Aristotle III Ethics

Aristotle approaches the study of ethics scientifically, considering it as a special case of arts and crafts – the art (or craft) of living well. As in any craft, actions and choices are made to attain some good purpose. For humans the all-embracing 'craft' of life is encapsulated in political wisdom, but in an echo of Plato he points out this is challenging (I 1094b 2):

> We should not look for precision in the same way in all our explanations – we can't do that even in the handicrafts. But when it comes to what is valuable and just – which is what the art of politics considers – there is a lot of variation and deviation, so that it can appear to be merely a matter of custom, and nothing to do with nature. Even good things show something of such deviation, because for many people harms result from them. For there are not a few who have been destroyed by wealth, and others by courage.

So unlike in other enquiries, here you can only describe what works 'for the most part' and to be as accurate as circumstances allow. Here education is critical (again in an echo of Plato), but an education of the right people.

> Each person is a good judge in matters that he knows well. In each single case, the person who has been educated in that area, and as a whole the one who has been educated in everything. For that reason a young person is not an appropriate student of political wisdom. They have no experience of how life is lived, and the reasoning that derives from this and about this. What's more, since they tend to be led by the passions, their learning will be pointless and bring no benefit, since the purpose of such learning is not knowledge, but [right] action. Here it makes no difference if the person is young in age, or simply immature in character. The deficiency lies not in age as such, but in living by the passions and chasing everything. For people like this, knowledge is useless, as it is for those who lack self-control. However, for those who can form their motives according to reason and act accordingly, it would be very beneficial to know about these things.

So political wisdom, like any other craft, has as its goal some achievable good. But what is its ultimate 'good'? Something like a happy life (eudaimonia), living well, doing well. But of course this is ambiguous (I 1095b14). Again, with a nod to Plato, he identifies three categories of person and three corresponding definitions of what is good:

> The unthinking majority, not unreasonably on the basis of their life experience, seem to suppose that 'the good' and 'happiness' means pleasure, and for this reason they are wedded to a way of life that seeks indulgence. For there are three principal sorts of people, this kind just mentioned, then the politician and the thinker. Now the masses, slave-like, seem to prefer the life of cattle, and there is some reason for this, since there are many people in authority who are as decadent as Sardanapallus. But those who are able, people of action prefer honour. For this is more or less the goal of political life. However, this seems to shallow for what we are looking for, because this seems to be something present more in those doing the honouring, than in those receiving the honours, while we intuit that the good is something in its

> own right, and something that can't easily be removed. What's more, they seem to pursue honour, to convince themselves that they are good; for it is from the wise that they seek approval; they want to associate with them and be known for excellence. So it is clear that for these at least, excellence is actually more important. So we could immediately suppose that it was rather this (excellence) that was the goal of political life.

Interestingly though, Aristotle does not stop here. For him virtue is *not* it s own reward.

> But even this seems not entirely complete. For it seems possible that you could have excellence and be asleep, or be inactive all your life, and what's more suffer hardships and great misfortunes. No one would say that someone living like that was having a happy life, unless they just wanted to blindly insist on their initial claim.

But there is a third class of people as well – sound familiar?

> The third category of person is the thinker. And we'll be reflecting on this sort of person later. The money-maker is someone operating under duress and wealth is clearly not the good we are looking for, since it is only useful for something else. For that reason the three things we have discussed [pleasure, honour and excellence] are what we should regard as proper goals, because they are loved for their own sakes.

So what is the good?

Aristotle moves away from Plato's mystical idea of the good as a single transcendent entity in whose radiance we see everything else in its true light. The good is always to be found in particular things, and therefore it's always different. Aristotle makes a close connection between 'the good' and one of his four explanatory causes: purpose. That for the sake of which everything else happens (I 1097a16).

> 'The good' seems to be something different in each sphere of action and craft. It means something different in the context of medicine or military strategy, and similarly in the other cases. So what is the good for each of these? Isn't it just that for the sake of which everything else is undertaken? In the case of medicine, it means health, in military strategy, victory, in building, the house, in each one something else, but in every sphere of action and choice, it is the goal. For whatever other things they do, they do for the sake of that. So that if there is a goal for all practical things, this would be the practical good, and if there were more than one, it would be these.

There can of course be lots of things (like wealth etc.) that are useful to achieving our goals, but our search is for what is a goal in its own right, and the best of these:

> We say that anything worth pursuing for its own sake is more perfect than what is pursued for the sake of something else; and what is *never* chosen because of anything else above things that are sometimes chose because of it, even when they are also sometimes chosen for their own sakes. Happiness, more than anything

> else, seems to be just such a thing. We always choose it for its own sake and never because of anything else. We choose honour and pleasure and intelligence and every excellence both for their own sakes (we lose nothing by choosing any one of them) but we also choose them for the sake of happiness, judging that we will attain happiness through these things.

Aristotle's approach to defining human happiness is analogical and biological, rooted in his understanding of the human within the natural world. He considers the fundamental 'task' of the human being, analogously to the work of particular craftspeople. A cobbler makes shoes, a flute-player plays the flute, what does a human do? Living is not enough – plants are alive. So it's not just a matter of nourishment and growth. Nor is it enough to be sentient – the other animals do that as well. What is distinctive in human life is being able to act according to reason (I 1098a7):

> So if the function of a human is an activity of the soul according to reason – or at least not without reason, still we would say that an activity belongs in general to this member of a kind as well as to this expert member (a lute-player and an expert lute-player are both lute-players), and so on in all cases, considering the superiority in excellence in addition to the function itself. The lute-player plays the lute, the expert lute-player plays it well. If this is so… the human good turns out to be an activity of the soul in accordance with excellence – and if the excellences are many, according to the best and most perfect. And evaluated in the context of a complete life. One swallow doesn't make a summer, nor a single day. Similarly, one day or a brief period of time do not make someone fortunate and happy.

Aristotle tries to find some consensus among earlier philosophers. He finds agreement that the human good of happiness is to do with an activity of the soul. Some say excellence, some prudence, some wisdom, some with pleasure – or at least not without. He then goes on to a preliminary discussion 'excellence' (or 'virtue') (1098b27):

> And it makes rather a difference whether we suppose 'the most excellent' is something we have acquired or something we are using, whether it is a disposition or an activity. It is possible to have a disposition without its accomplishing any good, as in the case of someone who is asleep, or otherwise rendered inactive, but when one is active one cannot fail to do so. One will act of necessity and act well. It's not the best-looking and the strongest who win the medals at the Olympics, but those who compete (for they're the ones the victors come from) so too in life, it is those who act correctly who achieve what is lovely and good. Their life is pleasant of itself. For taking pleasure is a characteristic of the soul, and everyone finds pleasant that of which they are lover – someone who loves horses finds a horse agreeable, or a show for someone who loves theatre. In the same way just things are pleasant to the one who loves justice and generally, anything to do with excellence to the lover of excellence. For the majority of people their pleasures are discordant because they are not natural, but for those who love what is lovely, they find pleasant what is pleasant of its nature. The actions carried out according to excellence are of this kind too, and so they are of themselves pleasant to such people. Their life has no

> need of any additional pleasure, like some add-on, but it contains its pleasure within it.

Notice that Aristotle is claiming something about the sociology as well as the anthropology of happiness and virtue. These are things we can observe in society if we pay attention. But again, he points out that happiness and virtue do not flourish in a vacuum. The rest of your life needs to be going well if you're going to be able to take delight in being good (1099a31).

> As we said, its seems that we still need some of the external goods. For it is impossible or not easy to carry out lovely actions without any resources. For there are many things that we carry out, as if through instruments, through friends and wealth and political influence. When people are deprived of some things, like noble birth or good children or good looks, this degrades their happiness. For no-one is completely capable of happiness who is ugly to look at or ill-born or solitary and childless, and still less if their children or friends are wicked, or (though good) have died. As we said, it seems that things need to be going well in such areas, which is why some people add 'good fortune' to happiness, while others add 'excellence'.

This brings out something that is crucial for making sense of Aristotle's ethics. Aristotle's human is never a rational animal in isolation. Earlier he equates 'happiness' with self-sufficiency. But points out that this must be an extended self-sufficiency (I 1097b 8)

> By self-sufficiency we do not mean that of a single individual, living a solitary life, but one that is shared with parents and children and wife, and generally with friends and fellow citizens, since by nature the human is a social (city-dwelling) animal.

Politics, Society and the Ethical Soul

This creates an important role for the 'politician' – in the sense of the person(s) responsible for making the state work. Again we can recognise an echo of Plato's concerns, arising out of his critique of 5th Century Athenian politics. We also see that we need an ethical model of the human soul (1 1102a1).

> Since happiness is an activation of the soul in terms of a perfect excellence, we should consider 'excellence'. This may be the easiest way to get a better grasp of happiness. It seems that this is where true politicians apply themselves above all else, for they want to make the citizens good and obedient to the laws. There have been examples of this in the lawgivers of Crete and Sparta.

That means that the political leader has to have some understanding of how the soul works, and which part of it is concerned with 'excellence'. Aristotle here presents us with a model of the soul that connects the biological soul of his scientific enquiries, with the ethical soul, oscillating between reason and desire, of Plato. Watch how he does it (deliberately leaving aside deeper questions about how it all fits together): the human soul has a part which operates with reason (logos) and a part which doesn't:

> Of the unreasoning part, a subsection seems like a common, plant-like soul-element, I mean the cause of nourishment and growth. People would suppose such a power

of the soul in all things that need nourishment, including foetuses, and the same power in full-grown animals, which makes more sense than supposing a different one. Any excellence in this power would therefore seem to be common to several things and not specifically human. For this part of the soul, this power, seems to come into activation mostly during sleep, but the good person and the bad person do not reveal themselves at all in sleep… except perhaps in small degrees when you try and investigate the movements [of their minds], and in this way the imaginations of the reasonable are better than those of the rest. But enough of that, and we can leave aside the nurturing capacity, since that is not a part of a specifically human excellence.

But it seems there is another unreasoning nature in the soul, which nevertheless has some part in reason. For we applaud reason and the part of the soul which has reason, in the case both of the self-controlled person and the person without self-control. For this is the part that exhorts correctly to what is best. But it seems that in these people there is something inborn besides reason which fights with and strains against reason. A simple comparison: as with paralysed parts of the body, when people want to move them to the right, they are carried in the opposite direction, to the left, so to in the case of the soul. The urges of those who lack self-control are in the opposite direction. It is just that in the case of bodies we see what is being moved the wrong way, but we can't see that in the case of souls. But just the same perhaps we should think of there being something in the soul apart from the reason, which is opposed to it and moves in the opposite direction. In what way it is different makes no odds. This part too seems to have some share of reason, as we said: for in the case of the self-controlled person, it obeys reason, and it may be that in the case of the balanced and brave person it is even more biddable, for there in every respect it echoes reason.

It seems then that 'unreasoning' [in the soul] can mean two things. The plant-like aspect has no share at all in reason. But the desiring aspect and in general the motivational aspect does indeed have some sort of share in it, in virtue of which it heeds reason and obeys it… if we had to call this 'having reason' then 'having reason' can be in two modes, one 'has reason' properly in itself, the other in the sense of someone who is heeding a parent. And we can define 'excellence' in terms of this distinction. For we say that some excellences are to do with intellectual processes and some are to do with moral character: wisdom, understanding and prudence are intellectual, while generosity and balance are moral. For when we are talking about someone's moral character we do not say that they are wise or intelligent, but that they are moderate or balanced.

And then comes a key idea – the excellences as dispositions of the soul:

We applaud a wise person for their disposition, and those dispositions that are worthy of applause, we call 'excellences.'

Virtue (excellences)

For Aristotle the virtues (excellences) of mind or character are 'states' or dispositions of the soul, modes of potential waiting to be actualised when the situation demands. As we have seen, it is only in action (actualisation) that we can see whether anyone does actually have these dispositions. Crucially, these dispositions are 'habits', things that can be acquired by any human soul, but which can only be acquired through appropriate experience and training. As we have seen, Aristotle seems to believe (as a matter of empirical fact) that it is very hard to become virtuous when too many circumstances work against you. This is a point of view which will be challenged in particular by the Stoic philosophers, and later by Jewish and Christian moralists.

But what is an excellence or virtue? How do we define it? Aristotle uses a broad-brush approach and speaks of virtue as a mid-point between two extremes. Notice how often he uses the language of 'we say'. His understanding of excellent human dispositions is embedded in a political and social context, articulated in every-day language. Nevertheless he clearly believes that the experience of Greek city states in the 4th Century BCE is sufficient to establish these excellences as constants of human nature. His analysis of virtues as a 'mid-point' has been very influential on subsequent philosophy, and particularly on Christian ethics. It has enjoyed a revival, thanks to Alistair MacIntyre and an earlier school of Oxford philosophers in recent years, and is currently a part of mainstream Catholic discourse in education.

Here are some of the things Aristotle says about human excellences (virtue):

> The person who can refrain from bodily pleasures and delight in this very fact is balanced, the one who is restrained and dislikes the fact is intemperate. Anyone who endures what is fearful and can delight in that – or at least not be upset by it – is courageous. The one who gets upset is a coward. Moral excellence has to do with pleasures and pains. It is for pleasure that we do ignoble things, and because of pain that we hold back from what is noble. Which is why, as Plato says, we need to be trained from youth to take delight in and to be upset by the things that we should. (1104a5)
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> Therefore excellence is a disposition in our choosing, which lies in a mid-point with respect to us, defined by reason (or proportion) and by what a morally wise person would define. And it is a mid-point between two evils, greater than one and less than the other. Evil states either fall short of what should be or exceed what should be both in how we are affected and in our actions, but excellence is about finding the mid-point and choosing it. (1106b36)
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> We can understand this by drawing a line. If we take terror and reckless violence, courage is a mid-point. When it comes to the excessive failings, there is no name for someone who acts without any fear at all… but anyone who is excessively confident, is recklessly violent, while the person who is excessively afraid and lacking in confidence is cowardly. In the case of pleasures and pains… the midpoint is being balanced, and excess is being intemperate. There are not a lot of people

> unresponsive to pleasure and pain, which is why such people have no name either, but they are lacking in feelings. In the case of giving and receiving money the midpoint is generosity, but excess and deficiency in this is extravagance and meanness (1107a32).

The Practical Syllogism

Aristotle is interested in the connection between thought and action. Theoretical knowledge – sciences or philosophy – seeks universal truths, which change nothing. But practical wisdom deals with particularities, the situation in which we immediately find ourselves. He considers different elements in the human soul, intellect, understanding, practical wisdom, choice, motivation, as he tries to explain how we move from thought, and moral reasoning to action. He speaks of a 'practical syllogism', a form of reasoning similar to the sort of reasoning used in science and mathematics, but which instead of leading to a conclusion – a new piece of knowledge, leads to a *human* action. An example (not Aristotle's) of a non-moral practical syllogism might run like this:

> I am thirsty for some milk: this is a glass of milk: man drinks milk

Epieikeia and Law

One of the big questions in ethics in the Western tradition, which is very heavily influenced on the one hand by the law-based ethics of Judaism and on the other by the virtue ethics of the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions is how to evaluate right action in relation to specific laws. Are there, in fact, absolute moral laws? Aristotle's answer is yes and no. There are laws, put in place for a purpose, but the laws which are set down for all in the city to read on tablets of bronze or stone are necessarily incomplete. They cannot anticipate every eventuality and will always need interpretation, contextualisation. So how does the mature moral agent act in relation to the laws of a city? Not, according to Aristotle, by obeying them unthinkingly. The mature moral agent – experienced, and able to exercise practical wisdom in their own personal choices – will have insight into the mind of the law-giver – what they would have said in those circumstances. They will thus be able to judge in freedom what the correct interpretation of the law is for the new circumstance. This ability (epieikeia) can be translated as 'reasonableness'. Something of this insight is preserved in the English tradition of case law, but can be unsettling for those who see obedience to law as the essence of morality (1137b5).

> There is some confusion with regard to 'the reasonable' [as to whether it is the same as justice or different from it]… because 'the reasonable' is a form of 'the just' which is better than some other forms. So it is better than that [lesser case of] the just, without belonging to a different category of thing. So 'just' and 'reasonable' are the same thing, but though both are morally developed qualities reasonableness is the more so.
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> What makes for the confusion is that what is reasonable is just, but not in the sense of 'just according to the law'. Rather it is a correction of legal justice. The reason for this is that every law is general, but there are some things that it is not possible to

speak of correctly in a general way. So when something has to be said in a general way, even though this cannot be done correctly, the law assumes what is the usual case, and is aware that this does not always work. It is still a good law, because the failure lies not in the law or the lawgiver, but in the nature of the matter. In fact this is exactly the sort of material for practical choices. So when the law speaks generally, and something happens in this situation that lies outside the general case, then the correct thing to do, insofar as the lawgiver has left something out and for reasons of simplicity 'failed', is to make good the deficiency, with what the lawgiver themselves would have said if they had been there, and what they would have legislated if they had known.

Thus [reasonableness] is just and better than some senses of just, not better than justice as a whole, but justice that fails through its simplicity. And this is the nature of the reasonable, a correction of the law, insofar as it is deficient due to its generality. For this is the reason also why not everything [reasonable] is according to the [letter of the] law, that there are some things that you cannot legislate for, so that you need a vote. Where things lack clear definition, the measuring criterion also lacks clear definition, like the lead measuring rod used by builders on Lesbos: it adapts itself to the shape of the stone and is not constant, so too with the vote on specific affairs.

So what the reasonable is, and that it is just and better than certain forms of justice is clear. It is also clear from this that there is such a thing as a reasonable person. The one who chooses and carries out such things, who is not legalistic in a bad way, but is less bound by it, although they use it as a help, this is a reasonable person. And this disposition is reasonableness, being a form of justice and not some distinct disposition.