

The Doctrine of the Mean

In subunit 1.6, you learned that Aristotle's highest end for human beings is *eudaimonia*, or well-being, which is constituted by a life of action by the part of the soul that has reason in accordance with virtue. Aristotle's point of departure is "this-worldly," meaning his method of inquiry begins from praxis, or experience in the world where things could be otherwise causing deliberation and decision to come into play, and from which we come to derive principles on the basis of practical reasoning. Book II of the *Ethics* sets out to give an understanding as to how we can determine what is virtuous, or that which is fine or excellent, such that our practical reason can be in accordance with it, both in the sense of actions to be taken and ends to be achieved. What Aristotle comes to find is that what is virtuous with regard to a person's character can be found between the extremes as to what it is not—or the mean between the two vices of excess and deficiency.

As you learned in subunit 1.6, Aristotle specifically addresses the close relationship between ethical inquiry and politics, yet it might be asked even at this early stage what Aristotle's ethical inquiry, with its emphasis on personal virtue and individual character, has to do with politics—meaning the social, cultural, and governmental aspects of the *polis*. As with his appeal to practical as opposed to theoretical or pure reason when engaging in ethical inquiry, although Aristotle focuses on what it means for an individual to be virtuous, what is virtuous is determined through contingency, meaning it is dependent upon and conditioned by the world which we inhabit.

Consider that for *eudaimonia* to be the ultimate good, it must be self-sufficient in the sense that it is chosen for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. We choose to be brave, honest, and generous along with all other virtuous states and actions, because those things which are virtuous are good things to be in themselves, in the sense that even if being brave would have no further result, we would still choose to be brave rather than to be rash or cowardly. However, according to Aristotle, we also choose those things which are virtuous for the sake of *eudaimonia*, and *eudaimonia* by contrast is not chosen for the sake of anything else. Although the ultimate good of well-being is self-sufficient in this way, "...what we count as self-sufficient is not what suffices for a solitary person by himself, living an isolated life, but what suffices also for parents, children, wife, and in general for friends and fellow-citizens, since a human being is a naturally political animal."¹ *Eudaimonia* is the ultimate end for Aristotle in that it provides a framework for all other various goods pursued; it provides those goods with meaning and a context within which practical reason can assign an order of importance. In this way, *eudaimonia* is not attained by being actively sought in the linear fashion of taking an action, X, as a means to achieving a goal, Y. It is not sought *instrumentally*, e.g. taking an action not because of the intrinsic good of that action, combined with an

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 1985) pg. 14, (1097b)

awareness of manifold particulars associated with that action, but for a singular, ulterior end. Rather, *eudaimonia* takes root through the correct ordering and maintenance of all other subordinate and worldly goods acquired through virtuous acts over a lifetime.

To explain, consider the following example from Professor Julia Annas.² A group of students are asked what they think a happy life consists of. In response, they mention material things—salary, a nice house, a nice car, and so on. The students are then asked to suppose that an unknown benefactor leaves a lot of money in the mail and that all the material things are now available. Would this make them happy? The students replied overwhelmingly “no.” They thought of a happy life as one in which they earned the money and made something of their lives so that these luxuries were an appropriate reward for their effort, ambition, and achievement. Happiness was associated with a fully-formed life.

To explain even further, it should be pointed out here that even though *eudaimonia* is the ultimate end, Aristotle does not define what is virtuous with reference to some prior notion/definition of *eudaimonia*. Terms and concepts within a definition must first be understood before understanding what is being defined. ‘Virtue’ is employed in the definition of *eudaimonia* and not the other way around—*eudaimonia* defined as well-being constituted by action of the part of the soul that has reason in accordance with virtue. *Eudaimonia* is not an existing thing or idea prior to virtue on the basis of which virtue can then be derived. On the contrary, it is by and through that which is virtuous that *eudaimonia* comes to be and take hold.

If this is the case, however, it would seem to contradict the first line of the *Ethics*: “Every craft and every investigation, and likewise every action and decision, seems to aim at some good; hence the good has been well-described as that at which everything aims,” as well as the picture of *eudaimonia* as providing significance and order of importance to subordinate ends met through virtuous action. How can we know what actions to take, what actions are virtuous in lying between excess and deficiency, if we have no prior definition or notion as to the ultimate goals or aims or our actions? It would seem we are left with a circular definition approaching a truism: *eudaimonia* falls into the definition of virtue, and virtue falls into the definition of *eudaimonia*. If Aristotle does not derive the virtues from the notion of flourishing or well-being, from where does he derive them? What other ultimate justification does he give in their defense?

To address these questions, for now let us reemphasize the worldly character of Aristotle’s approach to ethical inquiry. For Aristotle, our sense of self and our ethical purposes are derived from and bound by participation in an existing community, the world of parents, ancestors, friends, customs, institutions, and laws. There is no individual existence prior to or independent of the community, and ethical inquiry necessitates this ground. Aristotle’s focus on what it means to be virtuous is not about self-perfection as a good in itself, or in the Platonic sense of a self-defining activity that is independent of or antecedent to the community. For Aristotle, virtue is not merely

² Julia Annas, “Happiness as Achievement,” *Daedalus*, Spring 2004, pgs. 49-50.

intertwined with the *polis*; it cannot exist without the *polis*. It is with reference to the world around us that we come to know, albeit in a variety of ways, what is excessive and deficient, and hence virtuous.

Consider the worldly importance of habituation. Virtue for Aristotle is divided into two sorts that correspond to the rational and nonrational parts of the soul. The rational part is that which has reason within itself or is reason ‘through-and-through,’ while the nonrational part is capable of being influenced by reason. Virtue of thought is addressed in Book VI of the *Ethics* and will be discussed in sub-subunit 1.6.4, but it should be said here that although within itself, virtue of thought is neither *sui generis* nor entirely self-sustaining. It arises and grows through teaching and requires experience and time to develop. Virtue of character applies to the nonrational part of the soul associated with our emotions, feelings, dispositions, and actions. It is the result of habit acquired from our youth and beyond, and is the concern of both parents and legislators:

A state of character arises from the repetition of similar activities. Hence we must display the right activities, since differences in these imply corresponding differences in the states. It is not unimportant, then, to acquire one sort of habit or another, right from our youth; rather, it is very important, indeed all-important.³

For the legislator makes the citizens good by habituating them, and this is the wish of every legislator; if he fails to do it well he misses his goal. The right habituation is what makes the difference between a good political system and a bad one.⁴

This of course begs the question of what is the right sort of habituation, or rather how good habits are to be determined, given that for Aristotle there is no recourse to an authority outside of the existing community. Here, Aristotle resorts to experience with the natural, biological world:

First then, we should *observe* that these sorts of states [i.e. virtuous states] naturally tend to be ruined by excess and deficiency. We see this happen with strength and health, *which we mention because we must use what is evident as a witness to what is not*. For both excessive and deficient exercise ruins strength; and likewise, too much or too little eating or drinking ruins health, while the proportionate amount produces, increases, and preserves it.⁵

It has been emphasized that virtue for Aristotle is contingent upon the world which we inhabit. However, this leaves his framework open to charges of relativism in the sense that what is right or good is determined by personal opinion or public convention. But take note here that to ground his approach in deriving that which is virtuous, Aristotle relies upon observation of the physical, or natural, world (what is evident) to witness that which is not evident. Which actions lead to health—which actions are virtuous and

³ *Nicomachean Ethics*, pg. 35 (1103b22).

⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 34 (1103b3).

⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 36 (1104a12), emphasis mine.

which are not—might not be readily evident. However, we can observe, or witness, that eating too much or too little does not lead to health but to sickness, and from this observation, the amount of food and drink that will lead to health becomes (at least to a greater degree) evident. Aristotle extrapolates from this encounter with the natural world to determine that what is virtuous in (almost) all instances lies between the extremes of excess and deficiency. Through habituation from our youth and beyond, directed by parents and legislators, we attain that which is virtuous (i.e. health as a result of good eating habits) without having to find out for ourselves the ill-effects of obesity or malnutrition.

Aristotle is careful to qualify that the mean is to be determined in a way that takes into account the particular circumstances of an individual. Finding the mean in most circumstances is not as simple as taking the average between two numbers—e.g. Aristotle gives the example of a trainer taking into account the fitness level and particular sport (running vs. wrestling) when determining the appropriate diet for an athlete. To act in accordance with reason is a matter of observing the principle of the mean relative to us, or finding the appropriate response between excess and deficiency in a particular situation. Consider the more complex example of what it means to be generous. A virtue such as generosity is not just a tendency to do what is generous, or to take generous actions for certain reasons regardless of one's disposition. For a generous action to be truly generous and thus virtuous, it is necessarily concerned with many other things such as emotions and emotional reactions, choices, values, desires, perceptions, attitudes, interests, expectations, and sensibilities. To possess a virtue is to be a certain sort of person with a certain complex mindset in a given situation:

Actions expressing virtue are fine, and aim at what is fine. Hence the generous person as well as every other virtuous person will aim at what is fine in his giving and will give correctly; for he will give to the right people, the right amounts, at the right time, and all the other things that are implied by correct giving.

He will do this, moreover, with pleasure or at any rate without pain; for action expressing virtue is pleasant or at any rate painless, and least of all is it painful. If someone gives to the wrong people, or does not aim at what is fine, but gives for some other reason, he will not be called generous, but some other sort of person. Nor will he be called generous if he finds it painful to give; for such a person would choose wealth over fine action, and that is not proper to the generous person.⁶

Earlier we asked, how can we know what actions to take, or what actions are virtuous in lying between excess and deficiency, if we have no prior definition or notion as to the ultimate goals or aims or our actions. How are we to determine what is correct in giving? How are we to determine who are the “right” people, the “right” amounts? Although Aristotle extrapolates from the natural, biological case of a healthy diet to define what is virtuous as the intermediate between excess and deficiency relative to

⁶ Ibid, pg. 88 (1120a25).

us, in the case of generosity like other virtues of character, it would seem that there is no natural ground upon which determinations can be made. Who is to say that a person who chooses wealth over generosity is not fine or excellent? Who has that authority and upon what basis?

What is generous for Aristotle is determined by what is appropriate, meaning we come to know what constitutes virtuous behavior through habituation. We learn what is truly generous from those who already are generous as determined by the common experience and opinions of those around us. What is troublesome for Aristotle is that if the virtuous can only be grounded in habituation, other candidates for what counts as right or good come into play. But this account overlooks a further assumption and appeal to nature, which provides crucial ground for the integrity of Aristotle's ethical framework. For this, we return to Book I:

If something has a function, its good depends on its function.

Well, perhaps we shall find the best good if we first find the function of a human being. For just as the good, i.e. doing well, for a flautist, a sculptor, and every craftsman, and, in general, for whatever has a function and characteristic action, seems to depend on its function, the same seems to be true for a human being, if a human being has some function.

What sorts of things have functions?

Then, do the carpenter and the leatherworker have their functions and actions, while a human being has none and is by nature idle without any function? Or just as eye, hand, foot and, in general every bodily part apparently has its functions, may we likewise ascribe to a human being some function?

The human function

What then could this be? For living is apparently shared with plants, but what we are looking for is the special function of a human being; hence, we should set aside the life of nutrition and growth. The life next in order is some sort of life of sense-perception; but this too is apparently shared, with horse, ox, and every animal. The remaining possibility then is some sort of life of action of the part of the soul that has reason.⁷

Aristotle's human function argument from the crafts claims that if practitioners of crafts have functions, the more general entity of the "human being" must have a function. The argument from the body parts claims that if parts of a human being have functions, a human being should be taken to have a function over and above them. And just as the virtue or excellence of an eye is to perform its function of seeing well, the virtue or excellence of human beings is to reason well in making decisions and managing our lives as a naturally political animal operating within the *polis*. To say that a human

⁷ Ibid, pgs. 15, 16 (1097b22).

being has a function is to say that a human being has a nature, an end, a characteristic activity (in this case, reason), and so also necessarily a distinctive excellence and good to which it can be measured in terms of its performance as a member of the *polis*.

Aristotle gives another example in comparison of the harpist. The function of the harpist is to play the harp. A good harpist's function is to play the harp well. We take the human function to be a certain kind of life and take this life to be the soul's activity and actions that express reason. Like the harpist, the excellent human being's function is to express this reason finely and well. In short, the human being *by nature* will strive for its end (a *telos*) in a non-instrumental fashion, the *telos* demanding that which is fine or excellent in terms of performance. This claim that all activity is goal directed grounds Aristotle's framework in nature rather than in opinion or convention. A human being is by nature purposeful, and we are able to determine what is good with reference to some final destination or stage of development. In so doing, the human being will live up to or attempt to live up to the virtues as handed down through habituation, and in acting as such by reason in accordance with virtue, *eudaimonia* over time will take root. "Hence, as far as its substance and the account stating its essence are concerned, virtue is a mean; but as far as the best condition and the good result are concerned, it is an extremity."⁸

⁸ Ibid, pg. 45 (1107a7).