Teaching notes on 9.02a Aristotle & the Golden Mean

Slide 1

Learning objective: To discover and debate Aristotle's ideas on being a good person.

After saying 'salve' to Iucundus, mouse-clicks on this slide will make Iucundus ask, "quid tibi maxime placet… mus aut sciurus*?" This means (literally) "What (quid) is pleasing (placet) to you (tibi) the most (maxime), mus (mouse) or (aut) squirrel (sciurus)?" or, in more natural English, "What do you like best, mice or squirrels?" Mouse-click reveals the possible replies:

[mouse-click] mus mihi placet – I like mice

[mouse-click] sciurus mihi placet – I like squirrels

* 'sciurus' comes from the Greek 'skiouros' meaning 'shadow-tail' and gives us the word 'squirrel'. 'Mouse' is also a direct descendant of 'mus', which is both Greek and Latin for mouse.

Slide 2

One of the world's greatest philosophers was the Ancient Greek Aristotle, and this slide introduces him and the kind of things he wrote about. He thought a lot about the question, "How should people be good?" and came to the conclusion that being a good person is all about balance, and to avoid excess. This led to the development of the idea of the 'Golden Mean', a bit like a Goldilocks Zone for personality. This idea has been very influential in Western philosophy and literature.

Slide 3

🤓💬 Before we go any further, we need to clarify what we mean (!) by 'mean'. Mouse-click will prompt students to discuss the different meanings of the word according to whether 'mean' is a verb, adjective or noun. Definitions and examples will appear on mouse-click, as will the message that the 'mean' we're thinking about with Aristotle is the noun meaning 'average'.

Slide 4

The idea of balance and not acting excessively was big in Ancient Greece, expressed by the popular phrase 'meden agan' (μηδεν ἀγαν). You could get your students to think of a story where someone is an extreme character (e.g. too proud, too greedy), and this character has to learn a lesson about how to be a better person? [There are so many, from Hamlet and Othello to Mr. Men stories! You could tie in a book that the class are currently reading or have recently read].

Slide 5

 In his book, 'The Nichomachean Ethics', Aristotle sets out in detail the ideal 'middle ground' personality traits and what happens when they swing out of balance. The written exercise will prompt the students to think of ways of describing the 'too little' and 'too much' versions of these character virtues. This is a good exercise to do collaboratively and with lots of discussion as the students may actually disagree with Aristotle (e.g. is it possible to be too friendly?). Although some possible 'answers' are given to this exercise in the answers sheet, they are not definitive and are more designed to stimulate debate.

Slide 6

The plenary slide:

Question 1 Who was Aristotle's teacher? [The philosopher Plato]

Question 2 hat does 'golden mean' mean? [It's a good 'average' for a person's character, not swinging to any extremes of behaviour]

Question 3 quid tibi maxime placet, mus aut sciurus? ['mus!' for mouse fans and 'sciurus!' for squirrel afficionados]