

Aristotle on Excellence of Character

J.O. Urmson

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My main object here is to try to clear up some remarkably persistent confusions. What I am discussing is commonly called moral virtue. But since I believe that the translation 'moral virtue' frequently leads to misunderstanding of Aristotle's views I shall use always 'excellence of character', which is, no doubt, an imperfect translation of *ēthikē aretē*, but less misleading than is 'moral virtue'.

Aristotle distinguished between three broad types of excellence that may be displayed by human beings; these correspond to the three levels of complexity that living things display, the least complex shown by all living things including plants, that shown by all animals and that shown only by human beings. The first is bodily excellence, comprising health, strength, good looks and the like; this is not of direct concern to the student of ethics. Of the other excellences of the soul there are two kinds, those of the irrational or, more properly, non-rational element in the soul and those of the rational element.

Within the rational element of the soul Aristotle distinguished two main types of excellence. These we may call the excellences of intelligence, though they are commonly and absurdly called intellectual virtues. Of these excellences of intelligence one is theoretical; to have this excellence is to be good at such things as metaphysics and mathematics, which it is quaint to call a virtue. Like bodily excellence, theoretical excellence of intelligence lies outside our present scope.

The other type of excellence of intelligence is practical; it is often called practical wisdom. But, since in ordinary English wisdom is always practical, we may simply call it wisdom. It is an excellence in virtue of which people are good at deciding on the right way to behave and getting the right thing done. It is desirable in all kinds of contexts, prudential as well as moral; in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle's favourite illustration of its use is with regard to choosing a healthy diet. It is itself complex, including good judgment, ingenuity, executive ability, planning, and all that goes towards being able to determine the best policy and to put it into effect. Unlike theoretical excellence, it requires experience.

Before turning to our main topic of the excellence of the non-rational element in the soul, excellence of character, we must note another distinction made by Aristotle, that between two types of *orexis*, of appetite; one of these he calls *epithumia*, desire, the other *boulēsis*, rational wish. Desire is non-rational and, by definition, aims at the

pleasant; rational wish is, by definition, for the good and requires thought. The relation between these two types of appetition is central to Aristotle's view of excellence of character.

Since reason is, on its own, perfectly inert according to Aristotle—reason itself initiates no change, he says—human action is possible only in virtue of appetition. The desire for the pleasant we share with other animals, but rational wish is possible only for a rational animal. For to determine what is good requires memory, foresight and reasoning. Wisdom determines what is good, rational wish makes us seek it. So for action aiming at the good, any good however great or however trivial, we need rational wish and we need wisdom to determine what is good in the given circumstances. Good behaviour requires both appetition and reason. It would be no use for wisdom to determine what is good if we had not a rational wish to achieve it, and it would be no use for us to wish for the good if reason were not present to determine what was good. But the rational determination of the good belongs to excellence of intelligence, not of character.

Excellence of character is an excellence of the non-rational part of the soul. So we can already state one negative thesis. It is clear that any principle of conduct whatsoever must emanate from the rational element in the soul; therefore any account of excellence of character that makes it responsible for any judgments or principles of conduct must be mistaken. Thus, for example, if the celebrated doctrine of the mean were some principle of conduct, perhaps a doctrine of moderation, it would clearly be a dictate of wisdom, of practical reason, and be no part of an account of excellence of character. But it is, in fact, the differentia by which excellence of character is distinguished within its genus.

If we are to understand Aristotle's account of excellence of character, the best starting point is two statements of Aristotle about it that traditionally run

- (1) Excellence of character is concerned with passions and actions,
- (2) Excellence of character is concerned with pleasures and pains.

I have no serious quarrel with the wording of (1), though I should prefer to speak of emotions rather than passions, since 'passions' is a little antiquated. What is important about it is that it tells us that excellence of character is not concerned only with actions. Indeed, in the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle says that excellence of character is concerned with emotions, omitting reference to action altogether. But the traditional formulation of (2) above seems to me to be a grotesquely misleading translation, for which I should substitute some such translation as 'excellence of character is concerned with likes and dislikes'. The word *lupē*, translated traditionally as 'pain', covers all adverse reactions—pain, sorrow, grief, distress, boredom, and so on. Dislike, therefore, is not always the right word, but it is the right sort of word. To do mathematics

with *lupē* is to dislike doing mathematics, not to be pained as one does mathematics.

If we recall that Aristotle distinguishes two sorts of appetite, desire for the pleasant and wish for the good, we may now note that these two forms of appetite are not linked in any regular way. We put the point by saying that I may either like, or dislike, doing what I wish to do since it is good. So what Aristotle holds is that excellence of character does not depend solely on whether one acts well but also on whether one likes doing what one recognises to be the right thing to do, whether one does it gladly, willingly, or whether one has to force oneself to do so. So excellence of character is concerned with likes and dislikes in that way, and it is concerned with emotions (passions) as well as with actions because emotion involves favourable and unfavourable reaction, likes and dislikes. So desire and rational wish coincide as to their object in the person who has excellence of character.

Aristotle, of course, recognises merit in making oneself act well against one's inclination; but so to act is a second-best. The best possible life does not include friction, internal strife, forcing oneself. How different this is from Kant's view that an action in accordance with one's inclination, *Neigung*, has no moral worth! Aristotle does not believe that man is naturally good or naturally evil, though, like the potential musician, he may or may not have a nature easily formed in the right way. We acquire, he holds, a character by training and, with good training, we come to do effortlessly what wisdom determines to be the best way to act. Then we have *ēthikē aretē*, excellence of character; if we have to force ourselves we are merely *enkrateis*, self-controlled, which is a better state than being weak-willed or downright bad, but still a second-best.

To say that a person of excellent character will like acting well may in some circumstances be an exaggeration. The soldier, Aristotle agrees, who sees that the good and honourable thing to do is to stand and fight, thereby risking death, does not, if sane, actually enjoy it, like it. But still he differs from the self-controlled man, who makes himself stand while longing to run away, if he has excellence of character. He would not think of running away, there is no friction, and so, in a way, he stands and fights willingly. He wishes he did not have to, but in the circumstances he has no doubt or hesitation. Since he finds it easier than the man who has to force himself to hold firm he, no doubt, in a way deserves less praise than the latter; but Aristotle is interested in determining the most worthwhile, not the most praiseworthy, life.

So excellence of character is a disposition to act effortlessly and willingly as reason dictates; but that is not all that Aristotle has to say about it. Formally being a disposition is the genus; the differentia has yet to be added in order to achieve a definition. This is supplied by the doctrine of the mean. Since this doctrine has been, in my opinion, grossly misunderstood by most, if not all, modern commentators, it needs careful discussion.

According to most modern commentators the doctrine of the mean is a doctrine of moderation; the man of good character will aim to do acts that display neither too much nor too little of any given emotion, fear, desire, anger, but a moderate amount. There are many objections to this. To say merely that we should not exhibit too much or too little of an emotion is tautologically true, about as useful as saying that when adding up one should arrive at a sum that is neither too small nor too great. But if commentators add that the right amount is a moderate amount the answer becomes informative but absurd, if taken literally, as we are entitled to take philosophical statements. Is one, for example, always to display a moderate amount of anger, and every other emotion, whenever one acts? Clearly not; usually any anger is totally inappropriate. Manifestly the thesis must be modified to say that we must either display a zero amount of any given emotion or a moderate amount. But is a moderate amount, if any, always appropriate, both if one is jostled in a queue and if one's children are tortured? Obviously only slight annoyance is appropriate in the one case, whereas no wrath could be excessive in the other.

But, in any case, the doctrine of moderation in action is not only absurd if taken literally, though no doubt a harmless piece of advice in many practical contexts. It is clearly also a principle of action, one dictated by wisdom or by folly, not an element in non-rational excellence of character. An excellent character will follow the dictates of wisdom, but that excellence does not incorporate such dictates. So a doctrine of moderation, like any other principle of action, cannot be part of excellence of character. But since the doctrine of the mean is a part of the essence of such excellence, according to Aristotle, some other interpretation of it must be given.

To get on the right lines we need only read carefully what Aristotle says. He says that excellence of character is a disposition to choose that is in a mean relative to us and determined by the right reasoning of the wise man. So what is in a mean, is intermediate, is neither the degree of emotion exhibited on each occasion of action, nor the action itself; it is the disposition to feel the emotion and to act on it. Putting it into the shortest form, we may say that excellence of character is an intermediate disposition towards emotion and action, not a disposition towards intermediate emotion and action.

Anger and angry action may furnish an illustration. It is absurd to be always moderately angry or to be moderately angry when one is angry at all. But to have a mean disposition towards anger and its display is to be appropriately angry, slightly or very or moderately or not at all, as each occasion demands; it is to be angry with persons with whom it is appropriate to be angry and not with those towards whom anger would be inappropriate. In short, the mean disposition is to be angry to the right degree, at the right time, at the right place, with the right persons. What is right in each of these ways excellence of character cannot determine; to determine those things is the sphere of wisdom. Excellence of character is

non-rational but, in Aristotle's phrase, it listens to reason.

Thus, for every particular excellence of character there will be two possible defects; one may be too much disposed or too little disposed to feel and display each emotion. It is because of this double possibility of opposite error that Aristotle says that excellence is not merely the correct, but the mean, disposition.

Aristotle holds that nature does nothing aimlessly, by which, as he says, he does not mean that if a drop of rain falls on the tip of my nose it is part of nature's grand design, still less that nature aims to produce disabled persons, accidents and pestilences. What Aristotle means is that anything natural and normal can be found to be so for some reason. He applied this doctrine particularly in biology with regard to such matters as the function of the kidneys, liver etc.

But I think that Aristotle holds the same view in the field of ethics. Any emotion that is normal and natural in mankind must have some proper function, as much as the liver and kidneys. There can be diseased livers and kidneys, and there can be diseased emotions, but emotions, kidneys and livers are not diseased as such. There is no type of emotion that is simply bad and invariably bad. There may, Aristotle acknowledges, be obvious apparent objections to this; what of lust, sadism, vindictiveness, miserliness, for example? Aristotle's answer is that these are not names of types of emotions but of diseased emotional states, displaying excess or deficiency. Lust, for example, will be an aspect or type of excessive disposition to sexual desire, miserliness a deficient disposition towards expenditure, profligacy being the opposite extreme, and so on. Whether Aristotle succeeds entirely in this part of his argument is debatable, but it is clear that the moral neutrality of all types of emotion is part of his view.

It is manifest that, on its own, excellence of character does not ensure right action. This is as it should be. As the excellence of a non-rational and non-cognitive element in the soul, how could it do so? Kant said that percepts without concepts were blind, meaning that it is useless to perceive something if we cannot identify it, and he added that concepts without percepts were empty, meaning that a means of identification, a conceptual pigeon-hole, with no contents was useless. We may parody this by saying that excellence of character without wisdom is blind; it wants to go in the right direction, but cannot identify it; and wisdom without excellence of character would be empty—an ability to identify the right way that is never employed is pointless. Aristotle in fact holds that we could develop neither of these excellences without the other. If we are well trained in childhood we may acquire excellence of character, but only if we also come to be able to see for ourselves the wisdom of the instructions of those who trained us. We are always, Aristotle holds, responsible for our actions; if badly trained, we must attempt self-reform. But it will be prudent to stop at this point.