

Moral Philosophy
Морална философия

THE ACTUALITY OF ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUES

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Abstract. Aristotle defined the ethical and intellectual virtues which are recognized even nowadays as fundamental. Contemporary virtue ethics still takes into account Aristotelian virtues. The modern moral philosophers have tried to find new ethical values in a society in which religions are in decline and the old values lost their meaning. The starting point of their research has been Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics" which has remained the most important work in ethics influencing the philosophical thinking until nowadays. This paper seeks to explain the actual importance of the cardinal Aristotelian virtues and how they are seen today.

Keywords: virtue; reason; wisdom; moral virtues; intellectual virtues

1. Moral Philosophy and Virtue before Aristotle

There were three main philosophical schools before Socrates, the father of philosophy: the pre-Socratics (who famously investigated nature in their search for the fundamental principles of all things (Mourelatos 1993), more important being Parmenides, Empedocles, Heraclitus), the Sophists, (travelling teachers engaged in public debates about justice, duty, happiness and civic virtues) and the philosophical tradition of Socrates and Plato, centered at Plato's Academy, the first school for theoretical research. Socrates was the first to define philosophy as focused on problems. The historian of philosophy, Anthony Preus says that "in the times of Socrates, people turned from the inquiry into nature and the philosophers turned to political studies and useful virtues." (Preus 2007, 108). The shift from Pre-Socratics through the Sophists to the intellectual approaches of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle was a shift from speculation about the principles of nature to discussions about the ethical life.

Plato's "Republic" was the most important work of moral philosophy, before Aristotle. In "Republic", Plato explores the virtues in the individual person by first describing the virtues in the ideal society. He divides his imaginary society into ruler class, soldier class and citizen class with well-ordered roles, corresponding to specific virtues: the rulers of the city must be endowed with wisdom (sophia), the soldiers must have courage (andreia), the people of every class are

to possess temperance or moderation (*sophrosyne*) and justice (*dikaiosyne*). In Plato's thought, the individual is a miniature version of the city-state in which the virtues of justice, wisdom, courage and moderation must also be present. Plato anticipates Aristotle's view that there are four essential virtues, emphasizing the vital role of wisdom in ordering the city-state and the human soul, wisdom giving a unity both to the ideal society and to the virtues.

In his dialogues, "Republic" and "Philebus", Plato suggests that the soul's possession of virtues is a sufficient condition for happiness (*eudaimonia*), considering the human good as a state of being rather than an activity (contrary to Aristotle). According to Plato, virtues or moral excellences are character traits possessed in the individual's soul and they cannot be taken away by external circumstances. A virtuous person is virtuous regardless they have the opportunity to express their virtues. Plato also argues in "Republic" that a strict education for children is necessary if they are to arrive at a virtuous character which creates happiness: since the pull of pleasure and the fear of pain are undeniable for children and young people, they need external authorities such as teachers and parents teaching them the virtues and guiding their behavior (Aristotle 2014, X.9.1179b16-18, and II.3.1104b12-13). However, common person's opinion was (and still is) that happiness consisted of some external things, such wealth, money, pleasure or fame rather than virtue.

2. Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, the Fundament of Ethics

The question of what make a happy life is central concern to politicians, intellectuals and ordinary people. Happiness is the greatest good and it is achieved only by ethically good action which springs from the virtues of moral character and intellect (referring to dispositions of character and actions). Ethics is the branch of philosophy concerned with the question "how should we live?" Much of Aristotle's work focused on ethics or the study of right and wrong. During the Middle Ages (fifth to fifteenth century c.e.) philosophers usually referred to Aristotle simply as "the Philosopher". He was the inventor of the word "ethics". The historian of philosophy Terrence Irwin confirm the influence of Plato on Aristotle: "Aristotle places himself in the Socratic tradition by endorsing the critical examination of common moral beliefs in order to identify the puzzles and difficulties they raise. In Plato's early dialogues, Socrates raises these puzzles through systematic cross examination of ordinary beliefs." (Irwin 2007, 2). Most common views of the day analyzed and criticized by Plato were put forward in his dialogues as the opinions of the Sophists.

Dealing with human happiness, Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics", is one foundational work in moral philosophy, one of the most influential texts in ethics and every ten years a major new commentary appears. His ethical thought provides a contrast to our modern social and political assumptions offering a dif-

ferent perspective on the political and economic problems of the contemporary world. His work established moral philosophy as an independent discipline and it decisively influenced the field's terminology, main arguments and structure. "Nicomachean Ethics" is a timeless philosophical work classic and history's first treatises (systematic written analyses) which has profoundly influenced every era of moral philosophy (a branch of philosophy concerned with the theory and practice of morality or how we ought to live) since Aristotle's days. "Aristotle holds a position of unparalleled importance in the history of philosophy and he is a thunderingly philosopher to boot." (Barnes 1995, xv). Many of the moral concepts and principles of which now we think of as the West can be traced back to Nicomachean Ethics and to the Aristotelian concepts of happiness, virtue and practical wisdom. "Nicomachean Ethics" investigates the question of what a good human life is; in answering this question, Aristotle argues that a good life is one conducted according to the function or purpose of human nature. In Aristotle's sense, a function is a thing's unique and defining purpose and he asks himself: what is the purpose of human beings? Or: what are human beings meant to do? Aristotle believed that the mankind's highest function is eudaimonia, meaning happiness or flourishing. But what does this happiness consist of?

For Aristotle, our function as human beings will be determined by what separates us from other things in the world: reason (the human capacity of abstract reflection). We can exercise reason regarding both theoretical and practical matters. Therefore, our function and the key to real eudaimonia is to be realized through the proper exercise of theoretical and practical reason, which, for Aristotle was a question of recognizing the middle way between extremes of actions and character. Practical reason demands people be neither cowardly nor rash in the face of danger. The mean, the desired middle between these two extremes, is the character trait of courage. These "middle way" traits of character are called virtues and Aristotle outlines many including justice, courage, temperance (restraint from pleasures), and practical wisdom. Aristotle does not omit a discussion on theoretical reason; toward the end of "Nicomachean Ethics" he returns to contemplation (that is for him, reflection on eternal truths), a practice he considers the highest realization of eudaimonia: "If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable to expect that it is in accordance with the highest virtue... (T)his activity is that of contemplation." (Aristotle 2014, X.7.1177a.13-18).

Virtue Ethics is a branch of ethics that principally focuses on moral character. Now it is a leading current in contemporary moral philosophy: "virtue ethics is both an old and a new approach to ethics; old in so far as it dates back to the writings of Plato and, more particularly, Aristotle, new in that, as a revival of the ancient approach, it is a fairly recent addition in contemporary moral theory." (Hursthouse 2009, 9). But, "Nicomachean Ethics" is not important only for those engaged in academic philosophy. For Aristotle, philosophy begins "because of

wonder” (Aristotle 2005, 982b10-15). The wonder is that we feel in response to the puzzle presented to us in the physical world, in the social world and in the world of the individual action. Aristotle explores some of the most immediate and intimate sources of wonder for human beings: the question of the essential nature and purpose of human beings and the question of how we ought to live.

There is perhaps no more wondrous set of questions for human beings than that which “*Nicomachean Ethics*” addresses: how do human beings achieve happiness (eudaimonia)? What is the nature of happiness? Why do human beings fail to achieve happiness? These universal and humane questions are actual in any epoch and Aristotle’s work can speak meaningfully to us today. His ethical thought provides a contrast to modern social and political assumptions offering a different perspective on the political and economic problems of the contemporary world; basic needs must be met in order to live. What is that which makes the life good? Everyone in Aristotle’s days agreed that happiness makes for a good life, but there was disagreement about what happiness was.

3. The Happiness and the Virtues

While many considered happiness a matter of pleasure, honor or wealth, or a state of the soul, Aristotle followed his teacher, Plato, in arguing that this was a wrong idea, arguing that happiness is an activity in accordance with intellectual and moral virtues. Those are thought as a means to some other end, but the ultimate goal of the all human action is the good that people are really aiming at in all of their activities: “Every skill and every inquiry, and similarly every action and rational choice is thought to aim at some good; and so the good was aptly described as that at which everything aims” (Aristotle 2014, I.1.109a,1-3). Two things that guide Aristotle’s answers to the question of happiness are: reputable opinions (doxa) and what one can perceive (phainomena). As a general approach in his philosophy, Aristotle seeks agreement between previous reputable opinions and daily personal experience (Aristotle 2014, VII.I.1145b2-7). In the ancient world, people conceived of happiness as an objective state of being independent of our perception rather than merely a subjective experience. There is a wide disagreement of what happiness should consist of: “They disagree about substantive conceptions of happiness, the masses giving an account which differs from that of philosophers” (Aristotle 2014, I.4.1095a, 18-22). Aristotle inherits practical disagreement about what is the ultimate good, and he develops a genuinely new idea about the nature of this highest good, arguing that happiness is an activity, not a state of being. It is “activity of the soul in accordance with virtue” in a complete life (Aristotle 2014, I.7.1098a,16-18).

In the beginning of “*Nicomachean Ethics*”, Aristotle considers reputable opinions (endoxa) (Aristotle 2014, 1172b28ff), advancing his own theory, after a detailed and careful analysis of opinions of the others, including poets, sages

and philosophers. Although he was clearly influenced by Socrates and Plato, Aristotle also paid attention to the ordinary people's opinions about happiness. Regarding the nature of happiness, he agrees with Plato that the best life centers on virtues; still, there are important differences between their accounts. Contrary to Plato, Aristotle argues that virtue is necessary, but not sufficient, for eudaimonia as it is absurd to affirm that the person who is internally virtuous but desperately poor is really happy. He argues that virtuous action and contemplation represent the fullest life of happiness, admitting that some level of money and health are necessary to achieve happiness (existing a relation between wealth and happiness).

Like Plato, Aristotle acknowledges that pleasure cannot be the ultimate good, as "pleasure is not the good, because the good cannot become more worthy of choice by anything being added to it", (Aristotle 2014, 1172b28ff). According to Plato and Aristotle, the life of pure pleasure can be improved by reason. Therefore, pleasure cannot be the ultimate good, since the ultimate good must be incapable of being improved on. A final important difference between the two philosophers is in regard to ethics: according to Plato, the human actions aim at the "Form of the Good" (an abstract concept uniting all the things we call "good"), but Aristotle states that there is no form of that all good things can meaningfully be said to share - like, for example, honor, practical wisdom and pleasure (Aristotle 2014, I.6.1096b24). Therefore, ethics does not require theoretical knowledge of the abstract Form of the Good but only practical wisdom.

Aristotle's aim in "Nicomachean Ethics" was to find the highest good in human life (Aristotle 2014, I.2.1095a15-17), so as to provide both politicians and individuals with a goal and a model of action (Aristotle 2014, I.2.1094b11), every human being aiming at well-being or happiness (eudaimonia). According to Aristotle, eudaimonia describes a set of objective facts about the person rather than a passing feeling or opinion of one's life. Different people located it in different things, like wealth, honor, power. Plato and Socrates had already argued that happiness resides in the possession of virtue, but Aristotle's approach is to seek to blend these seemingly incompatible views on happiness emphasizing that the human good is found in the exercise of the virtues, stating that the ultimate good is the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. But the possession of virtues, although is necessary, it is not sufficient for happiness. In order to act in a virtuous manner, external things are needed, like friendship, financial resources and so on. Without them, the virtuous character does not have the chance to be expressed. Aristotle's originality is revealed by the stress on the virtuous activity. Therefore, both the good character and the virtuous action are necessary for happiness. This approach leads to the conclusion that the morality of an action should be judged by the character or virtue of the person, rather than by the outcome of the action.

4. Practical and Theoretical Wisdom

Aristotle's approach to ethics is groundbreaking in two ways: in his practical focus, arguing that ethics is practical, and in his belief that ethical reflection requires ethical education. Plato had suggested a name for the practical wisdom (*sophia*); Aristotle divided the intellect into theoretical wisdom (*sophia*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and productive wisdom (skill in producing things). Thus, one need not to be a philosopher or a theoretically minded to possess virtues such as justice, courage or temperance (Aristotle 2014, VI.3-5.1139b14-1140b30). Aristotle's approach to ethics, differing both from that of his predecessor, Plato, and from most of modern approaches, is not beginning with the theoretical defense of ethical concepts. For Aristotle, knowledge of what is a virtue or what is not a virtue is decided in the early stages of one's development. He states several times that a person can be ruined for life regarding virtue if that person is not taught early to exercise discipline in pursuing their desires: "anyone who is going to be a competent student in the spheres of what is noble and what is just... must be brought up well in their habits", (Aristotle 2014, I.4.1095b3-5). We can reflect on and refine later our understanding of the virtues, but we must learn early to see their essential nature and that they are ultimately worth pursuing.

The main argument in "Nicomachean Ethics" concerns the ultimate human good which is agreed to consist in happiness and Aristotle will conclude that happiness is virtuous rational activity (Aristotle 2014, I.7, especially 1098a16-17). He arguably blends the best aspects of the conventional opinions about happiness. Socrates and Plato correctly argued that the human being needs virtuous character to be happy, and the common person's opinions were correct regarding that the money and honor are part of what makes happiness possible. According to Aristotle, the happy person is the person who both possesses moral and intellectual virtues and has the external goods necessary to act in a virtuous way. He agrees with Plato that the life of philosophical contemplation is the highest good that human beings can attain.

The characteristic activity that all human beings share in common is living in accordance with certain virtues (*arete*) of thought and action. The virtues of thought have been called "intellectual virtues"; the virtues of action have been called "moral virtues". Each virtue is a mean between at least two corresponding vices (e.g. courage is the mean between foolhardiness which the rushing into dangerous situations, and cowardice, which is shrinking back from dangerous situations, without necessity or proper planning, even when action is required to help someone). To give an account on happiness, Aristotle asks what the characteristic activity (*ergon*) of human being is. As the reason makes a human being different from other beings, the account of happiness must be based on the fact that the human beings are essentially rational or reason-based beings. Aristotle argues that the function of human being and, therefore, the key to happiness is to act in accord with the virtues (*arete*), virtuous activity being in accord with the rational nature of human beings.

The rational nature of human beings is a combination of practical and theoretical wisdom. Practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is a very important intellectual virtue for Aristotle's system as it makes living virtuously possible: "The mark of a man of practical wisdom (is) to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself." (Aristotle 2014, VI.5.1140a25ff). The practically wise person does this in two ways: first, the person is able to judge the virtuous thing to do and how to do it in a certain situation, and, secondly, the presence of practical wisdom helps the virtuous person to control appetites or desires which would otherwise lead them away from acting according to the moral virtues. The judgment of actions and the control of appetites through the practical wisdom involve feelings and actions that are appropriate in certain circumstances (Aristotle 2014, II.6.110b17ff). Aristotle suggests that practical wisdom helps to determine which character traits represent the mean (desired middle way) between extremes of character. Additionally, practical wisdom helps us to see that although there is only one virtue to aim at in each area of human life, there may be many corresponding vices to avoid.

The virtues which Aristotle associates with happiness are deeply ingrained character traits of thought and action, including moral virtues such as justice, temperance, friendship, generosity, courage, as well as intellectual virtues such as scientific knowledge, intelligence and practical wisdom. These virtues cannot be acquired through instruction alone, but virtuous habits are necessary to be exercised over a long period of time, developing moral and intellectual virtues which make a person practically wise, able to recognize and choose virtuous actions for the sake of virtue. Theoretical reason is another part of what separates human beings from other beings; hence, a thoroughly happy human life is that in which the person contemplates abstract and universal truths. The life of philosophical activity is what makes us to be similar to gods (Aristotle 2014, X.7-8). A person who leads a life of morally and intellectually virtuous activity is truly happy having the resources necessary to act virtuously and to contemplate abstract philosophical questions.

There are also several secondary ideas developed in "Nicomachean Ethics", such as justice and friendship, pleasure and pain, voluntary action and responsibility, incontinence (weakness of will - *akrasia*); Aristotle gives a new account of why people who know the right thing to do often fail to carry it out. Plato had argued that if someone does not act according to virtue, then they must suffer from a lack of knowledge. Aristotle seeks to explain the obvious truth that often people seem to know what is right and yet fail to do it. His argument is that such people are incontinent (a term which he uses to describe people who lack self-control, being too affected by their desires to really know the moral claims that he or she puts forward as true. According to Aristotle weakness of will is like a perpetual state of being "asleep, mad or drunk." (Aristotle 2014, VII.3.1147a14). To overcome incontinence, a person must be taught to habitually choose the virtuous acts.

To understand Aristotle's account of happiness, it is important to know that he sees the task of moral philosophy as continuous with political concerns. He identifies two types of justice: one that could be called political (state of affairs that achieved the mean between one person possessing too much wealth and another person possessing too little wealth), (Aristotle 2014, 1133b32 ff), and one that could be called personal - the virtue of giving people what they deserve, lawless, greedy and unfair people missing it and being, thus, unjust (Aristotle 2014, V.1.1129a32 ff). In both "Nicomachean Ethics" and "Politics", Aristotle suggests that the state (polis) ought to play a role in developing people's character so that they come to possess the virtue of justice. According to Aristotle, friendship comes in three kinds: friendship of utility (convenience), friendship of pleasure and friendship of virtue (Aristotle 2014, VIII.3.1156a6-1156b35). The last of these is true and lasting: "Complete friendship is that of good people, those who are alike in their virtue" (Aristotle 2014, VIII.3.1156b8). Aristotle believes that pleasure matters for human actions: "Moral virtue is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of the pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of the pain that we abstain from noble ones" (Aristotle 2014, II.3.1104b9-10). Pleasure tends to lead us toward bad acts and toward a lack of self-control; consequently, pleasure is often not a good thing. However, it is a good thing when it is connected with virtuous activity. Finally, Aristotle's account of virtues is that happiness (eudaimonia) only applies to life as a whole; the virtuous person can only truly be judged at the end of life.

5. Followers of Aristotelian Ethics

"Nicomachean Ethics" maintained its importance as a classic in moral philosophy until today. The work has also played a significant role in contemporary moral philosophy. According to the American professor Ron Polanski, "Nicomachean Ethics is among the first systematic treatments of ethics and it is arguably the most important and influential philosophical work ever devoted to its field. With glorious preparation in the thought of Socrates and Plato, and equipped with a rigorous depth in all the principal areas of inquiry, Aristotle aimed for a comprehensive presentation of ethics that could stand the test of time" (Polanski 2014,1). The many who follow his philosophy are called Aristotelians or Peripatetics, after the circular walkway (peripathos) that stood next to Aristotle's school, the Lyceum. Great thinkers such as Descartes and Nicolaus Copernicus started to move away from Aristotle's theories about nature.

Aristotle's ethics was largely embraced during the Christian Middle Ages (from the 5th to the 15th century), when many philosophers and religious scholars, such as Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, wrote commentaries on Nicomachean Ethics. Albertus Magnus' commentary to "Nicomachean Ethics" (completed in 1250) was the most influential book on ethics written in the Middle Ages. Aquinas combined Aristotle's ethical system into his extremely influential master-work,

“*Summa Theologiae*” (written from 1265 to 1274). Following Aristotle, Aquinas maintained that every virtue is a mean (a desired middle) between vices, holding that practical reason (*prudentia*) is the source of our knowledge concerning which actions and character traits are virtuous. Due to the influence Aquinas’ work had on the subsequent Christian Theologians, Aristotle can be said to have exercised an influence upon the intellectual and ethical outlook of the Middle Ages. Other philosophers continued this attention during the Renaissance when European culture was reinvigorated by a turn towards classical models. Later philosophers, increasingly disagreed with the linkage between Aristotelian and Christian ethics, such as Thomas Hobbes. There was a decline in the popularity of Aristotle’s ethics as a complete system after Middle Ages. Kant bases the rightness of actions on whether people are acting according to an appropriate rule and consequentialism holds that the rightness of an action depends solely on expected outcomes; supporters of these views formulated several objections to virtue ethics and to Aristotle’s ethics.

Around the middle of the 20th century, many philosophers returned to Aristotle as an enlightening moral philosopher for the contemporary world. The latest renewal interest in “*Nicomachean Ethics*” began with the British philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe’s article, “*Modern Moral Philosophy*” which called for a reexamination of Aristotle’s ethics in the light of moral philosophers’ confused use of the notion of moral obligation in twentieth century’s moral theory, which would push us to seek a clear definition of “a virtue” and might bring with it a fresh insight into ethics. The recent “virtue ethics” movement, focusing on moral character as a basis for ethics, is inspired by Aristotle’s emphasis on virtue in moral conduct.

Famous moral philosophers, such as the English virtue ethicist Philippa Foot, the Scottish thinker Alasdair MacIntyre, the US scholar Martha Nussbaum, Rosalind Hursthouse from New Zealand are followers of Aristotle. MacIntyre wrote the influential book “*After Virtue*” (1981), in which he argues that the contemporary world is characterized by incoherence and unending disagreement about ethics stemming from a modern rejection of Aristotle’s belief in the intrinsic purposes of human nature. MacIntyre argues that a more consistent approach will only be recovered as some form of Aristotle’s ethics. Rosalind Hursthouse argues in “*On Virtue Ethics*” (2001) that it is a mistake to think of virtue ethics as focused on the character of the individual. Rather, virtue ethics is able to provide concrete guidance about the appropriate norms or principles of behavior. Hursthouse’s account provides rules related to virtues and vices: “Not only does each virtue generate a prescription – do what is honest, charitable, generous – but each vice a prohibition – do not what is dishonest, uncharitable, mean” (Hursthouse 2001, 36).

The potential of “*Nicomachean Ethics*” to influence contemporary and future philosophy is mainly linked to the fortunes of virtue ethics. Virtue ethicists take their inspiration and key terms from “*Nicomachean Ethics*”, highlighting topics such as virtue, happiness and practical wisdom. According to Rosalind Hursthouse,

“Virtue ethics is both an old and a new approach to ethics, old in so far as it dates back to the writings of Plato and, more particularly, Aristotle, new in that, as a revival of this ancient approach, it is a fairly recent addition to contemporary moral theory” (Hursthouse 2001, 9). The rise of virtue ethics is also responsible for the further development of core aspects of “Nicomachean Ethics”, although not all virtue ethicists are neo-Aristotelians. Many virtue ethicists agree with Aristotle’s central argument that a good life consists of virtuous activity; however, some aspects of the text need to be updated, seeming to be tailored for a certain society at a certain time, namely Athens in the fourth century b.c.e. Thus, Aristotle’s virtues are not necessarily our virtues (and vice versa); Aristotle has no virtue that would cover our intersection with the environment, for example.

In the future, virtue ethics will continue to provide fruitful discussions in questions about abortion (termination of pregnancy), euthanasia (mercy killing), and medical research, especially in the field of genetics and transplant of organs, from a virtue ethics perspective. Since virtue plays such an important role in ethical development, educators have begun to focus again more on the development of character. This insight goes back to a concern voiced by Aristotle, namely that moral education must begin at a young age. Even if Aristotle does not cover all of our practical concerns, “Nicomachean Ethics” is still relevant and provides a useful framework in which to develop virtues of our society and time. The Aristotle scholar, Paula Gottlieb, remarks: “No doubt that in all Aristotle’s ethical works there are gems waiting to be discovered and fruitful lines of enquiry to be pursued, even after two thousand years of study.” (Gottlieb 2013, 46).

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