

Aristotle's Philosophy On Human Nature

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Exposition:

According to Aristotle, there are three things to be found in a human's soul, namely feelings, states of character, and capacities. Feelings are the sentiments of happiness, sadness, anger, joy, hunger, pity, craving, etc. Feelings can be both positive and negative and are often accompanied by pleasure or pain. Aristotle states that virtue is a state and not a feeling or a capacity. Feelings are not based on appreciation or blame; virtues are based upon them. Feelings compel us to act in a particular way, while virtues organize us on how to act in a certain way. Our capacities are our powers to do something and tell how capable we are to act in a peculiar manner. Human virtue is defined as disposing of our behavior in the right way and acting as a means amid extreme points of lack and abundance.^[1]

These extremes are vices. Actions such as adultery or murder have no virtuous meaning, as they are always considered wrong. Aristotle says, "It is possible to be afraid, to be confident, to desire and abhor, to be angry and to pity, and, in short, to be pleased and pained in a greater and less degree, and to be both these improperly. But to have these passions when it is proper, and in such things, towards such persons, and for the sake of that which, and as, it is proper is the middle and the best, and pertains to virtue."^[2]

Aristotle defends his argument by saying that for being fearful or angry, no one is either praised or blamed. There is no deliberate intention involved in being angry or fearful. Virtues may or may not require a deliberate choice. Our feelings and capacities are naturally driven, unlike virtues. One never receives an appreciation of natural instincts or is never condemned for feeling in a certain way. However, the virtues and vices adopted by the individual provide him with praise and blame. Hence, Aristotle says, "If the virtues are neither passions nor powers, it remains that they are habits. And thus we have shown what virtue is generical."^[3] Aristotle further explains his statements that like the virtue of the eye is to see well, and the virtue of the horse is to be good for the race, similarly, the virtue of a man is to be good and do well to accomplish his work.

Critique:

Aristotle concluded his argument first by defining the terms he used and then by giving examples. I choose to take the example of being angry for the elaboration of the argument. Aristotle asserted that being angry is a feeling, and one does not receive any blame for feeling in such a way. But virtue will be how you act when you're feeling angry. Some people choose to remain quiet, some harm themselves, and some hurt the other person who made them angry. In this instance, some people

have the self-control to make a choice between saying anything to the other person or staying quiet. But in most cases, it is not a deliberate choice to choose between virtues and vice. This depicts the difference between acting virtuous and being virtuous. Acting virtuously is done on a deliberate choice while someone is virtuous, he or she need not think about choosing the good or the right path, instead, do it.

Aristotle reasonably explains his thoughts that virtue can be taken as a medium between two extremes. One extreme leads you to be erroneous, while the other gets you blamed. But being in the middle of being virtuous will get you praised by the people. He further demonstrates that there is no middle in one of these extremes. What's bad is bad, whether a feeling or an action. He took the examples of committing adultery or feeling envious; there is no virtuous medium between these. One cannot be considered as good or virtuous in performing these actions. Hence, Aristotle states, "For, in short, neither is there a middle of excess or defect nor are there excess and defect of the middle."^[4]

The mean state argument of Aristotle raises the problem of determining whether some people are virtuous or vicious. For instance, making a war in which numerous people have to be killed cannot be considered a virtuous act, though it solves other issues of security, etc. This problem arises from the unclear terms "excess" and "defect," which do not properly explain some particular scenarios and situations.^[5] Hence, though we are urged to evaluate the situations that are relatively virtuous to us so that we can maintain a standard of virtuousness, there are other situations where we need to assess the behaviors of the people in relation to the thing itself. Robert Louden, in his "Some Vices of Virtue Ethics," critiques Aristotle's views on virtues and vices:

"...virtues are not simply dispositions to behave in specified ways, for which rules and principles can always be cited. In addition, they involve skills of perception and articulation, situation-specific "know-how," all of which are developed only through recognizing and acting on what is relevant in concrete moral contexts as they arise. These skills of moral perception and practical reason are not completely routinized and so cannot be transferred from agent to agent as any sort of decision procedure...Due to the very nature of the moral virtues, there is thus a very limited amount of advice on moral quandaries that one can reasonably expect from the virtue-oriented approach."^[6]

End Notes

1. "Nicomachean Ethics." SparkNotes. Accessed March 13, 2018.
<https://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/ethics/section2/>.
2. An Analysis and Critique of Aristotle's Principles of Virtue. (n.d.). Retrieved March 13, 2018, from <https://book.douban.com/review/6573753/>
3. Louden, Robert B. "On some vices of virtue ethics." *Virtue ethics* (1997): 201-216.
4. Taylor, Thomas, ed. *The Nicomachean ethics*. Vol. 2. A.J. Valpy, 1818.
5. "Nicomachean Ethics." SparkNotes. Accessed March 13, 2018.
<https://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/ethics/section2/>. ↑

6. Taylor, Thomas, ed. The Nicomachean ethics. Vol. 2. AJ Valpy, 1818. ↑
7. Taylor, Thomas, ed. The Nicomachean ethics. Vol. 2. AJ Valpy, 1818. ↑
8. Taylor, Thomas, ed. The Nicomachean ethics. Vol. 2. AJ Valpy, 1818. ↑
9. An Analysis and Critique of Aristotle's Principles of Virtue. (n.d.). Retrieved March 13, 2018, from <https://book.douban.com/review/6573753/> ↑
10. Louden, Robert B. "On some vices of virtue ethics." *Virtue ethics* (1997): 201-216. ↑