Phil 104, September 3, 2010
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* II, III: 6–12

Aristotle's aims:
Two aims are suggested at different points:

1. To *bring about* virtue.
2. To achieve a certain kind of *theoretical knowledge about* virtue.

But this theoretical knowledge has important limits:

1. Theoretical knowledge about virtue is neither necessary, nor sufficient *for virtue*. You can't learn to become virtuous by learning facts, principles, etc., as you might learn to be a geometer by learning the principles of geometry.
    - Contrast Plato, who viewed theoretical knowledge of virtue (indeed, of the "Form" of good, a kind of abstract object, like the number two) as both necessary and sufficient for *possession* of virtue.
2. There are *no informative principles of conduct*, like the principles of geometry, to learn in the first place. You can say something about *what virtues are*, but you can't lay out any helpful *code of virtuous behavior*.
3. Theoretical knowledge about virtue *can only be acquired by someone who is already, for the most part, virtuous*. Only virtuous people, or people who have been brought up well, have the "data," or the starting points, or premises, from which such theoretical knowledge must proceed: particular judgments about what is noble or base, what would be appropriate to feel or do in particular situations, and so on.
    - Unlike Plato, Aristotle doesn't take it upon himself to try to convince someone who rejects morality to accept it.
    - This threatens to make Aristotle's views conservative. Our—or at least Aristotle's and his audience's—judgments about virtue are, in large part, simply assumed to be correct, at least until they lead to paradoxes, conflict, etc.
    - But what is the alternative? Don't we have to start with *something* that we *just believe* about morality?

How do we become virtuous?

- Not by theoretical knowledge, as we have seen.
- Not by nature. We aren't born virtuous or vicious. (However, moral virtues aren't *un*natural, or contrary to nature, because we are by nature capable of developing them.)
- Moral virtues come from *habit*: from the repeated *practice* of virtuous actions.
- So you'd better start early! "It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference."

Problem: Doesn't this make Aristotle's lectures either futile or unnecessary?

- Either we haven't formed the habits, in which case it's too late for us to become virtuous…
- …or we have formed the habits, in which case we are already virtuous.

Perhaps the aim is to teach his audience (aspiring statesmen?) how to make *others* virtuous?

Problem: One comes to have the virtues only by acting virtuously. But one acts virtuously only if one's action issues from one's virtues: i.e.,

1. The agent must *know* that the action is virtuous.
2. He must choose the action *for its own sake*. He must not have "ulterior" motives, like money, impressing people, avoiding punishment.
   - However, he may have some end other than merely that of performing a virtuous action: e.g., defending his city, helping a friend, etc. (Compare Hume's "natural" virtues.)
3. "His action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character." He will act the same way in other situations, even when external prompting, pressure, reinforcement, etc. is removed.

Solution: A second sense of "virtuous act": an act that isn't *really* virtuous, but *would have been* virtuous had a virtuous person performed it. So, we become virtuous by (outwardly) mimicking people who are virtuous. (At first, we do what our parents tell us to in order to avoid punishment or to please them, but eventually the training wheels come off.)

What is virtue?

Three things are in the soul, and virtue must be one of these:

1. *Passions*: Feelings that are accompanied by pleasure or pain: e.g., appetite, anger, fear.
2. *Faculties*: *Capacities* for feeling passions.
3. *States of character*: Those things in virtue of which "we stand well or badly with reference to the passions."

Virtues are *not faculties*, because:

- We are not praised and blamed simply for *being able* to feel pleasure, pain, etc.
- We have the faculties *by nature*; we're just born with them.

Virtues are *not passions*, because:

- We are praised or blamed not simply for experiencing *some passions or other* (but instead for *which* passion we feel, *how strongly*, *toward what*, in *which circumstances*, etc.)
- We feel passions without choice, but virtue somehow involves choice.

Therefore, virtue must be *a state of character*: a matter of how we stand with regard to the passions.

Example: the virtue of temperance:

- Has to do with the pleasures of "touch": food, drink, sex. (These pleasures are particularly important ethically, because they are the pleasures that "the other animals share in, which therefore appear slavish and brutish." In some sense, our humanity is at stake.)
- "Temperance" is displayed not only by *abstaining* from bodily pleasures, but also by not *missing* the foregone pleasure.

- *Merely* abstaining, while *minding* the foregone pleasure, is not temperance, but "continence," which is not a virtue at all, although not quite a vice either. (More later.)

Question: If virtue is a matter of how we stand with regard to the *passions*—as Aristotle says here—then what has it to do with *choices* and *actions*—as Aristotle elsewhere says that it has?

- Passions, and pleasure and pain, tend to *influence* actions and choices. At very least, they are typically the root cause of *bad* actions (or omissions).
- Virtue, even though a matter of how we stand with regard to the passions, is also the *product* of choice and action. (More next time.)

Virtue is, in part, a matter of what you feel

Aristotle's claim that virtue is, even in part, a matter of how one feels the passions—and so pleasure and pain—is striking and perhaps even alien. (Keep in mind when we get to Kant.)

1. This is one of the main reasons why virtue can only come from habit: because feeling pleasure and pain can only come from long habituation. You can't now, by some act of will, change what you take pleasure in or are pained by. (So, again: start early!)
2. The passions are not what you *do*, but what *happens to* you. (Indeed, the Greek word that is translated as "passion" might also be translated as "something that one undergoes.") How can this be part of *your* character, or express who *you* are, anymore than a facial tick or a sneeze? How can it be any part of *morality*?
3. So long as you abstain from bodily pleasures, why does it make you less virtuous that you *mind* abstaining? Why doesn't it make you *more* virtuous? ("What will-power!")

So why does Aristotle see the passions as central to virtue?

1. He *doubts the power of the will* to reliably get us to do the right thing. "[I]f appetites are strong and violent they even expel the power of calculation. Hence they should be moderate and few, and should in no way oppose the rational principle."
2. For him, virtue is a matter of *proper functioning*. It is more natural to think that one is functioning properly when passion, choice, and action are working *in unison* than when they are *struggling against* one another.
3. He is less worried than we may be by the complaint that it is somehow *unfair* to praise or blame someone for what isn't under his *immediate control*.

The doctrine of the mean:

More specifically, virtue is a state of character having to do with passions, actions, and choices "lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it."

"For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue."

Very roughly: The virtues are dispositions to feel, choose, and do neither too much nor too little. They sit between two vices: one of excess (doing or feeling too much) and one of defect (doing or feeling too little).

Examples:

- Pleasures of touch: too little = insensibility; mean = temperance; too much = self-indulgence
- Giving and taking money: too much taking, not enough giving = meanness; mean = liberality; too much giving and not enough taking = prodigality

The doctrine of the mean is not a doctrine of *moderation*. It doesn't say: "Always feel just a moderate amount of (e.g.) anger."

- It isn't virtuous to feel *even* moderately angry when people are doing nice things.
- And it isn't virtuous to feel *only* moderately angry when they are doing horrible things.

The doctrine of the mean seems to say instead: "Feel what is *appropriate in the circumstances*." Don't flip out over small slights, but do be outraged when people do outrageous things. In addition, feel your anger toward the right person, on the right grounds, and so on.

Problems:

1. Why do we *need* a scale of more or less, excess and defect, etc. to make *this* point?
2. Is there *always* a scale of more or less, especially for *actions*?
    - If we consider a single promise, what is keeping it "too much" or "too little"?
    - How do we make sense of the *mean* of, e.g., "toward the right people"? Not toward too many or too few?
    - "What does a person do too much of or too little of when he agrees to sell secrets to a foreign power? He may act with insufficient loyalty or from excessive desire for wealth, but neither of these is the treacherous response itself which the example is about. And the person who says 'No' to the enemy agent's suggestion probably does not do so because accepting it would be going too far or not far enough on some scale: such a reason may be nowhere near his mind." (Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*)
    - Indeed, when Aristotle comes to the virtue of justice (which I haven't asked you to read) he struggles to say what the scale is.

Is there anything more to the doctrine of the mean than doing what is appropriate to the circumstances?

1. A prevalent view in Greek medicine of the time was that health was a matter of a mean between excess and deficiency. (Aristotle's father was a doctor, and his work is full of medical examples and metaphors.)
2. Perhaps all choices and actions *manifest* or *express* passions, which do typically have a scale of more or less. The mean with respect to the action or choice is the action or choice that expresses the mean with respect to the passion.
3. The doctrine emphasizes that there are *lots of ways to go wrong*.
4. The doctrine emphasizes that there is nothing vicious about feeling the passions *per se*. ("Insensibility"—being left cold by the pleasures of touch—is a vice!) What matters is *how* one feels them.

Virtue is a matter of particular judgments, rather than general rules:
Whatever you take away from the doctrine of the mean, take away this:

- Virtuous action is *not* a matter of following determinate rules that one might possibly specify in advance. ("Never tell a lie.")
- Instead, it is a matter of discerning and doing *what is appropriate* in the highly specific, complex, nuanced, *particular* conditions that one faces.
- Aristotle often describes this as a matter of *perception*.
- Thus, in response to the *general* question, "How should I act?" the only accurate, *general* answer that one can give is: "In whatever way a truly virtuous person would act." This is why Aristotle writes—"by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it"—instead of trying to *state* any such principle.

Why focus on virtue?
After all, many of the "ethical theories" that we will consider later in the course focus instead on principles (Hobbes, Kant) or on ends of action (Sidgwick).

1. *Happiness* can come only from the exercise of virtue (and not from accidentally "virtuous" actions).
2. Specifying *determinate rules for conduct is impossible*. The best we can offer in the way of a general, theoretical understanding of ethical life is an account of the virtues.
3. If our aim is moral *education* or the *happiness* of those living in our society—that is, if our aim is to get *other* people to act well—then the best we can do is to inculcate the *virtues* in them. We can't get them to *act* well, strictly speaking; that's up to them. Thus, our focus will be on virtue, rather than action.

Review questions:
1. How would Aristotle resolve the following dilemma?
   One comes to have the virtues only by performing virtuous acts.
   But one performs virtuous acts only if one has the virtues.

2. "It's not bad to feel angry. It's only bad to act on it." Would Aristotle agree? Support your answer with a quotation.

3. Illustrate the doctrine of the mean with one of the virtues that Aristotle discusses in the text (but don't use one on the handout!).

4. Explain the following Aristotelian contrast (in Bk. II, Ch. 1, second paragraph): In natural development, potential precedes activity, whereas in moral education, activity precedes potential.