

THE BODY AND ARISTOTLE'S IDEA OF MORAL VIRTUE

CHRISTOPHER PERRICONE

One good reason to read Aristotle on ethics is that he has a feel and appreciation for the complexities of the subject matter. Not only does he say that “it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject matter admits...”(NE1094b24),¹ but also unlike Plato, whom he criticizes, Aristotle questions the feasibility of pursuing the Idea of the Good. Neither weavers nor carpenters nor generals nor doctors would benefit by knowing the “good itself.” A doctor, for example, “seems not even to study health in this way, but the health of man, or perhaps rather the health of a particular man; it is individuals that he is healing. (NE1097a14) The Idea of the Good seems both intellectually remote and not useful to particular actions. Right to the point Aristotle says: “The good, therefore, is not some common element answering to one idea.” (NE1096b26)

In this spirit, there is little room for an ethereal absolutism or rule driven ethics. On the contrary, the atmosphere is fresh and smells of the outdoors. Although we can't expect ethics to possess the elegance of mathematical reasoning, we need not despair that all is propaganda. The truth can be indicated in ethics but only “roughly and in outline”; the moral philosopher speaks about what is “only for the most part true and with premises of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better.” (NE1094b23) Aristotle urges us to aspire to an activity, a happiness, that is self sufficient, final, and complete. However, to do so only with the knowledge of the contingencies and limitations of human life. Rather than producing the dogmatism of absolutism or of rule driven ethics, Aristotle seems intent upon magnanimity and toleration, moral qualities no

¹ Throughout this essay, the *Nicomachean Ethics* is abbreviated by NE, the *Rhetoric* by R.

doubt absent for the most part from the ancient world, as they are from ours.

II

All this is nothing new. Rather it is a set up for a discussion of character and moral virtue. In one sense, I am interested in developing an interpretation of Aristotle, which I have not seen before. And in this sense, my essay might be rightly described as an Aristotle essay. Hence I want to say things consistent and coherent with what Aristotle says. However, in another perhaps more important sense, this is no Aristotle essay at all; I want merely to use Aristotle as a springboard to develop the idea of the role of the body in respect to moral virtue regardless of whether or not Aristotle or Aristotle scholars might entirely agree. In this sense I hope to go beyond what Aristotle says. Be that as it may, as I said, one of Aristotle's best qualities is his feel for detail and complexity. As a result, Aristotle produces a down to earth, no nonsense ethics. However, I have a reasonably good suspicion to wonder whether or not most scholars appreciate fully at least one aspect of his nominalistic turn of mind. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle admits that moral virtue cannot be prescribed exactly. However, even though he hints, there, in Book II that the body plays a role in our disposition to choose the mean, it is not until one looks at the *Rhetoric* that one realizes that the body *significantly* conditions our characters and our moral virtues.² Quite spe-

² When I examine the Aristotle literature on moral virtue, I find no mention or, when there is mention, little development of the ideas Aristotle discusses in the *Rhetoric*, especially II, 12-14.. A short list of works examined: Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, NY: Oxford UP, 1991; Stephen R. L. Clark, *Aristotle's Man*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975; W. W. Fortenbaugh, *Aristotle on Emotion*, NY: Barnes and Noble, 1975.; W. F. R. Hardie, "Aristotle's Doctrine that Virtue is a 'Mean'", in *Articles on Aristotle: 2 Ethics and Politics*, edited by J. Barnes, M. Schofield, R. Sorabji, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1978; Werner Jaeger, *Aristotle*, London: Oxford UP, 1948.; J. H. Randall, Jr., *Aristotle*, NY: Columbia UP, 1960.; David Ross, *Aristotle*, London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1949. When I examine commentaries specifically on the *Rhetoric*, I find no development of the idea that body is a significant factor in determining the mean. The two big works on the *Rhetoric* are: E. M. Cope, *The Rhetoric of Aristotle with a Commentary*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1877.; William M. A. Grimaldi, *Aristotle. Rhetoric II: A Commentary*, NY: Fordham UP, 1988. Both Cope and Grimaldi recognize that the body is a factor in determining moral character in so far as "Aristotle is aware of the corporeal (as opposed to the psychic) aspect of the emotions."(Grimaldi, 194) However, neither Cope nor Grimaldi follows this to its logical conclusion. See Cope 145ff. See Grimaldi 183ff. On the one hand Cope merely suggests the direction I take. On the other hand Grimaldi tries, not very convincingly, to subordinate in a Platonic fashion the body to intellect.

cifically, Aristotle says in the *Rhetoric* that character changes with age, i.e. not only does character change with experience or the development of habits (bodily features and expressions),³ which indeed it does, but also character changes because of the changes in the state of the body. If what Aristotle says is true, moral virtue as mean relative to us, is more circumscribed as well as more fluid than what *prima facie* appears. One might be led to say that there are the moral virtues of youth, which are not reconcilable completely with the virtues of the prime of life, and old age.

First of all, let me point out the hints in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the body conditions the prescription of moral virtues. Aristotle distinguishes moral virtue from intellectual virtue and those actions which arise in us strictly by nature. Whereas moral virtue arises in us by habit, intellectual virtue is born and grows as a result of teaching. Whereas moral virtue arises in us by habit, what arises in us by nature cannot be made to do otherwise:

“For instance the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards...”(NE1103a22) Hence Aristotle says: “Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by them.” (NE1103b25) The point is that moral virtue is neither an intellectual exercise (we want to become good not merely understand what is good) nor is the exercise of moral virtue beyond our control. However, there may be a misleading suggestion, here. One might be led to believe that Aristotle is excluding nature from the question of moral virtue, claiming that moral virtue is essentially a question of habit. But let me emphasize that we are “adapted by nature” to receive the moral virtues. That is, the moral virtues require a context within which to operate,

³ What Aristotle says about body and character (see Cope and Grimaldi in note 2) is not, in principle, different from what William James says about body and emotion or what John Searle says about brain processes and mental phenomena. See James' *Principles of Psychology*, vol. II. NY: Dover Publications, Inc. 1950 (451) James says: “I now proceed to urge the vital point of my whole theory, which is this: *If we fancy some strong emotion. and then try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feeling of its bodily symptoms. we find we have nothing left behind, no 'mind stuff' out of which the emotion can be constituted and that a cold and neutral state of intellectual perception is all that remains.*” See also, Searle's *Minds. Brains. and Science*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984., especially the first chapter where he argues that mental phenomena are *caused* by *and* are *features* of brain (bodily) processes. Of course, neither Aristotle nor James nor Searle is happy with mind-body dualism..

that context being "nature," our biological/psychological self in its physical/social environment. In other words, were "nature" different, that is, our bodies different and in different relation to the world, I take it that our moral virtues would be different, too. Or in other words, again, ought implies can. Indeed, nature has allowed a great deal of flexibility as to what we are able to do. By much practice I can become a builder or a lyre player, just as I can become brave or temperate by doing brave and temperate acts. Furthermore, Aristotle points out, here in agreement with Plato, that it is crucial, especially in respect to moral virtue, that habits be formed from early youth. Emphatically Aristotle says: "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." (NE1103b26) But again I would suggest we should proceed cautiously and not overlook the place of nature, or as I should say more specifically body, as a ground for action. Surely, I can learn to play the lyre. However, whether or not I have "fingers," is only in part a question of practice. The same, by analogy, would seem to follow in respect to bravery and temperance. Habits are not formed in a vacuum. Although "all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity" and "the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well" (NE1103a34), nevertheless nature, as body, as "potentiality," the ground of activity, cannot be excluded from the formation of habits.

Aristotle says virtue is a state of character. More specifically, he says "the virtue of man... will be the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well." (NE1106a24) Doing work well, as virtue, is based on an analogy with a part of the body, i.e. the eye. Just as when the eye functions well, one calls it healthy, so, too, when man functions well, one calls him virtuous. The idea of health as analogous to virtue is woven throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*. However, one must not be lulled into the Platonic error that "health" is univocal. There is no paradigm of health. There is no paradigm of excellence of the body, the eye or any other part or the whole itself. Nor is there a paradigm of virtue. A thing does its work well relative to itself. In the case of the eye, before we can determine its excellence, we must know what is the eye's "natural" condition, how naturally weak or strong. In the case of virtue, it depends on the "natural" condition of your character, the capacities and limits of what you are able to choose. These capacities and limits are defined by your body and its expressions

and realizations of passion. Clearly the mean relative to us can mean nothing other than choosing within the context of our bodily abilities. As Aristotle says, distinguishing the arithmetical mean from the mean relative to us: "if ten pounds are too much for a particular person to eat and two too little, it does not follow that the trainer will order six pounds; for this also is perhaps too much for the person who is to take it, or too little – too little for Milo, too much for the beginner in athletic exercises... Thus the master of any art avoids excess and defect, but seeks the intermediate and chooses this – the intermediate not in the object but relatively to us." (NE1106b8) Aristotle's illustration is perfect. Just as the state of the body directly affects what the athlete should eat, so, by analogy, the state of the body affects what is the morally virtuous thing to do. By the way, I take it that if all bodies were the same, the mean to be chosen would be the arithmetical one, not the one relative to us, whether in respect to diet or moral virtue. As a matter of fact, "the mean relative to us" would have no meaning were all bodies the same in their capacities and limits. Were all bodies the same Aristotle might have conceived of an ethics based on rules. However, as Aristotle says, there is no way of precisely prescribing the mean. The mean for you – doing the right thing to the right person, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way – may be not the mean for me; depending on my capacities and limits, your choice may be excessive or defective for me. In any given situation there are clearly excessive and defective choices to be made. The trick is not that we all hit exactly the same mean, which is not possible, but to avoid excess and defect. Hence rather than being precisely prescribed, moral virtue forms a range of actions which a variety of characters are disposed to and capable of performing.

I can already hear someone complaining that what I have discussed as bodily capacities and limits are what Aristotle would describe as psychological capacities and limits. Well, yes and no. Yes, Aristotle would think of the passions, e.g. anger and fear as psychological responses. But yes, they are also bodily responses: charge, run away, sweat, grit the teeth. As I have already mentioned, for Aristotle, psychological responses are probably nothing but expressions or features of the body. Yes, self-indulgence or rashness and boorishness or cowardice are expressions of character – how we stand in respect to the passions. Yes, they, too, are conditioned by the body at least in so far as they are linked to the passions. No, the body and mind are not separate. No, there are no purely

mind conditioned responses of any kind.⁴ However, if anyone is skeptical about the relationship of body to moral virtue, let him or her take a look at the *Rhetoric*.

In Book II 12-14, Aristotle considers "the various types of human character, in relation to the emotions and moral qualities, showing how they correspond to our various ages and fortunes." (R1388b32) The main reason is to "see how to compose our speeches so as to adapt both them and ourselves to our audience." (R1390a28) However, there are clearly questions of moral virtue at stake here, as well. The question of how fortune affects character, which begins in section 15, is unrelated to what I am interested in here. However, the question of age, as Aristotle discusses it, is clearly a question of body. Youth, prime of life, and old age along with being psychological perspectives are bodily perspectives. Indeed, I would argue that the bodily perspectives basically determine the psychological ones, although not entirely so. It is true that one can develop one's capacities and extend one's limits, both bodily and psycho-

⁴ For the most part, Aristotle argues that soul (psyche) is the "principle of animal life." (*De Anima* 402a6) Hence soul is nothing other than a particular body's activities, its movements - it is the power of living and knowing. Notice, however: "A further problem presented by the affections of the soul is this: are they all affections of the complex body and soul, or is there any one among them peculiar to the soul by itself? To determine this is indispensable but difficult. If we consider the majority of them, there seems to be no case in which the soul can act or be acted upon without involving the body; e.g. anger, courage, appetite, and sensation generally. Thinking seems the most probable exception; but if this too proves to be a form of imagination or to be impossible without imagination, it too requires a body as a condition of its existence." (*De Anima* 403a10) On the question of thinking, the mind, although it seems that "it too [like anger, etc.] requires a body as a condition of its existence," Aristotle seems to waffle a bit. On the one hand in support of what was just cited, Aristotle thinks that the Pythagorean myths are absurd, i.e. "that any soul could be clothed upon any body... for each body seems to have a form and shape of its own. It is as absurd as to say that the art of carpentry could embody itself in flutes." (*De Anima* 407b25) However, W. D. Ross points out even though "soul [cannot) exist disembodied -... Aristotle makes a reservation in favour of the highest element in the human soul, the active reason, which, as it 'comes in from outside,' exists too after the body's death, though whether in an individual form or merged in some wider spiritual unity, Aristotle does not say." (132) See W. D. Ross *Aristotle*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1966. By the way, Ross says further: "A notion like that of Descartes', that the existence of the soul is the first certainty and the existence of matter a later inference, would have struck Aristotle as absurd. The whole self, soul and body alike, is something given and not questioned." (132) Although the ontological status of mind, in particular, may be somewhat problematic, here, nevertheless one should notice that in so far as the affections are inseparable from body and character, the question of moral virtue is yet a bodily question and not problematic in this respect at all..

logically, through various practices and experiences. One might even imaginatively sympathize with other bodies, imagine what it is like to be another person, put yourself in the other guy's shoes. However, ultimately the state of one's own body conditions and constrains more or less what one is able to do. Ultimately the body conditions and constrains what is morally virtuous.

In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle discusses youthful character and the character of old age as extremes. The character of prime of life is the mean between the extremes. This adds a new wrinkle to the concept of the mean discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Although in both works the mean is understood as a mean relative to us, it seems in the *Rhetoric* a priority is given to the mean relative to the person in the prime of life. In other words, although a young man or an old man might choose the mean relative to him, nevertheless, all things being equal, it would be either excessive or defective relative to the mean chosen by the man in prime of life. Prima facie this seems arbitrary. Actually, it seems that in discussing character in respect to age, i.e. the state of the body, Aristotle abandons the idea of determining the mean relative to us and adopts the idea of determining the mean by arithmetical proportion. Exactly why he does this is hard to tell. In spite of this change, if that indeed is what it is, it is clear nevertheless that the mean relative to us floats along the excess-defect spectrum as we age.

It should be noticed that in painting his portraits especially of youth and old age, Aristotle uses terms referring to the body. Clearly youth and old age are the psychological and moral perspectives they are because of the condition of their respective bodies. And because of their respective bodies they are not only disposed to making some choices and not others, but also are incapable of some choices and not others.

Aristotle says: "Young men have strong passions, and tend to gratify them indiscriminately." (R1389a4) Because of their "bodily desires" (R1389a4) they display a lack of self-control. Youth is changeable, violent. Yet its impulses are superficial; from minute to minute tempers can run from hot to cool. Youth loves honors. Therefore, it cannot stand being slighted. Also, because of a love of honor, the young person adores victory, a superiority over others. Youth loves money. And yet in all innocence is often cheated of it. "... nature warms (youth's) blood as though with excess of wine" (R1389a19). Because of the vigor of their bodies the young think they'll live forever: "Their lives are mainly spent not in memory but in expectation; for expectation refers to the future,

memory to the past, and youth has a long future before it and a short past behind it.”(R1389a23) As a result of the bodily state of youth, young men are less fearful and more hopeful than old men. Youth has high ideals because it has not learned of all of life's limitations, bodily and otherwise. The young “would always rather do noble deeds than useful ones; their lives are regulated more by moral feeling than by reasoning.” (R1389a33) Hence “All their mistakes are in the direction of doing things excessively and vehemently.”(R1389b3) Youth overdoes everything. Its body speaks, loud and clear.

“The character of Elderly Men... may be said to be formed for the most part of elements that are the contrary of all these.”(R1389b12) I should like to emphasize, again, that the elements are ultimately bodily. Whereas young men overdo everything, old men “under-do everything.”(R1389b17) Whereas young men are “warm blooded, (the old man's) temperament is chilly.”(R1389b31) Whereas young men are passionate, old men's “sensual passions have either altogether gone or have lost their vigor.” (R1390a11) The weakening of the body over time naturally has psychological consequences. Old men think that “life on the whole is a bad business.”(R1389b16) “They are small minded because they have been humbled by life.”(R1389b25) Because of their years they are less sure of the themselves. They hesitate. They are cynical. They are stingy, cowardly, and ego-centric. Unlike, young men, the old care less for what is noble and more for what is useful. They tend to expect the worst. The old are more conscious of the limits of the body, the ticking, or should I say the running down, of its clock: “They live by memory rather than by hope; for what is left to them of life is but little as compared with the long past.”(R1390a8) Unlike young men, old men “guide their lives by reasoning more than by moral feeling; reasoning being directed to utility and moral feeling to moral goodness.”(R1390a17)

“The body is in its prime from thirty to five-and-thirty; the mind about forty nine.”(R1390b13) “Men in their Prime... have a character between that of the young and that of the old, free from the extremes of either.”(R1390a30) Men in their prime are neither rash nor timid, neither trusting nor distrusting others. Their lives are guided by both what is noble and useful. As I said above, it seems here that Aristotle abandons the idea of a mean relative to us. One could read Aristotle as saying: choose the mean that a man in the prime of his life would choose; that is the morally virtuous thing to do. But that would seem to be not only arbitrary but also a parody of moral virtue. By extricating the mean from that

which is relative to us, one is in effect arguing that a mean could be determined out of context, that in effect there might exist an abstract mean in itself such as Platonists have sought. I don't think Aristotle can argue this position. It may be true that the man in the prime of his life, because of his age, i.e. the state of his body and mind, risks less the traps of the excesses and defects of young and old men. However, unless we are to say that the young and old can never be morally virtuous, which seems absurd, we must adhere to the idea that the mean is relative to us. Hence at each stage of life there is a mean, tending toward excess in youth, tending toward defect in the old, tending toward moderation and fitness in the prime of life, acceptable to and praiseworthy in respect to that stage. For Aristotle to remain consistent, he cannot give moral priority to the man in the prime of his life. That would be tantamount to undermining the natural basis of moral virtue, i.e. its root in human nature, its root in the body. It would be abandoning the fundamental moral concept: ought implies can. Each stage of life has its capacities and limitations; the mean must be sought within them.

III

I've said what I want about moral virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Rhetoric*. As I read Aristotle, he, in the simplest terms, argues: the body is the basis of character; character is the basis of moral virtue; moral virtue is a mean relative to us. Given that the body ages, the mean will necessarily differ from one stage of life to the next. Now I'd like to develop some implications and suggestions.

I mentioned earlier in the essay that the moral virtues of youth, prime of life, and old age are not reconcilable. I think that now should be evident. Differences in age, i.e. in body, cannot be overcome, unlike differences in manners or culture which can be. Differences in manners or culture are merely differences in practice; people of different times and places act differently because of the power of local conditions to affect behavior. From a slightly different angle, although one might imagine (unlikely as it may be) a global uniformity of manners and culture among people, it is unimaginable that bodies and bodily experience could be anything but ontologically separate and distinct. If this is true, although one might imagine a scenario in which a mean, in respect to manners and culture, be relatively fixed, nevertheless a mean in respect to body can never be pinned down. More specifically, Athenians and

Thessalians, if their cultures assimilate with each other, might well choose similar means in cases where cultural factors were relevant. The reason being that with the assimilation of cultures, there would no longer be the question *what it is like to be* an Athenian or a Thessalian. In the case of youth and old age, although the body of one changes into the body of the other, no assimilation is possible. Even though as a young man, I may imagine *what it is like to be* an old man, I can't know what it is like to be one. Even though as an old man, I may remember what it is like to be a young, still I no longer quite know. Obviously one may imagine wrongly. Without the experience of old age, how can one presume to enter into the thoughts and sentiments of the old man? How can one disregard completely those propensities that are natural to the particular stage through which one is currently living? The same goes for memory, along with some further problems. Of course, one can remember what it was like to be a young man. But it is not quite the same as being a young man. As an old man that young man he once was may seem in many ways a stranger. Memory is so pale. So much is lost. So much is selected and edited. And besides the past is always viewed through the lenses of the present. If all this is true, it is hard to imagine how the moral virtues of youth and old age might ever be reconciled. As the great art historian Heinrich Wofflin said of works of art: not all things are possible at all times; so it seems that not all morally virtuous actions are possible at all times in the course of a man's life. It seems impossible for a young man to determine the mean as an old man would, and vice versa. Perhaps a young man alone must decide what is morally virtuous for young men, the old must decide for the old.

Age, of course, is only one bodily factor. If body is the ultimate ground of moral virtue, other bodily factors besides age may also play a role in the irreconcilability of means. I take it that difference in sex is a difference in body, and not merely a difference in manner or culture. Perhaps the reader has noticed that throughout this essay, I have talked about young and old men. That was intentional, and not merely politically incorrect. In both the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle is talking about moral virtue in respect to men. I would bet that a discussion of moral virtue in respect to young women, women in prime of life, and women in old age would be very different in both spirit and detail.⁵ Very simply men, as male bodies, do not respond in all respects

⁵ See Clark, 207 on the differences between men and women in Aristotle.

like women, as female bodies.⁶ If this is true, a young man might very well choose a mean not only irreconcilable with an old man's choice, but also irreconcilable with a woman's choice, a woman of any age. As in the case of age, and perhaps more dramatically so, I, as a male body, cannot know what it is like to be a woman qua woman, even though I may have an idea what it is like to be a woman qua human being. Of course, I may suspend my belief of myself as a male body and take an imaginative leap into the body of a woman. However, obviously my male imagination is considerably constrained.

And finally, let us not forget that there may be other bodily factors to deal with, which would condition character and therefore moral virtue. There are healthy and sick bodies, whole and maimed bodies, short and tall bodies, fat and skinny, clumsy, agile, muscular and frail ones...

POST SCRIPTUM

At the beginning of this essay I said that one good reason to read Aristotle is for his feel and appreciation of the complexities of the subject matter. One might say at this point that virtue ethics (that is, if one sees the plausibility of my reading) based on an Aristotelian model is so complex that it is useless. One might seek sanctuary from the complexities in the clearly defined realm of absolutism or rule driven ethics. But that would be a mistake. In effect, that would be a denial of the body. It would be to embrace asceticism. If the complexities exist, we must learn to deal with them. The complexities may be formidable, but I don't think we need despair. One of the positive outcomes of my reading of Aristotle is that, although individual decisions may be irreconcilable, because of bodily differences, perhaps when necessary, what is required is com-

⁶ See Patricia Smith Churchland, *Neurophilosophy*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986. especially "Sex and Neurochemicals," (88ff) Although Churchland says that you have to be very cautious about the conclusions you draw from the current scientific data, and that no doubt nature and culture often overlap in conditioning human behavior, nevertheless she says: "By now it is evident that it is not so much a question of *whether* there is sexual dimorphism in the brains of humans but of how much, what kind, whether there are any differences in cognitive capacities, and in what dimensions of behavior it shows up."(95) Two things: 1. what Churchland says seems non-controversial in respect to other neurophysiology literature I have examined; 2. according to Churchland, as for Aristotle, you can't dismiss entirely the role of the body in conditioning our passions and character, even though it is unclear what are all the details.

munity decision. What I am thinking of is this: although a young man's mean on war policy may not be reconcilable with an old man's mean or with a woman's mean, nevertheless when it comes to making war policy decisions, what may be required is not one individual decision or another, but a community of bodies representing various points on the excess/defect spectrum. That community would come up with its mean, a mean relative to it, and therefore the morally virtuous thing to do. This procedure might still be inexact, and also be riddled with problems of its own. However, it may be the best we can do. In the most general sense this means that the political "body" and its aims have priority over individual ones. And, of course, Aristotle would agree.

Baruch College, The City University of New York

Iona College