

Summary of the aristotle philosophy of virtue ethics philosophy essay



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Aristotle (384-322 B. C.) was born in the Greek colony of Stagira in Macedonia. His father's name was Nicomachus, he was a learned person and a physician. Aristotle was brought up in a good atmosphere of learning under his father. Later, after the demise of his father, Aristotle went to Athens for studying under Plato. According to Aristotle, his works deal with theoretical sciences including his writings in physics, biology and astronomy. He also mentions his writing in practical sciences for example Nicomachean Ethics and in logic for example Organon. Aristotle was thought of as a person who knew all the knowledge available at his time. He was the first person in western civilization who gives a procedural and systematic account of subject of ethics. We now turn to his ethical philosophy.

Aristotle states that any human investigation art or science aim at some thing, and that aim is good. Now like the field of medicine aims at healthy life, the field of shipbuilding aims at vessel building etc. Now considering these acts there intermediate stage, of action or production, has no worth like that of there final aim. For example, practicing medicine one has to study, this is the intermediate stage of the final aim of medicine, which is healthy life. So in the field of medicine it is the final aim of healthy life that has the final worth not the intermediate end i. e. is getting education and practicing. He further argues that the aim of politics is the good for man. The aim of politics at a broader view is the good of the city state.

Aristotle warns us against expecting a high degree of precision in our study of political science; it deals with the human variable, since it involves practical life of man which has different experience in case of each

individual. Thus, its subject matter is best handled by men of experience, not by young men who have but a little experience of life.

Taking the example of political science he asks what could be its aim and of the other human pursuits. The ultimate aim of political science, which includes ethics and social philosophy, is good of man. Further contemplation leads us what to the concept of goodness. The general agreeing position is, that the good is the state of human happiness. Aristotle further says that most of the men, i. e. the general masses and the men of wit and wisdom, would agree that good of man is happiness, but they would mostly differ in the meaning of happiness because its interpretation is different from men to men. Now the task ahead is to explore a general agreeable meaning or interpretation of happiness. In doing so Aristotle analyses the concept of chief good in an action.

Clarifying what is the chief good in an action, Aristotle exemplifies by saying that all the fields of; medicine, crafts, warfare, are actions all with different ends or final aim as stated earlier. But they must have a common final end. The end of medicine is health, for warfare it is self defense or offence etc. But what is there chief good. The chief good in an action must be the final objective of action. This is because final objective is done for the sake of its own worth and importance not for the sake of some other end. All human action is, as we know from preceding statement, human happiness. Happiness is not only common to all human actions but also the final end of all actions. Therefore, Chief good of all action is the happiness of man.

Further précising and qualifying the definition of happiness, Aristotle says that the happiness contains of two parts. First, is the ' activity of soul' which means the exercise of reason; and second, ' in accordance with reason' which explains the quality of performance.

To understand the concept of happiness one has to know the nature of virtue, for understanding the nature of virtue one has to determine the soul or spirit. Aristotle says soul or spirit has two components the rational and the irrational part. The irrational nature is further distributed in the vegetative part responsible for nutrition and growth of the body; other is the appetitive part which has some features of rational part of the soul as well.

Now Aristotle turns his discussion to the rational virtues of man. He says that rational virtues consist of intellectual and moral part. The intellectual virtue includes among other philosophical wisdom, understanding. The moral virtue includes practical wisdom which involves liberality and temperance.

Intellectual virtues grow from inculcation of knowledge and teaching. While moral virtues come about as a result of habit. For the moral virtues these are not endowed in man's nature. Rather these are acquired through a habit by first practicing and then learning them. For example of all arts; builders becomes by building, a lyre player by playing the lyre, justice by doing justice. While intellectual virtues which are natural qualities of man are potentially available to man, all he has to do is to use them.

Discussing the moral virtues of man further, Aristotle describes moral virtue not only as a state of human character but also as a quality which is its state. Virtue is human state of character which make a man good and which

enables him to undertake his responsibility fine. He now defines the exact state, or nature of virtue, which is following the principle of mean. Mean in terms of object is same for all men between two extremes but in relative terms the mean course is different for every one. Thus the master of any pursuit of life is avoiding the excess and deficit amounts in thought and action. Rather taking mean or the intermediate course not in objective but relative terms.

Hence moral virtue is mean of an action which falls between two extremes relative to us. This mean is a habit of choice which is guided by reason. Not every action or state of mind can fall in the principle of mean. All evil action like stealing or lying has no mean because their very nature is bad.

Now specifically speaking here are some examples of moral virtue. According to Aristotle, " With regard to feeling of fear and confidence the mean is courage. With regard to pleasures and pain the mean is temperance. With regard money lending and borrowing the mean is liberality lying between prodigality and meanness. With regard honor and dishonor the mean is pride which lies between empty vanity and undue humility. Still with regard to anger there is excess which is irascible and deficiency which is in irascible the mean is good tempered."

Turning the discussion towards the intellectual virtues he says that, the rational part of human soul, the intellectual virtue has two main functions. The first function is to know with certainty the principles behind natural phenomenon, secondly to guide us a proper conduct in our daily lives. The first function is that of the philosophical wisdom. Whereas, the second

function involves the practical wisdom. Practical wisdom tells us how we ought to act and how to control our desires and passions in doing it. Here he parts ways with Socrates who assumed that the reason guiding us to knowledge would ultimately help us engendering virtue. Aristotle claims that knowledge may give us understanding the phenomenon or the truth of things or principles behind things but it does not necessarily leads us to good deeds. For the inculcation of good character practical wisdom is a must.

Aristotle has show that the happiness of man lies in living a virtuous life. He further adds that philosophical wisdom is superior to practical wisdom. This is because philosophical wisdom is proximate to higher form of happiness than that of practical wisdom. Here he argues for his point of view. Firstly the philosophical wisdom leads us to continuous happiness. Secondly, it is perused as the final cause not the intermediate end. Thirdly, he states that philosophical wisdom is an activity which does not depend upon any sort of events. Thus such an activity is self sufficient. Nevertheless, virtues such as temperance and courage, in order to be practiced, need some other individual or society. Fourthly, the practical wisdom of a statesmen and a soldier are indeed virtues acts but there very nature may lead to despair and misery, whereas philosophical wisdom is not restrained by such ill feeling and experiences. So among other virtues, moral virtues, which provide happiness in human life; philosophical wisdom necessary provides the highest form of happiness.

Summary of the Aristotle philosophy of Virtue Ethics:-

Aristotle defined Virtue as a habit of choice, the characteristic of which lies in the observation of the mean or of moderation (relative to the circumstances
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of the individual concerned), as it is determined by reason or as the practically prudent man would determine it. Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics, II, VI, 15.

According to Aristotle the virtue is of secondary quality of character. It is a habit of choice. It is not a mere habit but habit of choice. Choice according to Aristotle is the deliberate desire of things in our power after consideration of them by the intellect. Moreover doing an action with the power to choose and as an act of voluntary action is regarded as virtue. Whereas the action that is undertaken once or accidentally is not virtue. Rather, the action should be done as habit of choice then it becomes a virtue. Thus the habitual performance of voluntary action is called virtue. It is a secondary quality of character.

Aristotle discusses the concept of middle or moderation. Virtue is regarded as a middle position between two vices. Courage is the middle position between rashness and cowardice. Liberality is the middle position between extravagance and miserliness. In addition the, mean course of some action is dependent on the circumstances of an individual. For example, a soldier's courage ought to be proximate to rashness then that of the courage of the statesman.

This conception of the mean was consistent with the concept of 'temperance', propounded by Plato. However, Aristotle wanted to determine with the more accuracy what a virtue ought to be. He tried to determine the limits within which each virtue must lie according to the circumstances of an individual. Like wise he tried to assign to each virtue a place of moderation

would give it between two contrary vices. Reason as much as for Plato as for Aristotle, was the characteristic of a virtuous man. For Aristotle it was through reason that enables an individual to determine the middle course between to vices according to his circumstances. Aristotle admitted that justice is a part of virtue but the whole in this he accepted Plato's view of the unity or harmony of the moral life.

According to Aristotle mean can be determined in two ways one of which is through reason and the other through the practical ability of the prudent man. The first way of evaluating the mean was consistent with the view of his predecessor namely Socrates and Plato, the former regarding through reason the highest virtue, and the later through the philosophical understanding of the guardians which needed education in logical studies.

The second way of evaluating mean is as prudent man would determine it. In this regarded Aristotle unlike Plato kept the common man in mind. The ability of the common man is not the theoretical ability of the philosopher but the practical ability of the man of experience. Furthermore, there is also the easier way of following the example of those who have learned and demonstrated their goodness in the practical experience of life. Aristotle himself demonstrated the ability of the practical prudent man as that of forming a practical syllogism as contrasted with the theoretic syllogism of the philosopher. The major premise consists in the general moral rule; however it may be determined or obtained. The minor premise consists in the recognition that a particular action is one that conforms to the general rule; and the conclusion is the carrying of the actual action. The power of apprehending the rule and particularly the power of seeing which actions

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conform to it are included by Aristotle in practical wisdom, which is the quality of the prudent man. In doing so Aristotle included in the Socratic view, virtue is knowledge, the idea that there is another and more practical kind of knowledge than the theoretic contemplation of the philosopher.