristotle's virtue ethics in applying her Capabilities Approach to a liberal democratic system of governance. The objective of this paper is to examine Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach through Aristotle's virtue ethics as we consider the ramifications of the former and the latter in the light of liberal democracy.

Aristotle's virtue ethics begins with an idea that happiness is a quality of life that constitutes a good life.[10] According to *Nicomachean Ethics*, a life worth living is one defined by happiness.[11] What Aristotle meant by happiness, however, differs from the general reception of the modern usage of the word "happiness." Instead, the original word, *eudaimonia*, could be translated as "flourishing," which ties with the Function Argument in consideration of human beings.[12] To Aristotle, ethics enables one to pursue a worthy life—a life in pursuit of happiness—by perfecting one's function and fulfilling one's nature. The Function Argument applies to all objects, beings, and even organs. For example, the nature of an oak tree manifests in its certain characteristics that

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9. Martha C. Nussbaum, "Aristotle, Politics, and Human Capabilities: A Response to Antony, Arneson, Charlesworth, and Mulgan." *Ethics 111*, no. 1 (2000): 102-40. doi:10.1086/233421.

10. Arjo, Conrad, and Gale, 50.

11. Arjo, Conrad, and Gale, 50.

12. Richard Kraut, "Aristotle's Ethics," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, June 15, 2018, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/.

are distinctive of oak trees, and the function of an oak tree is to be an oak tree. A "good" oak tree would be a flourishing oak tree. According to the Function Argument, such an oak tree would be an example of fulfilling its functioning according to its nature. How then did Aristotle define the nature of human beings? Aristotle asserted a certain peculiarity that set human beings apart from animals: Reason.[13] After making this distinction between other living beings and humans, Aristotle applied the Function Argument to humans by stating the following:

> We posit the work of a human being as a certain life, and this is an activity of soul and actions accompanied by reason, the work of a serious man being to do these things well and nobly, and each thing is brought to completion well in accord with the virtue proper to it.[14]

As we can see in the statement above, Aristotle now ties the Function Argument to why acquiring virtue is necessary for human beings—a flourishing life requires virtue.

According to Aristotle, there are two dimensions to virtue: intellectual and moral.[15] In expanding upon moral virtue, he rejects Plato's idea that one becomes a completely virtuous person through extensive academic training in a more defined and traditional sense.[16] Aristotle takes a more holistic approach instead; he takes into consideration different faucets of one's life, such as relationships, pleasure, virtue, pride, and wealth.[17]

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13. Arjo, Conrad, and Gale, 51.

14. Arjo, Conrad, and Gale, 52.

15. Arjo, Conrad, and Gale, 54

16. Kraut.

17. Kraut.

When we consider Plato's view on the three parts of the soul and their corresponding parts in *Republic*, we can identify the elements Aristotle's view that contrasts with Plato's view. In *Republic*, Socrates proposes a picture of the perfect state by associating the three parts of the soul with the three classes of society he sees fit: Knowledge (reason) with the guardians, courage (the spirit) with the auxiliaries, and temperance (the appetites) with the common people.[18] Though an arbitrary social hierarchy does not determine the three classes, such a distinction creates favorable conditions for exclusive members of the state. As a contemporary thinker, grappling with such a concept is deeply troubling.

On the other hand, social inclusivity was clearly not a part of Plato's ethical concern. In *Republic*, Socrates associates pleasures, desires, and pains with children, women, servants, and the freemen, whom he considers to be of the "lowest" and "more numerous class."[19] Traits like pleasures, desires, and pains correspond with the part of the human soul associated with appetites and physical needs rather than the rational part of the soul, "whereas the simple and moderate desires which follow reason, and are under the guidance of mind and true opinion, are to be found only in a few, and those the best born and best educated."[20] Since the orderliness of the distinctive classes set the premises for justice, the political implications of Plato's perfectionism are overtly conducive to a specific group of people in the society.

In comparison, Aristotle's perfectionism created a new framework for what constitutes a good life. By asserting that the moral dimension of virtue can be improved through deliberate choices in the form of habituation, the interplay between nature and nurture is brought to

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18. Plato, *The Republic*, http://www.idph.net/conteudos/ebooks/republic.pdf, 39.

19. Plato, 39.

20. Plato, 39.

attention.[21] Aristotle explained, "Nothing that exists by nature is habituated to be other than it is."[22] On the other hand, he claimed, "None of the moral virtues are present in us by nature."[23] Aristotle did not undermine certain natural abilities, but his conclusion that no individual is born virtuous undermines Plato's outlook on rule by "the best born."[24] Furthermore, Aristotle provided a rather broad and abstract picture of what moral education constitutes compared with Plato.

In *Nichomachean Ethics*, virtue is defined as "a mean with respect to two vices" of excess and deficiency.[25] Using the example of courage, Aristotle explained that a man, who appropriately responds to dangerous circumstances, manifesting neither excess fear nor recklessness, would be considered courageous. How does one aim for the mean in every circumstance? Aristotle suggested introspection, which will enable us move away from pleasures that we are naturally inclined toward.[26] Through deliberate application of one's will, a virtuous characteristic will eventually form.[27] However, examining oneself would not suffice. Since we are naturally inclined towards pleasures, we are easily prone to licentiousness rather than orderliness.[28] Thus, we must be on guard against pleasures to "err less."[29] This is where Aristotle's *Politics* provide more

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21. Arjo, Conrad, and Gale, 54.

22. Arjo, Conrad, and Gale, 54.

23. Arjo, Conrad, and Gale, 54.

24. Plato, 288.

25. Arjo, Conrad, and Gale, 62.

26. Arjo, Conrad, and Gale, 67.

27. Arjo, Conrad, and Gale, 62.

28. Arjo, Conrad, and Gale, 66.

29. Arjo, Conrad, and Gale, 66.

concrete context of his views expressed in *Nicomachean Ethics*; he ties everything back to the traditional sense of virtue that Plato would agree upon. Examining both works of Aristotle help us realize that though there is a clear distinction between Plato and Aristotle, the implication of his statements must be understood, not in the contemporary context of ethics, but in the traditional context of ethics presented by Aristotle. Like Plato, Aristotle perceived a worthy life strictly in the context of a legitimate political community—one that serves the common good.[30]

Though Aristotle arguably took a more holistic approach than Plato in evaluating moral virtue, we must be wary of implicating Aristotle's virtue ethics with liberal ideals. He added another defining peculiarity to the nature of human beings in *Politics* by asserting that "man is by nature a political animal"[31] What does Aristotle mean by this assertion? He states, "the state is by nature clearly prior to the family and to the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part."[32] In other words, there is no individual before the state. Without the consideration for an individual as an integral component of the political system, we begin to question the possibility of adapting Aristotle's virtue ethics as a whole in any contemporary ethics without jeopardizing individual freedom and rights.

As a prominent contemporary philosopher and an advocate of political liberalism, Martha Nussbaum adapted some of the elements of Aristotle's virtue ethics to lay the framework for her Capabilities Approach, which she proposed as an alternative to the Social Contract Theory in *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Nussbaum's arguments are

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30. Aristotle and Peter Simpson, *The Politics of Aristotle Translated with Introduction Analysis and Notes by Peter L. Phillips and Simpson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 115.

31 Aristotle, 11.

32. Aristotle, 11.

compelling and her approach is highly ambitious, expressing the highest regard for human dignity and integrity, though she does not reinvent the wheel in ethics. In "The Capabilities Approach," she takes Aristotle's perfectionism and John Rawls' principles and somehow metamorphosed them into arguments for her case.

Nussbaum's simple yet elegant style of writing makes her Capabilities Approach the centerpiece, which fully incorporates her political liberal ideals, which she deftly managed to accomplish without the obscene practice of politicizing. Nussbaum made her theory about the issue of human integrity rather than a political issue, which works to strengthen her case.

The Capabilities Approach is "an account of minimum core social entitlements" that is compatible with different views universally.[33] The list of The Central Human Capabilities reveal a comprehensive and abstract values that Nussbaum considers to be essential for human dignity.[34] She identifies a list of *"central human capabilities,"* which include the following:

> (1) *Life*; (2) *Bodily Health*; (3) *Bodily Integrity*; (4) *Senses, Imagination, and Though*t; (5) *Emotions*; (6) *Practical Reason*; (7) *Affiliation*; (8) *Other Species*; (9) *Play*; (10) *Control over One's Environment.*[35]

At a glance, Nussbaum's list may seem open-ended, and it may raise a question regarding the possibility of incorporation and implementation of such values in governance. However, Nussbaum's list is meant to be a reflection of her political objective; Nussbaum's list is

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33. Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2007), 70.

34. Nussbaum, 76.

35. Nussbaum, 76.

intentionally open-ended because the Capabilities Approach was developed to serve as "the source of political principles for a liberal pluralistic society."[36]

Furthermore, developing a comprehensive understanding of Nussbaum's political objective requires drawing a clear distinction between functioning and capabilities. Functioning concerns "beings and doings", whereas capabilities concern "real freedoms or opportunities to achieve functionings."[37] For example, functionings of persons with disabilities—their beings and doings—are limited in a society that lacks access to appropriate healthcare, transportation, education, and infrastructure. Therefore, ensuring capabilities is crucial to the political implication of the Capabilities' Approach. The Capabilities Approach perceives the role of a state as ensuring basic human capabilities at least to the minimum threshold level, so that individuals are given many opportunities to lead a healthy lifestyle.[38] This approach is not much different from the traditional Stoic position that "the notion of equal human dignity has been strongly linked to the human capacity for reasoning."[39] However, Nussbaum takes the Stoic position a few steps further to transition from "reason-based views of dignity" to a more holistic approach to emphasize inclusivity of all human beings as well as their ethical duties to nonhuman animals.[40] This leads into her view that individuals should be free to choose what kind of lifestyle they want to lead based on their definitions of what constitutes a worthy life. According to Nussbaum, the liberties

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36. Nussbaum, 70.

37. Ingrid Robeyns, "The Capability Approach." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. April 14, 2011. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/capability-approach/#FunCap.

38. Robeyns, 80.

39. Martha C. Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 63.

40. Nussbaum, 63.

that protect pluralism in a liberal democratic society are essential components of the Capabilities Approach; therefore, a state could not both ensure capability and enforce their functioning without limiting individual liberties.

Aristotle's *Politics* relates virtue ethics with politics. He presented six different forms of government to express his thoughts on justice.[41] Aristotle considered them in their "true forms" to determine their deviant forms.[42] The legitimate systems of governance—royalty, aristocracy, and constitutional government—share the same following objectives: "the common good of all."[43] When the sovereignty of each forms of government diverges from serving the common good, royalty turns into tyranny; aristocracy turns into oligarchy; constitutional government turns into democracy. Understanding these forms of government is crucial in comprehending Aristotle's thoughts on systems of governance and of justice because his perception of political legitimacy and of social justice was based upon the single conception of human flourishing:

> For man, when perfected, is the best of animals, but, when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all; since armed injustice is the more dangerous, and he is equipped at birth with arms, meant to be used by intelligence and virtue, which he may use for the worst ends.[44]

The political ramifications of Aristotelian perfectionism inevitably consist of authoritarian forms of governance in which laws and justice systems must reflect one single conception of *eudaimonia* rather than accommodating individual conception of the good. Could a liberal pluralistic society

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41. Aristotle and Peter Simpson, *The Politics of Aristotle Translated with Introduction Analysis and Notes by Peter L. Phillips and Simpson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 115-20.

42. Aristotle, 115-20.

43. Aristotle, 115-20.

44. Aristotle, 115-20.

be conceived in Aristotelian perfectionism? This is precisely the question Nussbaum, following

Rawls, needs to effectively address about the nature of political exclusivity of Aristotelian

perfectionism as she built Capabilities Approach by taking fundamental elements of perfectionism

to lay the foundation of her theory and its political considerations.

Nussbaum also recognized the glaring differences between Aristotle's virtue ethics and

what she wanted to propose in her theory of Capabilities Approach.[45] In an article, "Aristotle,

Politics, and Human Capabilities: A Response to Antony, Arneson, Charlesworth, and Mulgan,"

Nussbuam explicitly addressed this problem by proposing this solution: "the Aristotelian must

depart from Aristotle."[46] Then, she defends her position thoroughly by expanding upon which

particular elements of Aristotelian perfectionism she saw reasonable to utilize as the foundation of

developing her Capabilities Approach.[47] Nussbaum's defense consisted mainly of using historical

contexts to explain and justify the limitations of Aristotle's virtue ethics. For example, Aristotle

justified slavery, but extremely narrowly, which meant he thought: "slavery is justified only when

the individual in question is totally unable to foresee the future and totally lacks the deliberative

faculty."[48] As contemporary thinkers, there is a tangible urge to glance over certain elements of

traditional writings that we find objectionable or to justify the writers' intentions by citing

historical contexts. However, if we begin to tear the Aristotelian from Aristotle, the integrity of

the original documents begins to dissipate; they are no longer what they were meant to be, and by

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45. Martha C. Nussbaum, "Aristotle, Politics, and Human Capabilities: A Response to Antony, Arneson, Charlesworth, and Mulgan." *Ethics 111*, no. 1 (2000): 102-40. doi:10.1086/233421, 108.

46. Nussbaum, 108.

47. Nussbaum, 108.

48. Nussbaum, 115.

shielding ourselves from admitting to some of the ugly aspects of traditional ethical considerations (based on a liberal democratic ethical standard), we are giving into the fear that somehow the progress we have made regarding individual autonomy, equality, inclusivity, diversity, and social justice in ethics will not have less of an impact.

Throughout history, credible political conceptions in ethics have begun with the fundamental question of what constitutes a worthy life. To Aristotle, the key components of a worthy life were happiness and virtue; and in order to achieve happiness—"to live well and do well," acquiring virtue was absolutely necessary. Aristotle extended his virtue theory to politics and conceived viable political systems he deemed to be fitting, which led to discussions of political justice. The system of justice according to Aristotle was explicit rather than inclusive. In contemporary ethics, Rawls' addressed in *Political Liberalism* the same fundamental question regarding a political conception of justice, which he began by identifying such a conception as a "moral conception," and he made the idea of public reason in a democratic society more explicit. Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, though extremely ambitious and highly regarded, seems to be lacking as a viable political conception of justice.

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