

Essay Assignment

Aristotle, the American Founding, and Political Ethics Today

Course: Introduction to Ethics

Length: 5–6 pages (double-spaced), approx. 1,400–1,700 words

Submission Format: PDF document in Canvas

Due Date: February

Overview

In this essay, you will compare **Aristotle’s ethical understanding of politics** in the *Politics* with the **moral vision of the American founding**, as expressed in the *Declaration of Independence* and the *U.S. Constitution*. You will then use these frameworks to reflect on the **current political situation in the United States**.

The goal of this assignment is not to defend a political party or policy, but to practice **ethical and philosophical analysis**. You will be evaluated on your understanding of the texts, the clarity of your reasoning, and your ability to apply ethical theory to contemporary political life.

Learning Objectives

By completing this assignment, you should be able to:

- Explain key ethical and political ideas in Aristotle’s *Politics*
 - Identify the moral assumptions underlying the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution
 - Compare virtue-based political ethics with rights-based liberal democracy
 - Apply ethical concepts to contemporary political conditions in a thoughtful, non-partisan way
-

Assignment Prompt

Aristotle argues in the *Politics* that political communities exist **by nature** and aim at the **highest human good**. For Aristotle, politics and ethics are inseparable: laws and institutions are meant to shape citizens’ character and cultivate virtue.

The American founding documents—the **Declaration of Independence** and the **U.S. Constitution**—also make moral claims, but they emphasize **natural rights, liberty, equality, and limits on governmental power** rather than the direct cultivation of virtue.

In this essay, you will compare Aristotle's ethical vision of politics with the moral framework of the American founding, especially with respect to the question of citizenship. You will then use both to reflect on contemporary U.S. politics.

Your essay must address all three sections below.

Section I: Aristotle and Political Ethics (≈2 pages)

Using direct quotations, explain Aristotle's understanding of politics as an ethical project. In your discussion, address several of the following concepts:

- Humans as *political animals* (*zōon politikon*)
- The relationship between virtue (*aretē*), happiness (*eudaimonia*), and the polis
- Aristotle's account of citizenship and justice
- The role of law and habituation in shaping moral character

Your goal is to show why, for Aristotle, political institutions are essential to human flourishing, not merely social order or power.

Section II: The Moral Vision of the American Founding (≈2 pages)

Analyze the ethical assumptions behind the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. You may consider:

- Concessions such as the three-fifths compromise and attitudes toward Native peoples.
- Natural rights, equality, and human dignity
- Consent of the governed and popular sovereignty
- Constitutional mechanisms such as separation of powers and checks and balances
- The limited role of moral virtue in the design of American institutions

Explain what kind of citizens this system presupposes and what it sees as the primary purpose of government. How does this differ from Aristotle's approach?

Section III: Political Ethics and the Present Moment (≈1–2 pages)

Using Aristotle and the American founding as philosophical frameworks, reflect on contemporary political life in the United States. This section should be analytical rather than partisan. You might address questions such as:

- Would Aristotle regard contemporary American politics as ethically successful or deficient? Why?
- How might Aristotle interpret polarization, distrust in institutions, or the role of rhetoric and faction?
- Do constitutional safeguards still promote ethical citizenship, or do they now intensify conflict?
- Does the tension between virtue-based ethics and rights-based liberalism help explain current political challenges?

Your aim is not to propose policy solutions, but to **use ethical theory to diagnose political problems.**

Requirements

- 5–6 full pages, double-spaced
 - Use textual evidence from Aristotle and at least one American founding document
 - Define key concepts clearly and use them consistently
 - Avoid partisan advocacy; focus on ethical reasoning
 - Include a clear thesis and organized argument
-

Grading Criteria (100 points)

Category	Points
Understanding of Aristotle’s Political Ethics	25
Analysis of the American Founding Documents (from in-class)	15
Comparative contemporary analysis	25
Organization, MLA format, argument, & writing quality	10
Use of Direct textual evidence & conceptual precision	25

Academic Integrity

All work must be your own. Use direct quotations appropriately and cite all sources according to the MLA specified for the course.