

Aristotle's Ethics of Virtue: action and reaction in aiming at happiness

1. Introduction. Virtue in Plato: justice or morality in both the individual and the state allows the whole system to work properly, each part performing its proper function well; the Form of the Good an abstract principle, "from which things that are just and so on derive their usefulness and value" (*Republic* 505a). Aristotle systematizes Plato: virtue ethics = living a good life for the good of the community by perfecting the moral virtues and thereby fulfilling one's potential as a human being.

2. Ethics as part of politics. "Man is by nature a social being" (1097b11, cf. Plato, *Republic* 369b: "the individual is not self-sufficient"). Social environment all-important. Legislation part of political science (1094b1); any educator, whether it be the state or a parent, should "assume the role of legislator" (1180a35). "Even if the good of the community coincides with that of the individual, it is clearly a greater and more perfect thing to achieve and preserve [the good of] the community" (1094b8).

3. Aristotle's classification of the sciences: Theoretical (Metaphysics, Physics, Mathematics); Productive; Practical (Ethics, Politics). "Production aims at an end other than itself; but this is impossible in the case of action [practical sciences], because the end is merely doing well" (1140b4).

a. Method. "We must be satisfied with a broad outline of the truth" (1094b20). "Our account of this science will be adequate if it achieves such clarity as the subject-matter allows; for the same degree of precision is not to be expected in all discussions" (1094b12). "It is a matter of no little importance what sort of habits we form from the earliest age – it makes a vast difference, or rather all the difference in the world" (1103b25).

b. The highest form of happiness = contemplation. "But if a living being is deprived of action, and still further of production, what is left but contemplation? It follows, then, that the activity of God, which is supremely happy, must be a form of contemplation; and therefore among human activities that which is most akin to God's will be the happiest." (1178b20) "Contemplation is (...) the highest form of activity (since the intellect is the highest thing in us, and the objects that it apprehends are the highest things that can be known)" (1177a20).

4. Happiness = living well and acting well (1098b21), fulfilling the function of being human excellently.

a. Virtue = excellence in all fields of activity, involving both feelings and actions. Cf. Plato's perfect philosopher (*Republic* 487a).

b. Character training: disposition towards something. "We are constituted by nature to receive them [the moral virtues], but their full development in us is due to habit" (1103a25). "It is by refraining from pleasures that we become temperate [or self-disciplined], and it is when we have become temperate that we are most able to abstain from pleasures. Similarly with courage; it is by habituating ourselves to make light of alarming situations and to face them that we become brave, and it is when we have become brave that we shall be most able to face an alarming situation." (1104a35)

c. Individual variability, no rule for all human beings. Compare Plato: "No two of us are born exactly alike. We have different natural aptitudes, which fit us for different jobs." (*Republic*, 370b) Contrast Utilitarians (Bentham, John Stuart Mill: judging an action by its consequences, e.g. maximizing happiness for the maximum number of people) and Kant (reason alone can determine the form of a good moral action, independent of both consequences and personal incentives); for both the latter, there are general rules for all human beings.

5. Man's proper function. Three-part soul: Rational, Desiderative/Appetitive, Vegetative/Nutritive, corresponding to 3-part classification of organisms into Humans, Animals and Plants. Reason thus distinguishes humans, so: "If the function of man is an activity of the soul in accordance with, or implying, a rational principle; ... and if we assume that the function of man is a kind of life, viz., an

activity or series of actions of the soul, implying a rational principle; and if the function of a good man is to perform these well and rightly; ...if all this is so, the conclusion is that the good for man is an activity of soul in accordance with [excellence or] virtue, or if there are more kinds of virtue than one, in accordance with the best and most perfect kind.” (1098a8-18) Distinction between Intellectual virtues (e.g. wisdom, understanding, prudence) and Moral virtues (1103a5).

6. “Virtue is a purposive disposition, lying in a mean that is relative to us and determined by a rational principle, and by that which a prudent man would use to determine it.” (1107a1)

a. “Virtue”. Moral excellence rather than intellectual.

b. “Purposive”. “Every art and every investigation, and similarly every action and pursuit, is considered to aim at some good” (1094a1) “What is the Good for man? It must be the ultimate end or object of human life: something that is in itself completely satisfying. Happiness fits this description” (p. 13, heading to Book 1, chapter 7).

c. “Disposition”. “Like activities produce like dispositions. Hence we must give our activities a certain quality, because it is their characteristics that determine the resulting dispositions.” (1103b21) Virtue/excellence is a disposition, not a feeling nor a faculty (1105b30 ff.). Cf. 4(b).

d. “Lying in a mean...” Between two extremes, one of excess, the other of deficiency, both vices. Where exactly it lies in relation to the two extremes will vary with the virtue. e.g. Courage, between rashness and cowardice (field of fear and confidence); truthfulness, between boasting and understatement (field of self-expression); patience, between irascibility and lack of spirit (field of anger). See Table in Appendix I, pp. 285-6 (old edition p. 104). “But not every action or feeling admits of a mean” (1107a9). With acts that are evil in themselves, “it is impossible to act rightly; one is always wrong. Nor does acting rightly or wrongly in such cases depend upon circumstances.” (1107a15)

e. “...that is relative to us”. The mean varies for each individual. “We must notice the errors into which we ourselves are liable to fall (because we all have different natural tendencies – we shall find out what ours are from the pleasure and pain that they give us), and we must drag ourselves in the contrary direction” (1109b2). Pleasure and pain: “The pleasure or pain that accompanies people’s acts should be taken as a sign of their dispositions” (1104b4). “It is not easy to determine what is the right way to be angry, and with whom, and on what grounds, and for how long” (1109b15).

f. “And determined by a rational principle...” The distinctive feature of humans is reason.

g. “...and by that which a prudent man would use to determine it.” Prudence an intellectual virtue, calculative: “It is thought to be the mark of a prudent man to be able to deliberate rightly about what is good and advantageous for himself; not in particular respects, e.g. what is good for health or physical strength, but what is conducive to the good life generally.” (1140a26) “The full performance of man’s function depends upon a combination of prudence and moral virtue; virtue ensures the correctness of the end at which we aim, and prudence that of the means towards it.” (1144a8) Deliberation and choice: “Since, therefore, an object of choice is something within our power at which we aim after deliberation, choice will be deliberate appetite of things that lie in our power. For we first make a decision as the result of deliberation, and then direct our aim in accordance with the deliberation.” (1113a10) “It is possible, for example, to feel fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity, and pleasure and pain generally, too much or too little; and both of these are wrong. But to have these feelings at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way is to feel them to an intermediate, that is to the best, degree; and this is the mark of virtue. Similarly there are excess and deficiency and a mean in the case of actions. But it is in the field of actions and feelings that virtue operates... Virtue, then, is a mean condition, inasmuch as it aims at hitting the mean.” (1106b19)