

# THE MEANING AND DEFINITION OF ETHIKE ARETE IN ARISTOTLE'S NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

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At *Nicomachean Ethics* 1106b36 – 1107a2, Aristotle defines *ethike arete* as “a formed state of deliberate decision (a formed habit of deliberately deciding), showing its nature in being a mean — a mean *relative to us*, but a mean which is determined according to the principle, which the *phronimos* would use to determine the mean.”<sup>1</sup> It is customary to take this as Aristotle’s definition of *moral virtue* or *moral excellence*. This traditional rendering raises some difficulties among which are:

1. The word “moral” has for us connotations which the Greek word *ethike* does not necessarily have and could not have been intended to have in the above definition in the context of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Unless we are ethical relativists of a sort (and Aristotle does not appear to be one), we ordinarily think that what is immoral is immoral *simpliciter*. An action which is immoral is simply wrong — wrong both in the eyes of God and of men. When we say an action is wrong we do not mean it is wrong simply because of the way we look at it, or because a privileged observer would deem it wrong; the privileged observer, the man of better knowledge would call it wrong just because it is wrong. But according to the above definition *ethike arete* is a mean determined and determinable by the judgment of the *phronimos*. It is not an absolute arithmetical mean as Aristotle had pointed out in *EN*. 1106a26 – 1106b16.

2. If Aristotle is defining moral virtue (i.e. if *ethike arete* is identical with *moral virtue*) then this ethical theory cannot avoid the charge of relativism. Not even the addition that we must be guided in our evaluation of the mean by the sort of principle the *phronimos* would apply could save the theory from this charge,

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<sup>1</sup>This is an emendation of Joachim’s translation of the Greek. See H.H. Joachim *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. by D. A. Rees, O.U.P. (1951) p. 89.



especially as nowhere in the *Nicomachean Ethics* does Aristotle clearly spell out the *phronimos's* principles. It is not enough to say we must be guided by the kind of choice a man of wisdom would make in moral matters unless we also know the principles that guide the choices of the wise man.

3. The sphere of the moral seems to me to be wider than the kinds of things Aristotle describes as *ethike arete*. *Ethike arete* for Aristotle is a political virtue. The aim of politics is honour and honour depends more on those who bestow it than upon those on whom it is bestowed. There is morality in politics, but political (social morality) is not the whole of morality. The moral action is an end itself. It doesn't make sense to ask why one ought to do good, but it makes sense to ask why one ought to do good, but it makes sense to ask why to ask to cultivate *ethike arete*. It, according to Aristotle, is one of the means to *eudaimonia* — well-being or faring well.

These difficulties can be resolved if we understand Aristotle as defining what in English would more appropriately be termed "good manners" rather than "moral virtue". The word *ethos* means an accustomed behaviour — hence character. It is essentially a settled way of behaving. It is a disposition. Aristotle may therefore be simply saying that a man can be said to be of good manners if his state of character falls in an acceptable mean between two extremes. Where this mean lies is relative to us. "Relative to us" here cannot mean relative to each and everyone of us. If Aristotle had wanted to say that, he could have said it. The point of saying that the mean is relative to us is to emphasize what he had said earlier in the text: that there is no absolute mean to propriety. The mean is that which takes into account the special circumstances of each case, not each person. The mean is not predetermined, it is by our standards that it is to be decided; and in this we go by the judgment of the *phronimos*. The *phronimos* is the well informed member of society. Now, Aristotle admits that we all have to start from unreasoned acceptance of the norms of propriety in our society (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095a14 — 1095b13). However, the *phronimos* is the intelligent adult moral agent who does not just happen to have good manners, but whose habit of good behaviour has been acquired through a reasoned process. He knows why he does what he does. We may translate Aristotle's *phronimos* as the "cultured educated gentleman". What Aristotle is saying is that any behaviour which would receive the approval of society as expressible in the judgment of its knowledgeable cultured educated class is to be accounted good manners. Manners then are acceptable or otherwise as they are or are

not in accord with the sort of behaviour the advanced members of society would approve.

Aristotle is putting forward an empirical thesis true enough of the Greek society of his time and true of any society anywhere. It is not a relativistic doctrine, it is a statement of fact. What is good manners in one society and in one age depends on what the cream of the particular society and age considers to be so. This is why codes of etiquette change; manners change. Even if one were to say that this is relativism of a sort, yet we feel less moral acrimony at a relativistic code of social propriety — good manners, than we feel of a relativistic doctrine of morals. Good manners is one of the means towards well-being, or faring well (*eudaimonia*). We need friends, a reasonable amount of material wealth, good health etc. Also we cannot be said to have fully succeeded without the intellectual virtues. For Aristotle, to become a *phronimos* is not the highest state for man although this would do in the ordinary social sphere. He who engages in the contemplative life has the best life of all.

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