

Philosophy 609. Handout 05. Remark on Book II Chapter 4

Aristotle makes an elegant but difficult comparison between

1. a work of art: making a fine table, composing a poem, healing someone
2. a moral action: doing something virtuously: courageously, temperately, generously. (Not just a good action but a virtuous action.)

The comparison engages the following three features:

- a. whether the activity is done knowingly
- b. whether it is chosen in and for itself
- c. whether it is done through one's settled disposition (character or skill)

A GOOD WORK OF ART:

- a. being done with knowledge is the MOST IMPORTANT feature; i.e. you can't have done it by accident; it must be done with awareness of what you are doing; if you made a fine table by accident, it really would not be your doing.
- b. whether chosen for itself: NOT IMPORTANT; i.e. you may have done it for money, or fame, or to please someone else; the thing still remains a fine work of art.
- c. whether done from a permanent disposition or skill: ALSO NOT IMPORTANT; you may have just lucked out this time, but the thing still remains a fine piece of work; for example Carl Orff said of himself that he was an average composer who made one masterpiece, *Carmina Burana*.

A VIRTUOUS ACTION:

- a. being done with knowledge is necessary, but it is the LEAST IMPORTANT; this is a requirement for the action's being your action at all.
- b. being chosen for itself: VERY IMPORTANT; if do it for some other purpose, such as for money or fame or to please someone else or to get a job, the action is not really virtuous.
- c. being done through your firm and unchangeable character: ALSO VERY IMPORTANT; if you do something "generous" but you are really not a generous person, the action is good but not virtuous. The ontology of the action depends on the ontology of your character. There is something accidental about the good action that does not come from a stable character.

–This last requirement seems a bit odd to us: if someone does something generous, can the action not be judged just by itself? No; it is a good action, but not a really virtuous one.

–This implies that there is no such thing as the Scrooge phenomenon: no one can become virtuous (generous) overnight; he really would not know how to be generous, how to give appropriately.

–If someone does something good but not in character, we wonder where the action came from and what exactly is going on here, what his intentions are. We could not yet trust him.

The basic reason for the difference: works of art have their own subsistence; they exist as products and can be judged as they exist by themselves (the table, the sonata, the painting), but an action is an agent in action. It cannot be judged apart from the agent.

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A table devised by Fr. Brian Shanley, OP:

	Reason, Logos	Passion, Inclination	Action
The virtuous agent	GOOD	GOOD	GOOD
The self-controlled	GOOD	BAD	GOOD
The weak	GOOD	BAD	BAD
The vicious	BAD	BAD	BAD