Aristotle on virtue

According to Aristotle, a virtue (arête) is a trait of mind or character that helps us achieve a good life, which Aristotle argues is a life in accordance with reason. There are two types of virtue – intellectual virtues and moral virtues. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 2, Aristotle concentrates on moral virtues, traits of character. Aristotle thought that the list of virtues isn't a miscellaneous collection, but grounded in a general, reasoned account of what virtues are. He presents that account in §§5–6.

TRAITS OF CHARACTER

Aristotle says that anything that is part of the soul (the mind) is either a passion, a faculty or a state (trait) of character. So since virtues are part of the soul, they must be one of these.

1. Passions: Aristotle's term 'passions' covers our bodily appetites (for food, drink, sex, etc.), our emotions, and any feelings accompanied by pleasure or pain. But these can't be virtues for three reasons.
   a. Just having a particular passion – feeling hungry or angry – doesn't make you a good or bad person.
   b. We don't choose our passions, but virtues are related to the choices we make. We cannot generally, just by an act of will, choose what we feel or want.
   c. Virtues concern how we are *disposed* to feel and act; they are not desires that actually motivate us.
2. Faculties: faculties are things like sight or the ability to feel fear. Virtues can't be these, since we have these naturally but we have to *acquire* virtue.
3. So virtues must be states of character.

Aristotle defines states of character as 'the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions'. Character involves a person's *dispositions* that relate to what, in different circumstances, they feel, how they think, how they react, the sorts of choices they make, and the actions they perform. So someone is short-tempered if they are disposed to feel angry quickly and often; quick-witted if they can think on their feet; intemperate if they get drunk often and excessively. What we find pleasant also reveals our character.

Character has a certain stability and longevity. Character traits last much longer and change less easily than many 'states of mind', such as moods and desires. But character can change, and so it is less stable and long-lived than personal identity. Yet it is central to being the person one is.

VIRTUES AND THE DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN

What kind of state of character is a virtue? Some traits of character, such as being short-tempered or greedy, stop us from leading a good life – these are vices. Other traits of character, such as being kind or courageous, help us to lead a good life – and these are the virtues. Any virtue makes the thing which has it good and able to perform its characteristic activity well. So, in us, a virtue of character is a disposition to feel, desire and choose 'well', which is necessary if we are to live well and so achieve eudaimonia.

What does this involve? Aristotle compares living well with other activities, such as eating well or physical training. In these cases, the good nutritionist or good trainer needs to avoid prescribing too much food or exercise or too little. We achieve health and physical fitness by following an 'intermediate' course of action. However, what this is differs from person to person. A professional sportsman needs more food and exercise than most people. An 'objective' intermediate (or 'mean') is a mathematical quantity, halfway between the two extremes, as 6 is halfway between 2 and 10. But in human activity, the intermediate ('mean') is relative to each individual.

Now, in the 'art of living', so to speak, something similar applies. We can feel our passions either 'too much' or 'too little'. Virtue involves being disposed to feeling in an 'intermediate' way, neither too much nor too little. Some people feel angry too often, over too many things (perhaps they take a critical comment as an insult), or maybe whenever they get angry, they get very angry, even at minor things. Other people feel angry not often enough (perhaps they don't understand how people take advantage of them). To be virtuous is 'to feel [passions] at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way' (§6). This is Aristotle's 'doctrine of the mean'.

It is important to note that Aristotle's doctrine of the mean does *not* claim that when we get angry, we should only ever be 'moderately' angry. We should be as angry as the situation demands, which can be very angry or only slightly irritated. Given the very close connection between what we feel and how we choose to act, virtues are dispositions of choice as well, and there is a 'mean' for actions as well as for feelings.

What the right time, object, person and so on is, practical wisdom helps us to know. (We won't complete our account of virtue, therefore, until we have understood what practical wisdom is.) Practical wisdom is a virtue of reason, the main intellectual virtue concerned with living. Our passions, we noted, are susceptible to reason. There can be right and wrong ways to feel passions, and the right way to feel passions is determined by reason. If we feel our passions 'irrationally' – at the wrong times, towards the wrong objects, etc. – then we don't live well. So, Aristotle concludes, a virtue is 'a state of character concerned with choice, lying in the mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it' (§6).

VIRTUES AND VICES

The doctrine of the mean entails that we can (often, if not always) place a virtue 'between' two vices. Just as there is a right time, object, person, etc., at which to feel fear (or any emotion), some people can feel fear too often, about too many things, and towards too many people, or they get too afraid of things that aren't that dangerous. Other people can feel afraid not often enough, regarding too few objects and people. Someone who feels fear 'too much' is cowardly. Someone who feels fear 'too little' is rash. Someone who has the virtue relating to fear is courageous. The virtue is the 'intermediate' state between the two vices of 'too much' and 'too little'.

In §7, Aristotle presents the following examples. For many states of character, he notes, we don't have a common name.

Passion/concern	**Vice of deficiency**	**Virtue**	**Vice of excess**
Fear	Cowardly	Courageous	Rash
Pleasure/pain	'Insensible'	Temperate	Self-indulgent
Giving/taking money	Mean	Liberal ('free')	Prodigal ('spendthrift')
Spending large sums of money	Niggardly	'Magnificent'	Tasteless
Important honour	Unduly humble	Properly proud	Vain
Small honours	'Unambitious'	'Properly ambitious'	'Overambitious'
Anger	'Unirascible'	Good-tempered	Short-tempered
Truthfulness (regarding oneself)	Falsely modest	Truthful	Boastful
Humour	Boorish	Witty	Buffoonish
Pleasant to others	Quarrelsome, surly	Friendly	Obsequious
Shame	Shy	Modest	Shameless
Attitude to others' fortune	Spiteful (rejoicing in others' bad fortune)	Righteously indignant (pained by others' undeserved good fortune)	Envious (pained by others' good fortune)

Obviously, Aristotle notes, not all *types* of actions or states of character can pick out a mean. For example, being shameless is not a mean, but a vice, while murder is always wrong. Furthermore, we often oppose a virtue to one of the two vices, either because it forms a stronger contrast with that vice (e.g. courage–cowardice) or because we have a natural tendency towards that vice, so need to try harder to resist it (e.g. temperance–self-indulgence).

But we can wonder whether virtues and virtuous actions are always 'intermediate' in any meaningful sense.

ACQUIRING VIRTUES AND BEING VIRTUOUS

We now know what virtues are. But how do we acquire them? Virtues are necessary for eudaimonia, but because they are dispositions towards feeling passions, and passions are not under the direct control of the will, we can't simply choose to become virtuous.

In §§1–4, Aristotle argues that we acquire virtues of character through 'habit', in particular, the habits we form during our upbringing. (In fact, in ancient Greek, the word for a virtue of character, *ethiké*, is a variant on the word for habit, *ethos*.) To defend his claim, Aristotle argues, first, that virtues are not acquired just through teaching. If virtues could be taught directly, like a skill, it should be possible for there to be an adolescent 'moral genius' as there can be with other skills, like mathematics or gymnastics. But it's very unclear that the idea makes any sense.

Second, Aristotle argues that we are not virtuous just by nature. He points out that for what we can do naturally, we first have the 'potentiality' and then exhibit the activity. For example, you don't acquire sight by seeing; first you have sight, then you can see. But it is the other way around for virtues. We come to form dispositions to feel and behave in certain ways by what we *do*. We are not naturally virtuous, but we are naturally capable of becoming virtuous, just as we are not born musical but can become so: 'the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well [e.g. learning to play a musical instrument]. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.' Hence, 'by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and by being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly' (§1).

Aristotle concludes that whether or not we can lead a good life depends a great deal on the habits we form when we are young – in our childhood and early adulthood. Furthermore, because our character is revealed by what we take pleasure in, we need to learn to take pleasure in the things that we should take pleasure in, and be pained by what should pain us.

There is a puzzle in what Aristotle says. In order to become just, we have to do just acts. But how can we do just acts unless we are already just? The puzzle is solved by distinguishing between actions which are 'in accordance with' justice and just acts, properly so called (§4). The actions that we do when learning to become just are acts in accordance with justice. But a just act is an act that is not only in accordance with justice, but also done *as the just person does it*.

A fully virtuous action is one in which the agent knows what they are doing, chooses the act for its own sake (i.e. for the end at which that virtue aims, e.g. justice), and makes their choice from a firm and unchangeable character. A child, by contrast, may do what is just (such as not taking more than its fair share) because it is told to do so; or because it likes the person it is sharing with; or because it wants to please an adult – and so on. It neither truly understands what

justice *is* nor does it choose the act *because* the act is just. As we develop in virtue, we understand more about what is good and develop a moral character, so we are more able to meet the conditions for fully virtuous action. We will also need to develop practical wisdom.

VIRTUE: PAST AND PRESENT

There are many recognisable similarities between Aristotle's concept of an arête of character and our modern concept of virtue. Both are the grounds for calling someone good or bad, for praising or blaming them for what they feel and do. Both are clearly dispositions of feeling and closely related to the sorts of choices people make. If we start to list traits we would call virtues, we see a large overlap with Aristotle's list.

However, there are at least two very important differences. First, at least since the writings of St Paul, strength of will has been recognised as virtuous. When someone isn't disposed to act morally, but manages to do so by strength of will, we think highly of them. For instance, we might be more willing than Aristotle to call someone courageous who feels fear, but faces it down after a struggle with it. Or again, we are more likely to praise someone who resists the temptation of bodily pleasures as much as someone who doesn't feel their temptation. For Aristotle, having inappropriate desires actually shows a weakness of character; the properly virtuous person doesn't find acting well difficult. Of course, Aristotle accepts that it is better to act well through effort than not act well at all. But 'overcoming temptation' is not a sign of real goodness, but a sign of a weak or unvirtuous character.

Second, Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia is different from acting 'morally' as we would understand the term. And so the virtues he thinks are necessary for a good life don't match, and sometimes even conflict, with the moral virtues that we might accept. For example, he thinks we should have 'proper pride' (contrast the Christian idea of humility) and that we should aim to do public works of magnificence and expense. Aristotle has a sense of the best life involving 'cutting a figure' in society, achieving a certain recognition and 'honour'. Morality has since become more closely associated with self-sacrifice, and the traits we recognise as virtues more focused on securing welfare for others than recognition for ourselves. Whether this is a good or bad development in the history of ethics can be debated.