ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUE ETHICS

Andrew Fisher and Mark Dimmock

Aristotelian Virtue Ethics Introduction

Aristotle (384–322 BC) was a scholar in disciplines such as ethics, metaphysics, biology and botany, among others. It is fitting, therefore, that his moral philosophy is based around assessing the broad characters of human beings rather than assessing singular acts in isolation. Indeed, this is what separates Aristotelian Virtue Ethics from both Utilitarianism and Kantian Ethics.

The Function Argument

Aristotle was a teleologist, a term related to, but not to be confused with, the label "teleological" as applied to normative ethical theories such as Utilitarianism. Aristotle was a **teleologist** because he believed that every object has what he referred to as a final cause. The Greek term **telos** refers to what we might call a purpose, goal, end or true final function of an object. Indeed, those of you studying Aristotle in units related to the Philosophy of Religion may recognize the link between Aristotle's general teleological worldview and his study of ethics.

Aristotle claims that "…for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function".[2] Aristotle's claim is essentially that in achieving its function, goal or end, an object achieves its own good. Every object has this type of a true function and so every object has a way of achieving goodness. The telos of a chair, for example, may be to provide a seat and a chair is a good chair when it supports the curvature of the human bottom without collapsing under the strain. Equally, says Aristotle, what makes good sculptors, artists and flautists is the successful and appropriate performance of their functions as sculptors, artists and flautists.

This teleological (function and purpose) based worldview is the necessary backdrop to understanding Aristotle's ethical reasoning. For, just as a chair has a true function or end, so Aristotle believes human beings have a telos. Aristotle identifies what the good for a human being is in virtue of working out what the function of a human being is, as per his Function Argument.

Function Argument

1. All objects have a telos.
2. An object is good when it properly secures its telos.

Given the above, hopefully these steps of the argument are clear so far. At this point, Aristotle directs his thinking towards human beings specifically.

3. The telos of a human being is to reason.
4. The good for a human being is, therefore, acting in accordance with reason.

In working out our true function, Aristotle looks to that feature that separates humanity from other living animals. According to Aristotle, what separates humankind from the rest of the world is our ability not only to reason but to act on reasons. Thus, just as the function of a chair can be derived from its uniquely differentiating characteristic, so the function of a human being is related to our uniquely differentiating characteristic and we achieve the good when we act in accordance with this true function or telos.

The notion that humanity has a true function may sound odd, particularly if you do not have a religious worldview of your own. However, to you especially Aristotle wrote that "…as eye, hand, foot and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these?"[3]

On the basis that we would ascribe a function to our constituent parts — we know what makes a good kidney for example — so too Aristotle thinks it far from unreasonable that we have a function as a whole. Indeed, this may be plausible if we consider other objects. The component parts of a car, for example, have individual functions but a car itself, as a whole, has its own function that determines whether or not it is a good car.

Aristotelian Goodness

On the basis of the previous argument, the good life for a human being is achieved when we act in accordance with our telos. However, rather than leaving the concept of goodness as general and abstract we can say more specifically what the good for a human involves. Aristotle uses the Greek term eudaimonia to capture the state that we experience if we fully achieve a

good life. According to Aristotle, eudaimonia is the state that all humans should aim for as it is the aim and end of human existence. To reach this state, we must ourselves act in accordance with reason. Properly understanding what Aristotle means by eudaimonia is crucial to understanding his Virtue Ethical moral position.

Eudaimonia has been variously translated and no perfect translation has yet been identified. While all translations have their own issues, eudaimonia understood as flourishing is perhaps the most helpful translation and improves upon a simple translation of happiness. The following example may make this clearer.

Naomi is an extremely talented pianist. Some days, she plays music that simply makes her happy, perhaps the tune from the television soap opera “Neighbors” or a rendition of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”. On other days, she plays complex music such as the supremely difficult Chopin-Godowsky Études. These performances may also make Naomi happy, but she seems to be flourishing as a pianist only with the latter performances rather than the former. If we use the language of function, both performances make Naomi happy but she fulfils her function as a pianist (and is a good pianist) only when she flourishes with the works of greater complexity.

Flourishing in life may make us happy but happiness itself is not necessarily well aligned with acting in accordance with our telos. Perhaps, if we prefer the term happiness as a translation for eudaimonia we mean really or truly happy, but it may be easier to stay with the understanding of eudaimonia as flourishing when describing the state of acting in accordance with our true function.

Aristotle concludes that a life is eudaimon (adjective of eudaimonia) when it involves “…the active exercise of the mind in conformity with perfect goodness or virtue”.[4] Eudaimonia is secured not as the result exercising of our physical or animalistic qualities but as the result of the exercise of our distinctly human rational and cognitive aspects.

Eudaimonia and Virtue

The quotation provided at the end of section three was the first direct reference to virtue in the explanatory sections of this chapter. With Aristotle’s theoretical presuppositions now laid out, we can begin to properly explain and evaluate his conception of the virtues and their link to moral thinking.

According to Aristotle, virtues are character dispositionsor personality traits. This focus on our dispositions and our character, rather than our actions in isolation, is what earns Aristotelian Virtue Ethics the label of being an agent-centered moral theory rather than an act-centered moral theory.

Act-Centered Moral Theories

Utilitarianism and Kantian Ethics are two different examples of act-centered moral theories due to their focus on actions when it comes to making moral assessments and judgments. Act-centered moral theories may be teleological or deontological, absolutist or relativist, but they share a common worldview in that particular actions are bearers of moral value — either being right or wrong.

Agent-Centered Moral Theories

Aristotelian Virtue Ethics is an agent-centered theory in virtue of a primary focus on people and their characters rather than singular actions. For Aristotle, morality has more to do with the question “how should I be?” rather than “what should I do?” If we answer the first question then, as we see later in this chapter, the second question may begin to take care of itself. When explaining and evaluating Aristotelian Virtue Ethics you must keep in mind this focus on character rather than specific comments on the morality of actions.

Aristotle refers to virtues as character traits or psychological dispositions. Virtues are those particular dispositions that are appropriately related to the situation and, to link back to our function, encourage actions that are in accordance with reason. Again, a more concrete example will make clear how Aristotle identifies virtues in practice.

All of us, at one time or another, experience feelings of anger. For example, I may become angry when my step-son thoughtlessly eats through the remaining crisps without saving any for others, or he may feel anger when he has to wait an extra minute or two to be picked up at work because his step- father is juggling twenty-six different tasks and momentarily loses track of time (how totally unfair of him…). Anyway, as I was saying, back to Aristotle, “Anyone can become angry — that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way — that is not easy”.[5]

For Aristotle, virtue is not a feeling itself but an appropriate psychological disposition in response to that feeling; the proper response. The correct

response to a feeling is described as acting on the basis of the Golden Mean, a response that is neither excessive nor deficient. The table below makes this more apparent.

Feeling/Emotion	Vice of Deficiency	Virtuous Disposition (Golden Mean)	Vice of Excess
Anger	Lack of spirit	Patience	Irascibility
Shame	Shyness	Modesty	Shamefulness
Fear	Cowardice	Courage	Rashness
Indignation	Spitefulness	Righteousness	Envy

Anger is a feeling and therefore is neither a virtue nor a vice. However, the correct response to anger — the Golden Mean between two extremes — is patience, rather than a lack of spirit or irascibility. Virtues are not feelings, but characteristic dispositional responses that, when viewed holistically, define our characters and who we are.

The Golden Mean ought not to be viewed as suggesting that a virtuous disposition is always one that gives rise to a “middling” action. If someone puts their life on the line, when unarmed, in an attempt to stop a would-be terrorist attack, then their action may be rash rather than courageous. However, if armed with a heavy, blunt instrument their life-risking action may be courageously virtuous rather than rash. The Golden Mean is not to be understood as suggesting that we always act somewhere between complete inaction and breathless exuberance, but as suggesting that we act between the vices of excess and deficiency; such action may well involve extreme courage or exceptional patience.

In addition to feelings, Aristotle also suggests that we may virtuously respond to situations. He suggests the following examples.

Feeling/Emotion	Vice of Deficiency	Virtuous Disposition (Golden Mean)	Vice of Excess
Social conduct	Cantankerousness	Friendliness	Self-serving flattery
Conversation	Boorishness	Wittiness	Buffoonery
Giving money	Stinginess	Generosity	Profligacy

We must keep in mind the agent-centered nature of Aristotelian Virtue Ethics when considering these examples. A person does not cease to have a witty disposition in virtue of a single joke that might err on the side of buffoonery, or cease to be generous because they fail to donate to charity on one occasion. Our psychological dispositions, virtuous or not, are only to be assessed by judgment of a person's general character and observation over more than single-act situations. If we act in accordance with reason and fulfil our function as human beings, our behavior will generally reflect our virtuous personality traits and dispositions.

Developing the Virtues

In a quote widely attributed to Aristotle, Will Durrant (1885–1981) sums up the Aristotelian view by saying that "…we are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit".[6] It is fairly obvious that we cannot become excellent at something overnight. Making progress in any endeavor is always a journey that requires both effort and practice over time. Aristotle holds that the same is true for human beings attempting to develop their virtuous character traits in attempt to live the good life. You may feel yourself coming to an Aristotelian Virtue Ethical view after reading this chapter and therefore be moved to become wittier, more courageous and more generous but you cannot

simply acquire these traits by decision; rather, you must live these traits in order to develop them.

Cultivating a virtuous character is something that happens by practice. Aristotle compares the development of the skill of virtue to the development of other skills. He says that "…men become builders by building" and "… we become just by doing just acts".[7] We might know that a brick must go into a particular place but we are good builders only when we know how to place that brick properly. Building requires practical skill and not merely intellectual knowledge and the same applies to developing virtuous character traits. Ethical characters are developed by practical learning and habitual action and not merely by intellectual teaching.

In the end, the virtuous individual will become comfortable in responding to feelings/situations virtuously just as the good builder becomes comfortable responding to the sight of various tools and a set of plans. A skilled builder will not need abstract reflection when it comes to knowing how to build a wall properly, and nor will a skilled cyclist need abstract reflection on how to balance his speed correctly as he goes around a corner.

Analogously, a person skilled in the virtues will not need abstract reflection when faced with a situation in which friendliness and generosity are possibilities; they will simply know on a more intuitive level how to act. This is not to say that builders, cyclists and virtuous people will not sometimes need to reflect specifically on what to do in abnormal or difficult situations (e.g. moral dilemmas, in the case of ethics) but in normal situations appropriate responses will be natural for those who are properly skilled.

It is the need to become skilled when developing virtuous character traits that leads Aristotle to suggest that becoming virtuous will require a lifetime of work. Putting up a single bookshelf does not make you a skilled builder any more than a single act of courage makes you a courageous and virtuous person. It is the repetition of skill that determines your status and the development of virtuous characters requires a lifetime of work rather than a single week at a Virtue Ethics Bootcamp.