FEATURE ARTICLE

Virtue in All We Do: Aristotelian Insight into Character Development and the Air Force's Core Values

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ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates how Aristotle's political and ethical thought serves as a unique lens to understand character development and the Air Force's core values. This article first moves to show that because the moral lapses occurring in the Air Force were seeen as stemming from character flaws, a program of character development like Aristotle's would offer ideas superior to value-systems that emphasize rule following. This essay then looks to Aristotle to provide conceptual content for the ideas of character, character development, and each of the Air Force core values of integrity, service before self, and excellence—which also translates from the Greek as "virtue"—in all we do.

Keywords: Character Development, Aristotle, Virtue, Core Values, Phronesis

Introduction

The Air Force's core values have their roots in the project of one particularly sharp pupil who arrived at the Academy at the age of 17. He not only would go onto become a respected instructor and prolific author, publishing extensively on ethics, excellence in all human endeavors, and character development but also would be the principal mentor

to one of the most famous military leaders the world has known. More than that, the ripples of his influence would be felt outside the Academy and contribute to ongoing dialogues in virtually all subjects, from botonny to business ethics. That Academy was Plato's Academy, and the student, Aristotle. Though the Air Force core values were undoubtedly shaped by many thinkers, the influence and echoes of Aristotle clearly resound within them. This article aims to uncover how Aristotle's distinctive thought lends a deeper and richer understanding to the Air Force's core values in particular and character development more broadly.

The first section of this essay addresses the historic question of how the core values emerged as the answer to certain misguided ideas that were taking root in parts of the Air Force. It addresses how, since the problems went beyond individuals not following rules, Aristotle's character-centric ethic commends itself above other programs as the way to heal the ailment, by building a strong character in those who follow rules. The second section elucidates the stages of Aristotle's program of character development, tracing how the learner grows from having good habits to having an understanding of theories of goodness which habits express. The final section attends to each of the particular core values to demonstrate the theoretical moorings Aristotle's program provides them.

Diagnosing a Dysfunction

In Book Eight of his *Politics*, Aristotle warned that an institution erodes when it neglects virtue cultivation in its members (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2007).[1] Breakdowns in social structure, prioritizing selfish interests over community interests, and the eventual inability to accomplish its institutional goals would inevitably ensue. Comparing institutions to living creatures, the Athenian warned that as vicious values replace virtuous ones, deformation and

degradation of the institution would set in much like unhealthy habits that lead to a diseased body. Without healthy habits, functionality erodes; collapse follows.

Discerning dysfunction is relatively easy. For Aristotle, something is identified as dysfunctional when it fails to realize its unique purpose. Conversely, it performs with excellence when it achieves its purposes well. An unhealthy body cannot think and act with excellence. Analogously, an organization aimed at prevailing in its nation's conflicts cannot achieve its purpose without a high degree of readiness. Viewed in these terms, the Air Force of the early 1990s was plagued. An increasingly palatable ailment had grown in the military branch in the waning years of the Cold War. Tragedy and scandal had forced leadership to take pause and prompted focused reflection on organizational culture, ethical leadership, and what principles garnered praise and promotion amongst its members.

In many units, being humble and approachable brought scorn, not praise. The Air Force appeared to reward hubris, not competence and approachability. The noxious environment fostered events like Lieutenant Colonel Arthur "Bud" Holland's vainglorious stunt at Fairchild Air Force Base in June of 1994, a feat that took four lives and destroyed a B-52 Stratofortress. The event was part of a pattern. There was the friendly fire episode that took place on the Iraqi border 2 months earlier, stealing away 26 lives (Hoover, 2017). Then, there was the crash of a CT-43 in Europe where 35 people including that of Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown died, a crash that occurred in airspace that should never have been entered in the first place.

These were more than professional lapses; they stemmed in no small measure from the professional personas of the Airmen involved and a culture that enabled those traits to both exist and thrive. What grew increasingly apparent was that these failures were not one-offs. They had evolved from and were magnifications of

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1   Citations from Aristotle's will be denoted by a P when from his *Politics*, N when from *Nichomachean Ethics*, and EE when from the *Eudemian Ethics*. The Bekker number will follow when appropriate.

character attributes that the Air Force's culture esteemed, even revered. But they were corrupting the institution's health.

Drawn into question was if the linchpin of operational effectiveness was the Air Force's high-tech platforms or its people. Multi-million-dollar aircraft were destroyed not because of maintenance or manufacturing glitches but because of breeches in character. Finally, the root issue came into focus: mission effectiveness begins with the Air Force's most crucial assets, Airmen. The organization would stand or fall with their values, what they esteemed, when they would stay quiet, when they paused operations, and the kind of people they promoted. The malady called for a sustained focus on core values.

To address both these broader Air Force issues and its particular struggles, the Air Force Academy first instituted in 1994 what a year later the Air Force as a whole would adopt as its core values: "Integrity first, Service before self, Excellence in all we do." The trinity of ideals did not emerge out of an ethical or theoretical vacuum.[2] Among the voices that may be heard in these values, it is the Stagirite's, Aristotle's, that are of primary interest here. If we listen for his voice in these values, we find Aristotle's advice for organizational healing and thriving, a regimen focusing on virtue and character development.

The Salve of Character, and What Rule-Following Leaves Out

The virtue-based approach to character development provides a unique and fitting paradigm for the military profession. Perhaps no philosopher attends to the topic of character and character development more than Aristotle. While other ethicists have concentrated their energies on what makes something right or wrong, or what the rules of ethical action are, Aristotle saw that exclusively focusing on rules falls short at critical points. For one, we regularly find ourselves in situations where a rule has not been clearly outlined. Should I act or remain silent now? Should I study this weekend or spend time with family? Should money be spent on improvements or leisure? Rules and laws are important, indispensable even, but incomplete as an ethical system. In many situations, there simply are no rules available.

Additionally, ethical decision-making cannot be likened to deciding which checklist to run. Not only are circumstances ever in flux, but being ethical is fundamentally different than following a checklist. Even if a relevant rule was identified, the agent who acts still needs the resolve to follow the rule. We often know the rule that needs to be followed but lack the ethical resolve to pursue it. A robust ethical program needs to give insight into how our resolve to act becomes fortified. Rule-based ethical systems leave a void at another point as well. When the rule is followed, the agent ought to follow it for the right reason. Aristotle's virtue-based approach, as we will see, will attend to these reasons. Good people decide and act from a stable and upright disposition; they do the right thing with the right reasons. Character and its formation, Aristotle surmised, has to go beyond the intellectual and legal exercise of rule identification. The student of Plato would delve deeper into how ethical formation takes place and offer a more accurate picture of how it should take place.

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2 Circumstantial evidence suggests that philosophical content was present when the values were first adopted. Though the faculty at the Air Force Academy had long promoted its slogan of "Commitment to Excellence in Service to Country" (Discovery, 1984, p. 3), and elements like the class of 1991's motto *semper integritatas* (integrity always) were surely present at USAFA in the early 1990's, the fingerprints of Brigadier General (retired) Malkin Wakin's Philosophy Department can also be detected at the time of the adoption. Lieutenant Colonel Pat Tower, who had been in the department for some years, co-authored the inaugural document explaining the core values to the Air Force, the "Air Force Core Values Guru's Guide." Wakin, a founding member of the Joint Services Conference on Professional Ethics (JSCOPE), invited the Secretary of the Air Force to give its keynote address in 1995, where she expressed an admiration for the Academy's values (Tower & Dunford, n.d., p. 8). He was also consulted by the Secretary in May of 1995 as she considered their adoption for the Air Force as a whole (Bowden, 2016).

Long before Kant, Aquinas, or Aristotle understood that a person's moral identity and their character are inseparable. We are what we habitually do, say, feel, and think. Character constrains the kinds of choices we might make, the feelings we have, the things we are willing to do, and even the thoughts we have. Opposing the idea that with each decision every possible choice is open, Aristotle saw that the well-worn grooves of many past decisions serve to aid, inform, and limit the kind of decisions we make going forward. Veering outside of these lanes becomes increasingly less likely, so where there is an upright character, ethical temptations become less salient. Someone refuses to take a bribe, to abuse funds, or to have another drink because that is just not the type of person they are. Malham Wakin summarizes, "For Aristotle, it was very important that we develop the moral virtues through habit and practice, doing right actions so that they become part of our identity—our character" (2000, p. 115). The deepest of grooves of our way of life are rightly thought of as our second nature. Second nature, because these grooves are not innate; they become incorporated into who we are over time. We grow ethically by practice; with each new situation, we can strengthen the skill of perceiving circumstances and responding with the actions called for in that particular circumstance.

Character-focused ethics carries the discussion beyond focusing just on the duty of rule-following. One way it goes further is by delving into the reasons actions ought to be done. Performing duties out of an understanding and affection for the reasons that underly the particular duty—ethical, operational, or strategic reasons—differentiates thoughtfully-engaged people from mere rule followers. A deeper ethical theory looks for the good which a particular rule might encapsulate. As philosopher Charles Pfaff has pointed out, "A virtuous person is more concerned with being the kind of person that does the right thing at the right time and in the right way and not as much on the act itself" (1998). People of character see the good in a rule, but even where there are no rules, they do the right thing *because* they understand it is the right thing to do.

An ethic that focuses on character is particularly fitting for members of a profession. Robert Kennedy delineates between trades, which tend to center on highly precise and repeatable processes, and the professions, whose members regularly find themselves in conditions of uncertainty (2000). Because of persistent uncertainty, professionals must be able to connect and apply broad ethical and operational goods and principles to constantly changing situations. With a profession, many times there are no off-the-shelf checklists pointing to an exact rule to be followed. Instead, the professional comes to know an array of theoretical and ethical principles through a robust liberal education, and the professional has the trait of applying these principles in the right way. If Kennedy is right when he argues, "The unique and indispensable characteristic of a professional is the ability to exercise sound and reasonable judgment about important matters in conditions of uncertainty" (2000), then the mere knowledge of rules will fall short of ensuring sound judgments are made. Professionals need to know the good that is to be pursued in a situation and have a disposition to pursue it. A character-focused ethic fits the need. It goes beyond ensuring people just know lists of equations, regulations, ethical principles, or checklists to run. It focuses also on ensuring its members act from the known and habitually employed principles that define their character.[3]

The Air Force's emphasis on mission command pushes the service to this character-focused ethic. *Air Force Doctrine Publication-1* lists mission command as a tenet of Airpower, explaining that mission command empowers subordinates, allows for their flexibility and initiative,

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3 Aristotle makes this point when he writes that, beyond just doing the right act, "the agent must also be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character" (N, 1105a30ff).

and in doing so, requires them to have character. "Mission command," the publication reads, "provides Airmen operating in environments of increasing uncertainty, complexity, and rapid change with the freedom of action needed to exploit emergent opportunities and succeed" (USAF, 2021). The mark of a profession is inherent in the Air Force's mission—decision-making in often-changing conditions. But Kennedy warns that uncoupled from ethical-mindedness, the demand for efficiency and effectiveness out prioritize ethical demands, and this would lead to moral disaster. Airmen without moral insight are directionless, and therefore dangerous (Kennedy, 2000). Aristotle's insight for the professional Airman, as with any professional, attends to developing an uncompromising character in its constituents, and Aristotle was not silent on how this development happens.

Training, Education, and the Stages of Character Development

Character formation and character transformation occur slowly. It is nothing less than the re-forming of a person's second nature, those aspects that we speak of when describing the type of person someone is. Over time, we will have attained a virtuous nature when our thoughts, emotions, and conduct emerge with a measure of spontaneity. The less we have to concentrate on overcoming pain, awkwardness, or temptation, the more we freely and naturally accomplish a feat. That is, when our manner of life is *a* spontaneous manifestation of our thoughts, emotions, and sincerely held values, not merely a simple conformity to external rules, we express our nature. The Athenian philosopher suggests that to the extent we dependably think, act, and have ethically upright emotions, we have gained a virtuous nature. If, on the other hand, there exists a real chance that we lapse at a crossroads, the integrity of our character is still deficient and requires more development.

Aristotle attends to the question of how character develops in his writings on politics and writings on ethics. Ethics is very much a political question. "A city can

be virtuous only when the citizens who have a share in the government are virtuous," he writes. Adding, "and in our state all the citizens share in the government" (P, 1332a32-34). Since individuals cannot develop well without a virtuous city, the ethos of the city and of the individual are linked. What citizens should value, what they should shun, and what education they should receive are of political importance. Those who structure curriculum must have a clear conception of a virtuous citizen, individual goodness, corporate goodness, and how character formation takes place. The Greek philosopher's unique contribution pressed this last issue beyond his predecessor. Disagreeing with his mentor Plato, Aristotle submitted that a character-forming program cannot divorce education from training.

Where Plato contended that merely possessing knowledge sufficed to move a person to action, Aristotle discerned that intellectualism often stagnates and fails. Frequently, we intellectually grasp the right thing to do, but we still are not able or moved to do it. Reading about playing an instrument cannot make us a virtuoso. Until knowledge fuses to our nature in the requisite way, actions may not follow. In those with moral character, a well-worn track record of doing right will accompany the mental awareness of what is right. Repeated performance begins to seal knowledge into our nature, so along with education, with mental commitment and an intellectual understanding of relevant principles, training builds the habits of proper character. Education must be married to continuous practice. This process might be likened to the building of a person's muscle memory. Moving and performing rightly enables us to act with increasing ease. As in sports, our second nature arises when we repeatedly engage the intellect in the diversity of situations that confront us, taking account of all the factors on the field, and willing ourselves to act accordingly.

Aristotle's more detailed explanation of the shaping of character takes into account the stages of our physical

and intellectual growth. While the three stages overlap, they are critical to understanding Aristotle's theory of developing excellence. Habit <*ethos*> formation occurs first followed by the development of practical intelligence <*phronesis*>, and finally, we acquire full virtue when we possess an understanding <*noesis*> of the most general principles of human flourishing. Attending to the nuance in each of these sheds light on his pedagogical program.

Stage 1: Virtues of Habit
Our ethical development requires at its foundation the formation of good habits, what Aristotle refers to as *ethos*. Well known for his "golden mean," Aristotle suggests that good habits lie at a point of excellence, a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency. He recognizes that we all have certain predispositions to react to certain situations, but virtuous exemplars consistently hit the mean because they are disposed to reasoned reflection and willingly act in the right way, at the right time, with the right emotion. Their consistent action becomes habit, and habit resides at the foundation of character.

Migrating from one set of habits to another requires time, practice, and principled thinking that may sometimes feel foreign. It takes discipline and consistency, but over time, the formation of new habits makes the old ones obsolete. The new skill set becomes a second nature. With good habits, an exemplary moral character begins. A new personal identity emerges.

Aristotle realizes that at this early stage, role models play a critical function in helping us find where the mean lies. Language and its use also reveal much, and the intellect aids our knowledge of the mean even at this stage, but exemplars, those well-versed in a particular area demonstrate the mean to learners (N, 1107a2). Exemplars help us to definitively discern the point of excellence by explaining, correcting, and rewarding excellent work. Good habits emerge through this close-to-hand feedback. We read: "We must attend, then, to the undemonstrated remarks and beliefs of experienced and older people or of intelligent people, no less than to demonstrations. For these people see correctly because experience has given them their eye" (N, 1143b11-14).

In shadowing exemplars, our actions and thoughts move forward on the character-development path. The apprenticeship model of development finds Aristotle as a strong proponent so long as it is remembered that the purpose of apprenticeships is to move learners to the point where they grasp and apply the principle involved on their own. The apprentice follows the example of the craftsman to learn these principles. As we gain aptitude, the passive aspect of our nature, things like observing and copying, has primacy, but it recedes as the active aspects advance, deciding for ourselves the right way to act in a situation. Novices must learn by first being impressed upon so they may later take the reins of leadership.

Just as we learn language before being taught the rules of grammar, character formation begins as our parents, friends, mentors, and communities forge particular patterns of behavior in us. The later we wait to form ethical patterns of behavior, the harder they are to become impressed in us. Aristotle writes the habits formed in youths are "all important" (N, 1103b25). He lists many of the individual virtues that require cultivation—courage, temperance, generosity, wittiness, friendship, and modesty. Along with these, he traces the associated vices, what an excess or deficiency in the action or feeling would look like. It falls to teachers, mentors, and coaches to aid the forming of right habits and feelings in the impressionable by cultivating the virtue and curbing the vice.

The development of *ethos* is not limited to the actions of an apprentice. The forming of emotions, feelings, and pleasures toward and in response to the world also takes shape at this early stage of development. If we are to be

ethical over the long term, what we enjoy must be properly cultivated (Burnyeat, 1980). Those who become habituated in taking pleasure in the true, the beautiful, and the good (N, 1099a13-15, 1104b3-13) will be less apt to be captivated by the unethical lures of the convenient, hedonistic, or self-indulgent. Training the student to listen and to enjoy ideas, to appreciate beauty, and to desire justice not only prepares them to prize the ethical over the expedient but also binds the ethical to an inner drive, the pursuit of happiness.

Earlier, Aristotle was depicted as a critic of rule-following as an overarching ethic. While this is true of his overall ethical system, in the habit-forming stage of character development, rule-following has an important place. Memorizing lists in an effort to develop character is often critical. Apprenticeships, shadowing exemplars, continued practice, and the recitation of facts work to produce character through habituation. As Aristotle writes in his *Politics*, "For he would learn to command well must, as men say, first of all learn to obey." (1333a2).

In her chapter aptly entitled "The Habituation of Character," ethicist Nancy Sherman points out that Aristotle pushes for what she calls a participatory model even at this first stage. When we memorize or perform particular actions, we are still mentally engaged, attuned to the reason inherent in the actions (Sherman, 1989, p. 162). Memorization, training, focused ethical and technical education, and repeated demonstration engage the mind. It is not passive even in these acts. Aristotle would remind us that it "listens to reason" and assesses the reasons expressed in the activity (N, 1102b32). Dialogical followership, in which the student asks and gets questions answered from an exemplar, allows these acts to penetrate even deeper. Dialogue ensures the always-engaged intellect begins to grasp why actions are performed in a certain way.

As we practice and come to gain habits, we come to recognize the good reflected in many acts through a range of contexts. Seeing an exemplar act in diverse settings develops sensitivities to the unique situational factors; it allows the student insight into how the dynamic factors relate to the constant principles that the exemplar expresses.[4] In turn, as learners become more and more sensitive to the specifics of the situation, they repeatedly engage their will to enact principle correctly, through the right action, and in this way their character strengthens.

As we develop, our identity, which is to say our character, increasingly constrains what options are really open to us. Someone used to acting courageously will find it quite hard to not act courageously. Our nature assimilates repeated thoughts, acts, or emotions. But this can work in two ways. While everyone has a character, not everyone is of high moral caliber. Not all habits are good habits. The villain has deeply infused habits; vicious words and acts can emerge spontaneously from consistent ways of acting, responding, and thinking. The formation of an upright character, on the other hand, requires the hammering, chiseling, and sanding off of poor habits, vicious emotions, and unreasoned thinking by substituting them with good ones. Because we are often ensnared by old habits, the process of acquiring a virtuous character is fraught with challenges. To ensure the vestiges of poor old habits do not reemerge, proper ones must be actively and consistently cultivated.

Stage 2: Developing the Practical Intellect
Aristotle begins with the virtues of character, those acquired through habit, but he addresses another stage

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4 Aristotle is undeniably and ethical objectivist, and this is fully consistent with his program of casuistry. There are objective solutions and principles which exist. The virtuous agent must remain sensitive to the situationally unique details and make judgments about how to apply these principles despite the changing circumstance. Connecting a lesson learned from history to a contemporary context requires a keen intellect and creativity. A virtuous person will always act *kata ton orthon logon*, according to right reason (N, 1138b25). Right reason correctly judges the circumstances and sees how principles apply to the uniqueness of the situation.

in our ethical developing, acquiring intellectual virtue or *phronesis*. Phronesis describes the capacity of a person to judge and apply principles to the ever-varying circumstances of everyday life. Discerning the environment and responding appropriately could be described as practical wisdom, but these words sometimes carry connotations of stagnant reflection, pompousness, and inactivity, so many have instead translated *phroenesis* as practical intelligence. Aristotle's idea is that the person with practical intelligence consistently engages their experience-informed principles in matters of practical importance. To have practical intelligence is to be a competent, engaged expert.

As we saw earlier, the choice of doing right, even if we habitually do so, involves the will, and the will is informed by our practical intelligence. If we are to identify *right* habits, practical intelligence is indispensable. On this point, Aristotle speaks with clarity: "We cannot be fully good without intelligence" (N, 1145a33). Acting rightly requires discernment. Through watching, practicing, and listening, the habituated person's practical intellect grows. As apprentices grow into masters, practical intelligence flourishes.

Those with practical intelligence can discern what "right" amounts to in a myriad of situations. Their excellent actions will be done "at the right times, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way" (N, 1106a21-24). The right speed to drive, right time to speak, and the right amount to drink will vary by situation. The actions and habits of those with practical intelligence will form along the lines of right reason, at the point of excellence. Excellence will come to be a mark of their character, a description of the kind of person they are.

Some may mistakenly think that Aristotle is a relativist because he believes what is right is relative to the specifics of the situation. This is hardly the case. Aristotle is quite clear that it is never right to perform some

actions—they are by definition extremes; attending to the specifics of each situation ensures a right response. If, for instance, you need to get to the Emergency Room with haste, breaking the speed limit might be in order. Wielding a weapon is fitting for some circumstances and not for others. There are objective answers, and those with practical intelligence discern and act correctly in them (N, 1107a6).

Translating and employing principles requires an intellect sensitive to the dynamics of the situation, including the limitations arising from our physical capacities. Our bodies and our capabilities are part of the circumstance. Internal, external, personal, and interpersonal factors inform each unique opportunity to act. Those who have mastered practical intelligence are able to consistently discern the mean way to act with excellence and have themselves grown fit to be exemplars for others (1106b3).

Stage 3: Understanding the Principles of Action
In the last phase of character development, learners come to understand <*noesis*> the origins of the principles of practical intelligence. Those with practical intellect will know the right thing to do and do it with the right aim. They may yet lack an important element. Without insight into why their aims are actually the right ones, they appear to have luckily blundered into what is right. Even while the actions of warriors on either side of a conflict may appear similar in many regards, in the final analysis, we do not say they are moral equals when one fights for a side conducting a just war and the other fights to seize more territory.

Externally, the actions of the person without understanding may appear just the same as those who know *why* their actions are exemplary (Rorty, 1980, p. 350). Actions and conduct must serve as the barometer of a person's character for the outside observer. But knowing why a person acts the way they do makes all the ethical difference, and the person who fully embodies excel-

lence is the person with understanding, the person who understands and acts on right principles.[5]

These principles (which Aristotle spends little time exploring with Nichomachus, his son and namesake of his ethical text) are the origins of virtue (1095a31-35, 1139b27-30). While not everyone will venture into this contemplative arena to understand these origins, the leaders of a just and virtuous society, with its political structure and aims, will rear their constituents in light of these origins. The habits cultivated in the learners, well before they could possibly grasp "the why" of their acts, flourish because of the understanding of the guardians of the city (N, 1095b4-8).

If no one in an organization understands the basis of the principles being acted on, the organization and its individuals are a danger. The organization and its people would be detached from the moorings which give them ethical value, meaning, and significance. In that case, moral terms are emptied of their meaning and easily become weaponized to achieve any subjective end of their wielders. Aristotle uses the metaphor of a stumbling person to describe those who lack an understanding of their truth. Virtue without understanding is compared to a blind, staggering heavy person. They are a hazard to themselves and to others (N, 1144b9). The conclusion he offers is critical: "If someone acquires understanding *<nous>*, he improves his actions; and the state he now has, though similar, will be virtue *<arete>* to the full extent" (N, 1144b11-13). For Aristotle, the most complete person and leader will need to explore and grasp the first principles of ethical behavior.

Integrity of Character

Greek thought pours helpful conceptual content into each core value. The first of these, integrity, which encapsulates large swathes of Aristotle's thought, moves

well beyond simply telling the truth. While truthfulness is a particular virtue, integrity captures a personal disposition of possessing solid ethical principles and holding fast to them regardless of external pressures. In this sense, integrity closely parallels an architectural usage. When a bridge has integrity, it will not break under massive loads of weight, will not fail, or falter under pressure. It holds true to its purposes and principles.

An observation made by architect Frank Lloyd Wright captures how Aristotle might think of personal integrity. Comparing a home to an individual, the icon wrote:

> "In speaking of integrity and architecture, I mean much the same thing that you would mean were you speaking of an individual. Integrity is not something to be put on and taken off like a garment. Integrity is a quality *within* and *of* the man himself. So it is in a building. It cannot be changed by any other person either, nor by the exterior pressures of any outward circumstance; integrity cannot change except from within because it is that in you which *is you*—And due to which you will try to live your life (as you would build your building) in the best possible way." (Wright, 2010, p. 349)

Like a building, solid principles must come to be part of who we are. Integrity cannot be coerced. The deepest, defining convictions finally set in when we are rationally convinced that that our disposition to act in a certain way is how we want ourselves to be defined.

Aristotle would depict the idea of integrity as being the product of a number of characteristics. We find his discussion in the context of his portrayal of a person of fine actions (N, 1105A30). First, he writes that this individual knows what they are doing is actually right. They do not mindlessly or fortuitously produce right actions (N, 1105a23); their intellect and understanding are engaged. They have been educated in what is fine,

honorable, and worthy of being pursued. In the terms of the earlier discussion, they express *phronesis.*

Second, the person of integrity performs the act with the right motive. We would not say that someone has integrity if we learn their apparent action was performed with duplicitous purposes. Aristotle was no consequentialist. Intentions matter. Intentions, if we knew them, inform our moral assessment of the actor. Character is not merely the ledger of acts performed; having a morally upright character will saturate why the acts are done (EE, 1228a2). A person of integrity will act for the right reasons.

A third criterion reveals that only actions done from a "firm and unchanging state" are properly those of a person of integrity (N, 1105a34). Every person of integrity must have deep convictions. Not having convictions undercuts the very possibility of integrity. How could a person have integrity and act from a firm and an unchanging state if they have no values and no principles to hold fast to? Integrity wards off superficiality and shallowness. Those who have it do not adjust their character with each new fad. Convictions endure. Acting with uprightness requires both being principled and acting on those principles. Aristotle views character as a state, not a fleeting feeling, capacity, or a temporarily expressed value. For a person of integrity, it is in their nature to act in a certain manner. John Burnet helpfully summarizes by pointing out that our ethical actions will be the manifestation of a constant character, not an isolated effort (1900, p. 87). Integrity binds our actions to *the enduring state* of our character, uniting who we are with what we do.

Strong ethical theories explain why ethical failures occur. Aristotle's virtue ethics shines a light on this topic as well. As was seen, one way to fail is to have no moral principles. Another way is to not know ethical principles. Still others fail because they have no convictions about ethical truths. Aristotle was particularly inter-ested in the scenarios where we have and know principles and have convictions, but we become overwhelmed by other desires. A lapse occurs. In the sixth chapter of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he calls this the vice of *akrasia*, the opposite of integrity. *Akrasia* could be understood as being weak willed, failing to have self-mastery, or being incontinent. It describes the person who fails to act on the good, even if they know it, a person without integrity.

When we set out to act in a certain way but are drawn away from our commitments, the unity in our purposes and commitments fractures. We want to eat healthy, but we cannot resist another helping of butter pecan ice cream. Conflicting desires leave us prone to breaches of integrity. If not quelled, appetites, passions, and impatience may become distracting sirens, drawing us away from what sound reason and known truths otherwise suggest.

Habituating right habits is pivotal to internalizing ethical principles, growing integrity. At that point, temptations that otherwise would loom large fail to have their allure. We saw above that habituating the right desires early in life helps to ensure we pursue the good over the expedient.

Aristotle is aware that external factors may threaten integrity as well (N, 1099b). When a noxious culture adds to the chorus of distractions, even leaders with uncompromising integrity will be tested. Preventative measures help to subdue distractions. Accountability plans, oversights, and mentors help us retain our integrity. They prevent certain voices from influencing us so our integrity remains fully intact.

Importantly, Aristotle recognized that integrity is praiseworthy *only insofar as someone possesses upright beliefs*. To arrive at these, we must be willing to relinquish ill-informed and unjust principles. As Lynn McFall has pointed out, we cannot be people of integ-

rity if we hold to flawed principles (Mcfall, 1987). We must be willing to discard beliefs that are ill-founded, and by good argumentation and by having exemplars point us rightly, we can and do arrive at right principles of action (N, 1146a20). This again requires a balance. We must hold fast to particular well-grounded convictions while adjusting our less-informed ones in light of more solid reasoning. Greg Scherkoske notes that this is another instance of Aristotle's mean between an excess and a deficiency (2020). If we think too highly or too lowly of ourselves, we will not yield to right reason.

Having integrity means that we maintain our noble principles amidst the most pressing situations, those with loud distractions or those when no one is looking. When these noble principles are our deepest convictions, they come to be descriptions of the unique individuals that we are. Our personal identity becomes inseparable from these abiding convictions. Because they are not easily supplanted by the latest fad, the resiliency of these convictions is synonymous with integrity. In summary, to the degree that a person holds fast to a set of right moral principles, ideals, and rules in their actions, words, and thoughts, they are not just resilient, steadfast, and dependable; they have integrity.

Community Before Self

The second core value also has a solid backing in Aristotle's thought. For the father of Nichomachus, the good of the self-rests on the good of the community (P, 1253a20; N, 1094b8). He sees that we are everywhere dependent on a community. Individuals, like their particular wants and desires, while having potential value, presuppose a greater whole, a societal infrastructure, and a community without which an individual could not hope to thrive (N, 1094b7-10). If we want to realize potential and live the good life, we need a good society. Individuals are dependent beings. Unlike a community, we as individuals are not self-sufficient. Language, commerce, parents, political arrangements, security,

and sustenance precede the self. Individuals thrive only when these institutional arrangements are well ordered. Their proper functioning, Aristotle concludes, comes before self.

The philosopher did not argue that service to any institution would do. Rather, the virtuous person looks to serve an ethical political society, prioritizing it over their own comfort. A person is a *politikon zoon*, a political animal (P, 1253a; N, 1097b11). We are not monads, isolated from the well-being of the community. Individuals cannot separate their individual identity from the life of the community. Severed from the community, individuals fail to flourish. Serving the community protects the goods that individuals hold dear—certain freedoms, security, and personal property.

Serving these institutions, protecting them, and fostering their betterment preserve and promote one's own interests in turn. We value our security, expressing our voice and seeing our families thrive. Our social relationships are part of what we as individuals hold most dearly. When they are not present or thriving, we do not thrive. Service to the community makes pursuing self-interest possible.

Not everyone is equally fit to protect the community. Like Plato, Aristotle saw that the responsibility to guide and guard the community and to develop it along the right path would fall to a subset of the population. This group would need to be more than just habituated in virtue. They need to have progressed through all stages of character development. Their knowledge and understanding of goodness, their knowledge of which ends should be pursued and avoided, and their understanding of prudential, ethical, and efficient means of reaching those ends are vital to the society's flourishing. Possessing integrity, their positions as guardians, servants, and guides of the city would not be used or abused for personal gain, private interest, or to indulge a self-serving desire. Plato, and Aristotle after him, designated this class "guardians."

Those fit to lead the community must not only perceive how to efficiently pursue the goals of the community; they must know which goods to pursue.

Virtue in All We Do

Ethicists classify Aristotle's moral philosophy as virtue ethics, but it could equally be classified as excellence ethics. This is because the Greek word *arête* translates as either "excellence" or as "virtue." What it means to be virtuous is no more mysterious to the Greek mind than what it means to be excellent. Straightforwardly, identifying a virtuous example begins with identifying excellence in a unique function, characteristic, or activity. We might, for instance, observe that the virtue of a dog is to follow commands. Of an eye, it is to see. An ax, to chop. When something or someone fully expresses its unique function or characteristics, it is an excellent example of its kind. Only the most excellent canines win the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show. Eyes function excellently when they see with 20/20 vision. Or an ax that is heavy, sharp, and cuts deeply into wood with a single strike is called an excellent ax. These are virtuous because they are exemplars of their unique kind, performing their unique function virtuously. Aristotle moves forward with the question that marks off ethics as its own field of study: what is the unique function of a human being?[6]

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre comments that for Aristotle, human excellence would be having dispositions to act and feel on the basis of true and rational judgment (1981, p. 140). These judgments are involved in both everyday and monumental decisions. The virtuous person correctly identifies the goal to be pursued, sees the many factors that will affect the path to that goal, and makes the right judgment regarding the means

to achieve the goal. Those who make the right decision at the right time and place, and in the right way, hit the point of excellence. Those with excellent character consistently act, think, and have the right emotions which fit the context they find themselves in. When we become exemplars of our characteristically unique function, actively and consistently applying right reason to the variety of situations in our life, and understand why the good involved ought to be pursued, we express and exemplify excellence, virtue in all we do.

Conclusion

Aristotle's ethic, with its emphasis on character development, resonates and even amplifies through the corridor of time. The need for an unwavering character among its members became apparent early in the Air Force's relatively short history. Decentralized control to operate tremendous firepower, carry out complex missions, and make informed decisions to gain operational advantage was seen as demanding that those who wield these powers are not corrupted by it. The American way of war necessitates a force whose members have uncompromising character. In the service to their country, they must possess integrity, an unwavering commitment to pursue what is good over what is expedient and to express virtue in all they do.

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6   Aristotle pursues this question in the context of asking about how we achieve true happiness. What he contends is that living a fulfilling and happy life can only occur when one lives virtuously—living in terms of what it means to be a human being generally and in terms of their unique occupational role particularly (N, 1102a5). The path taken in the pursuit of virtue turns out to be the same path for the pursuit and obtaining of happiness. For the ancients, individuals who are truly happy are also those who are virtuous.

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