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History of Philosophy: Group D – Dr. H.W. Sneller

Assignment: Graded Midterm Essay

Date: 30 October 2016 - 23:59

Extended Deadline: N.A.

**Topic:** In Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle defines virtue as “the man relative to us.” In separate paragraphs, please describe briefly the basic notion of virtue as a mean, and then explain why he believes that such a mean is relative to us. Provide quotations and examples to support your claims. Include a final paragraph in which you explain your views on this issue of relativity. Be sure to take into consideration any possible drawbacks we may have discussed in class (especially those that Plato might call attention to).

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### *Relativity of the ‘Golden Mean’*

Aristotle states that moral ‘Virtue’ is the judicious conduct of an individual which is embodied in his ‘developed’ character and consequently this virtue enhances the quest to attain a ‘good life’. This life is according to Aristotle a life in harmony with the human capacity to reason. In consonance with this doctrine, it is emphasized by Aristotle that the moral virtues are not intrinsic to human nature, but rather must be developed by structural individual conduct.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Aristotle states that it makes “all the difference” whether these ‘virtuous’ habits are conducted from the very beginning of one’s childhood, or not. “States of character arise out of like activities” encapsulates this fundamental element of the moral virtue.<sup>2</sup> I interpret that the conduct embodied in the individual’s habits constructs the moral virtues, and subsequently consolidates and yields the ‘virtuous’ conduct; the conduct which is rooted in the capacity to reason. Here, the virtues also enhance the quest of the individual to the highest form of happiness, ‘Eudaimonia’.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross., revised by. J.L. Ackrill, and J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925), Book II, chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Book II, chapter 1.

According to Aristotle there are three types of ‘things’ found in the soul: passions, faculties and states of character. Hence, one of these must embody the virtue. For the fact that an individual is not assessed ‘good or bad’ by the degree of their desires or their capability to sense these passions, Aristotle justifies its doctrine by asserting that the virtue is rooted and thus cultivated by the character of an individual. This notion is confirmed by Aristotle: “the virtues are neither passions nor faculties, all that remains is that they should be states of character.”<sup>3</sup>

Before Aristotle proceeds in the analysis, he states that the affairs related to the individuals conduct and what makes something good or bad depends on the contextual factors, and thus does not have fixed boundaries and is eligible to transformation. Here, Aristotle argues that “both excessive and defective exercise destroys the strength”.<sup>4</sup> I believe that this is one of the fundamental arguments that illustrates to the reader that ‘everything is relative’ to one another, and that therefore the ‘right’ balance between the two extremes – excess and defect – is adaptive to the mean which is pursued. Arguably, this argument is one of the pillars upon which Aristotle projects that the judicious conduct of an individual is yielded by the individual’s character which attempts to harmonize with a mean; “the mean relative to us”.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, Aristotle proceeds by illustrating a vicious circle; when some individual refrains from enjoying pleasures, she will become temperate, and subsequently, this will reinforce and increase her capacity to refrain from such pleasures. The relevance here is that the conduct of an individual – embodied in the virtues – is affected by the degree of pleasure and pain that is desired and deterred. Aristotle asserts: “to feel delight and pain rightly or wrongly has no small effect on our actions.”<sup>6</sup> From this I interpret that the degree of pleasure and pain which is desired has a vital impact upon the attainment and viability of the virtues, and in fact, may create the difference between fruitful consolidation or destruction of the virtues. However, here I questioned the degree to which the desired degree of ‘pleasure or pain’ is constructed, or better said, blurred by irrationality.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, Book II, chapter 5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, Book II, chapter 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, Book II, chapter 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Book II, chapter 3.

And it is exactly here that Aristotle warns that when ‘pleasure’ is desired or attained, the individual should be extra critical in its conduct, for the pleasure may obstruct judicious judgement and subsequently devalue the desired virtue.<sup>7</sup> This complication is also stated by Aristotle: “every state of soul has a nature relative to and concerned with the kind of things by which it tends to be made worse or better.”<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, Aristotle argues that a ‘middle ground’ must be found between the defect and excess; however, this equal intermediate is “relative to us” and thus affected and determined by an array of contextual and individual factors.<sup>9</sup> Aristotle clarifies the adaptive and intertwined relationships between the defect, excess and the mean by illustrating that they challenge and may contradict one another, because “the brave man appears rash relatively to the coward, and cowardly relatively to the rash man”.<sup>10</sup> Thus, I believe that this difference in perception – created by varying ‘time & space’ elements - enhances Aristotle’s claim that the “mean is relative to us”. Moreover, the habits of an individual are prone to transformation, yet it takes much individual effort and time to attain the ‘gold mean’, for it is difficult to find the perfect balance between the two vices. If there is in fact, a ‘perfect’ balance. In comparison, Plato also emphasized that the knowledge that the individual ‘possessed’ constituted the virtue, thus if someone was all-knowing wise it would also acquire the virtues consequently. In contrast and as explained in the first paragraph, Aristotle persistently underlines the importance of the ‘virtuous conduct’, thus simply advocating ‘doing’ virtuous activities as a means to become virtuous, rather than ‘thinking’ about it.

In my opinion, the ‘relativity’ of desired conduct by an individual is indeed dependent on what is suitable to the particular situation, and thus the position of the ‘intermediate virtue’ – the golden mean – is flexible between the two vices. This need for nuance and judicious analysis from the different viewpoints provides the much-needed legitimacy and viability to Aristotle’s doctrine. To draw upon this relativity, culturally and socially defined reference frameworks significantly affects and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, Book II, chapter 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, Book II, chapter 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, Book II, chapter 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, Book II, chapter 8.

propagates what is considered a 'virtuous' conduct, even though the individual can reason for itself. From my own perspective, I know that in the case of Honour violence, annually thousands of women are killed worldwide to preserve the 'honour' of the family, tribe or nation. These 'honour-codes' are collectively utilized in patriarchal cultures, where thus, these practices have become the 'relative' norm – arguable embodied in the desired virtues within that context. Thus, what a culturally defined group A might perceive as a justified 'virtuous' conduct in certain circumstances, it may be abhorred in group B, and classified as intrinsically wrong. With this distant reflection, I attempt to project the 'relativity' of the desired means of individuals, whether between the coward or the rash man, or between different norms & values, defined by geographical and cultural influences; everything is relative.