

## Aristotle on Virtue

We have seen that on Aristotle's view the happy life is a life of human excellence. Human excellence consists in the rational activity of the soul. Note that it is not just any rational activity of the soul, it is the rational activity which best realizes our rational capacities, i.e., the excellence of our rational part.

### I. The Definition of Excellence (or Virtue)

What is this excellence of our rational part? Aristotle says:

Excellence, then, is (a) a state that decides, (b) <consisting> in a mean, (c) the mean relative to us, (d) which is defined by reference to reason, (e) i.e., to the reason by reference to which the intelligent person would define it. (1106b36-1107a2)

Each part of this definition deserves some careful attention. We might ask:

- i) What sort of state is excellence?
- ii) What does Aristotle mean in saying that virtue is "a state that decides"?
- iii) What is "the mean relative to us"?
- iv) What is it to be "defined by reference to reason, i.e., to the reason by reference to which the intelligent person would define it"?

#### i) States of Character

Aristotle believes that a virtuous person is one who acts in the right way out of a stable state of character. It is not enough for one's actions to conform to a set of moral requirements, since a person of bad character could manage to do the right thing for a stretch of time; but such a person, on Aristotle's view, would not be virtuous.

States of character are dispositions. Human beings, like other natural objects, have both active and passive potentialities, i.e., capacities both to act, and to be acted upon. Our conduct results from the actualization of human capacities to act; our feelings and emotional responses are the actualizations of our capacities to respond to situations. We have the active potentiality to act, and the passive potentiality to feel and to be changed by external circumstances. For example, when somebody insults me and I feel anger, this feeling is an actualization of my capacity to feel emotion. It is our state of character which disposes us to act and feel as we do in the circumstances we confront.

Virtue is concerned both with proper conduct and with feeling. A virtuous person is one who, as a result of a stable state of character, both acts well and feels well. Thus, to be virtuous is to be disposed to act (and feel) in the right way; the good person acts (and feels) in the right way because he or she has a good character and actualizes the potentialities of that character. So in saying that happiness is "activity" in accordance with virtue, Aristotle is saying that happiness consists (by and large) in the actualization of the potentialities of a good character. Virtue and happiness are concerned with doing the right thing as well as feeling the right thing; and even more, they are concerned the good character which gives rise to right action and right feeling.

Questions to think about:

- Should I really be said to lack virtue of I act rightly, but have the "wrong" feeling in acting? Is Aristotle's view too demanding?
- What counts as the "wrong" action or the "wrong" feeling, in a given circumstance? How do we tell?
- Could one be happy (eudaimon) or flourish, without a good character? Could one have a good character without being happy or flourishing? How would Aristotle handle the apparent counterexamples?

## ii) Choice and Deliberation

Virtue or excellence is a state concerned with choice, ie., it is a disposition to make choices well. This is why it is appropriate to see virtue as the excellence of practical reason, for practical reason is the faculty of deliberation which results in choice. As Aristotle says, "...it is that which has been decided upon as a result of deliberation that is the object of choice" (NE III:3 1113a4-5).

Aristotle's view of deliberation is concerned with the process by which we decide on a course of action (See NE III:2-4). As a result, the proper subject matter for deliberation and choice is what is within our power. (See, eg., NE III:3 1112a32-33, III:2 1111b29-30) We do not *deliberate* about whether Clinton should attack Iraq (though we may form opinions about this) (eg., 1112a28-31); but we can deliberate about what we should do now: Should I join the armed forces? Should I join a protest? Should I write my Congressional representative? Should I ignore the situation entirely? [Aristotle also notes that we do not deliberate about the past, but only about the future, for we are not in a position to affect the past. \*NE 1139b5-11]

Deliberation results in desire, "...for when we have decided as a result of deliberation we desire in accordance with our deliberation." (1113a12-13). In beginning the process of deliberation, we begin with a goal or desire, but it is often a goal which cannot be achieved directly. Perhaps it is too vague, or perhaps it requires intermediate steps to achieve it. Deliberation is the process by which we connect the goal (ultimately) with the immediate possibilities for action. For example, suppose I want to help my friend Anne. This desire is very vague; to help Anne I must first figure out what (within my power) would be helpful to her. In doing so I am making my desire more precise, ie., I am finding a more concrete goal which could function as a part of that larger goal. Suppose I decide that I will help Anne get a job. This deliberated decision brings with it the desire to help her get a job; but in order to act on this desire, I must figure out the means by which to do so. Eg., I may decide to babysit her daughter when she goes to a job interview. Eventually this train of deliberation will result in action. At some point I will get up from my seat to walk to her house to babysit her daughter. Deliberation a kind of self-conscious reasoning that transmits our desire from the abstract to the concrete; it enables us to form reasonable desires we can act on straightaway. Thus, the virtue of practical reason is excellence in capacity for thoughtful desire.

### Questions to think about:

- What does Aristotle mean in saying that we deliberate about what contributes to ends, not about ends (Eg., NE 1112b13, 1112b33-35, 1113b2-4)? Does he really mean that deliberation can never apply to ends? Why? In the example above, I claimed to have deliberated about how to help my friend, and decided on a goal: to help her find a job. What should we say about this example?

## iii) The Mean

What is it to act well, and feel well, ie., what makes our capacity for thoughtful desire excellent? Aristotle says that excellence lies in having a disposition for choice "lying in a mean relative to us..."

It is important to note that this definition is not to be taken as espousing the view that to be virtuous is to act (and feel) moderately in all situations. It is certainly not virtuous to act moderately angry (ie., between the extremes of being furious and being not really angry at all), if you insult me in a trivial way; nor is it virtuous to act only moderately angry if you commit a grave offense against me. Similarly, the mean cannot be defined to require the same action for each individual; for me to eat moderately will require me to eat much less than for a professional athlete to eat moderately. (See NE II:6 1106a24-1106b33)

Remember, virtue is a disposition of character, so what must lie in the mean is not the actions the virtuous person performs, but the virtuous person's disposition to act. Virtue is an "intermediate disposition" to act and feel in certain ways, not a disposition to act and feel in "intermediate ways". To have one's dispositions to act and feel "in the mean" is to have dispositions to behave appropriately in the circumstances one encounters. One should be disposed to act and feel in a way which is not too extreme (ie., neither too much nor too little) given the circumstances. For example, courage is a mean between cowardice and rashness; truthfulness is a mean between mock modesty and boastfulness; friendliness is a mean between surliness and obsequiousness; temperance is a mean between asceticism and self-indulgence; modesty is a mean between shamelessness and bashfulness; pride is a mean between undue humility and empty vanity. A diagram may help:

COWARDICE -----\* **COURAGE** \*----- RASHNESS

involves just the right amount of:

<---too much---[ FEAR ]---too little--->

<----too little----[ BOLDNESS ]----too much---->

#### Questions to think about:

- Does Aristotle's endorsement of the mean work better for some states of character than others? What ones (if any) don't fit well into his model?
- How does the suggestion that Aristotle's view that the mean concerns dispositions solve the problem mentioned above about individual differences? Should my disposition to make courageous choices be the same as one who is much stronger than I am?

#### iv) The Reasonable Person

Although it helps to know that to act well and feel well, one's state of character must lie within the mean, this still seems to leave the definition of virtue vague. What exactly is the mean, and how do we determine what it is? First, it is important to remember that virtue will be a disposition to make choices guided by practical reason. So one way of failing to act and feel aright will be to have a character disposed to act without thoughtful desire, ie., without deliberation.

But there is more to say, for as Aristotle suggests, the mean should be determined, "...by reason, and in the way in which the man of practical reason would determine it." By relying on a paradigm, viz., a person who excels at practical reason, to determine the mean, Aristotle is suggesting that there will be no rules which can tell us how to act virtuously, no rules to

determine the exact state of character which constitutes virtue. Instead we must look to a paradigm of virtue to determine how their character would dispose them to act.

Aristotle believes that virtue, ie., the dispositions or capacities to act and feel in the right sort of way, is something one cultivates by habituation. One does not simply decide to have a good character; nor does one become virtuous simply by understanding what virtue is, eg., by learning rules or definitions. One must establish in oneself the stable disposition to behave properly. To become virtuous we must start by acting properly, by imitating the behavior which would arise from a virtuous person's state of character. Through repeated practice we develop in ourselves the right sorts of dispositions, and along with these dispositions we gain an understanding of our action and its relation to the good. Knowledge of rules will not make the vicious person virtuous; and knowledge of rules is unnecessary for the person of good character.

#### Questions to think about:

- If we are a novice at virtue, and don't have knowledge of how to act properly, how do we know who to imitate in order to become virtuous?
- Why does Aristotle think that there are no rules which can determine how to behave virtuously?
- Would Socrates or Plato agree with Aristotle that we become virtuous by habit? (Cf., Meno, Republic Bks. II-III) Do you think virtue can be taught?

#### II. Virtue and Responsibility

Aristotle believes that one is responsible for one's good and bad actions. Not only this, but one is responsible for one's emotional responses to situations. One might think that here Aristotle is being too harsh, for (as he is the first to admit) we are not always in a position to control our emotions. If I get angry, this is not something that I do (it is not an action that I perform), it is something that happens to me as a result of another's actions. Nevertheless, Aristotle believes that we can condition and train ourselves to feel the appropriate amount of emotion in the given circumstances. Because what emotion we feel is not unrelated to how we act, by choosing to act in certain ways, we develop in ourselves not only the dispositions to act, but the dispositions to have the emotions which generally accompany such action. For example, by choosing to act violently in response to situations, I am allowing myself to develop dispositions to have certain emotions (eg., extreme anger) in those situations. If we fail to have the proper feeling in some situation, this is because we did not make the effort to train and control our emotions. Since in the past we could have done this, Aristotle thinks that we are responsible even today when such control is no longer directly in our power.

Our choices depend on deliberation. We deliberate about what kind of life we should lead, and what concrete goals will contribute towards our leading such a life. As a result of such deliberation about our life as a whole, we will change some of our concrete goals. We will also understand that if we want to behave and feel in certain ways, we must take steps now to condition our souls to make ourselves act and feel in those ways. Since all human beings are capable of deliberation, if we fail to do this, we are responsible.