

## Do You Play Tennis? Aristotle's Eudaimonia as Key to Educational Performance Management

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### **Abstract**

As based upon the historical reading of Aristotle's virtue theory by Joseph Dunne (1992), and applied to modern and post-modern management theory (Beadle, 2008), the theme of innate versus conditioned motivation will be analyzed as applied to educational performance management. From four years of standardized test prep tutoring applying coaching principles derived from Olympic-level track & field clinics and IMG Academy, the key natural law Aristotelian theme of eudaimonia ("happiness" or "flourishing") as the end-goal of the virtuous life will be presented as a key component for educational performance. How and why do some students exceed natural potential while other students lack motivation? How can careful clarification of internal goods of excellence be included within discussions of educational performance? These questions will be answered by sharing several case study examples of exemplary standardized testing performance improvement (50 – 90 percentile points improvement), and elite athletic performance (e.g. All-American designation). Additionally, several barriers to performance improvement will be examined to include physical injuries or unexpected occurrences, performance plateaus, testing or physical fatigue, anxiety, and lack of focus. Finally, through focus on Eudaimonia educators can formulate better the possible motivations, innate and conditioned, which encourage greater academic performance improvement.

**Keywords:** Eudaimonia, Aristotle, Performance Management, Knowledge

## Introduction

Contemporary discussions of virtue ethics, from Aristotelian natural law to the Thomistic Christianization of this earlier tradition, are usually confined to questions of morality, and how habituated action results in character, either negatively as vice or positively as virtue. Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) sought to overcome practical and epistemological problems within contemporary moral philosophy (ranging from deontological rules bereft of social context to emotional appeals to intuition). However, when applied more broadly to management theory fewer voices supporting a virtue ethics approach have emerged. Ron Beadle (2008), at Northumbria University, UK, however, has sought to bridge this divide by introducing MacIntyre's Thomistic Aristotelian natural law virtue ethics to practices and theories of management. Although business ethics and management are chief among his concerns, through an emphasis upon specific virtues, such as constancy, a broader dissemination of Aristotle's natural law virtue theory can be further advanced (Beadle, 2013). Thus, as aligned with the conference theme of the Global Active Learning Summit, Tokyo, Japan (2017), an analysis of how natural law virtue theory can be applied to active student engagement in sports performance aligned to standardized testing improvement will be examined. Specifically, what roles do technical knowledge (techne), practical knowledge or "prudence" (phronesis), and happiness (eudaimonia) play in assisting students in academic performance? The following paper will provide an overview of Aristotle's natural law virtue theory applied to performance management with a brief examination of eight students in Florida, U.S.A., ages 13 – 18, who were either coached in track and field or tutored in the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) or American College Test (ACT) college entrance examinations.

### Eudaimonia, Techne and Phronesis

What is the end goal of the virtuous life? Although answers may vary, from no end-goal at all (virtue as its own reward) to hedonism (epicureanism), according to Aristotle, virtue accumulation cannot be described apart from either the teleology of the virtues as producing human flourishing (eudaimonia) or practices as defined according to quite specific crafts such as "architecture, chess, portrait painting, physics, football and farming" (Beadle, 2008, p. 231). The end-goal of eudaimonia is not to portray the virtuous life as reducible to its more emotive rewards, but simply to include happiness and flourishing as constitutive of motivation for making the sacrifices which virtue requires.

If eudaimonia can be considered as the end-goal of the virtuous life, then how should knowledge be understood according to Aristotle's natural law virtue ethics? According to Dunne (1992), for Aristotle, a three-fold distinction of knowledge can be postulated. First, theoretical knowledge (episteme) is neither practical, nor productive, but nonetheless constitutes "real knowledge" that is not mere opinion (doxa), i.e. it is a logical ideal that is demonstrable (p. 237). Second, productive knowledge (techne) is both aligned with production that makes something in the strict sense (poiesis), but more technically, is any human activity that is directed to a specific end (telos), e.g. music can be considered a techne (p. 254). Third, practical knowledge (phronesis) is action that is not of necessity productive, but is a type of virtue (arete or "excellence") whereby techne is made best use of or optimized (p. 246).

As a multi-faceted theory of knowledge, Aristotle's natural law makes close epistemological and practical distinctions that can be especially helpful for contemporary performance management. Contrary to sharp modern distinctions between theoretical and practical rationality, the distinction between techne and phronesis is not only a distinction between types of real knowledges, but is also complementary of each other (p. 246). Moreover, techne is a type of productive knowledge, guided by practices, but not simply practice for its own sake (praxis), and is thus still fully theoretical as well (p. 244). Techne instead is guided by phronesis so that practices can be guided rationally to a productive end (p. 244). Thus, as a virtue theory (virtue as arete or "excellence"), knowledge is conceived as *both* doing *and* doing

correctly, and is thus excellence, not simply production (p. 264 – 265). As a productive excellence techne is rational because the product, whether material or a skill mastered, traces back to *causes* from which its being owes (p. 250). Thus, a person of techne is like a master craftsman who applies skillful theoretical and practical knowledge to a productive end (telos) rather than working solely from memory or experience (p. 252). However, techne is sometimes used interchangeably by Aristotle with episteme, for example, medicine is usually a techne, but can be an episteme, and math, e.g. geometry, which is usually an episteme, can also be a techne (p. 253).

#### Applying Aristotle's Natural Law Virtue Theory: Case Studies

In applying Aristotle's natural law virtue theory several caveats are necessary. First, phronesis itself is a knowledge gained by doing, but is also an actual rational knowledge that is neither luck, nor later Latin mistranslation as prudencia, for example, as formulated by St. Thomas Aquinas (p. 255). Second, techne is similarly an excellence (arete or "virtue"), rather than Latin ars (St. Thomas Aquinas), but closer to Latin theory known as Scientia (p. 253). Third, phronesis, however, is not synonymous with techne since action and making are two different activities (p. 262).

As applied to athletic and academic performance management several additional caveats must be mentioned. Through the Thomistic Aristotelian moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, as applied to management theory by Beadle (2008), *internal goods of excellence* must be pursued for their own sake. Thus, phronesis is a virtue in which the practices are perfected not in isolation, but as a product of who we are (Dunne, 1992, p. 273). From such a pursuit of excellence for its own sake, several case study examples can demonstrate that rather than achieving "knowledge" per se, excellence in performance is attained as a byproduct of character, i.e. *who we are*, and whether or not such virtue, or lack of arete (virtue or excellence), produces sufficient eudaimonia (flourishing or happiness/good spirits) to sustain optimal performance and improvement. Granted, happiness is somewhat subjective since what motivates one person to virtue or excellence in performance may not motivate another. But, by changing one's perception of reality through choosing what is most valuable, identifying best routes to success, how to use accelerants to success, and how to cancel one's negative inputs while seeking positive stimuli can all lead to happiness that is productive as motivation and reward for excellent performance (Achor, 2013, p. xvii). The following eight brief case study examples will show how personal motivations to success may differ, but once clarified and incorporated into a coherent system of technical and practical rationality, can produce exemplary standardized test score, or other universal, such as athletic, improvement results.

#### Case Study: "Catherine the great"

Perhaps the greatest natural academic mind I have coached or tutored was a track and field athlete whom I will nickname, "Catherine the Great" after the famous Empress of Russia. This athlete improved by 30 feet in 15 months in high school girls' discus throwing, qualified for the Amateur Athletic Union (A.A.U.) Junior Olympics, and through weightlifting and sports training, according to her own admission, also improved from a 710 math SAT score to a perfect 800 SAT math level two subject test. Additionally, she scored a nearly perfect 35 of 36 ACT, perfect 800 critical reading SAT, won the girls track and field varsity Most Valuable Player, the prep school's Latin Award *and* the Mu Alpha Theta math club Award. Ironically, her athletic and academic performance excellence was almost entirely marked by eudaimonia. Although able to "walk on" as a non-scholarship discus thrower on the Harvard University women's track and field team, she instead chose a mid-tier state university due to a full academic scholarship, and less stressful social environment. As someone primarily marked by intrinsic motivation, and as an excellent critical reader, she was also highly adept at noticing true motivations in others. Thus, having noted my own love of sports and the "good life," (eudaimonia) once during

track and field practice she asked me, “So, are you looking at condominiums, Coach King, because you are trying to find where you will play tennis? Do you play tennis?”

Case Study: “Emperor Constantine”

A second track and field athlete, a middle school discus thrower who placed in the top 20 for 13-year-old boys at the 2015 A.A.U. Junior Olympics, improved by 41 feet in discus throwing in 5 months, set his middle school record the following year, but due to injury has now switched to water polo. As a son of an Austrian Chief Financial Officer father and Greek sports-minded “soccer mom” mother, this athlete can be described as motivated primarily by technical precision. Unlike other athletes who seek extrinsic awards such as A.A.U. medals, again, according to an emphasis upon eudaimonia, so was happiness a motivator for success. Thus, whether a record-breaking throw was accomplished in practice or in an actual track and field meet mattered less than the joy and exhilaration of a discus throw done well. In fact, as technical precision was his primary motivator, once, even as a 13-year-old, he corrected me by saying, “Coach, you need to kick your knee up more, and get your feet off of the ground.”

Case Study: “Michael Phelps”

The greatest athlete whom I have coached or tutored was a former PSAT and SAT student, eventual All-American swimmer, coached by the strength and conditioning coach of U.S. Olympic Gold medalist Ryan Lochte, and now a university varsity swimmer at a top 20 U.S. research university. Unlike the preceding two case study examples, “Michael Phelps” was motivated more by extrinsic success as producing eudaimonia. Attending a top 20 university, following an All-American status achieved with two individual Florida state swimming championships, propelled him to success in standardized testing improvement. However, although capable of a 750 math SAT score in practice, an official 620 verbal and 660 math set of SAT scores (over 100 points of improvement per section) were achieved less for their own sakes, but more instrumentally as a means to the end-goal of acceptance into a top 20 university. Motivation as based upon happiness was less noticeable unless redefined as the happiness attained by external motivations for success. Once so defined, however, such an emphasis upon eudaimonia could also be noticed.

Case Study: “Jeff Bezos and his old sister”

Motivations of eudaimonia, if not aligned as the end-goal of virtue (arete or excellence in performance), can also slip into either utilitarianism as happiness is maximized for its own sake, irrespective of cause or source, or epicureanism as pleasure is simply maximized irrespective of other concerns. Thus, the fourth case study is a track and field discus thrower who is naturally gifted, but unmotivated, and his older sister who can be described as competitive and driven. The young discus thrower improved by 24 feet in boys’ discus in 2 months, but once natural ability had been maximized a lack of motivation to practice caused a plateau in performance with only a 5 feet improvement the following season. To quote this athlete, once during a major track and field meet he stated, “It’s not like I am going to get a discus scholarship. Oh well.” Conversely, his older sister improved her composite ACT score from a 27 to a 32 following 20 hours of intensive tutoring, and gained admission into a top 20 globally ranked university. Such motivation as based upon the happiness of success itself could be seen when during the conclusion of tutoring, prior to her final ACT, she frantically asked, “What is the next question?” Granted, the siblings will likely both be successful, one through natural talent operationalized with little effort, but the other having exceeded her natural talent through incorporation of top 20 standardized test taking tips and test-taking procedures aligned specifically only to the ACT.

Case Study: "C.E.O.'s son, Boston College," ak.a. "Andre Agassi"

The fifth case study example exhibited the greatest percentile and raw score improvement of any student whom I have tutored, also on the ACT, but possibly likely due to outlier data that might mask true performance. For example, during the first practice ACT "Andre Agassi" scored the worst percentile (bottom 1%) of all test takers. But, such a low score was due partially to one third of questions which were not completed, and the student having guessed on numerous answers. However, once time management, re-checking answers, and other test-taking strategies were mastered, granted following 50 hours of tutoring, he improved to the 91<sup>st</sup> percentile composite score on the ACT. He gained admission to Boston College, appeased his extremely strict C.E.O. father, and was marked by a motivation of eudaimonia expressed primarily as avoidance of punishment from his father. Lower test scores had previously resulted in losing access to his BMW, no social engagements, and even an attempted cessation of snack foods eaten during ACT tutoring sessions. Once success had been achieved, however, happiness through the form of luxury auto, social life, and acceptance by his father proved decisive as motivation.

Case Study: "C.E.O.'S son, Florida State University"

The sixth case study, similar to "Michael Phelps," was an elite athlete having been ranked as high as leading in assists, and second in goal scoring, in the U.S.A. for high school lacrosse while at IMG Academy. His personal motivation for success was also expressed as a form of eudaimonia, but more as admiration for his father, also a C.E.O. His SAT score gain was approximately 100 – 150 points per section, and he gained admittance into Florida State University's program in entrepreneurship. Strengths included time management, full incorporation of standardized test-taking strategies, and the ability to perform well under pressure. Ironically, although above average in math, he was one of only two students to answer correctly a difficult geometric question involving the hypotenuse of a cube.

Case Study: "Plato, the philosopher"

The seventh case study example involved the son of a major real estate developer whose primary motivation was to enjoy the good life. His test score improvement was primarily in verbal sections of the older SAT, with a 660 to 720 critical reading improvement, and acceptance into the school of entrepreneurship at the University of Florida. His learning style was more Socratic with dialogical approaches to tutoring the most effective. Since learning was its own reward this student excelled especially in more esoteric or philosophical critical reading subject matter. In summary, the classical philosophical life of introspection and analytical reflection was its own reward.

Case Study: "Alexander the great"

The final case study example, and the student with the second highest overall score attainment, was the Salutatorian of a larger public high school and graduate of its STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Math) magnet program. His PSAT score improved from a 168 to a 211, his SAT scores improved similarly to a 720 math and 640 critical reading, but his SAT subject test scores were the most noteworthy having attained a 740 U.S. History, a 770 Biology, and a 790 Math level two. The student was driven less by success or extrinsic reward, but more by personal self-motivation at having put forth his best effort. Of particular note in having put forth his best effort was how routinization and internalization of test taking strategies assisted him in overcoming fatigue and inattentiveness due to physical exhaustion as a track and field mid-distance runner. Thus, eudaimonia in the case of "Alexander the Great," much like the actual historical student of Aristotle, gained satisfaction through excellence achieved in having gained mastery over a set of difficult tasks.

### **Conclusion**

Due to the conference themes of the Global Active Learning Summit, Tokyo, Japan (2017), greater attention has been given to how Aristotle's virtue ethic may be applied to practices of active student learning than either more theoretical or social scientific methodology. Similar to the entire standardized test prep tutoring industry research is only effective to the extent that consistent, higher than average, score gains can be achieved through mastery of best practices of test-taking. Fuller studies of how overall motivation influences academic performance, for example, through theoretical designs studying self-efficacy, are helpful contributors to such a conversation. Also, both as an independent field of study, and also as a contribution to standardized test improvement, sports psychology is a helpful area for future theoretical and applied research. Having noted such possible overlap, however, the incorporation of technical and practical reason (techne and phronesis) as a unified approach resulting in the end-goal of happiness or flourishing (eudaimonia) can offer a unified, coherent, and effective paradigm for superior student academic performance. Since happiness itself is somewhat subjective, each student may exhibit different definitions of how eudaimonia might be understood, much less serve as a motivation for performance. In spite of such subjective understandings of how happiness is determined, in part, by each individual student, if connected to the performance of academic tasks, in the case studies of this preceding analysis, standardized test-taking improvement utilizing sports training models, then active student learning can result in higher test score gains.

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