

## ARISTOTLE ON PURPOSE, HABITS AND THE MEAN

### Telos (function, purpose)

If we consider the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity of the soul in accordance with reason, and the function of a good man to be the noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate principle; if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. (NE I.7)

### The Golden Mean

That moral virtue is a mean, then, and in what sense it is so, and that it is a mean between two vices, the one involving excess, the other deficiency, and that it is such because its character is to aim at what is intermediate in passions and in actions, has been sufficiently stated. Hence also it is no easy task to be good. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle, e.g. to find the middle of a circle is not for everyone but for him who knows; so, too, anyone can get angry- that is easy- or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not for everyone, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble. (NE II.9)

Excellence of character is concerned with emotions and acts, in which there can be excess or deficiency or a mean. For example, one can be frightened or bold, feel desire or anger or pity, and experience pleasure and pain generally, either more or less than is right, and in both cases wrongly; while to have these feelings at the right time, on the right occasion, toward the right people, for the right purpose and in the right manner, is to feel the best amount of them, which is the mean amount -- and the best amount is of course the mark of excellence. Likewise, in acts there can be excess, deficiency and a mean.... Hence excellence is a mean state in the sense that it aims at the mean. (NE, 1106b, 15-29)

## **Habits**

Excellence...is a settled disposition determining choice, involving the observance of the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason, as the practically wise person would determine it. (NE, 1106a26; 1107a2)

Argument and teaching are not effective in all cases; the soul of the listener must first be conditioned by habits to the right kind of likes and dislikes, just as the land must be cultivated before it is able to bring forth the seed. For a man whose life is guided by emotion will not listen to an argument nor will he understand it. (NE1179b, 23-281)

## **Nature**

And it is clear that the rule of the soul over the body, and of the mind and the rational element over the passionate, is natural and expedient; whereas the equality of the two or the rule of the inferior is always hurtful. The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind. (Politics, Book I part V)