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The Virtuous Person as Norm in Aristotle's Moral Theory

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Despite widespread and perennial tendencies towards oversimplification, both on the parts of philosophers and other academics or intellectuals, and on the parts of other people less explicitly concerned with and formed by academic and intellectual discourses and activities, our moral lives always remain irreducibly complex. Our moral theorizing, our attempts to provide more illumination, intelligibility, and consistency to our moral lives and their constitutive elements, takes place against the backdrop and within the context of this complexity. Whether explicitly and consciously articulated or only implicitly worked out through action and desire, whether closely focused on a particular situation, action, or choice or extended to questions and matters broader in scope, our practical reasoning is similarly situated. Given the complexity of moral life, two main dangers threaten moral theorizing and practical reasoning. Both involve a sort of intellectual and moral failure. The first danger is that of oversimplifying the structures and phenomena one aims to understand and explain, generating accounts that compensate for their inadequacies to the complex realities purportedly illuminated by the clarity and coherence brought to the matters to which the accounts restrict themselves. Utilitarian moral theories and practical reasoning, despite conceptual power and sophistication displayed at times, exhibit and exemplify this sort of failure, of which those in its grip generally remain unaware. The second danger is that of invoking moral life's complexity (and the inadequacies of various available moral theories) to excuse not attempting to reflect on, understand, and make good judgements and distinctions in moral life, or for engaging in over-subtle and -sophisticated theorization neglecting or misconstruing basic moral realities and distinctions any putatively adequate moral theory and any good practical reasoner must address. What variously get called "ethics" or "the ethical" in deconstruction and in post-modern theories provide examples of the latter.

One important quality of some of the various moral theories and modes of practical reasoning called "virtue ethics" or "ethics of character" is that they do considerable justice to the complexity of moral life in several ways. First, genuine virtue ethics involve recognition that reasoning and judgements about moral matters inevitably involves particularities not entirely subsumable by a set of clear and unproblematic criteria, rules, or decision procedures. Second, virtue ethics generally study, articulate, and draw upon a range of interrelated categories corresponding to the phenomena and structures of moral life. Simply to take one example, as John Cooper observes of Aristotle, the virtue ethicist focused on here, "[his] ethics and political theory are constructed around a closely knit family of psychological concepts: those of happiness (*eudaimonia*), virtue (*aretē*), practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), action (*praxis*), state or habit (*hexis*),

desire (*orexis*), pleasure and pain (*hēdonē* and *lupē*), choice or decision (*prohairesis*) – and the emotions or passions (*the pathē*).”¹ Third, precisely because they focus on virtues and vices, i.e. morally good or bad habits or dispositions, such theories account for success and failure, degree of progress or decline of moral development, as well as investigating the modes and means by which moral development takes place.

Still, precisely these strengths can raise problems in the minds of some people, one of these being that virtues and vices may seem to be understood and described in a manner that is less than clear, and which one might suspect is in fact viciously circular. In order to address this problem in a manageable way here, I will focus on Aristotle’s moral theory, although this raises a significant issue for other virtue ethics as well, one at the heart of what constitutes virtue ethics. For, not only it is fitting that proponents of virtue ethics provide its critics some account making a reasoned case for understanding virtue to not be merely circular, such an account turns out to be an integral part of virtue ethics as moral theory. In Aristotle’s work as we currently possess it, this problem is not explicitly raised and resolved, but resources are there for doing both.

Consider, for instance, Aristotle’s clarifications the nature of moral virtues and their characteristic actions. Virtue, as every reader of Aristotle knows, is a mean between extremes, and both the mean and the extremes are habits or dispositions (*hexeis*), produced by and productive of certain kinds of actions. “Every virtue is generated and is destroyed from engaging in the same actions (*ek tōn auton*) and through the same actions (*dia tōn auton*),” Aristotle notes, explaining that by doing them well, people become good, and by doing them poorly, bad (1103b7-13).² Using examples, he clarifies that through determinate actions in characteristic situations, people develop the virtues or vices specific to those actions and situations. The mean constitutive of a specific virtue is a pattern of action in these characteristic situations, and likewise are the excesses or vices (1104a19-27). And the activities (*energeiai*) of the virtues, their modes of fuller exercise and expression over time, are “in the same actions” (1104a30).

At the same time, simply doing morally good actions, actions characteristic of a virtue, cannot be strictly identified with being virtuous. Aristotle raises, only to reject, the view that a person doing just and temperate actions is already just or temperate (1105a17-22). It is not enough that actions be in accordance with the virtues (*kata tas aretas*) for them to be done, e.g. justly or temperately (*dikaiōs ē sōphronōs*). The acting person must be in a certain condition, i.e. they must be aware of (*eidōs*) what they are doing, the virtuous action must proceed from

¹ Cooper, “An Aristotelian Theory of the Emotions”, in *Essays on Aristotle’s Rhetoric*, Amelie Rorty, ed. (University of California Press. 1996), p.238

² Aristotle will also speak not only of generation and destruction of the virtues but also of growth (*auxēsis*), and in addition to the “from” and “through”, will also say that virtues are generated, destroyed, and increased “by” or more literally “under” (*upo*) the same actions. 1104a27-30)

deliberate choice (*proairoumenos*), and it must be done from a stable (*bebaiōs*) and fixed (*ametakinētōs*) disposition. These three conditions provide some clarification to Aristotle's important but seemingly rather circular distinction: actions or affairs (*pragmata*) are called just or temperate when they are the kind of actions (*toiauta*) the just or temperate person does, but the just or temperate person is not the one who simply does such actions, but the one who does them *as* (*houtō*) just (*dikaioi*) and temperate (*sōphrones*) people do them. (1105b5-10)

This seeming circularity will raise problems for some people. Moral goodness understood by reference not primarily to certain types of actions but to certain kinds of people with certain kinds of character, habits, and dispositions, is bound to be suspect on several grounds, a few of which we should note here. First, in actual moral life and discourse, it will not be simply kinds of people singled out as moral models and arbiters. Rather, it will be determinate individuals, whose moral status will usually be a matter of some ambiguity, and perhaps controversy. Second, while actions (at least many of them) are empirically observable, states of character are not observable with the same ease. One might suspect that Aristotelean notions of virtues and vices conceal some fundamental arbitrariness ultimately vitiating his moral theory. Such suspicions might be that virtues and vices simply reflect unexamined cultural norms, arbitrary preferences and desires, or even opportunistic and manipulative use of moral vocabulary to gain, preserve or employ authority and power. And, these suspicions are unlikely to be allayed by the fact that reason's proper determination what constitute virtues and vices involves *phronēsis* and developed habits, and remains irreducible to a system of rules or procedures.

At this point, several integrally connected features of Aristotle's moral philosophy need to be outlined and emphasized. All of these illuminate and unpack the significance of the virtuous person being the criterion for the moral goodness or badness of actions and persons. First, practical reasoning is involved in the virtues, and it is possible to provide rational accounts for virtues and rational determination of virtuous action, but this rationality cannot be entirely extricated from the virtues, habits, and affectivity primarily of virtuous people, and secondarily those not entirely possessing but recognizing their virtue. Second, moral virtues are structures determined by and determining not only practical rationality and actions, but also pleasures and pains and emotions. Third, recognition, understanding, development, and articulation of virtues and vices, virtuous and vicious people, and moral qualities, takes place through and is conditioned by determinate cultural, social, and interpersonal frameworks.

Aristotle's most definitive characterization of virtue runs: "virtue is a habitual disposition (*hexis*) expressive of deliberate choice (*proairetikē*), being in the mean state relative to us, determined by reason (*hōrismenēi logōi*) and as a person of practical wisdom would determine it (*hōs an ho phroninos horiseien*)" (1106b35-1107a2). Among the passages indicating how reason

determines this properly, four are particularly noteworthy. First, reason does not determine a virtue as acting or as feeling in a one-size-fit-all way, but appropriate to determinate situations, considering: “the right time (*hote dei*), the right situations (*eph’ hois*), in relation to the right people (*pros hous*), on account of the right things (*hou heneka*), and as one should (*hōs dei*)” (1106b21-2).³ Second, virtue requires some degree of “practical wisdom” or “prudence” (*phronēsis*),⁴ precisely why its definition includes the reference to how the *phronimos* would determine things.

Note, however, that although a rational account can be provided,⁵ there are no absolutely constitutive rules for determining if somebody is prudent, whether a particular action displays prudence, or precisely what prudence would dictate. Interestingly, one need not possess practical wisdom to understand its role or recognize it, at least in part.⁶ Third, virtue possesses not only a rational component, but also an affective and desirous component intimately entwined with the rational.⁷ Virtues involve deliberate choice, which is desire that deliberates (*orexis bouleutikē*), so that “it is necessary both that the rational account be true (*ton. . . logon alēthē*) and that the desire be rightly directed or structured (*orexin orthēn*, 1139a23-25).

³ Aristotle makes clear that determining the mean in particular cases (*en tois kath’ hekaston*) can be difficult (*khalepon*), not least because it is not easy for reason to distinguish matters definitively (*aphorisaí*), but also because these involve matters of perception (*tōn aisthētōn*) (1109b14-23). Three times, he uses the virtue of mildness or calmness, bearing on anger, as an example: 1109a26-30, where he also uses liberality, 1109b15-8, and 1126a32-b5. In the latter passage, he reiterates that these involve particulars, in which perception must judge (*[en] tēi aithēsei hē krisis*). It is worth mentioning that Aristotle holds that human beings, because they possess *logos*, have *aisthēsis*, “perception” not only of what moderns call sense-perceptions, but also of what may be called “moral qualities.” The listing of these in the *Politics* passage includes: “the useful and the harmful”, “the just and the unjust”, the “good and the bad”, and “all the other [such qualities]” (1253a14-18). In his discussion of practical wisdom, science (*epistēmē*) and intuition or mind (*nous*), he notes that this type of perception is not that of the special senses (*tōn idiōn*), is analogous to grasping fundamental mathematical principles or truths, but is a different type of perception (1142a24-31)

⁴ *Phronēsis*, Aristotle remarks, is “right reason” (*orthos logos*) bearing on matters of action. Virtues are “habits in accordance with right reason” (*kata ton orthon logon*), i.e. “in accordance with *phronēsis*,” but also, more strongly, “with”, or “cooperating with” right reason (*meta tou orthou logou*) (1144b21-8). Later, Aristotle notes the reciprocity involved in the relationship between practical wisdom and the virtues: “practical wisdom’s starting points (*arkhai*) are in accordance with the moral virtues” (1178a17-8). Also, “virtue, whether natural or developed through habituation, provides the starting-points” for practical reasoning (1151a18-9)

⁵ *Phronēsis* is a “practical habitual structure (*hexis. . . praktikē*) of truth, according with reason (*meta logou*), concerning what is good and bad for human beings” (1140b6-7). It is concerned not only with general principles, but also with particulars (1141b15-6), is a fruit of experience (1142a14-6)

⁶ In the *Rhetoric*, the character-based means of persuasion dictate that in order to be persuasive a speaker must attempt to convey to his or her audience his possession of three moral qualities: practical wisdom, virtue, and goodwill (*eunoia*) (1378a8). In N.E. he says that “everyone is some way seems to divine (*manteuesthai*)” part of *phronēsis*’ relation to the virtues (1144b24)

⁷ The intimacy of this connection shows in Aristotle’s statement: “deliberate choice is either mind bound up with desire (*orektikos nous*) or desire bound up with mind (*orexis dianoētikē*), and a human being is this sort of principle [of choice and action]” (1139a5-6).

Lastly, although at many places in several works Aristotle construes virtue as a condition in which the fully rational part of the soul, reason (*logos*) or intellect (*nous, dianoia*) is obeyed by the desirous and emotional part of the soul capable of listening to and participating in reason, the part determinately structured by moral habits, he also maintains that our nature, habits, and reason must harmonize (*sumphonein allēlois*, 1332b6), and he not only considers it possible for nature or habit to go wrong, but also human reason. “For [reason and habits] should harmonize with the best harmony, since it is possible for reason to *be entirely mistaken* (*diēmartēkenai*) about the best principle of action (*upothesis*), and for one to be driven likewise through [bad] habits” (1334b10-3). Setting these four passages together, it now becomes clear that attaining or at least approaching practical intellect’s and reasoning’s proper object, “truth in agreement with right desire” (*homologōs ekhousa tēi orexei tēi orthēi*, 1139a30-2) requires development and use of a rationality rightly resistant to reductive simplification, both because of the inherent complexity of the matters it engages and because its very nature is inextricably bound up with affectivity and habits. It also requires reference to, and eventually mimetic internalization of, practical rationality of others who function as models, teachers, and rectifiers.

Virtuous and vicious dispositions and persons will not be entirely determinable through rules for another important reason, namely, that they involve pains, pleasures, and in some cases emotions⁸ and desires. This does not render virtue and vice arbitrary or purely subjective, however, since these modes of affectivity are indices of virtuous and vicious dispositions, as well as of self-control and lack of self-control. In the virtuous person, modes of affectivity will manifest themselves in and receive appropriate structures, determinable, as noted earlier, by reason and as the person of practical wisdom. Moral habits, Aristotle notes, are those dispositions in accordance with which we are well or poorly disposed (*ekhomen eu ē kakōs*) in relation to emotions (105b26-7)⁹ Likewise, virtue and vice are concerned with pleasures and pains (*peri hēdonas kai lupas*, 1104b26-8), and feeling them through the course of activities provides an index or sign (*sēmeion*) of one’s dispositions. The virtuous person will be pleased in doing good actions (1099a13-22), and will deal well with the pleasures and pains attendant on or even constitutive of actions and emotions (1104b14-6).¹⁰ Again, particularly with pleasures and pains, the morally good person, and the condition of virtue provides the standard. Actions in accordance

⁸ The term here translated as “emotions” is *ta pathē*, “the passions,” which receive their most thorough, but certainly not complete, treatment in *Rhetoric*, bk. II. In English, some of them might also be called attitudes or moods.

⁹ The *Eudemian Ethics* is more explicit: “the states [of virtues and vices] are the states that cause the passions to be present in accordance with reason (*kata logon uparkhein*) or the opposite” (1220b18-9) The *Magna Moralia*, typically regarded as a later Peripatetic work, contains a very interesting formulation: “we say virtue to exist, when well-disposed (*eu diakeimenos*) reason is proportioned (*summetros*) to passions possessing their proper excellence, and the passions to reason”, and “virtue consists of both [passion and reason]” (1206a10-18)

¹⁰ *N.E.* bk. II contains a very closely focused discussion of the moral significance of pleasures and pains. One key point made there is that “we measure and evaluate (*kanonizomen*) actions, some of us more, some less, by the standards of pleasure and pain (1105a3-5)

with virtue are, as Aristotle says, pleasant “in themselves” (*kath’ autas*. . . *hēdeiai*, 1099a21-2). This does not mean, however, that they will be pleasant for everyone, for again good people, the “lovers of the fine” (*philokaloi*)¹¹ provide the standards for genuine and appropriate pleasures.¹² The virtuous person’s correctness in evaluation and feeling modes of affectivity will not be entirely discursively explicable, perhaps in extreme cases not even intelligible, to those lacking properly structured affective dispositions and orientations, and who most likely already possess poorly structured affectivity. Appreciating, and perhaps even sharing in a full sense, their judgements’ and feelings’ rightness, requires one to be, if not already virtuous, at least turned towards that direction.

In light of these points of Aristotle’s moral theory presented so far, the seeming circularity of virtues and virtuous actions defined in terms of virtuous people can be properly understood. Unless the complex conditions and phenomena of moral life are to be reductively oversimplified, comprehension and realization of the kind of good moral virtues are necessarily involves recourse to the standard provided by virtuous people. At the level of general moral theory, Aristotle has us acknowledge the multiplicity of factors involved in determination of acting and feeling in accordance with virtue. At the level of particular situations, of application, in order to act and feel appropriately, less than virtuous agents require something to determine and guide their practical reasoning, and the stance of the virtuous person ultimately provides the best, the fullest standard. Developmental progress in moral goodness likewise takes place through many causes, including at some point the developing person’s deliberate choice, but at a certain point there is no substitute for examples, teachings, and, when available, personal relationships virtuous people provide. And, rightly assessing whether other person’s actions, expressed emotions, and attitudes genuinely display deep-rooted virtue or vice, or are good or bad actions but not truly revelatory of character, and the degrees of these, likewise needs the input of the virtuous.

These points are strengthened by two final considerations. The first stems from the political, associative, interpersonal nature of human beings. Perception, ascription, judgements about, understanding, possession, transmission, and realization through activity of moral qualities happen in and are conditioned by determinate cultural, social, and interpersonal frameworks. It is through these that we develop, possess, and deploy our moral vocabularies, concepts, example-

¹¹ He employs a variety of overlapping characterizations at different points in his work. E.g. in 1176a16-22, it is the *spoudaios*, the morally good person, whose perceptions are to be taken as correct. In that same discussion, “virtue (*aretē*) and the virtuous person (*agathos*) are the measure for each thing (*hekastou metron*)”. At 1176b25, it is the *epieikoi*, those who have a sense for the appropriate, who are contrasted with the *phauloi*, the morally bad, though in the next lines, it is the *spoudaios* again who supplies the standard for pleasures and honors

¹² Aristotle speaks of things that are pleasant to “the many” conflicting with each other (*makhētai*), i.e. not being able to be integrated with each other, because they are only good and pleasant in a sense not absolutely (1099a11-2). Later, he provides an example of one activity’s pleasure hindering that of another, music-lovers unable to listen to (and presumably follow) philosophical discussion, or to study, when someone is playing music. (1175b3-7)

providing narratives, and everyday life illustrative experiences. Laws and political institutions play roles for better or for worse in formation of moral character of members of a political community, as do the kind of lives people lead, people's networks of relationships of family, friends, and associates, and what we might call the general culture, including artistic production and consumption. Aristotle suggests that one can take some cues from these, employing them as starting points for dialectical inquiry, since e.g. many people have at least a tiny share of virtue and practical wisdom (1281b4-5), most people recognize and use a moral vocabulary including virtues and vices of character,¹³ and engage in praising and criticizing along generally acknowledged moral lines. However, given that most people do not act virtuously, but simply make recourse to virtue-talk (*epi . . . ton logon katapheugontes*, 1105b13-4), that they claim that they have virtue (1291b5) and think one needs only a modicum of virtue (1323a36-7),¹⁴ and that they do not have a notion of what is noble and genuinely pleasant, never having tasted them (1179b15-6), discerning and developing virtue and vice through moral theory and practical reasoning will all the more require engagement with virtuous people, who will possess, exemplify, and be able to impart better understandings of virtue and vice than other people.

The second consideration, with which I conclude this paper, requires pointing out something Aristotle himself never discusses, but which is consonant with his thought. Virtue is never entirely manifested, let alone exhausted, in any given virtuous action, in any given adequate conception of virtue, or even in any given exemplarily virtuous person. This is precisely why the same virtue takes determinately different shapes in differing circumstances involving particular individuals, and in alternate cultural settings. This also reflects why people of practical wisdom and virtue are continually needed as determiners and discerners of virtue. Since virtue is not reducible to sets of rules, discerning and determining new, perhaps overlooked or misunderstood features of a virtue, or even distinguishing previously unknown virtues, will require experience and possession of virtues and practical wisdom. These are all consequences of the complexity, diversity, and depth of moral life's phenomena and conditions. As moral theory and as practical reasoning, virtue ethics represents attempts to provide intelligibility and discernment, but also to respect the integrity of this complicated reality. This constitutive aim in turn requires that the friend of virtue (*philaretos*, 1099a11), hopefully including the virtue ethicist, continually strive not only to become virtuous and preserve virtue, but also to reappropriate and deepen their interpretation of the virtues, including interpretation of how the person of practical wisdom would determine matters.

¹³ He discusses virtues and vices in a less rigorous manner suited to speaking with ordinary people in the *Rhetoric* in 1366a33-b22, and then makes a statement reflecting associations in the popular mind. "It is clear that whatever produces virtue is fine (since it is in relation to virtue) as well as what comes from virtue, such as signs of virtue, and works (*erga*) of virtue" (1367b25-8).

¹⁴ A mistake compounded by what they think one cannot have enough of, and pursue more than virtue: "wealth, property, power and reputation, and everything else of that sort"! (1323a37-9)