

Study Guide: Plato's Ethics

1. The ancient Greeks regarded agent evaluation (evaluating someone's moral character) as more fundamental than act evaluation (evaluating particular actions). The central ethical question they addressed was, "What sort of person should I be?"
 - a. *Eudaimonia* is a central concept for the Greeks. It means living well, or having a good soul (i.e., being the right sort of person). Attaining eudaimonia is the goal of their ethics.
 - b. The reason we should strive to attain eudaimonia (i.e., to be good people) is essentially self-interest: Those who attain eudaimonia live better, more desirable lives than those who do not.
2. Plato believed that each human being is a combination of a physical body and a non-physical soul.
 - a. He believed that the physical world – including our physical bodies – is not really real or important. Therefore, his ethical theory focuses on the well-being of the soul.
3. According to Plato, the soul has 3 parts: Reason, Spirit, and Appetite.
 - a. Reason is the part capable of reasoning, and pursues truth and knowledge. It is the weakest part of the soul, but the only part capable of governing it well.
 - b. Spirit is the part that is proud and concerned with one's status. It pursues fame and power.
 - c. Appetite, which is the largest and most powerful part of the soul, pursues pleasure and avoids pain. This part is in control of most people's souls, although this leads to many undesirable consequences.
4. According to the ancient Greeks, everything has a purpose. Furthermore, an object is better if it has the characteristics that will help it fulfill its purpose well. Such characteristics are known as *virtues*.
 - a. The purpose of the soul is to govern the body.
 - b. The primary virtue (i.e., the characteristic that enable the soul to govern the body well) is what Plato calls "justice." In this context, justice means a proper balance among the parts of the soul. Reason should be in control, with Spirit helping Reason to control Appetite.