



## Virtue ethics in Aristotle's Nicomachean ethics

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### **Abstract**

People have always been in pursuit of moral values and right conduct since the beginning of the mankind. However, leading an honest and earnest life is not an easy task. Aristotle, one of the greatest philosophers in history, argues that virtue is a habit which can be learned and gained through practice. This study is a modest attempt to examine Aristotelian theory of virtue ethics in his landmark work of Nicomachean Ethics and aims to push our thinking about being virtuous and leading righteous way of life.

**Keywords:** Ethics, virtue ethics, Nicomachean, Aristotle

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

“What ought we to do?” is the central question that concerns modern ethical theorists. The deontologist, the divine command theorist, the consequentialist, and the egoist all propose basic moral values that tell us how to behave in morally complex situations (Geirsson & Holmgren, 2000). However, advocates of virtue ethics believe that modern theories that focus on what we should do lack something important, and suggest that it is equally important, or even more important that we focus on the question of what characteristic traits individuals ought to develop in themselves (Geirsson & Holmgren, 2000).

Slote (2004) states that virtue ethics involve two distinctive elements. Virtue ethics treat areatic notions, such as “good” or “excellence”, rather than deontic notions, such as obligation, ought, right, and morally wrong (Slote, 2004). In pointing out the difference between virtue ethics and modern moral theories, Slote (2000) stresses that most modern ethical theorists believe “rightness as a matter of producing good results or conforming to moral rules or principles, but virtue ethics specify what is moral in relation to such inner factors as character and motive” (Slote, 2000 p. 325).

Hursthouse (2003) also points out the difference of virtue ethics from other ethical theories. The author stresses that in contrast to deontological theories which emphasize rules or duties, or the theories that focus on the consequences of actions, the core of the virtue ethics theory is in the heart or character of the individual (Hursthouse, 2003). The virtue ethics explains the characteristics of a virtuous person and suggests that individuals can develop moral character over time through habitual action and practice (Geirsson & Holmgren, 2000). The theory is important in addressing many ethical problems since virtue and moral character “provides the wisdom necessary for applying rules in particular instances” (Hinman, 2006).

The term virtue ethics originates from ancient Greek word “arete” meaning “excellence” or “virtue” (Hursthouse, 2003). Although the term “arete” is often translated as virtue, Annas (1998) states that it means “excellence”, not virtue. In one sense, “arete” means anything that reaches completion (Annas, 1998).

The origins of the theory date back to ancient Greek philosophy, especially to Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle's famous work “Nicomachean Ethics” is especially important in that

it is “the first systematic treatment of ethics in Western philosophy” (Gensler, et. al., 2004). Following paragraphs aim to examine Aristotelian theory of virtue ethics in his landmark work of Nicomachean Ethics.

## **2. ARISTOTLE (384-322 BC)**

The Greek philosopher Aristotle is considered to be one of the greatest philosophers of all time. He was a student of Plato's, and the personal tutor of Alexander the Great. He wrote on a wide range of a philosophical and nonphilosophical subjects, including biology, literature, politics, logic, metaphysics, and ethics. His famous work, the Nicomachean Ethics, contains his theory of the virtues (Geirsson & Holmgren, 2000).

Aristotle's theory begins with the assumption that “all actions aim at a good” (Gensler, et. al., 2004). Aristotle (350 B.C.E.) states that every art and every investigation, and likewise every pursuit and every action, aims at some good; therefore, the good has been defined as the object at which everything aims. Aristotle further states that there is not one single good. As there are many sciences and branches of knowledge, there are correspondingly numerous ends at which they aim (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). For instance, the aim of the medicine is producing health; the economics is acquiring wealth, etc.

### **Eudaimonia**

Aristotle later poses a simple question: what is the good and what is the highest of the goods achievable by action? The answer to this question is happiness, which Aristotle calls “eudaimonia”. In general terms, eudaimonia is often translated as well-being, happiness, flourishing, and success. Aristotle defines eudaimonia as “an activity of the soul according to complete excellence/virtue over a complete life” (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.p. 58). Geirsson & Holmgren (2000) states that in Aristotle's view, eudaimonia is tied to living rationally and considering rationality, which distinguishes human being from animals. Aristotle states that happiness is the most desirable of all things. It is “something final and complete in itself, as being the aim and end of all practical activities whatever” (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. pp. 58, 59).

According to Aristotle, there is a general agreement on the answer of this question. Both ordinary people and educated people define the good as happiness; however, with regard to what constitutes happiness, people's opinions differ (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). Ordinary people identify happiness as something plain and visible, such as wealth, pleasure,

or honor. While the definition varies among people, even same person may sometimes give different definitions (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). For example, when a person is ill, he identifies happiness with health, and he identifies it with wealth when he is poor. The other group of people that Aristotle calls "people of superior refinement and active disposition" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. pp. 241) identifies happiness with honor. These group of people pursue honor simply because they believe virtue is better, and to convince themselves of their goodness (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.).

## **Virtue**

Aristotle suggests that to better understand the nature of happiness we must investigate the nature of virtue, since happiness is "the active exercise of the mind in conformity with perfect goodness of virtue" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. pp. 63). According to Aristotle, virtue is a habit which can be learned and gained through practice. Aristotle believes that people can be taught to be virtuous, which can have important implications for moral education (Hinman, 2006). Aristotle notes that human virtue does not mean bodily excellence, but the excellence of the soul.

Aristotle separates virtue into two categories: intellectual virtues and moral virtues. "Intellectual virtues enable us to think rationally, whereas moral virtues enable us to handle our desires and emotions rationally" (Geirsson & Holmgren, 2000 p. 211). According to Aristotle, "a good intellect is chiefly produced and fostered by education, but moral goodness is formed mainly by training in habit" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. p. 63).

Of nine intellectual virtues that Aristotle identified, only practical wisdom cannot be thought, but can be learned through experience (Geirsson & Holmgren, 2000). According to Aristotle, the moral virtues, such as justice, prudence, fortitude, and temperance, can be acquired through practice and habitual action (Geirsson & Holmgren, 2000). This assumption leads Aristotle to an interesting conclusion: none of the moral virtues are formed in human by nature since natural characteristics can never be changed (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). To illustrate, Aristotle states that nothing that naturally acts in one way can be trained to act in another way; for instance, a stone naturally moves downwards and cannot be educated to move upward even if one were to try to accustom it to do so by casting it up into the air thousands of times (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). Consequently, Aristotle suggests that the virtues are not implanted in human by nature, but they result from the natural capacity of

individuals to acquire those virtues by developing that capacity through training (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.).

Aristotle further makes distinctions between virtues and endowments. Endowments are given us by nature, and we receive the power of using them first and later exercise these endowments in action (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). This is most obvious in the case of our sense faculties, such as sight and hearing. We possessed our senses when we started, not acquired them by hearing and seeing them repeatedly (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.).

However, in the case of virtues, we acquire them by first acting virtuously (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). According to Aristotle, it is just like a craftsman learns his art by doing things he needs to do. For example, by building houses men become builders and by playing harp become harpers (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). Similarly, people become just by acting justly, become self-controlled by acting temperately, and become courageous by acting bravely (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.).

Aristotle further states that even if acts are in conformity with virtues, it does not necessarily mean that they are done temperately or justly. He emphasizes on three conditions that a person needs to have when doing them: first "he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. p. 244). Basing his arguments on these three conditions, Aristotle reaches an important conclusion: "Actions are called just and temperate when they are such as the just or the temperate man would do, but it is not the man who does these that is just and temperate, but the man who also does them as just and temperate man do them" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. p.244).

### **Virtue: a state of character**

Aristotle next focus on what virtue is. According to Aristotle, there exist three kinds of things in the soul: passions, faculties, and state of character; and virtue must be one of these (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). By passions Aristotle means the feelings generally related to pleasure or pain, such as anger, appetite, fear, confidence, joy, friendly feeling, hatred, longing, envy, and pity (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). Aristotle defines faculties as "the things in virtue of which we are capable of feeling these, e.g. of becoming angry or being angry or being pained or feeling pity (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. p. 244). As for states of characters, they are "the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. p. 244). For instance, with reference to anger, if we feel it too weakly

or violently we stand badly, and if we feel it moderately then we stand well (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.).

Aristotle states that virtues and vices are not passions because people are called good or bad on the grounds of their virtues and vices, not on the grounds of their passions (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). For the same reason, virtues are not faculties since no body can be blamed or praised, called good or bad on the grounds of their faculties. Furthermore, unlike passions and faculties, "virtues are mode of choice or involve choice" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. p. 245). Aristotle concludes that if the virtues are not passions and faculties, then they must be states of character (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.).

Aristotle not only describes virtue as a state of character, but he also discusses what kind of state it is. "The virtue of man is the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. p. 246)

Aristotle emphasizes on the middle state as a virtuous state of character, and suggests that both deficiency and excess are essentially detrimental (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). He illustrates that both eating too little and too much is detrimental for health; and similarly, both taking too much and too little exercise impairs bodily health. Aristotle makes a generalization and states that there is defect, excess, and intermediate in every action and passion (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.).

According to Aristotle, this also applies to virtues: "virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. p. 245). For instance, while courage is a virtue, a man becomes coward when he cannot stand his ground when necessary, and he becomes foolhardy when he is not afraid of anything and walks into everything (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). Similarly, confidence and fear, pity and anger, and pain and pleasure may all be felt too much or too little, which is not good in both cases. (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.) Feeling them to the right people at the right times, in the right way and with the right intent is intermediate, and this is the characteristic of virtue (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). Thus, Aristotle concludes that "a master of any art avoids excess and defect, but seeks the intermediate and chooses this" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.).

Aristotle also notes that not every action or every emotion has a middle state. Their names already suggest "badness", such as envy and shamelessness; and among actions murder, theft, and adultery. (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). These actions and emotions are bad intrinsically, not when they are practiced too much or insufficiently (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). They are always wrong and it is not possible to commit or feel them rightly; for instance, it is

not possible to commit adultery with right woman in the right place and at the right time (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.).

Aristotle notes that the intermediate is not in the object, but it is relative to human. It means that what the “too much”, what the “too little”, and what the “intermediate” is depends on the person (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). Geirsson & Holmgren (2000) draw attention to the relativity of the middle state of the character. Accordingly, “there are no rules or formulas for finding the mean, and we cannot determine where the mean is to be found independent of the circumstances in which it occurs” (Geirsson & Holmgren, 2000 p. 211). For example, while ten pounds of food is too much for an ordinary person, it may be intermediate for a sportsman since he needs more energy than other people to maintain his strength (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.).

### **Choice**

Aristotle believes that choice is highly related to virtue and better discriminator of character than actions (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). Since choice plays an important role in Aristotle's understanding of virtue, he discusses choice in detail to describe what exactly it is. In particular, he makes some distinctions between choice and voluntary action, and between choice and wish, on which he later bases his arguments on virtue-choice relations.

Aristotle states that choice is voluntary, but not every voluntary action is made by choice. For instance, children and animals involve in voluntary actions; however, they do not choose their action, rather they act on the spur of the moment (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.).

In drawing distinctions between choice and wish, Aristotle states that choice is not wish, although it seems close to it; because, people may wish for impossible but choice cannot relate to impossible (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). For instance, a man can wish for immortality, but cannot choose it. Choices are the things that can be brought about by one's own efforts (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). In other words, choice relates to the means while wish relates to the ends. For example, everybody wishes to be healthy, but everyone choose the acts that will make them healthy (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.).

Aristotle further points out that we think about means, but not ends. According to Aristotle, we think about things that can be done and that are in our power. For instance, a doctor does not deliberate that his patient will heal, rather he assumes the end and considers how to achieve it, and if there are more than one mean to achieve the end, he considers which the best and easy one is (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.).

Aristotle continues that since ends are what we wish for and means are what we think and choose, actions about means must be voluntary and involve choice (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). Considering that exercise of the virtues is related to means, both virtue and vice are in our own power (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). It is in our power to act and not to act, which in both cases are the choices we make (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.).

### **Contemplation**

Aristotle suggests that if happiness is activity in conformity with virtue, then it should be in conformity with the highest virtue, which is the best thing in us. Aristotle calls this contemplative. Aristotle contends that this is in agreement with his arguments on virtue and with the truth. It is because this activity is the best and furthermore, it is the most continuous, since people contemplate truth more continuously than they can do anything (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). Aristotle believes that real happiness and pleasure is mingled with it (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.).

### **3. CONCLUSION: HOW TO HIT THE MIDDLE COURSE?**

In brief, Aristotle shows in his famous work of *Nicomachean Ethics* that moral goodness is a middle state, which is an intermediate between two vices: excess and deficiency. "It holds this position in virtue of its quality of aiming to hit the middle point in emotions and actions" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. p. 67).

Emphasizing on the difficulty of aiming at a middle course, Aristotle proposes three rules to help us achieve to hit the mean and be a virtuous person. First rule is "to keep well away from that extreme which is the more opposite to it" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. p. 68). For of two extremes, deficiency and excess, one is a worse mistake than the other. Aristotle suggests that since to hit the middle point is extremely difficult, "we must sail the second best way" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. pp. 68, 69).

The second rule that Aristotle suggests is to be aware of the mistakes to which we are most vulnerable. Everybody is different in terms of their natural tendency to different faults. We can and should discover our tendencies\_ what faults we are prone to\_ and try to go in the opposite direction (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.).

Lastly, we must always try to see pleasant things and pleasant feelings in everything (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). According to Aristotle, these three measures are the best way to enable us to hit the middle course.

As Aristotle emphasized, to be virtuous is not an easy task. It is easy to miss the target than to hit it, and to Aristotle, this is why going wrong is easy but going right is difficult (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E.). For this reason, "right conduct is rare and praiseworthy and noble" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. p. 68).

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