

Aristotle on courage, temperance and justice

COURAGE: NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, BOOK 3.6-9

In *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 3.6, Aristotle says that courage is the virtue which is the mean regarding fear (and, to a lesser degree, confidence). A simple understanding of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean might lead one to think that courage is simply about having the right 'amount' of fear, neither too much nor too little. But it is immediately clear that this is not what Aristotle means by 'the mean'. For instance, we fear everything that can harm us, but it is right to have some of these fears and others are simply irrelevant to the question of whether someone is courageous. So, for example, we should fear disgrace - this is modesty and the absence of such a fear is shamelessness. Or again, someone might not fear the loss of money, but this isn't a matter of courage.

So part of what defines courage are the *kinds* of things that someone doesn't fear. A courageous person doesn't fear the most fearful, harmful things, of which death is the greatest. Aristotle goes on to argue that the courageous person doesn't fear death for a 'noble cause', especially death in battle. Some of his remarks betray his culture, and perhaps we would now identify courage in how someone deals with a painful illness just as much as courage on the battlefield.

The courageous person fears things that we all struggle to endure, but faces them *as one should* (§7). Most of us fear not only what we shouldn't or as we shouldn't, but also *when* we shouldn't or with the wrong *motive*. The courageous person feels fear, and acts in relation to fearful things, in accordance with the right rule, and the point of being courageous - the end of courageous action - is always some good and worthwhile goal.

Hence, we should distinguish being courageous (§8) from

1. facing danger because one is required by law or the threat of punishment; such people are motivated by shame or fear;
2. being calm in the face of danger because one is very experienced and know what will happen; such people may not show courage when their knowledge gives out or something unexpected happens;
3. being driven by passion (anger, greed, lust) to do dangerous things; such people are not fully aware of the dangers involved, and are not acting on the right motive;
4. being calm and confident as a result of one's strength and past success; such people may not show courage when they fail or in sudden situations which they can't plan for; one's character is shown when action is needed quickly or spontaneously;
5. being unafraid because one is ignorant of the danger.

Aristotle has said that the virtuous person takes pleasure in virtuous action. Does this apply to courage (§9)? Yes, but not obviously. Courageous action involves pain, but the end at which it aims must be pleasant. So it is only when acting virtuously achieves its ends that it is pleasant.

TEMPERANCE: NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, BOOK 3.10-12, BOOK 7.1-10

As cowardice is the vice relating to fear, so self-indulgence is the vice relating to pleasure. But which pleasures? And what is the corresponding virtue?

We gain pleasure from many different objects and activities. We can assume, Aristotle says, a distinction between pleasures deriving from the body and those related to activities of the soul (§3.10). We don't call someone self-indulgent on account of their love of learning, or admiration, or friendship. So self-indulgence is a vice relating to bodily pleasures. But not even all of these. We don't call someone self-indulgent on account of their delight in seeing or hearing things, or even smelling things. Self-indulgence relates to the pleasures of taste and touch. In fact, Aristotle argues, it is really just touch. It isn't the tasting of things, such as a wine taster would engage in, that causes the problem. It is the consuming of such things. So self-indulgence relates to the pleasures of food, drink and sex.

Now, food, drink and sex are themselves necessary (§7.4), the pleasure they give is universal, and everyone desires them. But we can go wrong in desiring them (in general) *to excess*. But we can also go wrong in desiring *particular kinds* of food, drink or sex (§3.11). We can take pleasure in the wrong things, in the wrong way, on the wrong occasions, too much, and so on. Furthermore, someone who is self-indulgent is pained, more than they should be, when they miss out on such pleasures; and they value such pleasures too highly, choosing them at the cost of other more valuable things.

We need to distinguish self-indulgence, which is a vice, from simply being weak-willed (the anthology text says 'incontinent', but that word carries quite a different meaning now!) (§7.1). Both the self-indulgent and the weak-willed person have desires for pleasure which are bad, and both of them act on these desires. The difference is that the weak-willed person knows that their desires and actions are bad, and they act against their choice. The self-indulgent person has lost sight of what is good. They think there is nothing wrong in pursuing pleasure as they do. Self-indulgence is worse than being weak-willed, and it is harder to correct.

So what is the opposite of being self-indulgent? We might naturally say that it is being 'self-controlled'. But this could mean either of two quite different states. There is the person who is self-controlled in the sense that they need to control themselves in the face of temptation ('continent' in the anthology text). This person is like the weak-willed person in that they have desires for pleasure which are bad and they recognise that these desires are bad (§7.2). However, unlike the weak-willed person, they are able to resist these desires, and do what is right.

But then there is also the person who is not even tempted by such pleasures. They do not have bad desires, but desire pleasure as and when one should, in accordance with the right rule. This person has the virtue of 'temperance'. If

someone doesn't enjoy such pleasures at all, they are 'insensible' - but this vice is very rare.

So, in relation to bodily pleasures of food, drink and sex, someone can be either self-indulgent, weak-willed, self-controlled, temperate, or insensible. The temperate person will choose what is genuinely pleasant, and will only desire such pleasures if they don't get in the way of pursuing other ends, don't cost more than they can afford, and aren't 'unworthy' of human dignity (§3.11). Furthermore, because strong desires for these pleasures can easily lead us astray, and acting on such desires can increase their force over time, the temperate person's desires are moderate and few (§3.12).

JUSTICE: NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, BOOK 5

What is justice?

In his other analyses of virtues, such as courage and temperance, Aristotle understands what it is to act courageously or temperately by reflecting on the virtue. In a sense, the virtue defines the act. When it comes to justice, exceptionally, the analysis runs more in the opposite direction - the act defines the virtue. Justice, the virtue, is understood as the disposition to do what is just, to act justly and wish for justice. And we can provide a substantial account of what is just without referring back to the character trait of justice. Aristotle's account is largely deontological.

Aristotle argues that 'justice' has two meanings (§1).

1. In the 'wide' sense of justice, anything legal is just, and anything illegal is unjust. On his account of the law (but not perhaps ours today), the law instructs us to be virtuous (courageous, temperate, good-tempered, etc.) and prohibits us from being vicious. In this wide sense, then, justice is equivalent to virtue, at least in relation to how we treat other people. We shall put this meaning of justice to one side and focus on its narrow sense.
2. In its narrow sense, justice is fairness, and to be unjust is to act 'graspingly' (§2). Justice is concerned with those goods, such as money, safety or suffering, that are gained or in which we can obtain some advantage relative to other people. To be unjust is to seek to gain more than one's fair share of something good or avoid one's fair share of something bad. Justice is the principle that each person receives their 'due'. There are two kinds of justice as fairness.
 - a. Justice in the distribution of what is good and bad (who gets what). Here, justice requires us to treat equals equally (§3). If they are unequal, e.g. what people are due depends on how well they do something, then we should treat their differences proportionally. So people should receive goods according to their merit (however merit is to be identified).
 - b. Justice in rectification. Here, some injustice needs to be set right or corrected (§4). The focus, then, is not on the people involved, who are treated as equals, but on the injustice. What is unequal needs to be made equal. For example, if two people have signed a contract, and one breaks

the contract by taking more than their share of a profit, justice will require that the wrong-doer returns the illicit profit and makes some recompense. If one person has injured another, the victim has suffered. Justice in rectification compensates for this suffering and inflicts some form of suffering on the wrong-doer, removing their unjust 'gain' of avoiding suffering.

Justice, then, is intermediate between acting unjustly (having too much) and being unjustly treated (having too little). This virtue, unlike the others, *does* relate to an intermediate 'amount' of something (§5).

Development

We need to clarify what it is to act unjustly and what it is to be unjustly treated.

Aristotle distinguishes between unjust states of affairs, unjust acts, acting unjustly, and being unjust.

1. In an *unjust state of affairs*, there is an unjust distribution - someone has more or less than they should - but this is not the result of anything that anyone has *done* (§7). For example, you may suffer some illness that means that you cannot work for a long time and end up poorer than others.
2. An *unjust act* is an act which results in injustice (someone has more or less than they should). It is merely unjust, and no more, if the person is acting involuntarily (e.g. they act in ignorance).
3. However, to do an unjust act voluntarily is to *act unjustly*. One acts unjustly, but is not an unjust person, if the unjust act is voluntary but not done by choice. In this case, the person acts with knowledge but has not deliberated. An example would be injuring someone through anger. Such a person is not a bad person, but they do act unjustly.
4. However, to do an unjust act by choice is to *be unjust*. In other words, the unjust person knows what they are doing (it is not in ignorance) and has deliberated about what to do (§5.8). This is the worst form of unjust act.

To be unjustly treated, the unjust action must be against your wishes (§9). You cannot be treated unjustly voluntarily - if you agree to the action, you are not unjustly treated. Nor can you treat yourself unjustly - if what you do is voluntary, then even if it harms you, you haven't acted against your wishes, so you haven't acted unjustly against yourself. So, for instance, if you give away a great deal of wealth or you accept more than your share of suffering, you do no injustice to yourself.