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**What is the definition of virtue? Is it a good definition?**

Aristotle writes: "Virtue, then, is a *state of character* concerned with *choice*, lying in a *mean, i.e. the mean relative to us*, this being determined by reason, and by that reason by which the *man of practical wisdom* would determine it" [1](*NE* 2.6.1106b36-1107a3). What's more, Aristotle gives a definition of its 'essence', namely that "virtue is a mean, with regard to what is best and right an extreme" (*NE* 2.6.1107a7-1107a8). The terms italicised each correspond to a different component of the definition that, left bound up, give us a string of words that is rather opaque. My aim here is to fill in these referents with Aristotle's definition of the terms, such as to provide a fully formed account of what he takes virtue of character to be. I will then evaluate this claim in terms of whether it matches Aristotle's goal in the text, whether it has predictive success, and whether it is useful in any way. I will find that this definition both matches his goal and our intuitions as to what virtue is. However, this definition functionally restricts our judgment of the possession of the quality to our intimate connections and ourselves, and that it requires a meta-ethic to already be in place to be of any use.

To begin, we must first define 'state of character'. Aristotle notes that we are blamed for our vices, and praised for our virtues (*NE* 2.5.1106a1), and thus the locus of virtue must be in something that lends itself to such judgments. Such a requirement rules out virtue being either *passions* or *faculties,* since one is neither praised nor blamed for being angry per se, nor for having the ability to feel anger (*NE* 2.5.1105b32;1106a6-8). However, although we all feel anger, some of us feel it in excessive amounts, while others feel not enough of it (ibid); and for

[1] Emphasis added.

this we are praised or blamed. This leaves Aristotle to identify virtue as having to do with 'states of character': our dispositions to have a certain *amount* of any particular passion (*NE* 2.5.1105b25-28).

The second term in his definition is 'choice', which while seemingly innocuous, is a quite elaborate concept. Aristotle distinguishes 'choice' from the voluntary, the latter term being action which originates in, and is performed by an agent with all knowledge of the particulars of the situation (*NE* 3.2.1111a21-24). We would say that children perform acts voluntarily, but since they are done on a whim, they are not really 'chosen' (*NE* 3.2.1111b7-10). Thus, Aristotle identifies 'choice' as "deliberate desire of things in our own power" (*NE* 3.4.1113a9-10). This connection with deliberation means that 'choice' is about means *not* ends, as we can only deliberate about means (*NE* 3.3.1112b12), making 'choice' a means oriented desire brought by reason of things in our power. What exactly is meant by power is unclear, but Aristotle says that virtues and vices are within our power because we have the ability to act or not to act in situations, and our going one way will be noble and another would be base (*NE* 3.5.1113b7-10). Thus, it seems to refer to whatever is within our ability to do. This makes his definition of choice something like the following: a means oriented desire brough by reason of things in our ability to achieve.

The third term relates to virtue being a mean, specifically a 'mean relative to us'. Aristotle takes a 'mean' to be the intermediate state between an excess and a deficiency (*NE* 2.6.1106a29), but the 'mean' that is relevant in this situation is the one 'relative to us'. Unlike the arithmetic mean, this mean fluctuates based on the situation. For example, in deciding how much food to prepare for a meal, the mean between too much and too little - the *right amount,* is not a set amount, but depends on the person you want to feed. Thus the mean relative to a child

would be far less than the mean relative to an adult. In this way, the 'mean relative to us' is just to say: the amount between an excess and a deficiency as dictated by the particular situation at hand.

The final piece of the puzzle is to determine what is meant by a 'man of practical wisdom', and their method of determination. The key feature of such a person, says Aristotle, is that they have honed the ability of deliberation with regard to "the sorts of things that conduce to the good life in general" (*EN* 6.5.1140a27-29). However, it is not scientific knowledge, since scientific knowledge deals with the *necessary*, and one can only deliberate about contingencies; nor can it be art because art is concerned with *making* while practical wisdom is concerned with *action* (*EN* 6.5.1140a35-1140b4). This leaves practical wisdom to be: the capacity to act in a way that allows one to obtaining the goods that are required for the good life. A 'man of practical wisdom', then, is just a person who possesses this capability.

Now that we have our terms defined, we can insert them into Aristotle's formulation of what virtue of character is, to get the expanded definition. The result is the following:

"Virtue, then, is a [*disposition to have a certain amount of any particular passion*] concerned with [*a means oriented desire brought by reason, of things in our ability to achieve*], lying in an [*amount between an excess and a deficiency as dictated by the particular situation at hand*], this being determined by reason, and by that reason by which the [*person with the capacity to act in a way that allows one to obtain the goods that are required for the good life*] would determine it"[2].

[2] One limitation here is that this definition is now a translation of a translation – some subtleties from the original text were surely lost along the way. A more extensive project would consist of taking the same lines from different translators and comparing them to form the expanded terms, but unfortunately there was no room for this here.

Put more succinctly, virtue is the disposition to, given a certain situation, feel the amount of a passion towards a rational plan of action as a person who is proficient at acquiring human goods would feel. This definition also seems to match the 'essence' of virtue stated at the outset of the paper. It is certainly a 'mean' as it is a right amount, and it is certainly an extreme in what is best and right insofar as acting like the practically wise person is the best way to acquire those human goods.

It is time now to turn to the question of whether or not this is a *good* definition of virtue. Like the 'mean relative to us', there is no set standard of measurement for such an evaluation. However, there are some considerations that might point us to an answer. Firstly, does it accomplish Aristotle's goal in the *Nichomachean Ethics?* The goal of his inquiry is the human good, which he identifies with happiness, and happiness is "an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue…" (*NE* 1.13.1102a5). Thus, his definition of virtue must be conducive to happiness. Insofar as the practically wise person is the best at attaining the goods required for a happy life, then this condition is satisfied. This, however, is not particularly insightful, since this is the expected result, and if we simply define the practically wise person this way, then it is also an automatic result.

There are two further criteria we ought to consider, the first being its *predictive success*, i.e. whether or not it matches what we would normally think of as virtue. Aristotle, in his assertion that virtue is a state of character, places significant emphasis on the internal processes that lead to action. This must be correct, at least in part, since motivation for action plays a role in our judgment of said action. When considering two people who perform identical acts, say donating to charity, we would surely rate the one who does so out of an internal motivation as virtuous, and the one who grudgingly signed the cheque as 'good-by-accident'. Since the internal

states of the agents seems to be the difference maker between merely good and virtuous, it seems Aristotle is correct in giving an internal definition of virtue.

There is a significant difficulty here, however. This internal locus makes it ostensibly impossible for us to, in practice, judge others. To say that any particular act was virtuous requires one to have knowledge of the internal state of the agent at the time they committed the act, or at least knowledge of what kind of person they are. This kind of intimacy, in turn, is scarcely found anywhere but with our closest friends and family. How are we to attribute virtue to anyone we do not know well, since their actions underdetermine this judgment? In light of this objection, we ought to focus the definition towards the internal dynamics that constitute virtue. That is to say, the judgment of others, when their internal states are unclear, is hopeless, since whether or not they acted viciously or virtuously is beyond our reach. However, we can always apply this definition to *ourselves* when making choices. Thus Aristotle's definition is limited in its predictive power in the sense that it can only describe the actions of those whose internal states we are acquainted with.

This leads us to the second criterion, namely whether or not it is a *useful* definition. Again, given the centrality of the notion to Aristotle's ethics, we ought to find some use for this definition if it is to be a good one. Here the worry lies in the reference to the 'person who is proficient at providing human goods', the man of practical wisdom, as the standard bearer of the kind of state of character one needs to have to be virtuous. This presents a clear problem for the applicability of the definition: Who is this person? How can I know what they would do or how they would feel? Without a fixed point of reference, this reads like an empty platitude.

One might try to appease this concern with two suggestions. The first is to locate the person of practical wisdom as the one that people generally agree deserves the title. This sort of

collective agreement is what Aristotle appeals to when providing examples of men of practical wisdom: "It is for this reason why *we*[3] think Pericles and men like him have practical wisdom" (*NE* 6.5.1140b6). The second suggestion would be to look for markers of practical wisdom. In this case, the reason Pericles is mentioned as an exemplar is "[they] can see what is good for themselves, and what is good for men in general; we consider that those can do this who are good at managing households or states" (*NE* 6.5.1140b8-10). Thus, Aristotle would suggest deriving inspiration from heads of state or heads-of-households that are performing admirably.

Again, though, this might make sense in a time in which one's world and one's audience was confined to a single culture or creed. The problem with these evaluative words is that they can have different extensions based on one's background beliefs. What it means to be a good statesman or a good head-of-household, and who holds these titles, varies by culture and geography; and people could have legitimate disagreements as to what constitutes 'good' management. Aristotle himself admits as much when he asserts that to find his teachings intelligible, one must already be "well brought up" (*NE* 1.4.1095b7) – they must already be immersed in the vision of proper conduct that he is trying to explicate. In other words, in order for such a definition to be useful, one's meta-ethics (one's idols, one's values) need to already be defined.

Aristotle's definition of virtue, once freed from his idiosyncratic jargon, is an effort to place the locus of ethical behaviour in the disposition of the individual, insofar as this disposition is aligned with that of the agent who is best at procuring the goods required for human life. In giving such a definition, he both satisfies his goal in the *Nicomichean Ethics,* and accurately captures our intuitions about the meaning of the term, although accepting this definition means

[3] Emphasis added.

we must be internally oriented when applying it. However, it is limited in that it cannot be used to discover what the virtues actually are. Since it relies on models of behaviour, it stops short from being a specific universal ethic; one must already have role-models to put it into action. Insofar as one has already made this leap, it is a ‘good’ definition. If one is still searching, however, it will only serve to make the search ever more important.

Works Cited:

Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethic.* Translated by David Ross, Edited by Lesley Brown. Oxford University Press, Oxford. 2009.