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The Aristotelian Conception of Virtue

In the recent resurgence of interest in virtue, Aristotle's theory has pride of place. He provided one of the first comprehensive theories of virtue, one that placed a great deal of emphasis on the exercise of our rational faculties and the integration of the rational with the emotional. It is an attractive theory because Aristotle focused on the issue of what it was to be a good person in developing his theory. Many recent ethicists find this a welcome relief from theories that focus on the evaluation of action. The Aristotelian view has become extremely influential. For example, Alasdair MacIntyre views the Aristotelian tradition as the one that will save ethics from aimless fragmentation (MacIntyre 1979). Rosalind Hursthouse has recently presented a neo-Aristotelian account of virtue ethics (Hursthouse 1999). John McDowell appropriates the Aristotelian idea that virtue involves correct perception of morally relevant facts (McDowell 1979). The virtuous agent recognizes what is good, "sees things as they are," and acts accordingly.¹ It is the "seeing things as they are" element of Aristotle's theory that has permeated virtue theory (see also Murdoch 1970, Blum 1991). And it has scarcely been challenged.² One aim of this book is to challenge this condition of virtue. One of my claims, argued for in Chapter 2, is that correct perception, while important, is not necessary for virtue. In this chapter I will discuss the intellectualism of Aristotle's theory of virtue, since it seems the natural starting point for any book professing to take on central tenets of traditional virtue theory. However, I do not intend, in a small chapter, to develop an original and complete exegesis of Aristotle's views on virtue.³ Rather, this chapter is simply preliminary to the development of my own views, and will aid in putting those views in context within the virtue theory tradition. My aim in this chapter is simply to draw out the

predominant lines of thought in Aristotle, which I view as influential but also incorrect. This method will inevitably overlook the richness of detail in the theory.

The Aristotelian conception of moral virtue can only be understood as part of the greater project of giving an account of the good life. Living according to virtue was one element of living the good life, and the most important element. Because of this orientation, classical writers put a great deal of emphasis on the role of reason and knowledge in living according to virtue. A good man is a man who is well functioning, and the unique human function is reason – the ability to think rationally and acquire wisdom and knowledge. This is what distinguishes man from beast. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all developed highly intellectualist theories of virtue, consistent with their view of the proper activity for human beings (or, for the sake of historical accuracy, their view of the proper functioning of free men).

1. THE KNOWLEDGE CONDITION

Prior to Aristotle, Socrates held by far the strongest knowledge condition for virtue, since he actually identified virtue with knowledge. This means that, given the appropriate knowledge, one cannot fail to have virtue, and given that one is truly virtuous, one cannot fail to have the appropriate knowledge. They simply are the same thing. For Aristotle, however, the knowledge condition was not so strong. Knowledge is not identified with virtue; rather, the right sort of knowledge or wisdom is a necessary and sufficient condition for virtue.

... it is impossible to be good in the full sense of the word without practical wisdom or to be a man of practical wisdom without moral excellence or virtue. (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144b27–30)

Virtue and practical wisdom go hand in hand, though they are not identical. This also commits Aristotle to a unity of the virtues thesis, which states that the possessor of one virtue possesses them all. While a strict unity of virtues thesis strikes many as implausible – since it seems that persons can be flawed and virtuous at the same time – some modern Aristotelians have incorporated more flexible versions of the claims into their accounts of virtue.⁴

Further, on Aristotle's view, no virtue can be constituted by, or based upon, ignorance. Since virtues are dispositions for choice, in order for the agent to act from virtue he must know that what he is doing is the

morally correct action. For one's actions to be characteristic of virtue, one must act with full knowledge of the circumstances. One cannot act in, or out of, ignorance.⁵ Praise can attach only to voluntary or intentional actions, and this will require the agent to perform an action knowingly, *under the relevant description*. A particular action can be described in a variety of ways. When I turn on the light in my living room, the action can be described as “flipping a switch,” “lifting my arm,” “rearranging atoms,” or “turning on the living room light.” I must understand the action that I am performing as “turning on the living room light” in order for it to count as an intentional or voluntary turning on of the living room light. I can intentionally lift my arm without intentionally turning on the light, even if the result of my lifting my arm is that the living room light gets turned on. So a virtuous action – or one that represents a true exercise of virtue – is one performed knowingly under the description that is relevant to its being labeled virtuous. For a person to be acting generously, then, she must perceive that others are in need and knowingly help them.⁶ The notion of a virtuous *action* is derivative, or dependent upon, the notion of the virtuous agent: “. . . acts are called just and self-controlled when they are the kind of acts which a just or self-controlled man would perform” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105b4–8).

But the virtuous *person* must act in the following way:

. . . an act is not performed justly or unjustly or with self control if the act itself is of a certain kind, but only if, in addition the agent has certain characteristics as he performs it: first of all, he must know what he is doing; secondly, he must choose to act the way he does, and he must choose it for its own sake; and in the third place, the act must spring from a firm and unchangeable character. (Ibid., 1105a28–34)

The “firm and unchangeable character” trait is the virtue. But a virtue cannot be a disposition that leads to anything other than action conforming to this characterization. So, an agent who does something noble unknowingly, or nonvoluntarily, or whimsically does not demonstrate any virtue through such action.⁷ And virtuous action is crucial in Aristotle's overarching theory: to be happy or flourishing, the agent must not only have the virtuous disposition, the agent must also act, or *use*, the virtue (see Kraut 1989, p. 235).

Aristotle makes a distinction between several sorts of wisdom, only one of which concerns our discussion of virtue. The type of wisdom necessary for virtue he calls “practical wisdom,” or *phronesis*. Practical

wisdom is the intellectual capacity of the moral agent that is generally perceived to regulate virtue. It is a capacity that is developed over time to deal with practical matters. So, in contrast to theoretical wisdom, practical wisdom has to do with action, activity. This is what makes it crucial to virtue, which also concerns action. The exact relationship between virtue and practical wisdom is not clear. In one place Aristotle notes that “. . . virtue ensures that the aim is right, and *phronesis* the means to the aim” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1145a). This indicates that virtue fixes the end or goal of the good person, and *phronesis* is required for exercising virtue because it enables the end to be best realized.

Phronesis can roughly be characterized as practical good sense. Without it the agent cannot have virtue. It requires of the agent that he deliberate well, in the sense that the end of the deliberation is good, and the reasoning involved must be good as well (see *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141b9–13). The agent must be able to consider the relevant facts, weigh them, consider alternatives, and reach the right decision. Further, since practical wisdom is by definition concerned only with particular cases and situations – not abstract ones – it seems that the man of right reason must follow the preceding procedure in each case where a moral decision is called for.⁸ The knowledge condition for Aristotle requires that the person know what he is doing under the morally relevant description so that the action is truly voluntary (i.e., not performed in ignorance; see *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III) and so that it is the correct thing to do. Further, since choice is the result of deliberation, and practical wisdom involves deliberating well, the virtuous action is guided by practical wisdom. A man of courage will be able to assess a situation as calling for courageous action and deliberate about the best action to accomplish the appropriate end. He will know that what he is doing is dangerous but also that it is the thing to do. This sense of ‘knowledge’ was deemed practical by Aristotle because it concerned action rather than pure contemplation. So not only are actions done knowingly, they must be performed deliberately, as a matter of deliberate choice. As Richard Sorabji points out, the deliberation does not necessarily involve some calculation each and every time the agent acts. Even so, the act is regulated by the agent’s conception of the good life (Sorabji 1980, p. 210). This can itself be unpacked in a variety of ways, but the intuitive idea, I take it, is that the act must support or at least be consistent with the agent’s conception of the good. To differentiate courageous bodily movements from ones that are not at all intentional, however, one must make the stronger claim that the virtuous action is also seen by the agent

as being supportive of the good at the time the action is being performed. Otherwise, the account commits the agent to no more than rationalization after the fact. This is a topic I will return to later in the book. So, it would seem that Aristotle's view of moral virtue is a strongly intellectualist view in that it *requires* knowledge and deliberation.

The agent must also act, and feel, according to the mean. In other words, the virtue trait is neither excessive nor defective; it gives rise to neither excessive nor defective actions and feelings. How do we determine the mean? Aristotle maintains that it is impossible to provide a set formula (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106a14–b28). Rather, the virtuous agent must rely on ethically sensitive perception to determine where virtue lies. The virtuous agent picks up on, and responds to, the ethically significant factors present in various contexts and tailors her actions accordingly.⁹ John McDowell, in “Virtue and Reason,” resurrects this Aristotelian view of virtue when he argues that virtue consists of a perceptual sensitivity to the morally relevant features of one's situation, a kind of perceptual knowledge. This is taken to be an alternative to the view that virtue consists in the agent's having internalized rules, or principles, of ethical behavior. Rules are too crude, too general. Nussbaum echoes this:

It is very clear . . . in Aristotle . . . that one point of the emphasis on perception is to show the ethical crudeness of moralities based exclusively on general rules, and to demand for ethics a much finer responsiveness to the concrete – including features that have not been seen before and could not therefore have been housed in any antecedently built system of rules. (Nussbaum 1990, p. 37)

Nussbaum also believes that this perception, or “. . . the ability to discern, acutely and responsively, the salient features of one's particular situation,” is necessary for the good life (*ibid.*).

Some commentators, however, have believed that it is pure mechanical habit rather than intellect that for Aristotle is the key to virtue (by putting a great deal of emphasis on Aristotle's claim that virtues are “unchangeable” characteristics).¹⁰ Thus, the virtues are viewed as inculcated habits to act in various ways, without, necessarily, the use of practical wisdom on each occasion.¹¹ This characterization has unfortunately led some to regard Aristotle's theory of virtue as mechanical and virtue development as a matter of good programming.¹² It is true that early in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle claims that moral virtue is formed by habit (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a17–b25). Thus, it might be the case that in order to be virtuous the agent need merely have the

habit of hitting the mean on a certain range of choices. The person “knows how” to act rather than “knows that” in each case the action conforms to the dictates of practical wisdom and virtue. Even if this were the correct view of Aristotle’s theory, there is a knowledge condition to be discerned. It is simply a weaker one. The agent still *knowingly* acts to pick the appropriate course of action, though it is the case that she doesn’t deliberate, or puzzle out, or think about what the best choice is.

In any case, this interpretation of Aristotle is incorrect. It should be remembered that when he makes the claim that virtue is formed by habit, he intends a contrast with the view that virtue is a matter of nature. Aristotle wanted to contrast his own view with the view that one can simply be born with virtue. At most, nature disposes us to accept virtue. Yet, though habit helps us to form the virtues, a virtue is not a habit if ‘habit’ is to be understood as a mechanical procedure that may have little connection to practical wisdom (e.g., the habit of smoking cigarettes – here one does it without thinking). This is because developing a certain trait for Aristotle requires doing actions that are characteristic of that trait. It is by doing just deeds that a man is able to instill in himself a sense of justice. The habit of doing just deeds will help to make us just, but it is not itself what makes us just. Aristotle is describing a process when he discusses habit – the process of instilling a virtuous disposition. The product, or result, is the virtue itself, the exercise of which still requires practical wisdom. The habit of doing virtuous deeds is important because it is in this way that a person becomes familiar with what the right action is like, and once he has the virtue he can use practical wisdom to act rightly. Those who claim that for Aristotle virtue is habitually acting rightly are thus mistaken. They are confusing what Aristotle describes as the process of acquiring a virtue with the virtue itself. The debate about whether or not virtue is a matter of nature only, or a matter of correct upbringing and instruction, preceded Aristotle. It formed one of the central issues of Socrates’ confrontation with the Sophists. The Sophists clearly had to maintain that virtue could be taught – after all, teaching virtue was supposed to be their business. Socrates wanted such a position clarified in the *Protagoras*. Aristotle comes out in favor of the view that virtue can be acquired, that it is not simply a matter of nature. How can virtue be acquired? It is acquired by habituation.¹³ Thus, in these passages, Aristotle is simply articulating his version of the view that virtue can be taught.

Habit is necessary for internalizing the virtuous ‘end.’ This means that the urge to be virtuous does result from habit. However, practical wisdom, and knowledge of what to do in a particular context, are still required. Otherwise, the agent will have the end but no reliable way of realizing it. Thus, there is a knowledge condition.

There may also be a lesser role that habit plays in exercising virtue. The habit of acting rightly may familiarize an agent with what virtuous actions are like, just as developing good habits in playing chess familiarizes a player with good chess moves. Habit enables the agent to rule out stupid or obviously incorrect choices immediately and focus his attention on the plausible choices. This will save time and make the deliberation involved in virtue more efficient. It serves to streamline the process of making a choice according to practical wisdom, and it is compatible with the three conditions of virtue that Aristotle explicitly sets out.

Internalizing good ends is, of course, crucial to virtue because genuinely virtuous activity must have these ends internal to them or must make essential reference to those ends (i.e., the activity is “done for its own sake”). In other words, someone with the virtue of kindness is not motivated by greed in giving to the poor, with the aim of getting more money for himself. Rather, for the activity to be characteristic of kindness, the motive must be concern for others, the activity an expression of that concern, and the end that the concern be expressed to the benefit of others. The exercise of practical reasoning involves my having good desires and deliberating about how to serve them best by my actions.

Aristotle also makes a distinction between natural and real (or “full”) virtues. Natural virtues are contrasted with real virtues as traits that

1. we are born with: “. . . the various kinds of character inhere in all of us . . . by nature. We tend to be just, capable of self-control, and to show all our other character traits from the time of our birth.”

2. do not involve practical wisdom: “. . . it is impossible . . . to be a man of practical wisdom without [full] moral excellence or virtue” and

3. because they lack regulation by practical wisdom, will actually be harmful and/or fail to reliably benefit the agent possessing them: “. . . children and beasts are endowed with natural qualities or characteristics, but it is evident that without intelligence, these are harmful . . . as in the case of a mighty body which, when it moves without vision, comes down with a mighty fall because it cannot see. . . .” (Aristotle, 1958, 1144b1–35)

The natural virtues can be transformed into real ones once the child acquires practical wisdom and becomes a true moral agent. It is unclear whether or not Aristotle believed that adults could have natural virtue. Some argue that an adult who has attained the age of reason and yet still acts on pure inclination is more like the weak-willed. (Hursthouse 1999, pp. 104–5). However, Aristotle’s intellectualism is still evident in the demand that true virtue require practical wisdom, or deliberation and choice. Natural virtues are thus not full moral virtues because they are not chosen or regulated by practical wisdom.

The opinion that moral virtues – and virtuous actions – are voluntary and the result of choice is certainly not unique to Aristotle.¹⁴ I should point out that there is some controversy over Aristotle’s views regarding responsibility for character. On the one hand, as I have tried to point out, he does regard voluntariness in acquiring the virtue as an important part of having the virtue. This provides an easy and plausible way of distinguishing natural good traits from cultivated ones in a way that reflects well on the agent. On the other hand, Aristotle also takes pains to point out that moral education and habituation are crucial for the development of true virtue: thus, parents must take pains to raise their children properly. This makes virtue look like a matter of how well a child happens to be brought up – something beyond the agent’s control. The two perspectives can be made consistent, of course. One could argue that Aristotle meant that moral education makes children receptive to virtue, but that the final choice lies with them, and thus ultimately the virtues must be ‘voluntary.’ This view seems to be plausible when we read what Aristotle writes at one point about how natural virtue can evolve into full virtue: “. . . once he [the agent] acquires intelligence, it makes a great difference in his action. At that point the natural characteristic will become that virtue in the full sense which it previously resembled” (1958, 1144b13–14). So, to extrapolate a bit, the child developing good moral habits does not himself have true virtue until he acquires practical wisdom and then voluntarily makes a choice about the virtue. There is a sense in which his choice of the virtue when he is fully capable of reason constitutes a *voluntary* adoption of the virtue. An analogy with soft determinism might be apt here: while it is true that if he had not been raised properly he would not have the virtue, this does not cut against its voluntary adoption later on. All that is required is that he want the virtue, and choose to have and further develop what he already sees in himself.¹⁵

In any case, the view that *true* moral virtue is in some sense voluntary

is shared by almost everybody who has written on the subject. In order to accommodate this view, writers have had to make a distinction between praising someone's good qualities and *morally* praising them (what a Kantian would term 'esteeming' them). Thus, we admire a person's talent and intelligence, and we may praise her for these features, but this praise is not moral praise. These features are part of her temperament or personality, as opposed to her character. Moral praise is reserved for an agent's voluntary actions and features of *character*. We may like someone for having a pleasant or interesting temperament, but we do not admire her for this, since her temperament may be something she was born with, that she doesn't have to work at. Moral praise is somehow special and distinct from other types of praise because it is restricted to those things the agent is somehow responsible for. However, along with David Hume, I find this distinction spurious. People often do work hard at developing a pleasant temperament, at nurturing their good personality traits, such as intelligence, and their moral feelings, such as compassion and pity.

Hume took up the issue of voluntariness in his *Treatise*. He believed that an arbitrary distinction was made between natural abilities and virtues. Other writers like Aristotle disagreed, because natural abilities lack the quality of having been chosen or cultivated. As Hume puts it, the belief was that "they [natural abilities] are entirely involuntary, and have therefore no merit attending them, as having no dependence on liberty and freewill" (Hume 1960, p. 608). Yet, many qualities that are traditionally thought of as moral virtues can be just as involuntary as a natural ability like intelligence. One might be born prudent, or strong-willed, or generous. The Aristotelian will reply by making a distinction between natural virtue and real virtue, but this fails to mirror moral experience. If the distinction rests on some kind of intuitive distinction between temperament and character, it can't account for the fact that one and the same trait may or may not be voluntarily acquired.

There are cases where persons have lost their moral character through accidents. The most famous case is that of Phineas Gage, who, prior to suffering a terrible brain injury, was, by all accounts, intelligent, responsible, and very likable. After the injury to the frontal lobes of his brain, however, Mr. Gage lost the ability to make moral decisions.¹⁶ He became untrustworthy. Untrustworthiness is a vice. Phineas Gage went from trustworthy to untrustworthy by way of an accident. The lapse was not a product of his will. Further, there was nothing, as far as researchers know, that Mr. Gage could have done to alter the outcome.

If one rejects the Humean line, one is forced to conclude that Mr. Gage had no moral vices, since he didn't choose his deplorable traits. Rather, it seems much more plausible that we regard Mr. Gage as genuinely vicious, though we might not blame him for *becoming* vicious. Imagine also a counterpart to Mr. Gage, someone who previous to his accident was nasty and insensitive, but after getting hit on the head becomes sweet and gentle. His traits are virtues, though not voluntarily acquired.

Thus, we may in fact value voluntary virtues more than nonvoluntary ones. But if we do, it is only because we believe that when a person tries to acquire a good trait, he is exercising another disposition; he is disposed towards moral self-improvement. The additional esteem is not for the trait acquired, but for the trait used to acquire it. Generosity, when it is the result of a plan of self-improvement, is esteemed more than natural generosity, but this should not detract significantly from esteem awarded to the 'natural.'

However, in the case of the natural virtues for Aristotle, even though the traits themselves are not voluntarily chosen, the actions resulting from them may very well be, even though they are not regulated by practical wisdom. The basic traits are unstable and the action is capricious. Recall Aristotle's analogy with the sightless giant in discussing natural virtue; the natural trait, unregulated, will bumble about and cause harm. So, to use an example, natural generosity is promiscuous in its attentions. A person with this trait will give even to those who should not receive because that person lacks practical wisdom – or good judgment or common sense.

Aristotle wanted virtues, as excellences of character, to be reliable. Requiring practical wisdom in their exercise was one way to ensure this reliability, which in turn is crucial to the agent's happiness in living the life of virtue. In Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle writes: ". . . no function of man possesses as much stability as do activities in conformity with virtue: these seem to be even more durable than scientific knowledge . . ." (1100b12). Such a person will be able to handle bad luck with nobility, he's resilient, and virtue enables him to act appropriately even under terrible circumstances (1100b12–21). Of course, even though virtue insulates one from the effects of misfortune, it doesn't do so perfectly. However, virtue is still necessary for true happiness.

But if the virtue is a disposition, reliability is already built into the concept. What practical wisdom gives the agent, really, is flexibility. Someone who lacks practical wisdom might be at a loss in an unusual