

## Aristotle on virtue<sup>1</sup>

Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* with the question ‘What is the good for human beings?’ What is it that we are aiming at, that would provide a successful, fulfilling, good life? We undertake actions and activities either for the sake of something further or ‘for their own sake’. Suppose there is some end for whose sake we do everything else. Then this end would be the good for us. As Julia Annas notes in her article ‘Virtue ethics’, in thinking about why we do what we do, we end up thinking about how to live one’s life well as a whole.

Eudaimonia is the good for a human life. It is often translated as ‘happiness’ but Aristotle says it is ‘living well and faring well’. Eudaimonia is ‘the good’ or the ‘good life’ for human beings as the particular sort of being we are. To achieve it is to live as best a human being can live. But what sort of life is a good or flourishing life for us? Aristotle argues that a human life is distinctively the life of a being that can be guided by reason. Qualities that enable us to lead such a life are virtues. In this handout, we consider Aristotle’s theory of the virtues. (For further discussion of his concept of eudaimonia, see the handout ‘Aristotle on eudaimonia, function and virtue’.)

### THE RATIONAL ‘SOUL’

If the good life for human beings is living in accordance with reason, and this requires the virtues, what are the virtues?

A virtue is a trait of a person’s ‘soul’ - we would perhaps say ‘mind’ or ‘self’. Aristotle provides an analysis of the soul. We can divide it into an arational part, and a rational part (at least in analysis, even if there aren’t literal ‘parts’). The arational part can be further divided in two - the part that is related to ‘growth and nutrition’ (Aristotle thought that all life has soul) and the part related to desire and emotion. The desiring part we share with other animals, but in us, it can be responsive to reason. For instance, suppose someone wants to use all their money to buy things they want, but they recognise that it is good to share their wealth with others, and so they do so, their desire gives way. Someone with the virtue of generosity has reshaped their desires, and is not even tempted to try to spend their money on themselves, but happily provides for other people’s needs and desires. What they want ‘speaks with the same voice’ as their reason.

We can talk about the rational part of the soul having two parts as well. There is, again, the desiring part which can respond to reasons and there is the part with which we reason, which has reason ‘in itself’.

---

<sup>1</sup> This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 278-88

Virtues are traits that enable us to live in accordance with reason. They are, therefore, of two kinds - virtues of the intellect (traits of the reasoning part) and virtues of character (traits of the part characterised by desire and emotion). In the rest of his handout, we concentrate on virtues of character. (See the handout 'Aristotle on practical wisdom' for discussion of the central intellectual virtue related to leading a good life.)

## **VIRTUES AS CHARACTER TRAITS**

Aristotle says that anything that is part of the soul (the mind) is either a passion, a faculty or a state (trait) of character. So since virtues are part of the soul, they must be one of these.

1. Passions: Aristotle's term 'passions' covers our bodily appetites (for food, drink, sex, etc.), our emotions, and any feelings accompanied by pleasure or pain. But these can't be virtues for three reasons.
  - a. Just having a particular passion - feeling hungry or angry - doesn't make you a good or bad person.
  - b. We don't choose our passions, but virtues are related to the choices we make. We cannot generally, just by an act of will, choose what we feel or want.
  - c. Virtues concern how we are disposed to feel and act; they are not desires that actually motivate us.
2. Faculties: faculties are things like sight or the ability to feel fear. Virtues can't be these, since we have these naturally but we have to acquire virtue.
3. So virtues must be states of character.

Aristotle defines states of character as 'the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions'. Character involves a person's dispositions that relate to what, in different circumstances, they feel, how they think, how they react, the sorts of choices they make, and the actions they perform. So someone is short-tempered if they are disposed to feel angry quickly and often; quick-witted if they can think on their feet; intemperate if they get drunk often and excessively. ('Temperance' is the virtue relating to pleasure, especially our desires for food, drink, and sex.) What we find pleasant also reveals our character.

Character has a certain stability and longevity. Character traits last much longer and change less easily than many 'states of mind', such as moods and desires. But character can change, and so it is less stable and long-lived than personal identity. Yet it is central to being the person one is. Annas comments that my virtues are dispositions of me, and so they are connected to my life as a whole. Aristotelian virtue theory assumes that there is a sense in which I can think about my life as a 'unity'.

What kind of state of character is a virtue? Some traits of character, such as being short-tempered or greedy, stop us from leading a good life - these are vices. Other traits of character, such as being kind or courageous, help us to lead a good life - and these are the virtues. Any virtue makes the thing which has it good and able to perform its characteristic activity well. So, in us, a virtue of character is a disposition to feel, desire and choose 'well', which is necessary if we are to live well and so achieve eudaimonia.

This last point - choosing well - is important. Annas notes that virtues in the fullest sense aren't simply dispositions to behave in certain ways, like being clumsy is a disposition to have accidents. They are expressed in the choices we make and the reasons for which we act, and a virtue involves a commitment by the person to an ethical value. And so practical reason is central to having and exercising the virtues.

### **VIRTUES, THE DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN AND THE IMPORTANCE OF FEELINGS**

What is involved in choosing and living well? Aristotle compares living well with other activities, such as eating well or physical training. In these cases, the good nutritionist or good trainer needs to avoid prescribing too much food or exercise or too little. We achieve health and physical fitness by following an 'intermediate' course of action, which Aristotle calls the 'mean'. However, what this is differs from person to person. A professional sportsman needs more food and exercise than most people. The mean, what is neither too much nor too little, is relative to each individual. (This 'mean' is not a mathematical quantity, an 'objective' mean halfway between the two extremes, as 6 is halfway between 2 and 10.)

Now, in the 'art of living', so to speak, something similar applies. We can feel our passions either 'too much' or 'too little' - and here we see the importance of feelings in virtue. Virtue involves being disposed to feeling in an 'intermediate' way, neither too much nor too little. Some people feel angry too often, over too many things (perhaps they take a critical comment as an insult), or maybe whenever they get angry, they get very angry, even at minor things. Other people feel angry not often enough (perhaps they don't understand how people take advantage of them). To be virtuous is 'to feel [passions] at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way'. This is Aristotle's 'doctrine of the mean'.

It is important to note that Aristotle's doctrine of the mean does not claim that when we get angry, we should only ever be 'moderately' angry. We should be as angry as the situation demands, which can be very angry or only slightly irritated. Given the very close connection between what we feel and how we choose to act, virtues are dispositions of choice as well, and there is a 'mean' for actions as well as for feelings.

Annas expands on this. We need to do the right thing for the right reasons and in an appropriate way. This appropriate way involves both affective and intellectual aspects. Our action needs to be accompanied by the right feelings. This isn't merely a matter of self-control, but whole-heartedness. As in our example of generosity above, doing the right thing but grudgingly, or while controlling one's temptation to do the wrong, while better than doing the wrong thing (!), is not virtuous, according to Aristotle.

The intellectual aspect of virtuous action involves understanding that this action is the right thing to do. What the right action, time, object, person and so on is, for both feeling and action, Practical wisdom helps us to know. (We won't complete our account of virtue, therefore, until we have understood what practical wisdom is.) Practical wisdom is a virtue of reason. Our passions, we noted, are susceptible to reason. There can be right and wrong ways to feel passions, and the right way to feel passions is determined by reason. If we feel our passions 'irrationally' - at the wrong times, towards the wrong objects, etc. - then we don't live well. Likewise, we can choose the right or wrong actions and act for the right or wrong reasons, usually as a result of whether the feelings that help influence our choices are themselves rational or irrational. So, Aristotle concludes, a virtue is 'a state of character concerned with choice, lying in the mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it'.

The application of the doctrine of the mean to particular virtues

The doctrine of the mean entails that we can (often, if not always) place a virtue 'between' two vices. Just as there is a right time, object, person, etc., at which to feel fear (or any emotion), some people can feel fear too often, about too many things, and towards too many people, or they get too afraid of things that aren't that dangerous. Other people can feel afraid not often enough, regarding too few objects and people. Someone who feels fear 'too much' is cowardly. Someone who feels fear 'too little' is rash. Someone who has the virtue relating to fear is courageous. The virtue is the 'intermediate' state between the two vices of 'too much' and 'too little'.

Aristotle presents the following examples. For many states of character, he notes, we don't have a common name.

Passion/concern	Vice of deficiency	Virtue	Vice of excess
Fear	Cowardly	Courageous	Rash
Pleasure/pain	'Insensible'	Temperate	Self-indulgent
Giving/taking money	Mean	Liberal ('free')	Prodigal ('spendthrift')
Spending large sums of money	Niggardly	'Magnificent'	Tasteless
Important honour	Unduly humble	Properly proud	Vain
Small honours	'Unambitious'	'Properly ambitious'	'Overambitious'
Anger	'Unirascible'	Good-tempered	Short-tempered
Truthfulness (regarding	Falsely modest	Truthful	Boastful

oneself)			
Humour	Boorish	Witty	Buffoonish
Pleasant to others	Quarrelsome, surly	Friendly	Obsequious
Shame	Shy	Modest	Shameless
Attitude to others' fortune	Spiteful (rejoicing in others' bad fortune)	Righteously indignant (pained by others' undeserved good fortune)	Envious (pained by others' good fortune)

Obviously, Aristotle notes, not all types of actions or states of character can pick out a mean. For example, being shameless is not a mean, but a vice, while murder is always wrong. Furthermore, we often oppose a virtue to one of the two vices, either because it forms a stronger contrast with that vice (e.g. courage-cowardice) or because we have a natural tendency towards that vice, so need to try harder to resist it (e.g. temperance-self-indulgence).

### **THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MORAL CHARACTER**

We now know what virtues are. But how do we acquire them? Virtues are necessary for eudaimonia, but because they are dispositions towards feeling passions, and passions are not under the direct control of the will, we can't simply choose to become virtuous. Aristotle argues that we acquire virtues of character through 'habit', in particular, the habits we form during our upbringing. We need to develop virtue because, Aristotle argues, we are not virtuous just by nature. He points out that for what we can do naturally, we first have the 'potentiality' and then exhibit the activity. For example, you don't acquire sight by seeing; first you have sight, then you can see. But for the virtues, you must first practice acting in a virtuous way - courageously, generously, kindly, etc. - before you can be virtuous. We are not naturally virtuous, but we are naturally capable of becoming virtuous.

#### The skill analogy

We can understand how we acquire virtues by an analogy with acquiring practical skills, such as carpentry, cookery or playing a musical instrument. There are two parts to the analogy.

The first part regards how the development of the skill/virtue begins. We come to form dispositions to feel and behave in certain ways by what we do. The same is true for practical skills. You cannot learn cookery or a musical instrument just by studying the theory, by merely acquiring knowledge about how to cook or play; you have to practice the activity. Likewise, being told how to be good is not enough to become good; you have to actually practice being good: 'the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well [e.g. learning to play a musical instrument]. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.' Hence, 'by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and by being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly'.

It can seem that there is a puzzle in what Aristotle says. In order to become just, we have to do just acts. But how can we do just acts unless we are already just? The puzzle is solved by distinguishing between actions which are 'in accordance with' justice and just acts, properly so called. The actions that we do when learning to become just are acts in accordance with justice. But a just act is an act that is not only in accordance with justice, but also done as the just person does it.

This takes us to the second part of the skill analogy, which Annas draws out. While we first learn from others, this is only half the process. As with practical skills, the aim in moral education is to get the child/student to learn to think for themselves. This involves two related skills.

First, the expert progresses from simply following rules to developing a highly attuned sensitivity to how each situation is different, and how to respond to those differences appropriately. So a good carpenter responds and works with the knots and grain in the wood; a good chef checks the seasoning of each dish by tasting it, and adjusts each element of a meal in light of the others. Likewise, in growing in virtue, we become better able to recognise situations in which action is called for and what to do in response.

Second, just as in developing a practical skill, we understand why this way rather than that is better - why this screwdriver, why this spice, and not that one - so, in its development of virtue, the child comes to reflect on the reasons for acting this way rather than that. He or she tries to make their moral judgments and practice more coherent and unified and is able to justify their choices. In all this, our appreciation of what is virtuous may change. For example, we may first associate courage just with physical courage, particularly in fighting. But then, with reflection and greater experience, we come to identify it in dealing with emotional challenges, with loss, in friendships and speaking truth to power. We may come to rethink whether certain types of action that we thought exemplified courage, e.g. in Hollywood blockbusters, really are courageous at all or a form of masculine competition. Thus as we develop in virtue, we understand, in a practical way, more about what is good. All this is part of our developing practical wisdom.

And so, Aristotle argues, a fully virtuous action is one in which the agent knows what they are doing, chooses the act for its own sake (i.e. for the end at which the relevant virtue aims, e.g. justice), and makes their choice from a firm and unchangeable character. Until it has moved from the early learning stage to the development of a richer expertise, a child may do what is just (such as not taking more than its fair share) because it is told to do so; or because it likes the person it is sharing with; or because it wants to please an adult, and so on. It neither truly understands what justice is nor does it choose the act because the act is just.

Annas notes that there are limits to the skill analogy. First, we don't have to pursue the ends of a particular skill, such as creating beautiful furniture or tasty food, e.g. we may lose interest in that activity or its rewards. But virtues pursue our final end - eudaimonia - and we can't opt out of having that end, we can't want to live at all and cease to want to live a good life. Second, many practical skills can be developed without involving our emotions, but the development of our emotional dispositions is central to developing virtue.

Aristotle concludes that whether or not we can lead a good life depends a great deal on the habits we form when we are young - in our childhood and early adulthood. Furthermore, because our character is revealed by what we take pleasure in, we need to learn to take pleasure in the things that we should take pleasure in, and be pained by what should pain us.