

# CHAPTER 1

## Virtue and Vice in the SAMCROpolis

### Aristotle Views *Sons of Anarchy*

*Jason T. Eberl*

At the end of Season 5 of *Sons of Anarchy*, just before she's arrested as an accessory to murder, Tara informs Jax that she and their boys are leaving Charming. She doesn't want her and Jax to "end up like the two people we hate the most"—Clay and Gemma Morrow—and their boys to be "destined to re-live all of our mistakes" ("J'ai Obtenu Cette"). Jax faces an ultimatum: either leave SAMCRO behind or lose his family. Less than two years earlier, after getting out of a three-month stint in Stockton prison, Jax had told Tara that he was done with SAMCRO and had made a deal with Clay to give him a way out. So Tara's ultimatum should be a no-brainer for Jax, yet he seems torn.

In the past several months, Jax has assumed the presidency of the MC and taken on more responsibility for the future direction of the club. But is his allegiance to the club and his sense of responsibility to its members—his brothers—the only thing holding him back from going to Oregon with his family? Could it be that he simply can't bring himself to leave SAMCRO? After all, it's the only life he's ever known: "Since I was five, Tara, all I ever wanted was a Harley and a cut" ("Potlatch"). He has also confessed that, without SAMCRO, he's just "an okay mechanic with a GED. The only thing I do well is outlaw" ("Out"). And when Bobby Munson discovers that Jax is planning to leave the MC, he exhorts, "Your solution to a problem will always be a club solution. It's the way you're wired" ("Kiss").

*Sons of Anarchy and Philosophy: Brains Before Bullets*, First Edition.

Edited by George A. Dunn and Jason T. Eberl.

© 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2013 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Has life in SAMCRO held Jax back from being all that he could've been or has it allowed him to develop his potential in a way no other lifestyle could? Jax has certainly grown as a leader—outmaneuvering not only the ruthless ATF Agent June Stahl but also the diabolical Damon Pope, while at the same time appeasing the Galindo Cartel. Even Clay comes to admit that Jax is a better leader of the MC than he ever was (“Darth”). Indeed, leadership and cunning are examples of Jax’s *virtues*. The term “virtue” is derived from the Latin word for “power” (*virtus*), which is also linked to the word for “man” (*vir*) and “manliness”—so “virtue” shares a root with “virile.” Perhaps Jax could only have cultivated such virtues within the violent, anarchic world of SAMCRO, but he also missed out on cultivating other character traits—such as gentleness and moderation—that don’t fit well in the world of unbridled violence and lust that is the Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) famously argues that human beings aren’t born with inclinations toward either virtue or vice; rather, each person’s moral character traits are cultivated through a combination of social influence and individual rational choice. The social environment—*polis* (“city”) in Aristotle’s original Greek—in which one is born and raised, or currently lives, is centrally important to one’s initial and ongoing moral character development. It’s clear that having been raised in the *polis* of SAMCRO had a tremendous influence on the young Jax and Opie Winston, fostering their development of certain key virtues that Aristotle would commend: courage, loyalty, deep friendship, and willingness to make sacrifices for the common good. But this band of outlaws is also home to many vices: Clay’s greed, Tig Trager’s uncontrolled lust, and Gemma’s manipulative power games. Jax is clearly not immune to these malign influences, especially once he moves up to the head of the table as president. As he tells Bobby, “The gavel corrupts. You can’t sit in this chair without being a savage” (“Darth”). Far from being pure, the SAMCROpolis tends to nurture both virtues and vices in its “citizens.”

### **“Balance Between Might and Right”**

*Sons of Anarchy* relies on our fascination with “anti-heroes,”<sup>1</sup> morally ambiguous protagonists for whom we often cheer even if we can’t justify all of their actions. Nobody wants to see SAMCRO go down

under the RICO Act, even though the federal government's job is precisely to protect us from illegal activities such as gun-running, drug-muling, and criminal violence. Jax is forever trying to get the club out of such activities, but he can't avoid using violence, deception, and collaboration with other criminals to achieve his laudable goal—and that's just in one episode (“J'ai Obtenu Cette”)! Clearly, Jax and his fellow Men of Mayhem aren't your typical “white hat” good guys. But neither are they just a gang of violent law-breakers, for otherwise we'd have no sympathy for them. Part of the show's appeal stems from recognizing the members of SAMCRO as kindred spirits who exemplify—albeit to dramatic extremes—the mixture of virtue and vice found in every human being's moral character. No one is perfectly good or perfectly bad: Clay loves Gemma deeply and is genuinely, compassionately heartbroken when he learns of her rape, but this same man is also capable of bouncing her face off of the floor (“Hands”).

When Clay attacks Gemma, it's a shockingly brutal scene of spousal abuse, but it's not all that surprising given what we know about Clay's moral *character*. He's inclined toward violence, greed, self-protectiveness, and using people as means to get what he wants—just ask Elliot Oswald—or removing those who confront him as obstacles—such as the Nomads Clay initially hired to do his bidding. Gemma is the latest in a long line of people Clay has abused in various ways for his own self-centered purposes. So his treatment of her, despite his genuine love for her in other contexts, is consistent with the *type of man* Clay is. When Juice Ortiz asks Clay what he did to make Tara declare him “already dead” to her, he responds forlornly, “Same thing I always do”; and later, when Wayne Unser speculates that sentimentality caused Clay to spare his life, Clay responds, “Ain't my nature” (“Toad's Wild Ride”).

*Virtues* and *vices* are Aristotle's terms for such *inclinations* toward acts that are either good or bad, respectively. For example, Gemma knows exactly what Opie is doing when he attacks Sherriff Roosevelt and is hauled off to prison with Jax, Tig, and Chibs Telford—he's “staying close” to Jax as he has since the two were little boys riding Huffys before trading up to Harleys. Opie's virtue of selfless devotion to Jax is just as integral to the type of man he is as Clay's greed is to his moral character. Of course, Opie isn't morally perfect. His character is also comprised of some questionable traits. His loyalty to

the club, for example, overrides his fidelity to his first wife, Donna, eventually resulting in her death; and his jealousy over Lyla's chosen profession, while understandable, nevertheless leads to an unhealthy marital dynamic.

What distinguishes a virtue from a vice is that the former involves acting and feeling *in the right amount*—that is, performing the right action, or feeling the right emotion, at the right time and for the right reason. Vice, on the other hand, involves either an *excess* or a *deficiency* of action or feeling:

Some vices miss what is right because they are deficient, others because they are excessive, in feelings or in actions, whereas virtue finds and chooses what is intermediate.<sup>2</sup>

Take the virtue of loyalty, for example.<sup>3</sup> Bobby and Tig are both loyal to Clay, but they don't just blindly follow him. Both have challenged Clay when they judge him to be going down an unwise or unjustifiable path. Bobby constantly badgers Clay about the drug-muling deal with the Galindo Cartel in Season 4; yet, he goes behind Jax's back to broker a deal to save Clay's life in Season 5. Contrast this with Chuckie Marstein's obsequiousness—pathetically “accepting” whatever the club members bid him to do, which is often simply to get lost—or with Stahl's easy betrayal of her partner and lover, killing her to serve Stahl's own ambitions. Courage is another virtue exemplified by our collective protagonists, acting with boldness at the right time and for the right reason. Being bold, even risking one's life, is virtuous if it's for the right reason; but Juice acts rashly when he charges into a minefield. By the same token, being cautious can be virtuous too, but not if your caution involves putting innocent children at risk, as when cowardly Ethan Zobelle hides from SAMCRO in a convenience store full of children.

### **“What Kind of Nasty Shit Did Your Momma Do to You?”**

Virtues and vices are not things a person is born with, nor can they be merely bestowed upon you by another person.<sup>4</sup> Rather, they are *cultivated* through habituation, practicing the behaviors modeled by others whom one looks up to as moral *exemplars*:

Virtues ... we acquire, just as we acquire crafts, by having first activated them. For we learn a craft by producing the same product that we must produce when we have learned it; we become builders, for instance, by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions.<sup>5</sup>

Lowell Harland Jr. probably apprenticed as a mechanic at Teller-Morrow under the guidance of experienced mechanics such as his father and Clay. Likewise, one develops moral virtues by apprenticing under those who already possess such virtues, practicing the moral trade until it becomes *second nature*. The only problem is that vice may be cultivated in the same way as virtue—Lowell Jr. could just as easily have learned from his dad how to sabotage a motorcycle and get its rider killed.

And once a particular virtue or vice has become ingrained as part of one's character, it's as difficult to break as any habit—again, consider the drug-addicted Lowell Jr. Aristotle notes that “the reason why habit is also difficult to change is that it is like nature ... ‘Habit, I say, is longtime training ... and in the end training is nature for human beings.’”<sup>6</sup> Tara observes how mired in habit Jax is when she admonishes him, “You keep saying you want to change things, but you keep repeating old behavior. You can’t have it both ways” (“Potlatch”).

Aristotle stresses the importance of the right environment for becoming virtuous, especially when it comes to children. Our tendency to become habituated is the reason why

we must perform the right activities, since differences in these imply corresponding differences in the states [of moral character]. It is not unimportant, then, to acquire one sort of habit or another, right from our youth. On the contrary, it is very important, indeed all-important.<sup>7</sup>

This view is well captured by the precept, “Children learn what they live.”

We see this most clearly played out in the politically unstable and violent world of Belfast, as depicted in Season 3. Consider the contrasting aims of the two IRA leaders, Jimmy O’Phelan and Fr. Kellan Ashby. Jimmy O has been working behind the scenes, recruiting day and night, to set up his own revolutionary campaign separate from

the control of the “Irish Kings” who govern the Real IRA. Jimmy O’s army of choice? Teenage boys he can easily entice with dreams of “glorious revolution” and “fighting the good fight” for the cause of a free Northern Ireland.

Though he is a leader in the Real IRA’s violent struggle and long-standing arms-dealing relationship with SAMCRO, Fr. Ashby objects to Jimmy O’s plans and recruitment methods. He complains about how Jimmy has been “recruiting off the streets. Broken kids, some as young as ten, eleven. Promising there’ll be a united Ireland, all the cash and prizes that go with it. This isn’t a child’s war ... Jimmy’s lost sight of who we are, why we struggle. He’s not a soldier anymore, just a gangster” (“Home”).<sup>8</sup>

Importantly, Fr. Ashby was also a close friend and confidant of John Teller. He’s thus well aware of J.T.’s “resolute desire” to sever the MC’s ties to the IRA and to raise his boys, Thomas and Jax, in a more serene “biker commune.” We all know how *that* story ended. But Fr. Ashby sees a second chance at redemption when Abel, kidnapped by Cameron Hayes, is brought to Belfast and put in the care of Maureen Ashby: “I couldn’t do anything to help save the son, but I can do something to save the grandson ... from the life of his father” (“Firinne”). Fr. Ashby sees Jax as a willing participant in the same cycle of violence from which J.T. had failed to free him. Is being in Jax’s care truly what would be best for Abel? Won’t he, just like his father, want nothing but a Harley and a cut by age five? Wouldn’t Abel be likely to succeed his father at the head of the table in “church” and perpetuate the violence (and porn and prostitution, too) into the next generation?

Fr. Ashby is determined not to allow Jax’s vices to negatively impact Abel’s moral development. He succeeds in convincing Jax that a better life awaits Abel “with a father who didn’t torture and murder a man yesterday,” as we witness in the powerfully moving scene when Jax follows Abel and his adoptive parents around not long after seeing his mother pull a gun on some nuns—NUNS!—and threaten to kill a baby if they didn’t give up Abel’s location (“Bainne”). As we know, Gemma’s eligibility for “Mother/Grandmother of the Year” award slips away even further in Season 5. She and Clay certainly didn’t model the best behavior for Jax. Would he and Tara—who’s already helped Gemma kill and dispose of an innocent woman—do any better?

### **“A Unique Little Town”**

SAMCRO is embedded within the small town of Charming, California. As Clay affirms, “If it happens in Charming, it’s SAMCRO’s problem” (“Smite”). Jax and Opie, along with their generational cohorts Tara and David Hale, all grew up together in this community; yet they took different paths. Jax and Opie’s path we know well. Hale, proud son of one of Charming’s founding families, went in a different direction. And Tara had to get completely out of this “backwards, incestuous, and small-minded” town in an attempt to carve out her own identity and find her vocation as a healer, noting, “I didn’t hate Charming, just me in it at the time” (“Seeds”).

Charming is just as vital to *Sons of Anarchy* as any of its colorful residents. Charming has its own characteristics (though not virtues and vices in a literal sense) that have been formed by those who’ve invested their lives in the community—such as SAMCRO and the Hale and Oswald families—and is resistant to outside influences. As Unser quietly warns Zobelle when he’s setting up shop on Main Street, “Charming’s a special town. Not many folks take to it. I like to think the town chooses its occupants. Right ones stay, wrong ones disappear” (“Eureka”). We also witness Clay’s concern over the gentrifying effect of Mayor Hale’s Charming Heights suburban development initiative—just what sort of new people will be moving into town? Of course, this may reflect more Clay’s self-centered worry that the town’s expansion will shine a greater light on it and bring more intensive law-enforcement scrutiny—as if there isn’t enough already! He explains the situation to Jax after leveraging Oswald over the killing of his daughter’s rapist: “If Oswald’s land goes commercial, that means housing developments. Population rises, brings more cops, more state and federal involvement. Charming goes Disney, and SAMCRO gets squeezed out by the most dangerous gang of all: old white money” (“Fun Town”). President Jax, on the other hand, isn’t afraid to deal with Hale to help Charming Heights go through and bring some lucrative—and legitimate—business opportunities for Teller-Morrow Automotive.

The community of Charming and its leadership is indeed of central importance as the ironic, Mayberry-turned-upside-down setting in which SAMCRO operates. But it’s also an influential force in the moral formation of its long-time residents. Claiming something

directly opposed to the individualistic and anarchic worldview of Clay and company, Aristotle affirms a *communitarian* ethic in which political leaders do more than protect the innocent and make sure the town's traffic lights are working. For Aristotle, "the legislator makes the citizens good by habituating them, and this is the wish of every legislator; if he fails to do it well he misses his goal. Correct habituation distinguishes a good political system from a bad one."<sup>9</sup>

This level of moral leadership isn't at all evident in the case of Mayor Jacob Hale, Jr., whose goals for Charming are more focused on business opportunities that'll benefit his pocketbook—to the point of partnering with members of the League of American Nationalists ("Albification") and the largest purveyor of deviant sex products in Asia ("To Be, Act 2"). His conflict with SAMCRO is more about how Clay's values impact *him* and not the town. As outsider Lincoln Potter wonders, "Does it bother anyone in this town that their mayor is also their biggest developer? No one smells that stench?" ("Booster"). Later, Sherriff Eli Roosevelt, another transplant to Charming, challenges Hale, asking "And where are those lines, mayor? You know, the ones that separate public service from self service? ... You can wrap it in any type of 'I love Charming' package that you want. But it still funnels back to your pocket" ("Family Recipe"). Hale thus doesn't fit Aristotle's definition of a virtuous legislator whose primary interest should be the moral development of those who are governed. He's a far cry from Aristotle's "true politician," who "seems to have put more effort into virtue than into anything else, since he wants to make the citizens good and law-abiding."<sup>10</sup>

The mayor's deceased brother, on the other hand, aspired to succeed Unser as chief of police so that he could serve as an example of law-abiding leadership that doesn't mix itself up with "outlaw justice." According to Unser, Deputy Chief Hale "thinks Charming's stuck in 1969, wants to bring it into the twenty-first century." The deputy chief is also concerned about the fact that SAMCRO's members function as moral exemplars to the people of Charming, "You guys cruise around here like heroes, but you and I know the truth ... You're white trash thugs holding on to a dying dream ... You can't stop progress. It won't be long before SAMCRO is just an ugly memory in the history of Charming" ("Seeds").

Aristotle would endorse David Hale's desire to bring law and virtue into conformity:



For most lawful actions, we might say, are those produced by virtue as a whole; for the law prescribes living in accord with each virtue, and forbids living in accord with each vice. Moreover, the actions producing the whole of virtue are the lawful actions that the laws prescribe for education promoting the common good.<sup>11</sup>

Aristotle isn't proposing a *tyrannical* political system, however. In fact, he finds such an overbearing system to be the worst form of government.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, as we've already seen, it's the job of legislators to pass laws that will help cultivate virtue in the community's youth:

It is difficult, however, for someone to be trained correctly for virtue from his youth if he has not been brought up under correct laws; for the many, especially the young, do not find it pleasant to live in a temperate and resistant way. That is why laws must prescribe their upbringing and practices; for they will not find these things painful when they get used to them.<sup>13</sup>

Aristotle would be fine with the virtuous members of the community being more and more self-governing upon reaching maturity. But a truly *anarchic* state isn't possible because there'll always be "bestial" members of the community, whose vices can be controlled only through punitive measures:

That is why legislators must, in some people's view, urge people toward virtue and exhort them to aim at what is fine—on the assumption that anyone whose good habits have prepared him decently will listen to them—but must impose corrective treatments and penalties on anyone who disobeys or lacks the right nature, and must completely expel the incurable [Otto Delaney? Lenny "the Pimp" Janowitz?]. For the decent person, it is assumed, will attend to reason because his life aims at what is fine, whereas the base person, since he desires pleasure, has to receive corrective treatments by pain, like a beast of burden ... As we have said, then, someone who is good must be finely brought up and habituated, and then must live in decent practices, doing base actions neither willingly nor unwillingly. And this will be true if his life follows some sort of understanding and correct order that prevails on him.<sup>14</sup>

As his older brother is aware, though, Hale's "sense of self-righteousness can sometimes get the best of him" ("Albification") and it even leads him to temporarily buy into Zabelle's sermon about the

erosion of “faith, values, morals, and decency” (“Fix”) until he learns of Gemma’s rape. Hale’s sudden death at Half-Sack’s funeral may be symbolic of the death of his form of noble, righteous chivalry on behalf of the people of Charming. Can Charming, or SAMCRO for that matter, be saved to serve as incubators for moral virtue?

### **“I’m Not Sure Which Cancer’s Worse: the One in Me or the One in Charming”**

When Clay gives Juice his “Men of Mayhem” patch, he tells him, “You know, most days this life is just riding around, getting shit done. Some days it’s more than that. Some days we ask our guys to do shit very few men could do. That’s what this means” (“Fruit for the Crows”). As we noted at the outset, the MC can be fertile ground for the cultivation of virtues, like courage, of which Aristotle would approve. But such courage is often put at the service of the second type of “shit” to which Clay refers, SAMCRO’s lawless activities, which outsiders like Deputy Chief Hale view as fostering far more vice than virtue within the community of Charming. As Jax’s ex-wife, Wendy, not necessarily a paragon of virtue herself, warns Tara, “The MC, this town, it kills all the shit you love” (“J’ai Obtenu Cette”). So, are there any virtues that SAMCRO could not only cultivate within its own membership, but also model for the good people of Charming and for us viewers of *Sons of Anarchy*?

Yes, SAMCRO models *loyalty* founded upon the deep friendship within the community of members, old ladies, prospects, crow eaters, and other “friends of the club” like Chuckie and Wayne Unser. When the club is preparing to face off against the League of American Nationalists, everyone and their families are brought under the protective umbrella of Teller-Morrow. Clay even gives a heartfelt speech in which he expresses his sincere love for everyone there (“The Culling”). Aristotle notes that “fellow voyagers and fellow soldiers [the brothers of the MC are both] are called friends ... And the extent of their community is the extent of their friendships [other charters, families] ... The proverb ‘What friends have is common’ is correct, since friendship involves community.”<sup>15</sup> Aristotle is referring here to the function of *justice* within a community of friends and the fact that friends in such communities don’t necessarily need “laws” of justice

between them since they share what they have in common. It's only among members of the wider political community in which these more close-knit communities are embedded that laws of justice are necessary, since the bonds of friendship are weaker and the virtue of loyalty is not as prevalent.

We see this form of justice-without-law in play when Opie's first wife, Donna, who harbors no love for the MC that led her husband into prison for five years, can't pay for her groceries and Gemma steps in to help out, telling a skeptical Donna, "SAMCRO is not the enemy, it's the glue that'll pull you through the ugly shit" ("Seeds"). After Opie's death, Jax shows his widow Lyla *her* "family"—SAMCRO won't let her and her children go without ("Stolen Huffy"). How many other communities exemplify this degree of love and support for their members? And the club's generosity doesn't stop at the gates of T-M, as we see the club model other forms of community service activities for the people of Charming and surrounding towns: organizing a fundraiser for a local school ("Giving Back"), running a blood drive to support a children's hospital ("Eureka"), and working to save an urban garden from being paved over ("Family Recipe").

### **"It's in You. It's Who You Are"**

SAMCRO may not be the best exemplar of moral virtues beyond loyalty and courage, but Jax is trying his damndest to change the worst aspects of the MC's character. In line with Aristotle's advice about seeking out moral exemplars, Jax is following the lead of his father, John Teller, though he also recognizes that J.T. isn't to be admired in all respects. When Jax starts to lose hope that his father could really offer him further guidance, Piney exhorts, "Your father was the best man I ever knew. And before you let him die, you should find him and know that for yourself" ("Family Recipe").

While flawed, J.T. fits Aristotle's picture of a virtuous human being insofar as he exemplifies both *intellectual* and *moral* qualities worth emulating. As Piney describes him to Tara, "He's a complicated guy. He was angry and impulsive. Just righteous as hell. Hated being wrong. Not much of an education. Book smart, though. He used to devour three and four of them at a time. He was loyal. Too loyal" ("Una Venta"). J.T. was by no means a saint, but he remains a suitably

inspirational figure for Jax. We even see Jax following his father's intellectual lead by writing reflections to pass on to his own sons ("Sovereign"). J.T.'s weaknesses, though, didn't allow him to reform the club without getting himself killed.

Jax knows he needs to be smarter, stronger, and more ruthless than his father in order to succeed where J.T. had failed. The environment of SAMCRO, under Clay's leadership, and Gemma's maternal influence have cultivated within Jax just the right strengths to accomplish this task and we see him having largely succeeded at the end of Season 5—that is, until Sheriff Roosevelt knocks on his door. But there's a moral cost to his success. Much blood had to be shed and perhaps Jax is right when he confesses to Bobby that only a "savage" could effectively lead the MC and bring about the reform J.T. sought. The particular mix of virtue and vice that comprises Jax's moral character may, in the end, be exactly what SAMCRO needs at this moment in its history. We can only hope that, if Abel or Thomas eventually succeeds their father at the head of the table, the environment in which they've been raised will have evolved closer to the "biker commune" that cultivates virtues such as loyalty, courage, and communal brotherhood and away from the vices passed on from the elder generation who founded the MC.

## Notes

1. Other examples include the serial-killer *Dexter*, the tortured soul of *The Dark Knight*, and the morally gray world of the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* series.
2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [NE], 2nd ed., trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), Book II, Ch. 6, 1107a4–6.
3. For further discussion of the virtue of loyalty, see Chapter 3 by James Mahon.
4. The thirteenth-century Aristotelian philosopher and Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) claimed that God could directly "infuse" certain virtues—faith, hope, and charity—in a person by grace, but we'll limit the discussion here to Aristotle's original theory.
5. NE Book II, Ch. 1, 1103a32–b2.
6. NE Book VII, Ch. 10, 1152a32–34.
7. NE Book II, Ch. 1, 1103b22–25.

8. For further discussion of Jimmy O's and Fr. Ashby's distinct visions of the how best to carry out "the cause" of the Real IRA, see Chapter 8 by Philip Smolenski.
9. *NE* Book II, Ch. 1, 1103b4–7.
10. *NE* Book I, Ch. 13, 1102a7–10.
11. *NE* Book V, Ch. 2, 1130b23–26.
12. *NE* Book VIII, Ch. 10, 1160b1–9.
13. *NE* Book X, Ch. 9, 1179b32–36.
14. *NE* Book X, Ch. 9, 1180a6–18.
15. *NE* Book VIII, Ch. 9, 1159b28–3.