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Fostering Virtue

Aristotle starts his exploration of ethics by thinking about goals. What is the highest goal (also referred to as the best good) that all other goals are subordinate to, the goal that we seek for its own good and not for what other goals it can help us achieve? That goal is happiness (8). Political science is a good way to study and learn how to practice this good, because political science is concerned with the good of the community (which is more important than the good of the individual) (2). The best way to become acquainted with virtue is through study. Then Aristotle returns to his discussion of why happiness is the best good. Some goods are chosen for their own sake and for something else; for example, understanding is chosen for its own good but also as a means for achieving happiness, whereas happiness is never chosen for the sake of something else. Because of this it is considered complete. Happiness is also self-sufficient in that if you have happiness you don’t need anything else (8).

However, it remains to be clarified just what happiness is. What happiness is for something depends on that thing’s function; happiness helps that thing to be the most excellent example of that thing that it can be. A human’s function is “activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason”, so happiness is activity of the soul in accord with reason or acquiring reason (9). The virtues are what we need so that we are able to do the things that will help us achieve happiness (16). There are two kinds of virtues: virtues of thought, which are acquired through teaching, and virtues of character, which are acquired through habituation (18). Virtue is neither a feeling nor a capacity but rather a state (23). The virtues of character are dispositions to feel, act, or desire properly, whereas the virtues of thought are dispositions to think properly. Virtue aims to be at an appropriate mean between deficiency and excess (for example, the virtue of bravery is in between cowardice and rashness) (25). Aristotle also mentions a few preconditions of virtue to keep in mind: voluntariness (not being forced), deliberation (considering the best means for an end), decision (choosing one among a number of options we’ve considered), and wish (desire for the apparent good) (Book III).

Aristotle discusses the virtue of friendship. Friendship is “mutual loving” (121). To have a virtuous (also called “complete”) friendship with someone, you must be good people similar in virtue and be friends for the friend’s own sake, not just for any utility or pleasure they might give you (122). In a complete friendship, friends will support each other, comforting and helping each other as the situation calls for (152). There are also various types of communities (e.g., travelers, soldiers, etc.), and each kind of community has its appropriate kind of friendship among its members (129). Those communities are all subordinate to the political community (130).

Calvin is very intentional about trying to create a sense of community. As an example, every floor of a Calvin dorm has a Barnabas who leads the floor in Bible study. This fosters a floor community. Calvin is aware that virtue does not take place in a vacuum but rather is affected by how we connect with each other as people. Bible study is an example of a way people are gathered together to learn about virtue (specifically, Christian virtues) and hold each other accountable. Bible study is a way to bring people close together and possibly develop complete friendships. Praying together and being vulnerable are ways people can come to appreciate each other for the other person’s sake and support each other in times of trouble. And by doing Bible study together, people can grow in virtue, helping to satisfy the “good people similar in virtue” condition of complete friendships. This weekly practice helps people to make a habit of virtue, and habituation is how we develop virtues of character.

Another example of habituation is the option students have to go to chapel. Chapel is offered every day at the same time. There are no classes during chapel time (though some people do schedule things during this time with the rationale that students will probably be free so scheduling is easier), so every student has the opportunity to go to chapel. This consistent, available time slot helps people to develop the habit of going to chapel. Chapel helps students practice virtue and become habituated.

Aristotle says the primary way we develop intellectual virtues is through teaching. As a liberal arts school, Calvin provides a great core of classes to ensure students are taught important subjects (including philosophy) that they might not otherwise study. In addition, “think deeply” is part of Calvin’s mission statement. As an example, Calvin aims to ensure faith is incorporated and discussed in every class, not just religion classes.