

Notes selected from the writings of
ARISTOTLE: THE ETHICS

From Book II. Aristotle's Doctrine of the Happy Mean

What is good character?

The origin of the Virtues: Aristotle tells us that whereas intellectual virtues are the result of teaching, moral virtues are the result of habit. We have moral virtue only as a capacity which habit develops.

In this sense, Aristotle holds the view that men are born neither good nor bad, but with a capacity to become either one or the other. As we develop our sense organs, so we develop virtue. We learn both by doing, as the builder learns by building a house. For this reason Aristotle feels it is very important to view the habits that are formed in us when we are young, because different traits of character develop from different kinds of action. "It is by action that some become just and others unjust, and by acting in the face of danger.....that some become brave men and others cowards."

The Three Factors of Choice

Taking the standpoint of the person choosing a course of action, Aristotle gives three factors involved in making the right choice:

- 1. the noble
- 2. the beneficial
- 3. the pleasurable

Choosing the wrong course of action also involves three factors.

- 1. the base
- 2. the harmful
- 3. the painful

Of all these, the pleasurable has the greatest attraction for us. For this reason, it is important that we are trained to feel pleasure and pain in the right way. If we are trained in the wrong way we shall never be able to resist the lure of wrong pleasure. Aristotle concludes by saying that ethics and politics must deal with pleasure and pain, for the right attitude toward pleasure makes a man good - the wrong attitude makes a man bad. (This last statement is concerned with motive - selflessness, to give pleasure which equals the good attitude; and the selfishness to will only displeasure upon another - bad attitude.)

In further discussing the virtuous action, Aristotle points out that "the value of the action lies in the doer of the action".

To Act Virtuously is a Question of Motive

For a man to act virtuously, he must be of a certain disposition:

- 1) He must know what it is he is doing.
- 2) He must choose to act the way he does, and he must choose to do so for the sake of the act itself.
- 3. The action must come from "a firm and unchangeable character"

For example to give money to a charity is generally considered virtuous. But, to act virtuously by this gesture I must satisfy the three conditions just given, i.e.: I must know that I am giving my money to charity; I must choose to give that money not in order to make a profit (public acclaim) and not because such a donation would be tax deductible, but purely for the sake of the action itself. Finally, I must not give money to charity today and tomorrow decide that it was a foolish thing to do. Aristotle concludes that the really good action, is that action which springs from a good motive, and is the right thing to do in the particular circumstance.

Definition of Virtue - A Disposition Towards the Mean

What kind of an attitude is virtue? Aristotle states that every science and every art aim at finding the mean between "excess" or "too much", and "deficiency" or "too little". In everything which is without distinct parts and is divisible, he says, there is an arithmetical mid-point between the two extremes. For example, if 10 is too many and 2 is too small, 6 might be the acceptable mid-point between the two. Aristotle thinks virtue is also some kind of mid-point between too much and too little in both feeling and action. Nevertheless, it is clear that there is no mid-point in feeling and action which can be determined by arithmetic. The mean in matters of virtue is also relative; Aristotle therefore defines virtue as:

- 1) a disposition to choose,
- 2) "consisting essentially of the mean relative to us",
- 3) which is determined by a rule,
- 4) "that is, by the rule by which a wise man would determine it".

The first thing to notice in this definition is that virtue concerns a choice midway between two opposing courses of action. The second point to notice is that choice is not a matter for our emotions, nor is it the product of our subjective reasoning. It is determined by a rule or principle such as would govern the actions of a wise man. This means that there is no excuse when we make a bad choice. If we do not have wisdom enough to make a choice, we should ask the opinion of the man who has. "Right action is possible when we apply principles that are recognized by the prudent and the wise to be generally valid to a specific circumstance."

Right Action is Relative

Since virtue is relative, right action is also relative. Every good action involves the right way to do it, the right time, and the right amount of doing. Aristotle insists that no emotion or impulse is naturally bad, but each has its own time and place. Nevertheless, he does not believe that every action and every emotion has its proper mean. Some actions and emotions are bad in themselves. In cases of adultery, envy, or murder, for example, Aristotle says there can be no question of right and wrong. These actions are inherently bad. But, one can have too much or too little self-control at a particular time, just as he can have too much or too little courage.

Advice on Choosing the Mean

How are we able to choose the mean if it is this delicate a balance between two extremes? Aristotle gives us two pieces of advice. 1) Watch out for the vice which is most opposed to its corresponding virtue. 2) Be on guard against the vice which you yourself are most likely to choose.

Significance of Aristotle's View of Virtue

We should not be misled by Aristotle's view of virtue into thinking that virtue is mediocrity, a kind of moral compromise between two evils. Rather we should think of Aristotle's concept of virtue on two levels. 1) The Greek word for virtue is arete, meaning excellence. Insofar as virtue is excellence, thus, a positive value, goodness lies at the extreme opposite pole of kindness. 2) Insofar as virtue is a "such", which must be defined in terms of something else, it is the midpoint between two vices. Virtue is not a combination of vices, however. It contains within itself the good which the two opposing vices have in excess. For example, courage contains enough boldness to keep the courageous person from falling into cowardice; in addition it possesses enough foresight to prevent him from giving way to foolhardiness. Courage is not a mixture of boldness and cowardice, but the best of the two extremes. As "the best", it is obviously directly opposed to its two "worst" vices. Virtue can be compared to a set of scales. When we weigh ourselves, we move the marker on the scale slowly over to the point where the arrow delicately balances itself mid-way between the top and the bottom of the scale. In one sense, virtue is the point on the scale where the marker stops when the arrow finds its balance relative to our weight. In another sense, virtue is the midpoint between top and bottom where the arrow hangs in equilibrium.

The Greeks saw the beautiful interms of balance and proportion, and they carried their aesthetic values over into the world of morality and right action. Consequently their maxim, "nothing in excess" was the "golden mean" not only for the artistically pleasing, but for the morally right.