Aristotle on the Virtue of *Phronesis*: Practical Wisdom

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Abstract
This paper will consider the relevance of Aristotle’s teaching on virtue to today’s world and suggests that a revival of the theory of virtue ethics would have a great deal to contribute to this debate, notwithstanding the fact that Aristotle lived so long ago, 384-322BC. As human nature does not seem to have changed since Aristotle’s time, his teaching would seem to be as relevant to today’s world as it was over 2330 years ago. The consideration will begin with an account of the virtue of phronesis or practical wisdom based on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics. This concept emphasises the need for careful deliberation, in a manner that requires the context of each situation to be fully considered, in order to determine what the right practical action is. Aristotle stresses that ‘it is not easy to be good.’ Therefore, in considering the virtue of phronesis the question ‘why don’t we always act rightly?’ will be considered in the light of what some other more recent scholars have to say. Aristotle suggests that we learn about virtue from the role-models we encounter in our families, schools and communities. It is worth reflecting on the fact that our choices and actions actually determine the types of role-models we are. Whether we become role-models of virtue or vice, is therefore, our personal responsibility. In conclusion, the paper will consider the questions ‘can goodness be taught?’ and ‘can people be educated to live virtuously?’ before arguing in favour of the need for a virtue approach to moral training.

Key Words: Aristotle, virtue, phronesis, practical wisdom, ethics, action, good, choice, character.

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1. Introduction
This paper will consider the relevance of Aristotle’s teaching on virtue by first introducing Aristotle before examining the virtue of *phronesis*. The question of ‘why don’t we always act rightly?’ will be considered in advance of an invitation to reflect on what types of role-models we ourselves are. In conclusion, the paper will consider ‘can goodness be taught?’ before arguing in favour of a virtue approach to moral training.

2. Aristotle (384-322 BC)
Aristotle was a key figure in ancient Greek philosophy and is said to be a teacher who enchanted and inspired the brightest youth of Greece. No man before him had contributed so much to learning and no man or woman after him might aspire to rival his achievements.1
Aristotle’s work had effectively disappeared from scholarship in the West until the eleventh century when there was a substantial translation movement from Arabic into Latin, which made his works available to Western scholars for the first time. The more significant of those were St. Albert the Great (1206-1280) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). The contemporary discipline of virtue ethics, which emphasizes moral character, is largely influenced by the writings of Aristotle and Aquinas.

It can be said that throughout his life Aristotle was driven by the desire for knowledge. Aristotle was the first to classify areas of human knowledge into various disciplines, one of which was ethics, derived from the Greek *ethikos, ethos*, meaning ‘character.’ Aristotle’s work on ethics is called *Nicomachean Ethics* after his son Nicomachus who is believed to have edited the work and gave it its final form some years after his father’s death. This work belongs to the category of ‘practical philosophy’ which deals with action.

Ethics is concerned with action. Aristotle acknowledges that intellect and knowledge are important, but he stresses repeatedly, that they are not ends in themselves - but the means to an end. In order to act morally, investigation and deliberation are required, followed by decision and the corresponding right action.

Aristotle stressed that the good life was a life lived in the city, the *polis*. His analysis of community, of happiness, and the life of virtue would seem to be as relevant to today’s world as it was in ancient Greece, since human nature does not seem to have changed in the meantime. The core theme of Aristotle’s *Ethics* is virtue and follows the key question ‘how should I live?’

3. **Phronesis**

Aristotle approached ethics by advocating careful and reasoned deliberation, informed by life experience, before taking the required action. Good deliberation that is not followed by the appropriate action does not count as *phronesis*. While practical wisdom includes knowledge it is more than knowledge. Knowledge and skills can be misused to produce poor, and morally unsatisfactory results, *phronesis* cannot. Practical wisdom is an on-going process of personal development, integrated into the psyche by the process of inquiry, deliberation, and right actions in the everyday lived experience.

Aristotle’s aim in writing his *Ethics* was to provide an account of how the good person should live, and how society should be structured in order to make such lives possible. Aristotle stressed that the good life is a life lived in the community and that the individual is a part thereof.

The present inquiry does not aim at theoretical knowledge like the others (for we are enquiring not in order to know what *excellence* is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use), we must examine the nature of actions, namely how we ought to do them; for these determine the nature of the *states* that are produced. That we
must act according to right reason is a common principle and must be assumed.  

Aristotle’s observations on the reasons for our actions are deliberately general to emphasise the basic assumptions of ethics. We try to think through problems such as ‘how can I pay these bills?’ but rarely do we ask the deeper questions, ‘what should I be doing with my life?’ or ‘what is the best way to live?’

Aristotle answers his own question that politics is in fact the highest level of practical science, since it is about action and how to organise the community for the best. Aristotle’s Politics is both a continuation and an elaboration of his Ethics. Therefore ethics and politics are complementary in that they are concerned with what is most important to us as human beings. Ethics looks at the question from the point of view of the individual, and politics from the point of view of the community as a whole.

Being good is a continuous, as opposed to an occasional, practice and Aristotle uses the analogy that ‘one swallow does not make a summer’ to encourage us in the repeated practice of good actions.

But we must add that in a complete life one swallow does not make a summer nor does one day or a short time make a man blessed and happy.

The aim of ethics is to do the right thing for its own sake. Acting rightly is the practical expression of ethics, which Aristotle considered to be the most important of the sciences, to such an extent that he does not consider the alternative to be a viable proposition - ‘to entrust to chance what is greatest and most noble would be a very defective arrangement.’

Therefore how we act determines our state; by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with others we become just or unjust, brave or cowardly, good-tempered or self-indulgent. Thus states arise out of like activities. This is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind. The agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion.

Eudaimonia - happiness - is the ultimate human good and requires virtues of character and thought; yet the goal is not happiness as such. Happiness is the consequence of taking pride in being excellent at what we do. What we wish for relates to a particular end or purpose and the choices we make contribute towards that end. If we wish to be healthy, we choose and live a healthy lifestyle. Our choices relate to what is within our power to do. Whether we do the right thing or
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not, is entirely another matter. Virtue is a major component of human flourishing and will be considered next.

4. Virtue and Choice

For Aristotle the Good Life is a moral life of virtue. ‘Every art and every enquiry and similarly every action, and choice, is thought to aim at some good.’

To understand what Aristotle has to say about virtue we first need to grasp what he means by ‘a habitual disposition,’ - *hexis* - which suggests that we have a natural capacity to develop our disposition by training.

Moral excellence comes about as a result of habit. We are adapted by nature to receive the excellences and are made perfect by habit. All of the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity. We get excellences by first exercising them for the things we have to learn before we can do, we learn by doing e.g. we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts and brave by doing brave acts.

The difference between a virtue and a skill or a craft, is that while both require inquiry and deliberation, a craft is generally concerned with an end product, while a capacity can be used correctly or incorrectly. In contrast, *phronesis* only includes the correct use of capacities towards ethical action. Aristotle is very specific that in the case of the virtues, simply looking at the ‘product’ is not enough. The right thing done for the wrong reason does not count as a virtuous action.

Aristotle does not intend his general principles and his account of the virtues to be taken as rules, because perception and experience also play a part in virtue. Experience is an important prerequisite to reasonable deliberation because balanced emotional insight is an important element of good moral decision making, which involves more than an emotional response to situations. Aristotle argues that we can train ourselves in good moral decision making.

In general, the choices we make express the nature of our character. If our intention is to build and strengthen our character, this will require us to choose in favour of the good. Aristotle suggests we do bad things on account of pleasure, and avoid doing good things on account of pain. Since choices are generally limited to what is within our power to do, virtue is also a choice which is within our power. ‘Excellence is also in our own power, and so too vice. For where it is in our power to act it is also in our power not to act and vice versa.’ Why we don’t always act in accordance with our deliberation is also worth considering.

5. Why don’t we act rightly?

Knowing what is right does not make a person virtuous, one must be disposed to it, yet there can be inconsistencies between knowledge and conduct. Moral
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weakness – *akrasia* – ought to be considered as a component of any attempt at the development of moral consciousness.\(^20\) Davidson is one of many who argue that while Aristotle offers no satisfactory analysis of *akrasia*, Aquinas does.\(^21\)

Experience, however, shows that many act contrary to the knowledge that they have, and this is confirmed by Divine authority. Consequently the Philosopher was not altogether right, and it is necessary, with the Philosopher (Ethic. vii, 3) to make a distinction. That this takes place in the passions is evident from the fact that sometimes, when the passions are very intense, man loses the use of reason altogether: for many have gone out of their minds through excess of love or anger. It is in this way that passion draws the reason to judge in particular, against the knowledge which it has in general.\(^22\)

Agents sometimes describe ‘being overcome by the force of the attraction,’ when reason fails to adjudicate between ranges of options, we can all too easily make a choice, simply because we want whatever is chosen.\(^23\)

Integrating virtuous action into our lives requires that we experience our human weaknesses through some process of self-knowledge which facilitates the coming to consciousness of all sides of our personality. While this process can be fruitful to help us to understand and clear old unhelpful patterns of behaviour, exploring the unconscious aspects of our nature can also be humiliating to our ego identity.\(^24\) The problem of moral weakness seldom seems to have been directly addressed by contemporary educational philosophers.\(^25\) One suggestion is that *akrasia*, may originate in the early lived experience.\(^26\) In conclusion, it appears that *akrasia* deserves further study in the overall context of morality.

6. Can Goodness be Taught?

Moral education aims to assist students to appreciate the value of moral engagement in contrast to training in obligations and prohibitions. Aristotle makes a case in favour of a virtue approach by arguing that moral excellence is based on habit and not teaching. A virtue ethics approach places importance on the nurturing and good example provided by home, school, friendship and community which can contribute, or stifle, the process of moral development. Considering the question of whether goodness can be taught, one argument suggests that ‘goodness can be learned, is continually being learned and unlearned.’\(^27\)

The influence of role models can direct us towards vice or virtue. A virtue approach to teaching morality encourages students to evaluate and learn from their experience. An approach in favour of a community setting is consistent with the views of Aristotle, McCabe and MacIntyre.\(^28\) Having a role model we can identify
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with, can serve to motivate and inspire us more than an abstract principle, however well argued it is.29 Experience is an essential part of phronesis. The task of the moral life is ‘to listen to the experience, to grow in openness to it and let it lead.’30

In conclusion, my wish is that we remember that each of us is a role model of some kind. The choice remains whether to be models of vice or virtue.

Notes

1 For ease of reading I propose to use ‘he’ throughout this paper. However it should be noted that every use of ‘he’ can be taken to refer to the human person – inclusive of both genders which is consistent with Aristotle’s usage. In contrast with English, Greek and Latin both distinguish the male as well as the female in their vocabulary: aneér in Greek and vir in Latin both mean ‘man=male’; gyneé in Greek and femina in Latin both mean ‘woman’; and ánthroopos in Greek and homo in Latin both mean ‘man=person.’ Aristotle used ‘ánthroopos’ not ‘aneér.


4 Aristotle wrote another book on moral philosophy, the Eudemian Ethics, but for the purpose of this inquiry I will be dealing with the Nicomachean Ethics and for ease of reading I shall refer to this text simply as the Ethics. For an introduction to Nicomachean Ethics with explanatory notes and glossary see Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics, 2nd ed, translated by Terence Irwin, (Indiana: Hackett, 1999), and Aristotle on Ethics by Gerard J. Hughes, (Routledge: Oxon, 2001). Both are clear and helpful resources.

5 A polis is a community of free citizens governed by a political system with laws that assign some rights and functions to the citizens. When Aristotle speaks of the polis he is referring to a sovereign political unit making alliances on its own initiative with the functions of a modern state.


7 Prudence, from the Latin prudentia is to deliberate about things that promote ends and is also referred to as right practical action. At this stage phronesis (Greek) and
prudentia (Latin) would appear to refer to the same virtue. The modern word ‘prudence’ fails to convey the classical and medieval meaning of the term.

Nicomachean Ethics in The Complete Works of Aristotle, (Bollingen Series; 71:2) ed. by Jonathan Barnes, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 1743 (2,2, 1103b 26-32). Aristotle regularly uses the term ‘excellence’ as the adjective corresponding to ‘virtue’ and equivalent to ‘good’. The term state – hexis – means ‘having, possession’ formed from ‘to have’ (hence the Latin habitus is a suitable translation, though the English ‘habit’ is misleading). Aristotle argues that a state is not merely a capacity but a type of capacity that is included in the state of character and has been formed by repeated activities. Someone’s state also includes their desires, feelings, and decisions. That is why ‘habit’ and ‘disposition’ are misleading translations of hexis.

However it is important to note here that Aristotle’s use of the word ‘politics’ has a very different meaning to today. For Aristotle, politics was a more idealistic and practical science.

Aristotle, Ethics, p.1735 (1,7, 1098a 18-19).

Aristotle, Ethics, p. 1738 (1,9, 1099b 23-24).

Aristotle, Ethics, p.1743 (2,1, 1103b 14-23), p.1744 (2,2, 1104a 7-10). A moral agent is a person who is capable of acting with reference to right and wrong.

Although Eudaimonia is generally translated as ‘happiness,’ ‘human flourishing’ is perhaps a more appropriate translation and I use happiness here in this context.

Aristotle, Ethics, p. 1729 (1,1, 1094a 1-2). Aristotle’s idea of virtue is wider than moral virtue and in some instances ‘excellence’ may be more accurate.

Disposition is also referred to as a ‘capacity’ in the Ethics.

‘Hexis’ or ‘state’ literally means ‘having possession’ as we will see by the following quotation Aristotle is referring to having the ‘capacity’ or ‘potential’ which is brought to fruition by action.

Aristotle, Ethics, p. 1742-3 (2,1, 1103a 14-35).

‘Perception’ can also be read as ‘insight’.

Aristotle, Ethics, p. 1758 (3,5, 1113b 6-7).

The Greek term akrasia has become synonymous with ‘weakness of will,’ see Westberg, Right Practical Reaso, p.204. He suggests that there is no adequate term in English for ‘Incontinence’ which is not an adequate translation to reflect Thomas Aquinas use of the Latin term incontinentia. My use of the term akrasia refers to when we fail to act in accordance with what we know we should do.

Martha Nussbaum suggests that Aristotle’s imagery of bondage and freedom indicates that he found the experience of dilemma anything but delightful. See
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Bibliography


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