

# Practical Virtue



*Excellence of Character*

# Virtues of the Soul

- ❖ A happy life is a life excellently, or virtuously, lived.
- ❖ Accordingly, an account of happiness will require an account of virtue, or excellence (*aretê*) (*EN* 1102a5-7).
- ❖ In particular, virtue is an excellent expression of a rational soul (*EN* 1106a16-26).
- ❖ Two parts of the soul: one rational and one non-rational
- ❖ Consequently, 'Virtue is of two sorts, intellectual and moral' (*EN* 1103a14-16).

# Moral Virtue

- ❖ Virtue is a state of the sort which issues decisions, consisting in the mean relative to us, determined by reasoning of the right sort, that is the reason in terms of which a wise person (the *phronimos*) would determine it. It is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency (*EN* 1106b36-1107a6; cf. 1138b18-20).

# The Components of Virtue

- ❖ Virtue is a state (*hexis*) (*EN* 1105b20)
- ❖ . . .and a state which issues in decisions (*EN* 1112a14)
- ❖ . . .one determined by right reason (*orthos logos*) (*EN* 1138b18)
- ❖ This is the sort of reasoning issuing from the *phronimos* (*EN* 1140a25)
- ❖ Finally, virtue is a mean between excess and deficiency (*EN* 1107a-b), but only relative to us.

# Virtue is a State (*hexis*)

1. Virtue is either a state (*hexis*), a capacity, or a feeling.
2. Virtue is not a feeling (for people are regarded as virtuous not insofar as they feel this or that way, but rather insofar as they manifest virtue or vice).
3. Virtue is not a capacity (for we are endowed by nature with capacities and become virtuous only by exercise and habituation; in general, no-one is praised for being able to be virtuous, but rather for being virtuous).
4. Hence, virtue is a state—a *hexis*, an acquired but entrenched condition of character, achieved through guided development and habituation (*EN* 1105b20-1106a13).

# A State Issuing in Decisions

- ❖ Virtue is the sort of state which issues in decisions (*hexis prohairetikê*).
- ❖ Being in this state presupposes prior deliberation on our part (*EN* 1112a14-16).
- ❖ This is not to suggest that virtuous conduct requires deliberation immediately preceding action.
- ❖ Rather, virtuous action flows directly from an entrenched state.
- ❖ A virtuous state is one which, having been guided by deliberation in its inculcation, is the sort which eventuates in decisive action.

# Reasoning of the Right Sort

- ❖ This is reasoning that can eventuate in a general direction for human conduct, though not in a fine-grained or determinate rule for all situations (cf. *EN* 1138b18-1140b24).

# The Sort the *Phronimos* would Employ

- ❖ This is an intelligent person, or person of understanding or practical wisdom (*phronimos*).
- ❖ Such a person is able to grasp what is in fact true about what is good or bad for a human being, and so will not be liable to imprudent confusions on this score.
- ❖ The intelligent person does not *determine* what is right.
  - ❖ Rather, the intelligent person characteristically *recognizes* what is right.
    - ❖ It is sensible to follow his lead (*EN* 1140a25-b6).

# Residing in a Mean

- ❖ Virtue is a *mean* (*mesotês*) between extremes.
- ❖ But only relative to us:
  - ❖ In every action, an agent must look to herself and her context in making a determination of how to act
  - ❖ In proceeding this way, it would be wrong to rely upon a purely quantitative formula.
    - ❖ Where rashness and cowardice are the excess and the deficiency, courage is the mean;
    - ❖ Between self-indulgence and self-deprivation, moderation is the mean;
    - ❖ Where great sums of money are controlled, between the excesses of ostentation and stinginess lies the mean of magnificence;
    - ❖ But where smaller sums are concerned, between wastefulness and stinginess lies generosity (*EN* 1107a32-1108a31).

# Better and Worse Humans (*EN* vii 1)

- ❖ The *phronimos*: the person of complete practical virtue
- ❖ The continent person: one who abides by rational calculation
- ❖ The *akratic* or incontinent person: knowingly does base actions, because of feelings
- ❖ The vicious or rotten person: probably irredeemable