

## Doing Virtuous Actions Virtuously (NE II.4)

Book II, Chapter 4 §1

ARISTOTLE

4

[Virtuous Actions versus Virtuous Character]

1105a Someone might be puzzled, however, about what we mean by saying that we become just by doing just actions and become temperate by doing temperate actions.\* For [one might suppose that] if we do grammatical or musical actions, we are grammarians or musicians, and, similarly, if we do just or temperate actions, we are thereby just or temperate.

20 §2 But surely actions are not enough, even in the case of crafts,\* for it is possible to produce a grammatical result by chance, or by following someone else's instructions. To be grammarians, then, we must both produce a grammatical result and produce it grammatically—that is to say, produce it in accord with the grammatical knowledge in us.

25 §3 Moreover, in any case, what is true of crafts is not true of virtues.\* For the products of a craft determine by their own qualities whether they have been produced well; and so it suffices that they have the right qualities when they have been produced.\* But for actions in accord with the virtues to be done temperately or justly it does not suffice that they themselves have the right qualities.\* Rather, the agent must also be in the right state when he does them. First, he must know [that he is doing virtuous actions]; second, he must decide on them, and decide on them for themselves; and, third, he must also do them from a firm and unchanging state.

1105b As conditions for having a craft, these three do not count, except for the bare knowing.\* As a condition for having a virtue, however, the knowing counts for nothing, or [rather] for only a little, whereas the other two conditions are very important, indeed all-important. And we achieve these other two conditions by the frequent doing of just and temperate actions.

§4 Hence actions are called just or temperate when they are the sort that a just or temperate person would do. But the just and temperate person is not the one who [merely] does these actions, but the one who also does them in the way in which just or temperate people do them.

10 §5 It is right, then, to say that a person comes to be just from doing just actions and temperate from doing temperate actions; for no one has the least prospect of becoming good from failing to do them.

15 §6 The many, however, do not do these actions. They take refuge in arguments, thinking that they are doing philosophy, and that this is the way to become excellent people. They are like a sick person who listens attentively to the doctor, but acts on none of his instructions. Such a course of treatment will not improve the state of the sick person's body; nor will the many improve the state of their souls by this attitude to philosophy.\*

## Notes

**Topic:** The distinction between doing virtuous actions and doing virtuous actions virtuously (i.e. in the manner in which the virtuous person does them).

**Context:** The acquisition of the virtues of character. Aristotle holds that we become (say) generous by frequently performing generous acts.

**A Puzzle about coming to be virtuous:** How can someone become virtuous by doing virtuous actions?

One might think that someone who performs e.g. generous acts is already generous. It isn't clear that such a person still stands in need of coming to be generous by frequent repetition of generous activity.

**Strategy for a Solution:** We need to distinguish between virtuous actions and virtuous actions as done by the virtuous agent (virtuous actions done virtuously). So what distinguishes virtuous actions from virtuous actions done by a virtuous agent?

Aristotle gives **three conditions for doing virtuous actions virtuously:**

- (1) The agent must *know* she is performing a virtuous action
- (2) The agent must do the action *for its own sake*
- (3) The agent must do it from a *firm and unchanging disposition*

**An interpretive question/puzzle for us to consider:** Why does Aristotle say that the first condition “counts for nothing, or [rather] for only a little?”

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'Απορήσειε δ' ἂν τις πῶς λέγομεν ὅτι δεῖ τὰ μὲν **IV**.  
 δίκαια πράττοντας δικαίους γίνεσθαι, τὰ δὲ σώφρονα  
 σώφρονας· εἰ γὰρ πράττουσι τὰ δίκαια καὶ σώφρονα,  
 20 ἥδη εἰσὶ δίκαιοι καὶ σώφρονες, ὥσπερ εἰ τὰ γραμματικὰ  
 καὶ τὰ μουσικά, γραμματικοὶ καὶ μουσικοί. ἢ οὐδ' ἐπὶ  
 τῶν τεχνῶν οὕτως ἔχει; ἐνδέχεται γὰρ γράμματικόν τι  
 ποιῆσαι καὶ ἀπὸ τύχης καὶ ἄλλου ὑποθεμένου. τότε οὖν  
 ἔσται γραμματικός, ἔαν καὶ γραμματικόν τι ποιῆση καὶ  
 25 γραμματικῶς· τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶ τὸ κατὰ τὴν ἐν αὐτῷ γραμ-  
 ματικῆν. ἔτι οὐδ' ὁμοίον ἐστὶ ἐπὶ τε τῶν τεχνῶν καὶ τῶν  
 ἀρετῶν· τὰ μὲν γὰρ ὑπὸ τῶν τεχνῶν γινόμενα τὸ εὖ ἔχει  
 ἐν αὐτοῖς· ἀρκεῖ οὖν ταῦτά πως ἔχοντα γενέσθαι· τὰ δὲ  
 κατὰ τὰς ἀρετὰς γινόμενα οὐκ ἔαν αὐτὰ πως ἔχη, δι-  
 καίως ἢ σωφρόνως πράττεται, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἔαν ὁ πράττων 30  
 πῶς ἔχων πράττη, πρῶτον μὲν ἔαν εἰδῶς, ἔπειτ' ἔαν προαι-  
 ρούμενος, καὶ προαιρούμενος δι' αὐτὰ, τὸ δὲ τρίτον ἔαν καὶ  
 βεβαίως καὶ ἀμετακινήτως ἔχων πράττη. ταῦτα δὲ πρὸς  
 μὲν τὸ τὰς ἄλλας τέχνας ἔχειν οὐ συναριθμεῖται, πλὴν 1105<sup>b</sup>  
 αὐτὸ τὸ εἰδέναι· πρὸς δὲ τὸ τὰς ἀρετὰς τὸ μὲν εἰδέναι οὐδὲν  
 ἢ μικρὸν ἰσχύει, τὰ δ' ἄλλα οὐ μικρὸν ἀλλὰ τὸ πᾶν  
 δύναται, ἄπερ ἕκ τοῦ πολλὰκις πράττειν τὰ δίκαια καὶ  
 σώφρονα περιγίνεται. τὰ μὲν οὖν πράγματα δίκαια καὶ σώ- 5  
 φρονα λέγεται, ὅταν ἢ τοιαῦτα οἷα ἂν ὁ δίκαιος ἢ ὁ σώ-  
 φρων πράξειεν· δίκαιος δὲ καὶ σώφρων ἐστὶν οὐχ ὁ ταῦτα  
 πράττων, ἀλλὰ καὶ [δ] οὕτω πράττων ὡς οἱ δίκαιοι καὶ σώ-  
 φρονες πράττουσι. εὖ οὖν λέγεται ὅτι ἕκ τοῦ τὰ δίκαια πράτ-  
 τειν ὁ δίκαιος γίνεται καὶ ἕκ τοῦ τὰ σώφρονα ὁ σώφρων· 10  
 ἕκ δὲ τοῦ μὴ πράττειν ταῦτα οὐδεὶς ἂν οὐδὲ μελλήσειε  
 γίνεσθαι ἀγαθός. ἀλλ' οἱ πολλοὶ ταῦτα μὲν οὐ πράττου-  
 σιν, ἐπὶ δὲ τὸν λόγον καταφεύγουτες οἴονται φιλοσοφεῖν  
 καὶ οὕτως ἔσεσθαι σπουδαῖοι, ὁμοίον τι ποιούντες τοῖς  
 κάμμουσιν, οἱ τῶν λατρῶν ἀκούουσι μὲν ἐπιμελῶς, ποιοῦσι 15  
 δ' οὐδὲν τῶν προσταττομένων. ὥσπερ οὖν οὐδ' ἐκεῖνοι εὖ  
 ἔξουσιν τὸ σῶμα οὕτω θεραπευόμενοι, οὐδ' οὔτοι τὴν ψυ-  
 χὴν οὕτω φιλοσοφοῦντες.

1105<sup>a</sup> 2. συντεράφθαι K<sup>b</sup> 19. καὶ τὰ σώφρονα L<sup>b</sup> 21. τὰ add.  
 K<sup>b</sup> 26. τε add. K<sup>b</sup>

28. οὖν] τῶι K<sup>b</sup> αὐτά L<sup>b</sup> 32. διὰ ταῦτα K<sup>b</sup> ἔαν καὶ K<sup>b</sup>: καὶ ἔαν  
 vulg. 1105<sup>b</sup> 2. τὸ post δὲ om. K<sup>b</sup> οὐδὲν ἢ μικρὸν K<sup>b</sup>: μικρὸν ἢ  
 οὐδὲν vulg. 3. τὸ om. K<sup>b</sup> 4. ἄπερ] fort. εἴπερ 8. ὁ seclusi  
 12. γενέσθαι codd. 19. τὶ δ' ἐστὶν ἢ ἀρετὴ ἐξῆς σκοπεῖται K<sup>b</sup>

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