

# Sparks (Conversation Starters)

## For *Aretē* (Excellence or Virtue)

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"Virtue is a kind of health and beauty and good condition of the soul." —Plato

"Virtue is a weapon that cannot be taken away." —Antisthenes

"Happiness is an activity of the soul that accords with perfect virtue." —Aristotle

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**Suggestions for use** ▪ Use the following Sparks to start a conversation with a friend or group. Or journal with them, using them to get to "know yourself" —an imperative straight from the ancient Greeks.

The following quotations come from the Cave's  
*Aretē: Excellence or Virtue—What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Aretē.*

### Spark 1 ▪ The Goal or Good of Life

#### Spark 1 Quotations

The Cynics hold that the goal of life is to live according to virtue—just like the Stoics.—*Diogenes Laertius*

The human good is the activity of the soul that accords with virtue.—*Aristotle*

#### Spark 1 Questions

1. What is the overarching goal of life? Is there one such overarching goal? Or are there many goals? Is there one overarching goal for everyone (that is, is the overarching goal the same for everyone)? Or does the overarching goal differ for everyone? Explain.
2. What do you think it means to say that excellence or virtue (*aretē*) is the goal of life? What does Aristotle mean when he declares that "the human good is the activity of the soul that accords with virtue"? What is the soul? What is the activity of the soul? How might it "accord with virtue"?
3. Is excellence or virtue (*aretē*) the overarching goal or good of your life? If so, why? If not, why not (what is more important)?

## Spark 2 ▪ The Power and Promise of *Aretē* (Excellence or Virtue)

### Spark 2 Quotations

Nothing in the world can contribute so powerfully to material gain, to good repute, to right action, in a word, to happiness, as virtue and the qualities of virtue. —*Isocrates*

Virtue promises happiness and tranquility and a life that flows well. —*Epictetus*

### Spark 2 Questions

1. Are material gain (wealth, property), a good reputation, right action (behaving well), tranquility, a life that flows well, and happiness important to you, things you value? Why or why not? Are any of these valued things the same thing? Which is the most important to you? Which is the least important? Explain.
2. What is virtue? What do you suppose are the “qualities of virtue”?
3. If virtue (*aretē*) is a kind of excellence, then how does “virtue” contribute to the possession of the valued things mentioned in number one?

## Spark 3 ▪ Doing *Aretē* (Excellence or Virtue)

### Spark 3 Quotations

Virtue is something you do—it is a matter of deeds. It doesn’t require a stockpile of arguments or much learning.  
—*Diogenes Laertius (giving the Cynic philosopher Antisthenes’ position)*

It is said that excellence dwells upon rocky peaks that are hard to climb. . . . She guards a holy place. She may not be seen by the eyes of all mortals. Only the one who experiences heart-vexing sweat from within may see her, the one who reaches the peak of manliness. —*Simonides of Ceos*

Virtue enters the soul by means of training—not automatically as happens with vice.

—(*Pseudo*) *Crates of Thebes in a letter to Orion*

### Spark 3 Questions

1. Can it help to talk about *aretē* (excellence or virtue)? Can it help to learn about *aretē* (by reading or by listening to a lecture or otherwise)? Is talking or learning enough?
2. The claim of the ancient Greeks is that *aretē* (excellence or virtue) takes hard work. “Virtue is something we do.” It “enters the soul”—our innermost being—“by means of training.” Do you agree? Can you give an example from your own life? How is acquiring *aretē* similar to learning how to play and be excellent at a sport or a musical instrument or some other skill?

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3. What can you do to be excellent or virtuous? How can you practice? At what? When? Where? Be specific, concrete.

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