The Yates Case with Aristotle and Augustine

Do you ever wonder how philosophers from years ago would think about

some of the serious stuff going on in our world today? Well, in the case of Andrea

Yates I think it would be very interesting to find out how the philosophers Aristotle

and Augustine would view them. What angles they would look at on if she should get

the death penalty or sit in jail for the rest of her life. If she was really insane or just

murdered her children because she wanted to, these are some of the things I would

like to know.

Andrea Yates killed her five children on June 20th, 2001. Yates had been

home preaching to her family and was reading things out of the bible she thought

her children needed to learn. Mixed with her depression she took the things she

was reading the wrong way and stared believing crazy things. She claimed that

she was the devil and that she did it to save them. Yates’ depression was caused by

many different things, one being she missed having any newborns in the house to

take care of. She started believing that she was such a bad mother and that she was

corrupting her children. Yates said she heard voices inside her head telling her that

her children would go to hell if they lived this corrupted life she was letting them

live, and the only way to help them was to kill them so they couldn’t be corrupted

anymore. So on this day in June, she took her five children and drowned them in

their bathroom tub.

Aristotle would say she did this so the ends justified the means. Meaning her

children would be in heaven and she would get the death penalty for killing them.

To him, she had not carried out her final cause, which is to be a good mother to her

children. She hadn’t thought she was a good mother and this is why she did this. Her

biggest desire at the time was do kill her children. According to Aristotle your

desires are the ones that are going to make you most happy, therefore this is why

she killed her children is because she thought she would be happy or more relieved.

Also, if she wasn’t psychotic she might not of thought she, herself, was a bad mother,

therefore she wouldn’t of killed her children and she would have carried out her

final cause. Aristotle’s final cause is human happiness. You could argue that she did

reach this goal because she was truly happy once she new her children were safe in

heaven. Therefore she achieved happiness but not necessarily virtue. She knew

what she did was wrong therefore she could not be virtuous. As follows, we don’t

know if she was truly happy then because you can’t be a happy person without

being virtuous. I think she was happy or possibly relieved that she thought she

saved her children.

Yates had to know she had done something wrong because she called the

police. Aristotle would say that she knew what was the right thing to do but she did

the wrong thing anyway. She wanted to be tried and get the death penalty but to

her disappointment she didn’t get it. Yates knew that after her children were dead

there was no point in her living, meaning she had no more “cause” and without a

final cause because, according to Aristotle, you can’t “be” anything without one.

Aristotle would also say that she acted viciously because she killed her

children willingly because there was no external force, meaning there was no one

forcing her to kill her children. He would say she was voluntarily killing them and

acting un-virtuously. Yates would argue that the devil forced her to kill her children,

which would mean she was acting involuntarily or un-virtuously. Yates could be

at both ends of Aristotle’s Golden Mean. This is when some one is between two

opposite vices and she could be close to each end at times. It is hard to say if she was

acting voluntarily because she knew the voice in her head was fake but still listened

to it. We would think this because she called the police after she did it. At the same

time, if she was psychotic she would think this was the only logical solution for her

problem and think it might make the voices stop if she would just listen to them.

For Aristotle there is only virtuous people and no virtuous actions therefore Yates

couldn’t have ever acted virtuously. She also couldn’t be a virtuous person because

of the way she reacted to the situation she was in. According to Aristotle a virtuous

person is someone who can adjust his or her reactions and feelings to any situation

the come across. This is something Yates didn’t do very well. She reacted badly

to her depression and couldn’t see things the way they really were. She couldn’t

keep her cool when she was around her children that day and that lead to what has

happened.

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**Criteria for writing and evaluating a paper:**

**I. Thesis** (20 points).

A. Does your essay have a clear, informative, and compelling thesis?

B. Does your thesis offer a compelling insight into the text and issue under consideration?

C. Do you explain why your thesis matters, i.e., why it’s important?

D. Is your thesis stated at the end of an introductory paragraph?

**II. Support of thesis** (60 points).

**A. Thesis defense.** Does your essay have a consecutive argument that defends your thesis, carefully moving the reader from one point to the next (or does it simply run in place)? Your aim is *not to prove* to the reader that your thesis is iron-clad, *but to show that it is reasonable, that what you see in the text is there to be seen.* **So do you cite and quote evidence from the text (a good rule of thumb is to use *three examples*), and do you explain how that evidence supports your thesis?** Do you lead the reader through your argument, one step at a time, explicitly telling me how that step supports your thesis?

Remember that the *reasons* you give for or against an argument should be more than simply your beliefs or opinions. Rather, they should be potentially convincing to someone else, even if this person may not initially share your beliefs or opinions. After all, are *you* convinced that something is true *just* because someone else happens to believe it? Thus in trying to bring your reader over to your side, make sure to meet him or her in the middle by appealing to reasons that they might accept.

B. **Evidence and reasoning.** Does your essay have adequate citation and quotations from relevant texts that support the argument of the paper, and do you explain how those citations and quotations in fact support the argument?

C. **Consistency.** Does your essay demonstrate internal consistency or ways of handling contradiction and paradox as they emerge in the argument?

D. **Addressing an objection.** Does your essay show an awareness of a possible objection to your thesis? Does your essay address this objection?

**III. Style and presentation** (20 points).

A. Does your essay

1. avoid grammatical, spelling, and punctuation errors? (This is **very** important, since the reader can’t help but take these factors as indicating the author’s care in writing the paper.)

2. have clear and well-structured sentences, paragraphs, and arguments?

3. have properly defined key terms?

4. have properly documented quotes? Page numbers in parentheses placed after the quote are sufficient if you are dealing with just one text.

**B. Succinctness.** Is every paragraph, sentence, and even every word absolutely necessary to your argument (or do you have irrelevant material and rambling discussion)?

**Notes on the papers:**

One thing that a philosophy paper should *not* be is a “book report”, i.e., an attempt to summarize an entire philosophical text. Instead, a good philosophy paper should give a close analysis of a *single key* *argument* in a text. An “argument” in this sense isn’t a verbal fight (this isn’t the Jerry Springer Show, after all!). Rather, an argument is a chain of reasoning from certain statements (called the “premises”) to another statement (called the “conclusion”) that the argument claims is *supported* by the premises.

A *good* philosophy paper contains both an analysis of such an argument and some *criticism* of it. A good criticism generally consists of either (1) reasons why one or more of the *premises* of the argument is *false*, or (2) reasons why the *premises* in fact *do not support* the *conclusion* (in which case the conclusion still might be false even if the premises were true). You may or may not agree with the argument; and you may or may not agree with your criticism of it. This doesn’t matter for the purposes of this course. Remember that the *reasons* you give for or against an argument should be more than simply your beliefs or opinions. Rather, they should be potentially convincing to someone else, even if this person may not initially share your beliefs or opinions. After all, are *you* convinced that something is true *just* because someone else happens to believe it? So don’t just state whether or not you agree with the author’s conclusion. Instead, try to give *reasons* for or against the author’s *argument* for this conclusion.

In my experience, **the most common way for paper grades to suffer is due to a lack of** ***documentation in the texts***. You should use direct citations sparingly – generally only if the exact wording of the passage is either directly relevant to the argument you’re making, or particularly clear and concise. (Short direct citations should be placed in quotation-marks; direct citations over 3 lines long should be offset, indented, single-space, and without quotation-marks.) In other cases, use indirect citation – paraphrasing in your own words what the author says, and telling the reader where s/he says it.