



Aristotle on the Nature and Art of Selfhood

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The virtues...we acquire by first having put them into action, and the same is also true of the arts (τεχνων). For the things that we have to learn before we can do them we learn by doing...we become just by the practice of just actions, self-controlled by exercising self-control, and courageous by performing acts of courage (NE 1003a, 30-1003b, 2).¹

Some have found this passage to contain a paradox; how can we do brave things before we are really brave, or practice moderation before we are moderate? I really don't think there's much of a paradox, even though the phrasing is awkward. Our experience of slowly learning a skill or habit is familiar enough, as is the phrase "practice makes perfect." You force yourself, painfully and unnaturally at first but less so with practice, to act bravely or moderately. If one persists, and with adequate luck, one becomes brave and moderate; it becomes our "second nature." 20th Century philosophers have distinguished between competence and performance. In Aristotle's account of habituation, repeated performances, even if the first few are below par, can lead to competence over time. In Aristotle's terms, which are more ontological than the empirical "competence and performance" model can accommodate; there is a deeper dimension of *potential and act*: "...of all the qualities with which we are endowed by nature, we are provided with the capacity first, and display the activity afterward" (NE 1103a, 25).

¹. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* Martin Ostwald, trans. Macmillan, pubs. 1962 p. 34

Habituation alone is not enough. After all, we can easily develop bad habits in the same way that we develop good habits. Living examples of virtue are required, so that mimesis also plays a part in our moral growth. We are political creatures, and we all need others who care about the development of our character and who offer guidance and advice; “if this were not so, we there would be no need for an instructor” (NE 1003b12-3). We imitate those who have already successfully developed courage or moderation, acting as if we were brave or moderate, struggling at first, but slowly training ourselves.

But, if “acting-as-if” and imitation are the keys to developing virtue, then surely the *Poetics* will provide a clue to Bk. II of the *Ethics*, and in a way that may add to our understanding of how ethics and aesthetics are connected. The *Poetics* opens with a detailed treatment of mimesis, analyzing mimesis according to the means, the objects, and the manner or modes of imitation (1447a10-1448b5). The most important object of imitation is the serious, deeply significant action of tragedy, and its most important aspect is the plot, driven by the character and thought of the *dramatis personae* (1450a1-15).

Aristotle measures the quality of a tragedy by its ethical content: “good men ought not to be shown passing from prosperity to misfortune, for this does not inspire either pity or fear, but only revulsion; nor evil men rising from ill fortune to prosperity” (1452e). Both scenarios are morally, ethically absurd. Offering a strong

clue to the relationship between tragedy and the *Nichomachian Ethics*, the ideal tragic character is a mean between the extremes of the perfectly good and the completely evil human being, basically good, but flawed. For example, the first words out of Oedipus' mouth express deep compassion for his suffering Thebans, stricken with plague; but, before long, he reveals one of the mistakes that governs his nature, hubris, overconfidence in his mental powers. (One wonders whether Sophocles was addressing the wise men of Athens in their impotence to stop the plague)! In another form taken by the mean in the *Poetics*, the tragic heroine must not be a victim of pure bad luck (*dustuchia*), nor act in a deliberately depraved way; *hamartia* is a mean between accidental and deliberate action. This reflects Aristotle's position, central to his ethical thought, that "a good character is largely under a person's control."²

These noble figures who err so seriously are, of course, not to be imitated, but rather provide warnings in our moral education. For example, Achilles and Hector insure that the *Iliad* is not just epic, but an epic tragedy; and Achilles, in his hubris and inability to moderate his profound grief and rage, offers us a negative example of conduct, a model of what can go wrong in a noble character.

Book II of the *Nichomachean Ethics* offers a solution to the traditional question of Greek ethics: is virtue by nature or by culture? The Latin word "culture" provides a clue through its relationship to cultivation. Like a garden or field, a human being has certain natural potentials for behavior that can be developed or neglected.

². Cynthia A. Freeland, "Plot Imitates Action: Aesthetic Evaluation and Moral Realism in Aristotle's *Poetics*" in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, ed. Princeton, 1992 p. 117

Aristotle himself achieves a mean between the traditional alternatives of nature or culture; nature forms parameters within which moral training can take place, but does not determine our lives. The villain Iago, who understands nothing of virtue (or friendship), ironically offers an astute reading of the natural possibilities for ethical life; one wonders whether Shakespeare puts the speech in the evil man's mouth in order to express the inherent danger of self-fashioning.

Virtue? a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus
or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which
our wills are gardeners: so that if we will plant
nettles, or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up
thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs, or
distract it with many, either to have it sterile
with idleness, or manured with industry, why, the
power and corrigible authority of this lies in our
wills.³

Aristotle's account of the ethical role of tragedy illustrates how the arts, especially the narrative arts, play an absolutely crucial role in our moral lives. It's revealing that the *Nicomachean Ethics* uses the example of learning a *techne* to address the central problem of whether virtue is cultural or natural: of course, it's a combination:

³. William Shakespeare *Othello* (Act I Scene 3) Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, eds. Washington Square Press, 1993 p. 51

...none of the moral virtues is implanted in us by nature, for nothing which exists by nature can be changed... Thus, the virtues are implanted in us neither by nature nor contrary to nature: we are by nature equipped with the ability to receive them, and habit brings this ability to completion and fulfillment (NE 1103a, 20-5).

Our dual nature as beings who are both natural and cultural makes it possible for us to do ethical work on ourselves. The paradox is that it's our nature to be cultural, so that, equally paradoxically, Diogenes' complete rejection of culture makes him a completely unnatural man! We are imbedded in nature but not overdetermined by nature, and enjoy-or suffer-a remarkable (but not unlimited) power to adjust our own behavior, our own emotions, even our very identities. "We are the sole, the quite mysterious, natural species that, by enculturation, becomes 'second-natured' artifacts, apt for and drawn to the proliferating work of self-interpretation, socially and personally."⁴ As in the case of the Athenians who become who they are in the experience of tragedy, works of art play a crucial role in teaching human beings how to belong to a community, a society, a culture.

Works of art can play such a role in self-formation and self-interpretation because of their ontological similarity to human beings. Any artwork, even an enormously complicated one like a tragic play or a film, relies upon natural things like sounds from musical instruments and from the human vocal apparatus, colors and shapes from paints and wood, paper and ink, cellulite and metal. Yet the artwork cannot be reduced to these things, it relies upon nature without being itself natural.

⁴. Joseph Margolis *What, After All, Is a Work of Art?* Penn State, 1999 p. 125

For Aristotle, *techne* is a form of mediation between the natural world and the artworks that we create. But *techne* also provides a passage from the infantile, pre-cultural baby to the acculturated adult, a passage achieved through habituation, and partly through exposure to and participation in the artworks and performances that characterize their social environment. Babies are born, but Greeks (or Celts or Kikuyus) are created out of babies, partly through Greek, or Celtic, or Kikuyu art: “we cannot deny the existence of texts if we admit the existence of selves; and uttered texts cannot be more determinate than the reflexively determinable nature of self-interpreting selves. Ultimately, the theory of texts is a theory of selves and of their utterances.”⁵ We can use performed texts in our ethical training, in our projects of self-knowledge, self-examination and subject-formation, because we are just as artifactual as those texts. Ethics can mimic a *techne* because we are, in a sense, self-interpreting texts, and it’s through the arts that we do this interpretive work.

⁵. Joseph Margolis *Selves and Other Texts: The Case for Cultural Realism* Penn State, 2001 p. 174