

Ask Aristotle ... on Aristotle!

Q: "In Necomachean Ethics you assume an inherent good in the world. Isn't this a rather large assumption about the nature of the universe? Shouldn't you have wrestled with this concept?"

A: I'm a thinker, not a fighter, therefore I do not wrestle.

No, I do not assume an inherent good. The initial claim for my discussion of ethics is that all human activities aim at some good -- i.e., the goal to which they are directed. The good is that which one is attempting to achieve versus failure or just acting aimlessly. However, it is easy to see where this error of interpretation may have been made. Notice that a specific context must be maintained for this statement to be true. If you read further, the discussion is limited to those actions that are legitimate by virtue of being productive activities with specific goals. Activities such as robbery and murder are set aside for purposes of this discussion, yet even these have goals that can be considered "good" in a strictly contextual meaning -- i.e., the successful outcome of the action.

Assuming that the purpose of an action is to reach a goal that is good, what is the good that Man should be striving for? The answer to this question is the "good" of the discussion. But, if such good were inherent in the universe, it would have to be inherent apart from human intervention. But how can that be if the good is defined by human activities, and consequently a product of freewill? Perhaps you should have wrestled with this question.

My original formulation might possibly be viewed as subjective for indicating that the good is good because Man pursues it. But this is not the case. Man should pursue the good, because it is for Man that it is good. Ultimately, as Ayn Rand shows us, the good is that which supports Man's life qua Man.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "What contribution toward taxonomy did [you] make?"

A: I wrote "[De Partibus Animalium](#)" (On the Parts of Animals). In addition, I also wrote "Historia Animalium" (The History of Animals) and "De Geratione Animalium (On the Generation of Animals).

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "I am in the fifth grade and I was wondering if Aristotle was from Poland? I am doing a report on Poland. Thank you, Chad."

A: Dear Chad,

No, I was not born in Poland. I was born in Ancient Greece in a little town known as Stagira on the peninsula of Chalcidice. Thank you for your inquiry, I wish you all the best on your report.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "Can you tell me where in Aristotle's works he presents the idea that we are born "tabula rasa?" Of course, Aristotle did not use this Latin term (I believe John Locke did) since he spoke Greek. But I'm wondering if he made the idea explicit or was it implicit in his writings and where can I find it? Also, I think I remember Ayn Rand indicated that Aristotle said we are born tabula rasa. Do you know the reference for this in her works? I could not find it in the Ayn Rand Lexicon. Thanks."

A: Sure! Just ask the question as if I weren't even here and you were talking to someone else merely pretending to be me.

Wow, that question takes me way back. It's been some 2,300 years since I first wrote about this, so it took me a moment to recollect. No, I did not actually use the phrase "tabula rasa," but I did make an analogy to a "writing-tablet on which as yet nothing actually stands written."

In *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, a modern day English translation of my writings [Edited by Richard McKeon, and published by Random House], you can find this reference in *De Anima (On the Soul)*, Book III, chapter 4, "Passive Mind" [translated by J.A. Smith]. You will find there a paragraph which reads as follows:

Have not we already disposed of the difficulty about interaction involving a common element, when we said that mind is in a sense potentially whatever is thinkable, though actually it is nothing until it has thought? What it thinks must be in it just as characters may be said to be on a writing-tablet on which as yet nothing actually stands written: this is exactly what happens with mind.

As to whether or not Ayn Rand made reference to this I do not know. If you find it, please let me know. She was certainly as familiar with my writings as anyone else.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle**

Q: "What is Aristotle's theory on divine providence?"

A: What? You too? Hello! I exist (i.e., am real), A is A and all that other good stuff. Geesh!

My theory on divine providence can be found in *Ethica Nicomachea* (Nicomachean Ethics) [translated by W.D. Ross] in the same book mentioned in the above Q&A. In Book I, chapter 9, I explain that if anything should be the result of divine providence, it would be the greatest of all things, happiness. However, as I also go on to explain, it is not the result of divine providence at all. Rather it is the result of virtuous activity. I wrote as follows:

It will also on this view be very generally shared; for all who are not maimed as regards their potentiality for virtue may win it by a certain kind of study and care. But if it is better to be happy thus than by chance, it is reasonable that the facts should be so, since everything that depends on the action of nature is by nature as good as it can be, and similarly everything that depends on art or any rational cause, and especially if it depends on the best of all causes. To entrust to chance what is greatest and most noble would be a very defective arrangement.

If there is anything else Aristotle (I) can help you with, you just let Aristotle (me) know. After all, that's what Aristotle's (I'm) here for.

**Your Friend in Reason,
Aristotle (me)**