

# Chapter 19

## Virtue and the Mean

### 19.1 Readings and Homework

- Readings: Aristotle, *Ethics*, II
- Further Readings and sources for the course notes:
  - R. Kraut, “Aristotle’s Ethics” SEP 2005
  - D.S. Hutchinson “Ethics”, Cambridge Companion to Aristotle
- Study Questions:
  1. To what part of the soul do appetites and desires correspond?
  2. For Aristotle, how human beings can become virtuous?
  3. How does Aristotle characterize virtue? How does it compare to Plato’s ways of defining virtue?
  4. What are the relations between virtuous action and pleasure and feelings?
  5. What do you think is or are true for Aristotle?
    - (a) Being angry is always bad
    - (b) Being envious is always bad
    - (c) Bad and good generally depends on the circumstances

## 19.2 Classification of Virtues and their opposite

- **Distinction between virtues sharing reason:**
  - virtues of thought
  - virtue of character
- **Virtues of thought are the virtues of the purely rational part of the soul:** wisdom, comprehension and intelligence. Their practice implies a direct use of reason. They thus correspond to the part of the rational part of the soul which has reason within itself and uses it directly.
- **Virtues of character** are: courage, generosity, temperance etc. They correspond to a part of the soul that shares with the irrational and the rational parts of it: impulses, appetites or desires. In what sense?
  - It is a part of the soul which **can conflict with reason**: thus it is different and irrational to some extent (notice that this is the same argument as in Plato's *Republic*: since conflict is possible, there must be two different principles at work)
  - That said, not only can it conflict with reason, but also it **can obey reason** (in the case of continent persons) or, even better, gracefully listen to reason (in the case of the temperate and brave, that is, truly virtuous person).
- The part of the soul corresponding to the character is thus:
  - irrational in so far as it does not contain reason in itself (reason is not the direct principle at work in what it dictates to do),
  - but it shares in reason through a constant interaction with the rational part. The kind of interaction (conflicting, obeying, listening) determines the kind of person and action under consideration (incontinent, continent, virtuous).

In the following, **we will focus on the virtues of characters**, that is, these virtues that share with reason, but involve also a part of irrationality.

## 19.3 Virtues of character are dispositions, actualized through habituation – Chapter 1

It is an important thesis of Aristotle that virtue is a disposition brought up by habituation.

### 19.3.1 Virtue is coming from habituation

- That virtue is coming from habituation means that:
  - **virtue is not natural** (1103a20): Human beings are not brave, moderate and just naturally. Contrast with Rousseau.
  - **That said, vice is not natural either**: Human beings are not cowards, excessive and unjust by nature. Contrast with Hobbes. And with Glaucon's challenge!

Thus the virtues arise in us neither by nature or against nature. Rather we are by nature able to acquire them, and reach our complete perfection through habits. (1003a25)

**SO: The fundamental (and paradoxical) nature of human beings is to be *perfectible through habits*.**

- **How does it work? How can *habits* induce virtue?**
  - Analogy with learning a craft: one becomes good harpist in playing the harp.
  - Applied to virtue this becomes: one becomes virtuous (temperate, brave etc) in doing virtuous (temperate, brave etc.) actions
  - Further evidence : education in the city – citizens become habituated to behave according to the laws.
  - Notice that it works the other way around as well! That is, bad actions provokes bad habits inducing bad character and, consequently, bad actions, and so on.
- **Discussion**: Human beings: good naturally, bad naturally, or full of possibilities?

**SO: one becomes truly virtuous in getting the habit of doing virtuous actions, by regularly doing virtuous actions!**

### 19.3.2 Virtue as a disposition

What does it mean that virtue is a *disposition*? a disposition of what? and what is a disposition anyway?

- **Disposition:** property that manifests itself only under certain conditions.

paradigmatic example: fragility. Glass is fragile, which means that it can break under specific conditions (getting hit by a hammer...). Glass does not always break, it breaks only under the conditions specified. Fragility does not manifest itself all the time, but only under certain conditions. Fragility is a disposition.

- **The point is that through habitual good actions, we come to have the tendency to have the good emotional response to what happens.**

Let's try to understand:

1. Aristotle admits that virtues of character concern a part of our soul which involves irrationality: emotions, desires. **There is no way to deny that emotions are part of us.** We should expect them to be part of our actions. So to have a virtuous character is to be virtuous concerning our emotions and desires.
2. What is virtue in that case? It may easier to see what it is to be vicious: you arguably won't be able to be virtuous if you are overwhelmed by your emotions. This suggests that we will be vicious or virtuous according to the type of emotions we have in a given situation. **Virtue of character thus consists in having the right emotional response to given circumstances.**

**Example:** Fear. Well, there is no way to deny that fear exist. Fear is a feeling that we have and even need for survival. Fear should be managed by reason though. **The brave person is the one that has the appropriate amount of fear in given circumstances.**

- **Conclusion:** The claim of Aristotle is that, in acting in the right way, you get the irrational part of your soul used to produce the right emotional response. **In making sure to have the appropriate**

### 19.3. VIRTUES OF CHARACTER ARE DISPOSITIONS, ACTUALIZED THROUGH HABITUATION

**emotional response to given circumstances, you teach your body to produce this appropriate response. When this has become a well fixed habit, then you are virtuous.** At that point, you do not need to fight anymore: the appropriate response comes naturally to you, which means that you now possess a virtuous character. This is what perfectible means. And this is why education is so important.

To sum up then, in a single account: A state of character arises from the repetition of similar activities.(1103b22)

There are always two components of true virtue for Aristotle: what you do and what you feel. To do virtuous actions is not enough ! You have also to feel the right way about it. To be virtuous, not only you have to do what is right to do, but it should also come to you naturally, as a result of good habits, which is exactly what virtue of character means.

- **Discussion:** Aristotle, in defining virtue as a tendency to have the appropriate emotions goes directly **against Plato's** idea that virtue is equivalent to knowledge. According to Aristotle, **it is not sufficient to know what the good is to do the good.** Indeed, Aristotle accepts and discusses the notion of weakness of will. Conversely, vice is not simply a lack of knowledge but a disposition to have inappropriate emotional responses to concrete situations, induced by bad habits.

A consequence is that, again, a book on Ethics cannot make you virtuous, unless you are used to doing good actions.

Do you remember Plato's arguments? 'no one is mean voluntarily', meaning, when someone does something bad, it is because he or she is mistaken on what is the best for him/her at that moment. This is ignorance, nothing else. If they really knew what the best for them was, they would have done it.

So, what do you think? Is there something like weakness of will, or is what some call weakness of will nothing but a mix of ignorance and hypocrisy?

- **Pb: Aristotle's account seems circular:**
  - to be virtuous we have to become virtuous

- to become virtuous we have to act virtuously
- but to act virtuously is to be virtuous

How do we get out of it?

- the notion of habits: habits induce a disposition – this is made clear in 1104b1-3.

Habituation in disdaining what is fearful and in standing firm against it makes us become brave, and when we become brave we shall be most able to stand firm.

- Example: junk food

This is the story of the virtuous or vicious circle.

**That said, to ever start on the virtuous circle, we still have to know more about what generally characterizes virtuous behaviors.** For this, we need to know

1. which are the virtuous actions
2. which are the virtuous emotional states corresponding to the virtues of character

The theory of the mean is supposed to help us in the virtuous circle of virtue. That said, never forget that the very nature of ethics (not an exact science) forbids to hope for a purely rational, deductive account of what are the virtuous behaviors.

## 19.4 The Doctrine of the mean – Chapter 2

One of the most important theory of Aristotle: **virtue is an intermediate.** Aristotle's argument for the doctrine of the mean:

- **Assumption:** “**virtuous actions should express correct reason**”.(1103b33)

This is an assumption based on common belief – again, ethics is not an exact science.

- **Method: “no fixed and invariable answers”**

- There is no universal recipe: virtuous actions should be characterized depending on the particular circumstances
- Analogy with navigation and medicine

- **A proposal: virtue is a mean**

- This proposal is based on observation: Virtuous states of character are “ruined by excess and deficiency but preserved by the mean” (1104a25)
- Examples for an analogical use: exercise/strength, eating and drinking / health
- Aristotle extends this thesis to all virtues of character
- Example (famous): Fear: the brave in between the coward and the rash person
- Aristotle concludes that we are out of the circularity, and that we can say now that the same activities make us *becoming* and *being* virtuous.

- **The two doctrines of the mean**

Here is the doctrine of the mean about actions, or rather, the two versions of the doctrine of the mean:

(DM1) Virtuous actions are the actions that lay in between two alternative actions that are respectively excessive and deficient.

(DM2) Virtue of character is an emotional state in between two excessive states.

- **About DM1:** Can all choices be formulated in terms of choice between extremes actions? Can we always put the alternative choices on a quantitative scale?

Remember Euthyphro’s problem: should he prosecute his father or not?

Answer: the object of choice is not the mean, granted. But, in Kraut’s terms, the virtuous person, in choosing what to do, “seeks to express the right degree of concern for all the relevant consideration”. Now what comes in degrees is quantifiable. The issue is about how much attention you should give to this or that consideration (involuntary murder vs. family duties in the case of Euthyphro).

It seems then that (DM1) is not quite right. It is not clear that virtuous actions can be characterized as a mean. **SO: the doctrine of the mean is better grasped by (DM2).**

- **About DM2:** Are some emotions banned?
  - Are not there some emotions that are always bad? YES – see the end of the final chapter of the book: spite, shamelessness, envy etc.
  - These are excesses already: to say that there is a mean between too much spite and not enough spite is similar to say that there is a mean between too much cowardice and not enough cowardice.
  - So how do we choose what are extremes? Should feel anger or fear at all or are they always bad?

Aristotle here attacks the Stoics, for whom no feeling of fear or anger can be virtuous.

By contrast, for Aristotle, it is essential for humans to have these feelings and emotions. Further, it is virtuous to have them in the right way, that is, appropriate to the circumstances. This means that there are virtuous ways to be angry.

How do we know that spite is always bad, while fear is not? Common sense?

- **Is the mean the middle? Are strong emotions are banned?**

NO! – at least, to the point where you lose control (from reason) of course. Aristotle clearly states that the appropriate intermediate is to be decided upon according to the particular circumstances. See the eating diet of the athlete and of the lay man.

Distinction between arithmetic and geometric mean: the ratio between virtue and the excesses is the same. This does not imply that virtue is in the middle. Virtue can well be closer to one of the extreme than to the other one.

$$Virtue = \sqrt{Cowardice \times Rashness}$$

$$Virtue^2 = Cowardice \times Rashness$$



$$\frac{Cowardice}{Virtue} = \frac{Virtue}{Rashness}$$

**SUMMING UP: virtue of character is**

1. never defined absolutely
2. virtue of the part of the soul which is irrational but interacts with reason, i.e. emotions
3. the disposition to display the appropriate emotional state in response to given circumstance
4. obtained by habituation, by teaching our soul to display virtue
5. given by a mean between excess and deficiency of a given emotion (fear, anger etc.), a mean which is defined as *relative and geometric*.

## 19.5 Virtue and feelings: pleasure and pain – Chapter 3

We have come to the idea that **virtue is a disposition to have appropriate intermediate emotions given the circumstances**. What about feelings – pleasure and pain?

Note on feelings and emotions:

- feelings: your body response to a sensory input (pain, pleasure)
- emotions: the result of your feeling after your brain has processed it (anger, fear, joy)

Note that the same feeling can result in various emotions: pain can procure anger, fear, or even joy!

So, up to now, we have studied the relationship between virtue and emotions. The question arises as to how virtue and feelings are related. Does Aristotle also defend the idea that the virtuous person is in an intermediate state between pleasure and pain?

No, quite the contrary.

- **“Actions are not enough”** – This is to say, what you do is not enough to determine whether you are virtuous or not. Virtue is actualized through virtuous actions, but virtuous actions are truly virtuous only if the appropriate feeling come along.

To say it simply: you are **not** truly in virtuous state of character if you do the good, constantly fighting against feelings to the opposite effect.

- **Arguments for the necessity to consider feelings in Ethics**
  1. pleasure and pain are the **causes** of any of our action
  2. pleasure and pain are **immediate consequences** of any of our action
  3. **empirical evidence:** to inflict pain whenever you do bad is efficient to correct bad actions (resp. pleasure for good actions) – this is the point of education
  4. **Consequence:** against the Stoics and Epicurians: happiness is NOT a state of no pleasure-no pain
  5. to be virtuous is to be correct about pleasure and pain – **to be virtuous is to take pleasure in fine things**
  6. **natural:** comes right from **infancy** (This is Epicurus’s argument for taking pleasure as a measure of virtue: from the observation that infants naturally seek pleasure, Epicurus infers that the true nature of human beings is to seek pleasure. Taking in turn that one is virtuous only if one lives according to nature, Epicurus concludes that one is virtuous only if one lives seeking for pleasure.)
  7. corollary: hard to fight – even more than emotions

**The conclusion** is that, in order to be accurate, **Ethics has to take feelings into account.**

- There is no way of avoiding them.

- There are essential parts of the way in which we act

- **Aristotle’s thesis: a virtuous person is virtuous with pleasure** (as cause and effect of the action).
  - This means that if you are reluctant to do the right thing, you are not being truly virtuous.

19.5. VIRTUE AND FEELINGS: PLEASURE AND PAIN – CHAPTER 3269

- **four types of behavior instead of two:**

- **vicious:** think in a wrong way, feels in a wrong way, acts in a wrong way

- **incontinent:** thinks in a right way, feels in a wrong way, acts in a wrong way

- **continent:** thinks in a right way, feels in a wrong way, acts in a right way – still fights against his emotions and feelings

- **truly virtuous** (practical wisdom): thinks, feels and acts in the right way.

- **SO: Unlike emotions, the virtuous person should not aim at an intermediate state concerning feelings. Virtue goes hand in hand with pleasure.**

Example: junk food again, or the Belgian Waffles on Clark

- **Discussion:**

- (1) Do only the action itself and/or the way you feel about it determine whether an action is virtuous or not? What about the consequences?

- (2) Cannot it be argued that a virtuous action is all the more virtuous when it does not give him and her any pleasure? Is not it the virtuous action “perverted” whenever colored by pleasure?

**SUMMING UP: Virtue of character is:**

1. never defined absolutely
2. virtue of the part of the soul which is irrational but interacts with reason, i.e. emotions
3. the disposition to display the appropriate emotional state in response to given circumstance
4. obtained by habituation, by teaching our soul to display virtue
5. given by a mean between excess and deficiency of a given emotion (fear, anger etc.), a mean which is defined as *relative and geometric*.

- 6. is always accompanied with pleasure

Are we out of the circle? Well, not yet: it remains to say how we are going to set what the appropriate intermediate emotions in given circumstances are.

## 19.6 Just and temperate actions are the actions that a just and temperate person would do – Chapter 4

- The notions of habits and learning take us in the circle (virtuous or vicious)
- We can learn from those who know: we learn grammar from grammarians, and we may become grammarian ourselves that way.
- Applied to virtue, the rule is thus: Just and temperate actions are the actions that a just and temperate person would do

### **The virtuous person is the standard and measure of our actions**

- The virtuous person is defined as:
  1. does virtuous actions
  2. knowing that he does so
  3. having rationally decided to do so because they are virtuous
  4. willing to do so (permanent state of the soul, not fighting)
- Consequence against the philosophers who are only philosophizing: being virtuous IS doing virtuous actions.
- Discussion: Is that trivial ? Well no: the virtuous person is good at **deliberation**. And deliberation is how you choose what to do... but this is in the chapters that follow.
- Aristotle sums up 1107a: Virtue is:
  1. an emotional state

2. consisting in a mean
3. the mean relative to us
4. which is defined with reference to reason
5. i.e, to the reason by reference to which the intelligent person would define it.

## 19.7 Conclusion

Among the most important point of Aristotle's ethical theory are:

- that it is not an exact science – that no universal method can be given for decision making;
- that emotions and feelings are necessary parts of our actions, thence of our being virtuous;

Aristotle is going to spend a lot of time on the notion of **deliberation** in the following chapters, trying to define **practical wisdom**, the virtue of thought. Practical wisdom is what is used in deliberation, or decision process. As a virtue of thought, it corresponds to the part of the rational soul which has reason by itself. Practical wisdom uses reason directly. **Rational practical thinking IS part of virtue.**

That said, that a kind of rational thinking is part of virtue is not what makes Aristotle's theory special. What is new with Aristotle is that rational thinking is not sufficient to be virtuous. Being virtuous involves being active, and actions go hand in hand with emotions and feelings. Consequently, virtue is also defined in terms of appropriate feelings and emotional responses to given circumstances. In short, to think right is not enough, and to act right is not enough either: the way you feel about it is essential.

