

**Aristotle, one of the most important philosophers ever to write about justice lived in ancient Greece, some 2400 years ago. He thought that justice means giving each person his due, or what he deserves. But how do we know what people deserve? What goods and opportunities should go to which persons?**

Aristotle's answer is that we have to consider the "*telos*"—the point, the end, or the purpose—of the good in question. Say we have some nice flutes. Who should get them? According to Aristotle, it's not the rich person, since playing flutes has nothing to do with money. Nor is it the person who will be made most happy, since making good music is different than being happy. The purpose of a flute is to be played, and to be played *well*. So, Aristotle thinks, the flutes should go to the best flute players.

Aristotle's method is to think about justice by thinking about the purpose of a good, an institution, or even a person. If the purpose of a tennis court is to play tennis, then the best tennis players should get priority. If the purpose of universities is to pursue and reward scholarly excellence, then the students with the best academic records should be admitted. If the purpose of a human being is to live a good life, then society should promote the good life by ensuring that citizens have the resources necessary for living a good life, and by encouraging them in the pursuits that make for a good life.

Is this the right way to think about justice?

### **What is the Purpose of an Institution?**

If we want to use Aristotle's "teleological" method to think about the justice of a particular institution, we need to determine the point or the purpose of the institution. But how are we to know the purpose?

Consider the practice of golf. Is the purpose of golf merely entertainment, or is it athletic excellence? The question is important because the answer will help to determine how golf should be played. If the purpose of golf is mere entertainment, then it shouldn't matter if players ride golf carts from one hole to the next. The use of golf carts does not conflict with the purpose of entertainment. Indeed, allowing golf carts may even serve this purpose better than making everyone walk the long course, by hastening the pace of play. However, if the purpose of golf is not mere entertainment but athletic excellence, then perhaps players should be required to walk the long course, or else forfeit the game.

How do we know the purpose of golf or any other practice or institution? Should we say that the purpose of an institution is given by what most people believe it to be? The problem with this answer is that people tend to disagree about the purposes of institutions. Does the purpose of an institution lie in its beneficial consequences? Does the purpose lie in the values that the institution promotes, honors, and rewards? Consider each of these alternatives as you think about the following questions.

1. Who should be admitted to colleges and universities? Should admission decisions be made strictly on the basis of academic merit? Or should colleges and universities admit students with a variety of academic and other backgrounds, and to strive for diversity? What would be fair? What is the purpose of higher education, and does it help you to answer this question?
2. For much of its history, the US military did not permit women to serve in its ranks. Was this unjust? What is the purpose of the military, and does it help you to answer this question?
3. "Hooters" is a restaurant that hires only female waitresses who are willing to wear revealing clothing. However, some men want to work there as waiters, too. Is it unfair that "Hooters" hires only women? Consider the purpose of the restaurant. Is it merely to serve food? Or is it to entertain men? Who should get to decide the purpose?

5. Strip Clubs, Modeling Agencies, and other businesses that hire on the basis of appearance discriminate against unattractive, and obese people in hiring (and appearance is often morally arbitrary). Is this wrong? Should these businesses be forced by the government not to discriminate in this way, and hire a certain percentage of obese and unattractive people in the name of equality? Is discrimination always morally wrong? If not, when is it okay?
6. In the bathroom battles, an Aristotelian might argue that the purpose of gender separate bathrooms and showers is to maintain privacy from the opposite sex. If the purpose of something defines whether it is acceptable to discriminate (like Hooters and strip clubs), then is it acceptable to forbid transgenders from using (biologically opposite) bathrooms that are contrary to the purpose of privacy? Does their gender identity get to override the value of privacy? Why? Or why not?