

The Greek Concept of Virtue

Let us begin by looking in a general way at the ancient Greek conception of virtue and morality. Although the various authors we will consider differ considerably in their views about morality, there are a number of core assumptions which they all shared, and within which their views evolved. Many of the assumptions and the debates will be familiar to us; they concern the foundations of moral motivation (why be moral?), the basis for moral obligation (by what authority does morality make demands on us?), and moral epistemology (how do we know what is right or wrong? Can virtue be taught?).

The Greek word for virtue is 'ARETE'. For the Greeks, the notion of virtue is tied to the notion of function (ERGON). The virtues of something are what enable it to perform excellently its proper function. Virtue (or arete) extends beyond the realm of morality; it concerns the excellent performance of any function. For example the function of a paring knife is to cut fruits and vegetables. A paring knife "has virtues" relative to that function, eg., a good paring knife has the virtue of being sharp, strong, etc. From this it appears that our own broad idea of virtue retains the Greek suggestion that virtue is excellence in performing one's proper function.

In keeping with this broad conception of virtue, human virtue is that which enables a human being to perform well or excellently the proper function of a human being. We may find it odd to speak of the proper goal or function of a human being; what is the function of human beings? The function of something is linked to what it can do *especially well*, or what *only it* can do. For humans, to put the point broadly, this is to live a human life. So the function of a human being is to live well or excellently the life that we have. Since to live well is to be happy, one's virtue is what enables one to lead a happy life.

So, on the Greek conception of virtue, a virtuous person is one who has the ability to live excellently, ie., to live a full, productive, and happy human life. Moral goodness is a kind of functional goodness: goodness relative to our proper purpose or function. This is only a schematic model and must be filled in by further discussion of what constitutes a distinctively human life, and distinctively human excellence.

Happiness is not only the product of well-living, but it is also what we naturally pursue. We have as our function a well-lived life, and we are naturally motivated to pursue such a life; this is a life of happiness. In short, happiness is our TELOS, ie., our goal or aim. On the Greek approach to ethics what is morally right for an agent must contribute to the agent's happiness, for the moral goodness of our actions is necessarily connected to living well. On this view, one can always characterize what is morally right in a way which reveals it as conducive to the agent's good, or self-interest. (This need not mean that all morality is narrowly self-centered, for it may be essential to my happiness and the goodness of my life that I am able to care for others.)

During Socrates' lifetime, it was usually assumed that there are five cardinal virtues: wisdom, moderation/temperance, bravery, justice, piety. Popular belief had it that one could

have one of these virtues without having the rest. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle believed, however, that the virtues are inseparable; if you have one you have them all.

The point of these virtues is that each enables one to perform well in a particular sphere of life, and the virtues together enable one to live a good life as a whole. Bravery enables one to perform well in situations of danger; justice enables one to carry out successfully one's dealings with the others in a community; having all of the virtues enables one to perform excellently in all aspects of life. Truly living well requires that one have all of the virtues; complete virtue is the key to happiness (EUDAIMONIA).

There are two problems we shall have to address in coming to understand this conception of virtue:

1. Morality requires that we be just. To be just is to honor the claims of others in considering potential conflicts. In some cases, honoring the claims of others will clearly be against one's self-interest. How do we reconcile the claim that justice is a virtue and so (necessarily) leads to my happiness, with the seemingly undeniable fact that sometimes the unjust person who does not treat others fairly ends up happier? (Eg., won't an unjust person who gets more than a fair share of the pie be happier than they would be if the pie were divided fairly?)
2. If all morality is in our self-interest (because morality necessarily promotes our happiness), and we are naturally motivated to act in our own self-interest, why is it that sometimes we perform actions we know to be morally wrong? In other words, how is possible that sometimes we know the right thing to do, and yet go ahead and do the wrong thing? This is known as the problem of AKRASIA or "weakness of will".