

Moral Idiots and Blameless Brutes: Aristotle on moral responsibility for moral ignorance

In his ethical treatises, Aristotle makes it clear (esp. *EN* III.1) that ignorance of general moral truths is blameworthy. Contemporary critics might wonder whether this is fair, as ignorance is typically considered an excusing factor of moral behavior. After all, aren't there people who grow up under such dire social conditions that it would be impossible for them to learn right from wrong? For instance, what of an infant raised by a morally corrupt family of criminals?

In this paper, I provide my interpretive account of how Aristotle would respond to these worries. First, I argue that the average person is afforded a minimal requisite degree of moral knowledge at a very young age through interactions with their own family and members of their *polis*. Both social norms and general laws communicate effectively to youths that certain behaviors are not to be tolerated. I concede that, interestingly, if there were no polis (i.e., a state of nature), it is very possible that many (if not all) people would become vicious (some might be stunted and remain in a *bestial* state). However, given that man is a *social* animal even before he is a *rational* one, empirically, nobody would find themselves in such a position for very long. Finally, I suggest that man's social nature—though not unique to him—is developmentally necessary for any agent's rational capacities to become actualized.

In addition to the practical necessity of a social community, Aristotle has more evidence at his disposal to maintain that the vicious are responsible for acquiring their vicious characters. Again, critics wonder how Aristotle could fairly blame people who were raised so poorly that they were not able to comprehend the good even superficially. Surely the barbarians of which he often writes are salient examples of such people. I argue that Aristotle has two responses at his disposal, each of which is apt depending on the individual in question. First, it is possible that

one might become a rational adult raised in general isolation (e.g., in the wilderness with one or two other people, or in an utterly dysfunctional polis) and fail to acquire general knowledge of right and wrong *as they are*. Even if one lacked prior general moral knowledge, the kind of practical reasoning that is general involves consenting to the type of lifestyle one is adopting (even if one does not fully appreciate all of which that entails). Therefore, while this agent might not think *murder is wrong* in an abstract sense, she could think *I detest murder, therefore I shall take no part in it*. Such an agent is making a sufficiently informed choice concerning the action she takes and how she values it. As Aristotle states, only a *komide ainestheton* would fail to recognize that repeated actions result in habits in favor of similar behavior.

Second, if one were so dense as to overlook the effects of practice, something different is afoot. A child who fails to acquire *this* basic knowledge—whether as a result of a terrible upbringing or despite the good *polis*' efforts—cannot be blamed for her character. Such children are not vicious; they are brutes. Something in their rational faculty is so corrupted or underdeveloped that they lack moral agency. They may look like a human, and they may be human offspring, but they are only human *homonymously*. Their defective reason renders them incapable of functioning in the most human of ways. While their lot is pitiable and worse than even that of the vicious, they are not to blame for their condition. Therefore, Aristotle would agree with modern ethicists that such children are not to blame for their baseness. The main difference concerns the opinion on how severely damaged one has to be to qualify for this exemption.