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Department of Higher Education  
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## A STUDY OF ARISTOTLE'S GOLDEN MEAN

Nwe Nwe Oo\*

### ABSTRACT

The research problem in this paper is “Why should people behave with the doctrine of Golden Mean?”<sup>1</sup>The tentative solution to this problem will be arrived at or reached by an exposition of Aristotle's virtue. This views clearly prove Golden Mean that is a necessary condition for morality.<sup>2</sup> The research methods, which will be used for this paper are the descriptive method and evaluative method.<sup>3</sup>An evaluation will be made in accordance with the principle of reciprocity.<sup>4</sup>The significance of the paper is to achieve harmony and peace in human society and to prove that the more negative aspects of human nature can be controlled through avoiding extremes in thought, speech and action.<sup>5</sup>

**Key words:** (1) Virtue (2) Morality (3) Golden Mean

### INTRODUCTION

In the present days, have everyone is searching for happiness. It is actually based on morality in which the people who has their own ethical ideals. However instead of making his or her own moral principle everyone is trying to achieve his or her desire. Thus, human being needs to learn the ethical teaching of Aristotle.

Aristotle was born in (384-322 B.C), in northern Greece. Aristotle studied with Plato for eighteen years, but he also became the world's most complete scientist. His theories of biology and physics influenced Western science for almost two thousand years. According to Aristotle, ethics is not merely a speculative study and good conduct arises from habits that in turn can only be got by repeated action and correction.

His ethics developed as a theory that was valuable for the fundamental principles. Aristotle argued everything as well as all human activities has a purpose or utility. The happiness is ultimate purpose of man, but happiness is not just a life make full of pleasure. It must also be a rational life in accordance with reason. And it must also be an active and a virtuous life, a life of rational activity in accordance with virtue. The Confucius' Principle of the Golden Rule maintains that human society must be built on the foundation of temperance and moderation.

Aristotle's *Nicomachean* ethics is the first systemic intervention of ethics in Western civilization. He emphasizes the basic moral principle and it is immanent in the activities of men's daily lives and can be revealed only through a study of them. He laid down a principle of Golden Mean in order to avoid the errors in daily affairs. Aristotle aims his mean state for the moral value. Human's action and purpose aim at some good and so it has been well said that the good is that at which everything aims. But a difference is evident among these aims or ends. Sometimes human's action and purpose aim the exercise of a faculty, sometimes a certain result beyond that exercise. And where there is an end beyond the act, there the result is better than the exercise of the faculty.

Since there are many kinds of actions and many arts and sciences, it follows that there are many ends also; e.g. health is the end of medicine, ships is the end of the ship, victory of the action of war, and wealth is the end of economy. In applying self-sufficing people do not regard a man as an individual leading a lonely life, but people also take account of parents, children, wife and in short, friends and fellow-citizens generally, since man is naturally a social being. According to him, happiness is the most desirable thing in the world, and that is not merely as one among other good things, if it were merely one among other good things, it is

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\*Professor, Dr, Department of Philosophy, Yangon University of Distance Education

<sup>1</sup> Research Problem

<sup>2</sup> Tentative Solution

<sup>3</sup> Research Methods

<sup>4</sup> Research Principle

<sup>5</sup> Contribution

plain that the addition of the least of other goods must make it more desirable; for the addition becomes an extra of good and of two goods the greater is always more desirable. Thus it seems that happiness is something final and self-sufficing, and is the end of all that man does.<sup>1</sup>

### ARISTOTLE'S THEORY OF ETHICS

Aristotle's theory of ethics is the first comprehensive scientific theory of morality in the West. His ethics is an attempt to give a definition of the highest good. According to him, every human action has some end. This end may be the means to a higher end, this to a still higher and so on. Finally, one must reach a supreme end which is an ultimate principle or good. The highest good for man is not mere bodily existence or sensuous feeling but a life of reason. Hence for Aristotle, the highest good for man is the complete and habitual exercise of the functions which make him a human being.

### MORAL VIRTUE OF ARISTOTLE

According to Aristotle, moral virtue is the outcome of habits or is derived from habit. Excellence, then, being of these two kinds: intellectual and moral; intellectual excellence owes its birth and growth mainly to instruction, and so requires time and experience, while moral excellence is the result of habit or custom. No moral virtue is rooted in people by nature as well as law of nature cannot be changed by habituation. Thus, nature gives them the capacity of receiving them, and capacity is perfected by habit and this is developed by training.<sup>2</sup>

But habits or types of character are not only produced, preserved and destroyed by the same occasions and the same means, but they will also manifest themselves in the same circumstances. This is the case with obvious things like strength. Strength is produced by taking plenty of nourishment and doing prosperity of hard work, and the strongman, in turn, has the greatest capacity for these. And the case is the same with the virtues: By abstaining from pleasure people become temperate and when people become temperate, people are best able to abstain. And so with courage: by habituating themselves to despise danger, and to face it, people become courageous; and when people have become courageous, people are best able to face danger.

The pleasure or pain that accompanies the acts must be taken as a test of the formed habit or character. According to him, moral virtue or excellence is closely concerned with pleasure and pain. Virtue has to do with pleasure and pain, it has to do with actions and passions or affections; every action is accompanied by pleasure or pain. The quality of the soul is either (1) a passion or emotion, or (2) a power or faculty, or (3) a habit or trained faculty; and so virtue must be one of these three. By (1), a passion or emotion means appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, love, hate, longing, emulation, pity or generally that which is accompanied by pleasure or pain; (2) a power or faculty is that in respect of which people are said to be capable of being affected in any of these ways, as for instance, that in respect of which people are able to be angered or pained or to pity and (3) a habit or trained faculty is that in respect of which people are well or ill, regulated or disposed in the matter of their affections; as, for instance, in the matter of being angered, people are ill regulated if they are too violent or too slack, but if they are moderate in their anger people are well regulated.<sup>3</sup>

Virtue, then, is a habit or trained faculty of choice, the characteristic of which lies in moderation or observance of the mean relatively to the persons concerned, as determined by reason, i.e., as the prudent man would determine it. And it is a moderation, firstly inasmuch as it comes in the middle or mean between two vices, one on the side of excess, the other on the side of excess, the other on the side of defect, and secondly, inasmuch as, while these vices fall

<sup>1</sup> Oliver A. Johnson (1999). *Ethics*. New York: United States of America. p.59

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 65

<sup>3</sup>Theodore C. Denise, Nicholas p.White, Sheldon P. Peterfreund. (2002). *Great Tradition In Ethics*. Belmont: wadsworth, Thompson Learning, Inc. p.27.

short of or exceed the due measure in feeling and in action, it finds and chooses the mean, middling, or moderate amount. Regarded in its essence, therefore, or according to the definition of its nature, virtue is a moderation or middle state, but viewed in its relation to what is best and right it is the extreme of perfection.<sup>4</sup>

But it is not all actions or all passions that admit of moderation; there are some whose very names imply badness, as malevolence, shamelessness, envy, and among acts, adultery, theft, murder. These and all other like things are blamed as being bad in themselves, and not merely in their excess or deficiency. It is impossible, therefore, to go right in them; they are always wrong: rightness and wrongness in such things (eg, adultery) does not depend upon whether it is the right person and occasion and manner, but the mere doing of any one of them is wrong.<sup>5</sup>

According to him, there can be no excess or deficiency in temperance or courage because the mean or moderate amount is, in a sense, an extreme, so in these kinds of conduct also there can be no moderation or excess or deficiency, but the acts are wrong, however they be done. For, to put it generally, there cannot be moderation in excess or deficiency, nor excess or deficiency in moderation.

Moderation in respect of certain pleasure and also certain pains is temperance, while excess is profligacy. With respect to honor and disgrace, there is a moderation which is high-mindedness, an excess which may be called vanity, and deficiency which is little mindedness.<sup>6</sup>

The extreme dispositions are opposed both to the mean or moderate dispositions and to one another, while the moderate disposition is opposed to both the extremes.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, happiness is an activity of the soul in accord with perfect virtue. Happiness is not something which is static, but is an activity. According to Aristotle, “the good life for man is a life of happiness and man ought to behave so as to achieve happiness. Men ought to behave so as to achieve happiness.”<sup>7</sup>

## THE GOLDEN MEAN OF ARISTOTLE

According to him, happiness can be found in his doctrine of golden mean. According to Aristotle, how should people behave in order to achieve happiness? Aristotle’s answer is found in the well-known formula called “The Doctrine of the Mean” or “Golden mean” The doctrine of the golden mean or of moderation is central in the ethics of Aristotle. Reason seeks the balanced course between too much and too little. “Nothing overmuch” is the guidance of sanity. That conduct is virtuous which avoids the extremes either of excess or of deficiency.

The proper way for a man to behave in the moral sphere is in accordance with the mean. For example, in order to be happy, he must be courageous, liberal, proud, witty, modest, and so on. But all of these “virtue”, as Aristotle designates them, are virtues of moderation, courage is the mean between cowardice and rashness; liberality between prodigality and frugality: pride between vanity and humility and so forth. Aristotle’s philosophy of the “golden mean” can be condensed as follow; In order to achieve happiness, men must act moderately, they must act so as to be striving for the mean between two extremes.<sup>8</sup>

Aristotle emphasizes on an examination of the facts of human experience. For him, there is one world of reality\_ the visible world of nature. Ideas exist, but they exist in things. Reality is found in things; it is an unfolding process. Ideas and things, or form and matter, are

<sup>4</sup> Oliver A. Johnson (1999). *Ethics*, New York: United States of America. p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.71.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>7</sup> Richard H. Popkin and Avrum Stroll. (1959). *Philosophy Made Simple*. New York: American Book-Stratford Press, INC. p.20.

<sup>8</sup> Richard H. Popkin and Avrum Stroll. (1959). *Philosophy Made Simple*. New York: American Book-Stratford Press, INC. p.21

united, and there is continuous development from potentiality to actuality. The 'spiritual' and the 'natural' are inseparably connected. The moral ideal is found in the structure of man's own nature.

As to human nature, according to Aristotle, men actually are seeking many different things. Men engaged in medical seek health, the military man seeks victory or proficiency in military tactics, the bridle maker aims to make good equipment for horses, the businessman wants to acquire wealth. But they are not ends- in –themselves; they are means to still other ends, and there is apparently a hierarchy of ends.

According to Aristotle, the good is that at which all things aim and highest good is as well-being. It includes the complete development of the functions which make a human being and a member of a society. It is not an inactive achievement but the active exercise of functions, and happiness is its natural outcome. Happiness is an activity in accordance with virtue. It does not come from wealth or from pleasure. According to him, only the common people would identify the good with pleasure. Pleasure is good; it is not the ultimate good. 'The pleasures of animate beings differ in kind.' The pleasures that follow activities are proper to man. Just as the excellence of the sculpture lies in the skill with which he practices principles of his art, so the excellence of man lies in the proper fulfillment of his function. The function peculiar to man is his life of reason. Consequently, he should exercise this function and live in the light of reason.

According to Aristotle, man's nature is divided into two parts. There is an irrational side composed of a vegetative part, not directly controlled by reason, and an appetitive part, which man shares with the lower animals. The impulses emanating from man's nature may be controlled. In contrast to the irrational part, man has a rational nature or self which is a distinctive characteristic of human beings. The well-being of man differs from that of the vegetable or other animal in that it is an expression of reason. The rational part of man may be engaged in reflective thought upon the nature of things, or it may direct its energy to the control of the desire arising from his irrational nature. By redirecting irrational impulses into rational virtues, human personality is perfected and man's highest welfare is attained.

According to Aristotle, man is essentially and primarily a rational being. The good for man, therefore, depends upon the exercise and the development of his rational nature. Whenever man achieves the mastery and the direction of life by reason, human excellence and happiness are attained. While the intellectual virtues rank among the highest, knowledge alone is not sufficient. Reason must become a functional reality to the extent that it moves the will and expresses itself in habitual activity. The virtues are acquired by practicing them. The habit of right thinking, right willing, and right acting is a virtue. These can bring people to another important principle.<sup>9</sup>

According to Aristotle, virtue and happiness are related. Happiness is simply the name of the good life, and it subsumes the virtues as an essential part of its character. Happiness is the life of activity in accordance with virtues; happiness is nothing more than the name of the ultimate good in life, that toward which all activities and hopes are aimed. For Aristotle, ultimate good is happiness, the life of virtuous action in accordance with reason.<sup>10</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Modern virtue ethics takes its inspiration from the Aristotelian understanding of character and virtue. Aristotelian character is, importantly, about a state of being. Character is also about doing. Aristotelian theory is a theory of action, since having the virtuous inner dispositions will also involve being moved to act in accordance with them. Realizing that

<sup>9</sup>Dupre Ben. (2007). *50 Philosophy Idea*. London: Quercus Publishing PIC. p. 97

<sup>10</sup>Robert C. Solomon. (1996). *A Handbook for Ethics*. New York, Harcourt Brace College Publishers. p.102.

kindness is the appropriate response to a situation and feeling appropriately kindly disposed will also lead to a corresponding attempt to act kindly.

It is important to recognize that moral character develops over a long period of time. People are born with all sorts of natural tendencies. Some of these natural tendencies will be positive, such as a peaceful and friendly nature, and some will be negative, such as an irritable and jealous nature. These natural tendencies can be encouraged and developed or discouraged and dissatisfied by the influences one is showed when growing up. There are a number of factors that may affect one's character development, such as one's parents, teachers, peer group, role-models, the degree of encouragement and attention one receives, and exposure to different situations. People's natural tendencies, the raw material they are born with, are shaped and developed through a long and gradual process of education and habituation.

Moral education and development is a major part of virtue ethics. Moral development at least in its early stages relies on the availability of good role models. The moral agent acts as a role model and the student of virtue emulates his or her example. Initially this is a process of habituating oneself in right action. That right action is virtuous which avoids the extremes either of excess or of deficiency. The good life is not one that exercises extreme repression or that permits excessive indulgence; it is one that encourages the harmonious development of all moral functions of the human beings.

The development of moral character may take a whole lifetime. But once it is firmly established, one will act consistently, predictably and appropriately in a variety of situations.

As discussed above, virtue is a developed character. It is also a purposive disposition. A virtuous actor chooses virtuous action knowingly and for its own sake. Finally, virtue is determined by the right reason. Virtue requires the right desire and the right reason. To act from the wrong reason is to act viciously. On the other hand, the agent can try to act from the right reason, but fail because he or she has the wrong desire. The virtuous agent acts effortlessly, perceives the right reason, has the harmonious right desire, and has and temperance state of virtue that flows smoothly into action. The virtuous agent with power of reason and rule of temperance can act as an exemplar of virtue to others.

In this paper, it is attempted to find out and show that the Aristotle's moral virtue "golden mean" can be used as the significant ethical concept for the human society by finding evidences from philosophy of Aristotle. Aristotle's philosophy of the "golden mean" holds that to achieve happiness, men must act moderately, so they must do by striving for the mean between two extremes. Aristotle maintains that virtue is a habit or trained faculty of choice and it is a characteristic that originated in moderation of action as determined by reason.

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