

VIRTUE AND SUBSTANCE IN ARISTOTLE

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Abstract. Aristotelian virtues involve practical knowledge that cannot be quantified. This is why you cannot get a universal formula to teach you exactly what their content is. This type of ethics is more like a life-orientation than a clear-cut demand. The following text highlights some features of this theory related to Aristotle's substantialist metaphysical view.

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For the Greek philosopher Aristotle, the human being was oriented to the good, and this good consisted, to a certain extent, of happiness. However, it was not enough to know what the good is; you also had to constantly do the good if you wanted to reach it.¹ Without doing the good, your knowledge of it is of no avail; it doesn't transform you into a good person. This necessity arises because practical knowledge is different from theoretical knowledge. The latter involves representation, while the former requires activity and a certain feeling associated with that activity. In this sense, we could compare morality and virtues with riding a bike. Although you might have a very clear representation of what a rider does while riding a bike, you will not be able to do the same thing unless you have internalized the capacity to keep your balance while riding the bike. This internalization is immediate and not mediated by representation, like any other type of theoretical knowledge.

Certainly, theoretical activity can also involve a practical dimension, in the sense that by repeating mental operations very often, you become more skilled in accomplishing them. A literary critic who read a lot of literature and wrote about it would make much easier associations between ideas and recognize a new literary value more quickly than someone lacking such a practice. Also, a person who reads a lot

¹ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by David Ross, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, 28/ 1105 b5-28.

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performs the reading activity much more easily than someone who is just learning the alphabet, or how to use it and recognize the letters of the written words.

Because of this practical, active character, virtue, in Aristotle, as the capacity to choose the middle path, could not have been reached only by being taught by another person, but it also required some life-experience. This is one reason why in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle considers that young people would not benefit much from being instructed in politics. You cannot really desire to be a virtuous person if you do not understand the benefits of not indulging in excesses and do not know what consequences such excesses have. A coward is excessive in fear, whereas the rash man is excessive in courage. However, in order to understand why courage is a virtue as the middle path between fear and rashness, someone has to experience the consequences of his actions. In ancient times, being a coward could lead to becoming enslaved because one was not brave enough to fight against the enemy. On the other hand, being rash meant misrepresenting your chances of defeating the enemy and throwing yourself into a hopeless battle, losing your life or freedom in vain. The same is true with respect to bodily pleasures. These pleasures are parts of the human needs, and the more you indulge them, the more powerful they become, and the more dependent you become on them. Your dependence is expressed through the fact that you are unable to resist and control them. An alcoholic cannot control his craving for alcohol; he cannot observe other values besides his need for strong drink.

The virtuous person knows how powerful such addictions can be. Therefore, he might even avoid the occasions that expose him to them because he knows that they can transform easily into uncontrollable vices that would make him unable to accomplish even the most common human activities. A vicious person was not always so; they became so because of the repetition of self-exposure to potentially harmful agents while completely ignoring their dangerous character.

This is why to be a virtuous person means not only to follow blindly certain behavioral rules, as children do when so required by their parents, but especially to know the importance of those rules based on some knowledge of life. Therefore, we involuntarily entertain a greater appreciation of people who have got rid of a vice than of someone who tells you to avoid it without knowing from a personal experience how harmful that vice is. While we could call the first one a virtuous person, we would call the latter at the most a prudent or circumspect person. While we see the strength of character in the first person's case, the latter seems to give us only abstract recommendations.

Hence, true virtue is not simply following moral rules. It involves knowledge of human nature from your own experience; it requires the experience of human nature, both in its positive and negative traits. And like riding a bike, it involves the ability to keep the balance between excesses.

Of course, you do not need to experience all the vices in order to be transformed into a virtuous person. Moral rules are also based on the experience of other people, of those who have made mistakes which show their peers that following such a path of

behavior is very dangerous. Therefore, education as a mediate knowledge of human nature can replace personal experience. Over time, other means were also sought to develop and test someone's strength of character. Children and youth were always exposed to less dangerous experiences – like athletic sports – through which they could grasp an initial knowledge of their bodily nature and could experience their weaknesses and the power of emotions. Such sports could teach them how to control their emotions and overcome their weaknesses. Once you have experienced the power of impulses and emotions in a certain area and how to handle them, you are better prepared for future situations in which you would be exposed to other types of turmoil of passions. This is one reason why athletic sports had such an important role in the education of the ancients. While pushing you quickly to your own limits, sport makes you aware of the latter's existence. Sport is an accessible activity that teaches you the inner strength required to handle your impulses. Once you acquire that strength, you can be better prepared to apply what you have learned in other areas of your emotional life.

From this point of view, Epicurus's doctrine of pleasure seems a more detailed version of the Aristotelian theory of virtues. Epicurus does not recommend following your pleasures blindly, but only so far as they are not harmful to you and those that do not endanger you. You should seek pleasure because pleasure is the most desirable feeling. However, he does not invite you to pursue your need for pleasure without considering as many consequences for your life as possible. He, too, therefore, recommended knowledge of life.

Aristotelian virtue and Epicurean pleasure were expressions of an individualist view of morality, an approach centered on what the individual feels and must do to feel himself better. In contrast, in modernity, Kantian morality was centered on what you should do with respect to others, for their sake, for their well being. When Kant demanded to see others as ends in themselves², not only as means, he encouraged you to put others before your 'pathologic' interest, his moral theory being from this point of view deeply imbued with Christianity.

An important aspect of Aristotle's view concerning the good life is that you cannot have it if you are ill or alone and isolated from your fellow beings; or if you are poor and have no means to secure your daily food. Such circumstances make you dependent on factors whose absence drives you away from a good life. Therefore, in Aristotle, this life involves, most of all, being a free man, both with respect to others' will and your own needs.

Unlike this Aristotelian understanding of the good life, the Christian view does not require individual welfare. In Aristotle, this welfare is the necessary support of contemplative activity, which is the main goal of human life. If your organic needs are not met, and you struggle either with emotional imbalance or material shortfalls, the serenity needed for contemplation will also be affected. In contrast, Christianity is not

² See Imm. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated by Mary Gregor, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

mainly interested in contemplation because the latter is related rather to this world and its beauties. Christians' main interest was always oriented toward transcendence, toward a God that they assumed they would meet in the after-life. Only after more than a thousand years from its appearance did Christianity start to consider nature worthy of study as a different kind of revelation.

Since Aristotle could not think yet in terms of pre-determinism, as Christians were more or less forced to do because of the omnipotence and omniscience of their God, here, contemplation did not depend on your place in life. The idea that God has put you where you are, that your life is not in your hands but His, made people think that you must endeavor to conceive of yourself and the world from that point. This is a stoic idea that Christianity adopted later.

To the table of virtues that Aristotle discussed, Christians added a few others: faith, hope, and love, but also patience and resilience. All these were seen as virtues because they involved an inner attitude and self-control. Like courage or temperance, they involved an emotion guided by the soul's rational part, the part that drives someone to act. They also involved a certain external behavior, a manifestation of the inner psychological set-up. Christianity requires you to prove your faith, hope, love, and not only declare them; you have to live according to them.

If in Aristotle the main condition required to reach the highest good (the contemplative life) is the soul's serenity (the inner balance), in Stoicism this serenity was transformed into a fundamental value. Thus, we might say that it was not Stoicism that discovered serenity as a quality of the wise man, but that this serenity was a necessary condition in Aristotelian ethics already. The same serenity was a prerequisite of the ethics of Epicurus. Although pleasure was the highest good for the latter, serenity was also implied in the quest for pleasure. In other words, the pursued pleasure had not to affect the serenity of the soul.

We find serenity as an important element also in the doctrines of other Greek philosophers. Both Parmenides and Heraclitus endeavored to detach themselves from the crowd, not only with respect to the way they thought but also to the way they behaved and felt themselves. Plato attacked the poets and banished them from his ideal city because they induced the inclination to emotional turmoil into people through their art. He denounced emotions as something irrational, leading people towards doing things they regretted afterward. Later, Stoicism discovered a new means by which contemplation could be exerted, and this was the inner acceptance of fate. This fate was seen as the result of a wise divinity that rules the whole universe.

Over time, this inner peace of mind lost its value. Christians, who sought to identify themselves with their suffering Messiah, could no longer put peace of mind in first place, but, rather, suffering. Suffering was now seen as the most important condition for salvation. The martyrs often wanted to be martyred because, in this way, they could prove their faith; they could prove that they valued the transcendent divinity more than everything else, including their own life and body. In Christianity, wisdom was replaced with saintliness, and peace of mind with self-sacrifice. Therefore, Christian morality

could no longer be anchored in the states of the individual's soul and mind – as was the ancient, pagan morality – but it had to be anchored in a commandment, that is to say, in something completely foreign to the individual's understanding and disposition. Also, the end of morality was no longer a happy life here in this world, but the happy life in the afterworld. And since no mortal could know this afterworld, it needed a God – the Christ – to teach humans how to attain it. Happiness in the transcendent world could not be obtained according to the criteria that people used to live in this material world.

Once saintliness replaced wisdom in morality, human nature and self-knowledge could no longer be arguments for this morality. Its main criteria became religious commandments. And these commandments demanded you place God, your neighbor, and the religious community above your own interests. From a Hegelian viewpoint, Christian morality was an anti-thesis, a negation of the contemplative morality of the ancient Greek philosophers. And it also created the premises for the later functionalist Kantian approach of morality with its complete disregard of the individuality and personality of the moral agent.

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* contains a depiction of the various kinds of character people have. Because he aims to describe our virtues as the mean between excesses and defects, Aristotle portrays the whole range of behaviors and dispositions of character to which a virtue is related. Therefore, his ethics is both an inquiry into the nature of moral values, i.e., moral ideals, and a comprehensive textbook of moral characters. By reading it, you learn what you must do and what kind of people you can meet in human society, thus preparing you to interact with them and know what you can expect from each of them. Unfortunately, although human nature has not changed so much in this respect, modern education no longer endorses this type of study, being more concerned with abstract laws and facts. You can still meet the same range of people around you today, as they could be met in ancient times.

From this perspective, Aristotle has more like a phenomenological approach because he is describing real, negative, and worthy characters. The latter are not products of the imagination but results of social observations, deeds, and ways of life that impressed people over time. He does not offer a universal rule suitable for all life situations, as we might expect when we require an answer to the question 'what is moral?' He rather selects fragments of life and shows what people consider to be the best-suited behavior in that situation. However, this behavior is not seen simply as a socially-related understanding. Aristotle holds that it is in the nature of things to admire virtuous behaviors and characters and to consider them an ideal, that is to say, the most admirable and preferable behaviors. According to him, admiring them is not a result of social prejudice, but those behaviors awaken, almost involuntarily, in all of us the same recognition. It is due to this effect that virtues are considered to be the highest moral values. The wish to emulate them shows a common human nature which all of us share, but which does not actualize spontaneously in human beings.

Aristotle maintains that virtues cannot be described thoroughly and defined exactly because they depend on the social context in which they are practiced,

especially on how the virtuous person judges the situation. Thus, for example, to be courageous needs to be knowledgeable in warfare. As Aristotle says, one must act at the right moment, in the right way, and with the right force to be brave and not to be rash. Your action must be firm, and you must not shrink for any reason from what is needed to be done because the opportunity could otherwise vanish, and the battle be lost due to your hesitation. All such requirements presuppose being well familiarized with war. The same goes for all other virtues. For all of them, the virtuous person must be able to determine that ineffable nuance that transforms one's conduct from an excess or a lack into a virtue.

Aristotelian virtues involve practical knowledge that cannot be quantified. This is why you cannot get a universal formula to teach you exactly what their content is. This type of ethics is more like a life-orientation than a clear-cut demand. For example, unlike Kantian ethics in which lying is always reprehensible, the virtue of truthfulness in Aristotle is the mean between being a liar and being a boaster. It involves telling the truth and lying if there is a higher need to do this, such as the interest of your community and the people you love.

The Stagirite constantly starts from common examples and experiences. On the grounds of these everyday cases, he then inductively elaborates a theory about man's nature. He develops this theory based on the features of acts that repeat enough times to be seen as emerging from an underlying substance. His concept of knowledge is based on the observation of things as they manifest in nature and society.

Things are different in Christianity in this respect. Here the nature of man is not understood as starting from the experiences that show how people behave most often. Also, in modernity, Kant denies that we should begin our knowledge of things with sheer observation. On the contrary, he states that in our knowledge, we must start from an initial concept that we form as a hypothesis; then we verify through observations and experiments if this initial concept corresponds to what is observed. Of course, this Kantian explanation is akin to the scientific approach. In science, especially in mathematics and in Newtonian physics, the theory starts with principles, theorems, and axioms, that is to say, with propositions that postulate that certain objects behave in certain ways. In Euclidean geometry, for example, it was assumed that the point has no dimensions or that the line has a single dimension. Geometry thus constructs its fundamental objects. The same happens in Newtonian physics, where, for example, the principle of inertia postulates that an object moves in a certain way under certain conditions. Based, then, on this principle, every concrete, natural case of motion is explained as a deviation from the ideal case of motion, a variation that can be calculated.

Kant applies the same procedure in ethics, where he starts not from real people but from an ideal concept of the human being. This concept is that of an end in itself. For Kant, each human being is an end in itself; thus, all our actions must endeavor to heighten another person's well-being. Therefore, for example, you must not lie to your neighbor because, by doing this, you will contradict the moral principle of treating him

as an end in itself and harm him. By lying to him, you treat another person as a means to an end that is in your own interest. Your interest, in this case, is set above the end that should be embodied for you in another human being.

Kant's formula of the categorical imperative was derived from this initial principle of morality. It stated that one must treat others always as ends in themselves and never only as means (the latter part of this maxim expresses the awareness that human beings are not ideal spirits but concrete, bodily beings that cannot completely ignore their material needs).

Aristotle's approach had been different. He presents how people behave, what differences are in their behavior, and what types of behavior are the most admired, concluding that such admiration reflects a general human disposition for the moral life.

The Aristotelian distinction between the four causes (formal, material, efficient, and final), besides being rooted in the philosophical tradition, is also an empirical one. It is important to highlight that ancient philosophers considered that our knowledge of things started with observation. We may recall that Thales considered that the principle of all things, the so-called arché, was water, because he believed, due to his own observations, that all things contained water. When Aristotle and the Aristotelians claimed that things fall because of aiming to reach their natural place, they grounded this claim in immediate observation. However, observation had a different meaning for them than for us. They thought that through observation, we know the inner nature of things, their substance.

This view dominated European culture until modernity, which introduced the idea that things lack such substances, being, instead, the result of relations that can be determined rationally. A substance-based knowledge involved seeing things evolving and bringing into light the essential (hidden) attributes of the internal substance. This substantialist view was expressed later even by Hegel, in modernity, when he claimed that philosophy, like the owl of Minerva that comes out only in the dusk, can develop its knowledge only at the end of the historical process, when the latter has already exhibited all its features and can be known in its conceptual structure.³

Ancient philosophers, who were only in the process of learning how to deal with abstract notions, based their procedures on observation. To illustrate this, we could mention an attempt to define the human being made in Plato's Academy. Diogenes Laertius recounts that Plato defined man as a biped and featherless animal. When Diogenes the Cynic brought him a plucked fowl, saying that here was his biped and featherless animal, Plato is said to have added to his definition: 'with broad nails'⁴.

The ancients saw things falling, and they concluded that the fall was due to something which lay in things' nature, to something that propelled them from within to move in that way. The same is true with respect to the concept of final cause: the

³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, translated by T. M. Knox, revised, edited and introduced by Stephen Houlgate, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 16.

⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Book VI, 40, English translation by R. D. Hicks, vol. II, London, William Heinemann, 1925, p. 43.

assumption of the final cause was based on observation. In many cases, things transform because they seem to aim at a higher organization. When modern science eliminated final causes, it was not because of some observation that denied their existence, but because its own approach was completely different. Modern science has ceased to think using the category of the nature of things, of their substance. Final causes were associated with such substances. According to this view, things transformed and brought to light new qualities because their inner substance became actualized in them more and more. For the ancient thinkers, it was obvious that the embryo, although it was not yet human, contained within itself the substance of humanity, which, as the embryo transformed into a mature human being, actualized itself more and more. In the view of modern science, at the base of reality there were only material atoms that combined with each other to produce the bodies we see in nature. Thus, for this science, in reality, there existed only bits of matter, lacking any intrinsic nature and diversity. The sole features that those bits possessed were extension and impenetrableness. Diversity and transformation occurred because atoms hit each other and then combined; material bodies were always effects and products of those previous combinations and never emerged as inner tendencies leading to greater complexity. According to this new view, things could not evolve by themselves towards higher stages of complexity and involve thus final internal causes. The higher complexity could be seen only as a result of the accidental mechanical impact of atoms.

We see thus that there is a fundamental difference between the modern mentality and the ancient one. Aristotle could elaborate his theory of virtue in the belief that in observing what people do, both in their excessive and defective behaviors, one finds ultimately universal human features. Further, he also believed that virtues are not something created by the mind of a philosopher, but were forged by human communities in social life, when members of the community considered certain behaviors as being exemplary. Aristotle's method is to describe what happens in reality as an expression of eternal nature, a nature that manifests itself over time. When vicious deeds were done, this also belonged to a part of the nature of man, because they were done by the irrational part of the human soul. On the other hand, when virtuous deeds were done, these were considered to spring from the rational part of the soul.

In Aristotle's view, seeking pleasure is not only natural but shows a resemblance to God too, because beings who do this carry within themselves something divine. Here, contemplation of God is the highest human fulfillment; it is a sort of participation in the happiness that God himself enjoys in his complete isolation and self-sufficiency. Of course, this type of happiness is not a bodily pleasure. In the substantialist view of Aristotle, the meaning of virtues and morality is to support the activity of contemplation that is the goal of human life, in fact, the highest Good.

Aristotle's substantialism explains why he says that only vicious people seek changes, and that the nature that needs change is corrupted. By contrast, what aims at permanency is simple. The need to change occurs because there are different elements linked together so that one's satisfaction will necessarily entail the others' frustration.

In the case of human nature, a constant satisfaction of its rational part is necessarily followed by the frustration of its sensible one. This happens because constantly aiming at rational satisfaction involves at least a postponement of the immediate satisfaction of the sensible needs.

For Aristotle, God has a simple nature; this is why he cannot know corruption, and since the highest good in human life is to try to get closer to His nature, the end of morality is also to simplify one's own nature, to reduce your divers impulses to the most important desire, which is contemplation. Virtue helps you in this respect. This is why the theory of virtues plays such an important role in Aristotle's ethics.

You are not meant to be a virtuous person for the sake of virtue but in order to attain the highest good in life or, in other words, to actualize your human substance completely. The entire theory of virtues is a presentation of what is usually thought about moral values and conduct. The latter is a partial actualization of the human substance present in all human beings. The complete actualization of this substance happens only in the contemplation of divinity.

Aristotle's discourse has an analytical character in that a virtue is discussed in several contexts. To a certain extent, we could assume that this was a general feature of ancient thinking. We may recall that in the Platonic dialogues, Socrates, when trying to discover the meaning of a concept, started from the common situations in which one used it and tried to discover what its common traits were. He proceeded analytically by starting with the diversity of life-situations and trying to reduce them to unity.

The conclusion of Aristotle's ethics is that the end of human life is happiness and the endeavor to get closer to the divine nature through contemplation. Aristotle considers that God's life consists in contemplation, and of course, God is contemplating himself because he is the worthiest object of contemplation. It is an open question what relation exists in Aristotle between the rational contemplation of God and the contemplation of the world through the lenses of the substances incorporated in it.