

# Christian Ethics. How Should We Live?

## 3. Virtue and Happiness

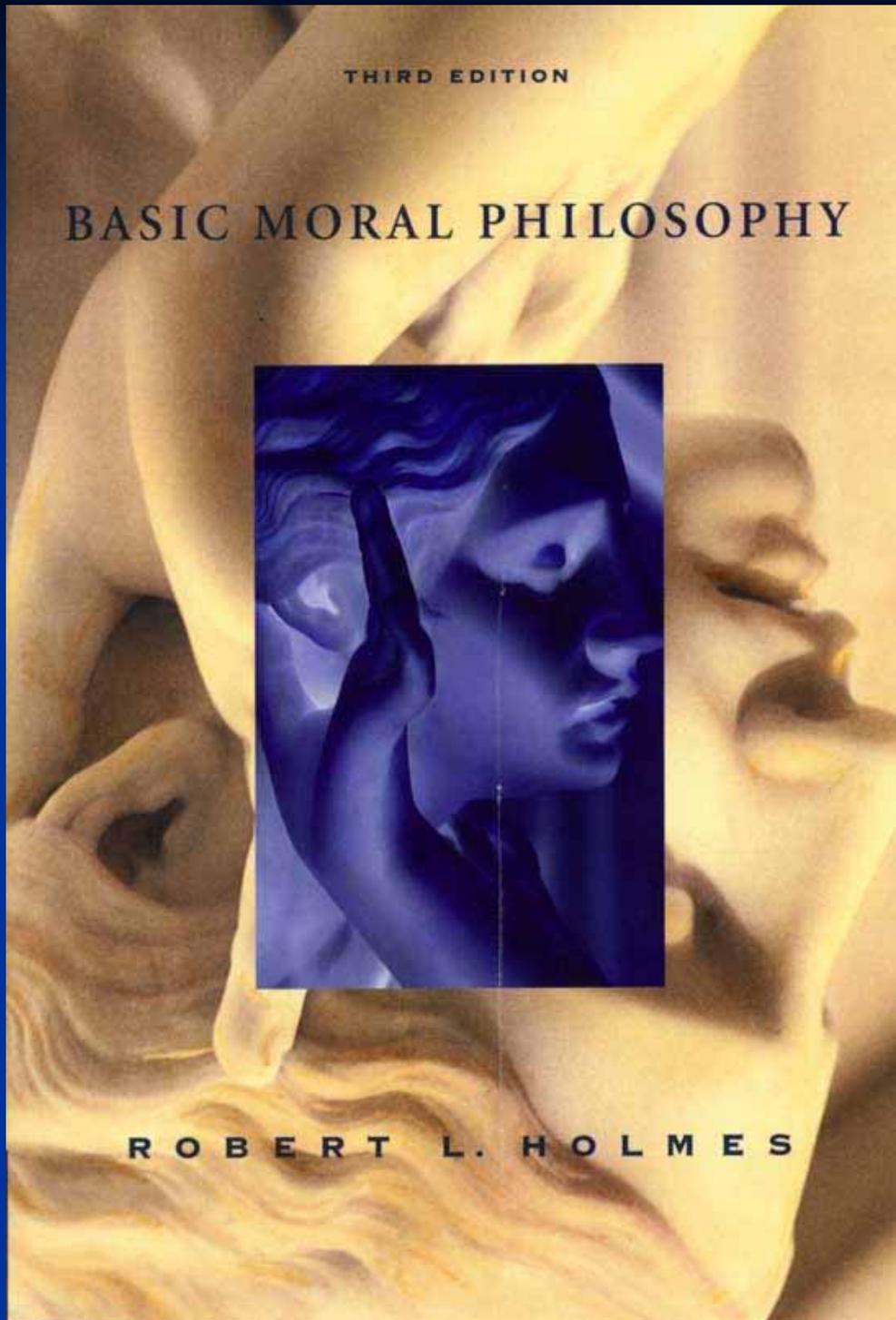
**Sunday, May 22, 2005**

**10 to 10:50 am, in the Parlor.**

*Everyone is welcome!*

*St. John in the Wilderness*

**Almighty and eternal God,  
you have revealed yourself as Father,  
Son and Holy Spirit,  
and live and reign in the perfect unity of  
love:  
hold us firm in this faith,  
that we may know you in all your ways  
and evermore rejoice in your eternal  
glory,  
who are three Persons yet one God,  
now and for ever.**



- **Basic Moral Philosophy, Third Edition**, Robert L. Holmes. Thomson Wadsworth, 2003. ISBN 0-534-58477-2 (Chapter 4: “Virtue and Happiness”)
- Dr. Holmes is professor of philosophy at the University of Rochester.

# **Happiness and Aristotle's Virtue Ethics**

# Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

## Ethics of Doing vs. Being

- There are two ways of approaching the question of what it means to be moral or ethical:
  - 1. **Ethics of Doing = Action-based Ethics = Ethics of Conduct.** Asks the question: *What should I do?*
  - 2. **Ethics of Being = Virtue-based Ethics = Aretaic Ethics.** Asks the question: *What should I become?*

# Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

## Virtue Ethics & the Greeks

- The ethics of the ancient Greeks were **Ethics of Being = Virtue-based Ethics = Aretaic Ethics**. They approached ethics by asking: *What should I become?*
- As virtue ethicists, they were not primarily interested in *particular actions*, but rather in identifying the *type of person* who would act properly.
  - The *type of person* who would act properly is the “virtuous person,” a person who possesses certain characteristics or **virtues** that dispose that person to act properly.

# Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

## The Human *Telos*

- Everything in the world has an end, a purpose, a *telos*:
  - The purpose or *telos* of an acorn is to become an oak tree.
  - The purpose or *telos* of an egg is to become a chicken.
  - The purpose or *telos* of architecture is to produce buildings.
  - The purpose or *telos* of medicine is to promote health.

# Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

## The Human *Telos*

- Human beings also have an end, a purpose, a *telos*: to exercise that which makes us distinctive: our ability to think, contemplate and reflect: our reason.
  - Aristotle believed God was engaged in pure and eternal contemplation.
  - The human end, purpose, or *telos* was to approximate this divine activity.

# Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

## *Telos and Virtue*

A virtue is any characteristic that enables us to perform or achieve our purpose, our *telos*.

- A **virtue**, in other words, is any characteristic that contributes to excellence in our ability to think, contemplate, reflect, and thus approximate the divine activity of pure contemplation.

# Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

## *Telos and Virtue*

- In summary:
  - We have an end, a purpose, a *telos*.
  - We should spend our lives developing those characteristics (= **virtues**) that allow us to achieve or perfect our end, our purpose, our *telos*.
  - Having such characteristics will naturally dispose us to perform *good* actions, that is, *moral* or *ethical* actions.
- If we do the above, *we are living virtuously*.

# Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

## *Telos and Virtue*

- Aristotle and the Greeks then asserted that if we live virtuously, there is a remarkable, even astonishing *by-product*.
- This “by-product” is so remarkable that it is the **highest good**.
- The Greeks asserted that living virtuously:
  - brings us **happiness**,
  - is the *one and only pathway* to genuine **happiness**.

# Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

## Virtue and Happiness

- Living virtuously is the one and only pathway to genuine **happiness**, and **happiness** is the **highest good**, because:
  - 1. **Happiness** is desired by all.
  - 2. **Happiness** is **self-sufficient**: once we have it, we lack nothing of importance.
  - 3. **Happiness** is **final**: we desire it *only for itself*, and not as a stepping stone or means to achieving something else.

# Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

## Virtue and Happiness

- The pleasures of a life of ambition or greed can provide only a *spurious* happiness.
- It is like the “pleasure” that comes when we quench thirst, or the pleasure that comes when we are hungry and eat.
- Such activities are pleasurable and provide a *spurious* happiness because they relieve pain – the pain of thirst, the pain of hungry.
  - Similarly, there is a “pleasure” when we stop hitting our head with a hammer.
- Such “relief of pain” happiness, relieving a negative, is not genuine happiness.
- *Genuine* happiness is purely *positive* in character.

# **St. Augustine and the Highest Good**

# St. Augustine

## Virtue and Happiness

- St. Augustine (354 A.D. to 430) was the first major Christian philosopher.
- Augustine agreed with the Greeks that:
  - We all desire happiness.
  - Living virtuously is the one and only path to happiness.

# St. Augustine

## *Telos* and Virtue

- Augustine disagreed with the Greeks that:
  - Our **end, purpose** or *telos* is to develop our ability to think, contemplate, and reflect, and that characteristics that aid and perfect such abilities are **virtues**.
- Rather:
  - Our **end, purpose**, or *telos* is to love God, which in turn, involves loving our neighbor and ourselves.
  - **Virtues** are those characteristics that aid and perfect our ability to love God, our neighbor, and ourselves.

# St. Augustine

## Virtues

- The primary virtues according to St. Augustine, are:
  - **Faith**
  - **Hope**
  - **Love** (of God, ourselves, and others)
- If we fully have the virtue of love, then other virtues follow as *manifestations* of love:
  - **Fortitude**: the willingness to endure whatever we are faced with for God.
  - **Prudence**: the discernment of what helps, and what hinders our love.
  - **Temperance**: the striving to keep our love pure.
  - **Justice**: the result of love ruling all else in the affairs of daily life.

# St. Augustine

## Virtues

- The intellectual and moral “virtues” of Aristotle – those characteristics that aid and perfect our ability to think, contemplate, and reflect – are *not* virtues, said Augustine.
- Only those characteristics that *aid and perfect our ability to love God, ourselves, and our neighbor* (**faith, hope, and love**) are **virtues**.

# St. Augustine

## Happiness that is the Highest Good

- If we live virtuously –
- that is, develop and perfect throughout our lives the virtues of **faith, hope and love** –
- we will achieve a genuine **happiness** that is the **highest good**.

# St. Augustine

## Happiness that is the Highest Good

- Aristotle had said that the **happiness** that comes as a by-product of living a virtuous life is the **highest good** because:
  - 1. **Happiness** is desired by all.
  - 2. **Happiness** is **self-sufficient**: once we have it, we lack nothing of importance.
  - 3. **Happiness** is **final**: we desire it *only for itself*, and not as a stepping stone or means to achieving something else.

# St. Augustine

## Happiness that is the Highest Good

- Augustine said that the **happiness** that is the **highest good** must have one additional characteristics:
  - 1. Desired by all.
  - 2. **Self-sufficient**: once we have it, we lack nothing of importance.
  - 3. **Final**: we desire it *only for itself*, and not as a stepping stone or means to achieving something else.
  - 4. **Permanent**: it cannot be taken away from us.

# St. Augustine

## Happiness that is the Highest Good

- Such an enduring happiness, Augustine said, can never be realized in this world.
- But, if we live virtuous lives – perfecting our end / purpose / *telos* to love God, ourselves, and our neighbors – we will ultimately realize an enduring happiness that will be highest good in the world to come.

# **Thomas Aquinas and “Natural” Happiness**

# Thomas Aquinas

## Virtue and Happiness

- St. Thomas Aquinas (1225 A.D. to 1274) is the other major Christian thinker in classical Christian ethics.
- Aquinas agreed with Aristotle and Augustine that:
  - We all desire happiness.
  - Living virtuously is the one and only path to genuine happiness.

# Thomas Aquinas

## Virtue and Happiness

- Augustine had said that only by:
  - accepting God
  - accepting that our end / purpose / telos is to love God, which in turn requires us to love our ourselves and our neighbor

can we develop those characteristics (i.e. virtues) that perfect our love of God, ourselves, and neighbor, and thus realize happiness.

- Aristotle's moral and intellectual virtues were not genuine virtues at all, and therefore could not lead to happiness.
- Thomas Aquinas moderated this rather harsh position taken by Augustine.

# Thomas Aquinas

## Virtue and “Natural” Happiness

- Aquinas acknowledged that characteristics that help us to improve aspects of ourselves such as:
  - our ability to think, contemplate or reflect,
  - our physical skills,
  - our artistic sensibilities,
- can be considered “virtues,” and can lead to a “natural” happiness, even if we don’t accept God.

# Thomas Aquinas

## Happiness that is the Highest Good

- Aquinas agrees with Augustine that the “greatest” happiness, the happiness that is the **highest good**, can only be realized by accepting and loving God.