

4. Virtue

Martín Abreu Zavaleta

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We have reached one of the more substantive points of Aristotle's discussion. So far, he has argued that the ultimate good for a person is happiness, or, to be more precise, a happy life. He has also argued that a happy life is a life of action in accordance with virtue. However, he has also insisted that the purpose of his investigations is not just knowledge of the nature of happiness and virtue. Rather, his investigation has a practical purpose: we study what is good because we want to be good or excellent ourselves. So how can we become excellent?

1 Becoming virtuous

Aristotle is mostly concerned with what he calls virtues of *character*. He thinks that it is in our nature to be able to acquire these virtues, but we can only fully acquire them through habit. On the other hand, if someone is by nature incapable to possess a virtue, then no amount of learning or habituation will make that person have the virtue. So how exactly do we acquire these virtues? Well, by doing virtuous actions.

This may seem counterintuitive, but Aristotle offers some good examples that illustrate what he is talking about. There are some skills that we can only learn through practice: we learn how to play the guitar by playing the guitar, we learn to swim by swimming and to paint by painting. Similarly, Aristotle thinks, we learn to be virtuous by doing virtuous actions: we learn to be just by doing just acts, and to be brave by doing brave deeds.

But at the same time, being a virtuous person *partly consists* in doing virtuous things. So, for instance, we become brave by doing brave things, but being brave in itself partly consists in doing brave things. We say "partly" because to be virtuous is not just to perform certain kinds of actions. In addition, we must also have the right kinds of attitudes; This is what Aristotle means when he says that "virtue of character is about pleasures and pains" (1104b9)

Imagine someone who did things that we would ordinarily consider virtuous, but felt disgusted by them. Consider John, who is not a generous person at all, and thinks that giving money to charity is just a waste of resources that he'd rather invest or spend in buying a more powerful computer or fancy electronics. In a nutshell, John finds the very idea of donating money to charity repulsive, and he'd never do it of his own volition.

Now suppose that there is an evil scientist who is well aware of John's feelings towards charity. This evil scientist likes to force people to do things against their will, and for this purpose has devised a special chip that he can implant in people's brains to control their actions. Using this chip, the evil scientist can make John donate money to all sort of charitable enterprises, but every time John donates money to charity as a result, he feels disgusted at himself and does it only with

great pain. According to Aristotle, even if donating money to charity in those situations is what a generous person would do, John himself is not generous because he doesn't have the right attitudes: it's not enough to do things that are virtuous, but to want to do them as well. So the virtuous person not only does virtuous things, but also wants to do them. Once she does them, she may experience a kind of satisfaction, namely, the satisfaction that results from doing what she wanted to do.

Aristotle thinks that this can help him solve a puzzle. Before, he had said that we learn to be virtuous by doing virtuous deeds, but he also said that being a virtuous person partly consists in doing virtuous things. He puts the puzzle as follows:

Someone might be puzzled, however, about what we mean by saying that we become just by doing just actions and become temperate by doing temperate actions. For [one might suppose that] if we do grammatical or musical actions, we are grammarians or musicians, and, similarly, if we do just or temperate actions, we are thereby just or temperate. (1105a16-19)

This is why Aristotle thinks that doing virtuous deeds doesn't suffice to be virtuous—though we become virtuous by habituating ourselves to do virtuous deeds—and requires something else than a mere kind of actions.

Aristotle's analogy involving grammar is quite illustrative:

But surely actions are not enough, even in the case of crafts; for it is possible to produce a grammatical result by chance, or by following someone else's instructions [... Grammar requires to] produce it in accord with the grammatical knowledge in us. (1105a25)

Aristotle is now making some precisions in his account of a virtuous actions. Before, he was speaking loosely. Now he will be more explicit about what he takes virtuous actions to be:

But for actions in accord with the virtues to be done temperately or justly it does not suffice that they themselves have the right qualities. Rather, the agent must also be in the right state when he does them. First, he must know [that he is doing virtuous actions]; second, he must decide on them, and decide on them for themselves; and, third, he must also do them from a firm and unchanging state. (1105a30-5)

Now that Aristotle has decided to be more precise, he draws a distinction between *virtuous actions* and actions that are *merely in accordance with virtue*. We may say that the latter are actions that are indistinguishable from virtuous actions when seen from outside. However, virtuous actions and actions merely in accordance with virtue are distinguished because someone who does the former knows that the actions are virtuous, wants to do them because they are virtuous, and has a stable disposition to execute them and perform. Someone who merely acts in accordance with virtue may fail in any of these three respects.

Question: Where does this leave Aristotle's account of how we learn to be virtuous? Before, he had said that we learn to be virtuous by doing virtuous things, but his new definition of virtuous actions seems to entail that only people who are already virtuous can do virtuous things. We can't learn to be virtuous by doing virtuous things, because to do virtuous things we would have to be virtuous already. So how do we learn, then?

2 The doctrine of the mean

Aristotle thinks that virtue is a kind of state: a stable disposition to do certain kind of things, with certain kinds of motivations. Now he'll elaborate on the particular kind of state that he is talking about.

Aristotle thinks that, in general, virtues are the intermediate point between two extremes. In other words, virtue tracks *just the right amount* of a certain kind of thing: it doesn't fail by being deficient, nor does it fail by being excessive. But the intermediate point between two extremes (i.e. what constitutes the right amount) sometimes depends on the person that we are talking about. Aristotle uses the following example about food: ten pounds of food are too much for anyone to eat, and two pounds are too little.¹ The arithmetic middle point between these two amounts of food is six pounds of food, but this doesn't mean that it will be best for everyone to eat six pounds of food: an athlete who needs a lot of energy and who has more demanding nutritional requirements will be better off eating seven pounds of food, whereas someone with a sedentary life may be better off eating only two.

Virtue is the middle point (the right amount) between two extremes. Aristotle puts it clearly in §§10-12 of Chapter 6:

By virtue I mean virtue of character; for this is about feelings and actions, and these admit of excess, deficiency, and an intermediate condition. We can be afraid, for instance, or be confident, or have appetites, or get angry, or feel pity, and in general have pleasure or pain, both too much and too little, and in both ways not well. But having these feelings at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the intermediate and best condition, and is proper to virtue. Similarly, actions also admit of excess, deficiency, and intermediate condition.

As Aristotle points out, virtue is very difficult to achieve, for there are many ways to err, yet only one to be virtuous. Being virtuous is the state that leads us to the mean in feeling and in action. Someone who is virtuous constantly and regularly feels in the right way, at the right time, etc., and acts in the same way. **Question:** Does Aristotle think that there are also middle points for vices, e.g. for murder, envy or shamelessness?

Noticing that the virtue is the intermediate point between two extremes can also guide us in our quest to become virtuous. If we know that we tend towards one of the extremes, it will help us to try to do things tending towards the opposite extreme. Moreover, Aristotle thinks that one of the extremes is usually worse than the other. For instance, he thinks that between rashness and cowardice, the latter is the worse of the two. So by knowing this, we can try to become brave by first tending towards rashness and then adjusting until we become brave. **Question:** How does this match Aristotle's first position, that we become virtuous by doing virtuous things? Is this new recommendation incompatible with the first, or does it complement it in some way?

¹Two pounds still sound like a lot of food to me, but let's just go with it.