

# The Morality of the Aristotlean Virtue Ethics to the Contemporary Nigerian Man: A Philosophical Reflection

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## Abstract

*The quest for happiness has been acclaimed by scholars to be the proper goal of human life. The means of actualizing this goal differs according to scholars. Aristotle held that happiness is not constituted in honor, wealth or power but by rational activity in accordance with virtue in the journey towards self actualization. This rational activity, Aristotle claims, manifests as honesty, pride, friendliness, witness, rationality in judgment, friendship and scientific knowledge. By the virtue of our shared humanity, we are obliged to respect and honour one another. Each individual has an intrinsic value that can never be lost and ought not to be jeopardized with. However, this paper exposes the Aristotelian virtue ethics, offering its morality as a standard for the contemporary Nigerian man in the quest for happiness and to free himself from the unsalutary situation and the “galling yoke” of deprivation in which he finds himself.*

## 1. Introduction

Aristotle begins his ethics by positing that “all actions aim at a good” for him, ever art and every investigation, every action, aims at some good; therefore, the good has been defined as the object at which everything aims.<sup>1</sup>

Concerning the good and the highest good, Aristotle posits a question thus: what is the good and of the goods achievable man, what is the highest? In answering this question Aristotle posits the *Eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* is a Greek word which is often translated to mean happiness, well-being success and flourishing. Aristotle defines happiness or *Eudaimonia* “as an activity of the soul according to complete excellence or virtue over complete life”<sup>1</sup> Further Aristotle writes “happiness is the most desirable of all things. It is something final and complete in itself, as being the aim and end of all practical activities whatever”<sup>1</sup>. according to Aristotle, there is a general agreement to the question of happiness as being the goal of every human striving. However, opinions differ with regard to what constitutes happiness. Some people see happiness as wealth, pleasure or honour, while others like the sick see happiness as health, while the third group which Aristotle calls “people of superior refinement and active disposition” identifies happiness with honour.<sup>1</sup>

However because of the varied ways people see and pursue happiness, there abounds to be conflicts, infringement of rights, injustice, corruption etc in the society. Such is the case with the contemporary Nigeria. People have devised Selfish behaviours such as, theft, murder, lawlessness, bribery and corruption as means of gaining happiness.

I-Thou relationship of martin Buber is a thing of the past in the face of the contemporary Nigerian man. Consequent upon the ills that would abound in the society as a result of varied ways of pursuing happiness, Aristotle developed his virtue ethics. For Aristotle, “virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate. The virtue of man is the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him to do his own work well.”<sup>1</sup> Aristotelian virtue set to establish “mean that would govern society, in order to achieve a smooth and peaceful coexistence.

The goal of this paper is to examine Aristotelian virtue ethics and its morality in the Nigerian society of today. This paper surveys the underlined principles and virtues Aristotle identified in his *Nicomachean ethics* and advocates it for every contemporary Nigerian. Nonetheless, the paper also observes some of the challenges that are currently inhibiting and eroding virtuous life in Nigeria. Finally, the paper shall commend the morality of the Aristotelian virtue ethics as a way forward and out of the situation.

## 2. The profile of Aristotle

Aristotle (384-322 B.C) was born in Stagira in the northern Greece. Through his father, *Nicomachus*- a physician to king *Amyntas* II, Aristotle had connections to the royal house of Macedonia. Aristotle enrolled in Plato’s academy in 367 and spent 20years in the academy as a student, colleague, lecturer and writer. At Plato’s death, Aristotle joined a group of philosophers at the court of *Hermias* in *Assos* on the northern Aegean coast of Asia Minor, where he married the ruler’s niece. In 336 Alexander became king on the death of his father and about two years later, Aristotle returned to Athens to set up a school of philosophy and science called the Lyceum or

the *Peripatos*. Aristotle retired soon after Alexander's death in 323 to escape persecution from an anti-Macedonian faction, and died in Chalcis. His works include: Categories, Prior Analytics, posterior Analytics, De Anima, Metaphysics, Nicomachean Ethics, Politics and poetry.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Aristotelian Virtue Ethics: An Exposition

In his Nicomachean ethics, Aristotle says that the virtues function more as means to safeguard human relations, particularly authentic friendship, without which one's quest for happiness is frustrated. With Plato, Aristotle agreed that virtue ethics cannot be based on only deontological ethics and consequentialist ethics. Here virtue ethics differs in that the focus is instead upon being rather than doing,<sup>1</sup> traditionally; Aristotle's Nicomachean ethics is conceived to be the founding text of virtue ethics. Although the four cardinal virtues "wisdom, justice, fortitude and temperance" which featured prominently in Aristotelian moral philosophy were used first by Plato.

Virtue ethics is a habit disposed toward action by deliberate choice, being at the mean relative to us, and defined by reason as a prudent man would define it. This Aristotle says

*Virtue then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and that principle by which the mean of practical wisdom would determine it. Virtue is not simply an isolated action but a habit of acting well. For an action to be virtuous a person must do it deliberately, knowing what he is doing, and doing it because it is a noble action. In each specific situation, the virtuous action is a mean between two extremes.<sup>1</sup>*

Aristotle's account of virtue begins from the idea that within any "practice" or domain of life, goodness is understood in relation to the Greek word *telos* (literally meaning: "end or purpose") of that domain or "that for whose sake everything is done". For instance, Aristotle treats medicine as a domain whose *telos* is "health" and military strategy as a domain whose *telos* is "victory". In relation to a given domain, Aristotle says, an acquired character trait is a virtue to the extent that the person who possesses it is thereby better able to contribute to the *telos* of that domain. The underlying idea is that human happiness or flourishing (*eudaimonia*) requires that people are oriented towards their various activities in ways that respect the intrinsic ends of the domains to which those activities belong. Further, Aristotle seems to think of the *telos* as a natural fact that can be ascertained or determined by intuition.<sup>1</sup> Aristotle posits the "polis" as the summit of political organization, and the role of virtue is to enable human beings to flourish in that state environment. Virtue ethics relies on Aristotle's fundamental distinction between the human-being-as-he-is from the human-being-as-he-should be.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Aristotle categorizes the virtues as "moral and intellectual virtues", the most important of which was wisdom-Sophia (theoretical wisdom) and phronesis (practical wisdom). Among the moral virtues Aristotle identified include: prudence, fortitude (courage), temperance, which moral philosophy has identified as cardinal virtues as mentioned earlier. Aristotle argued that each of the moral virtues was a mean a mean between two corresponding vices, one of excess and the other of deficiency. For instance, courage is a virtue found amidst the vices of cowardice and rashness.<sup>1</sup>

**Courage:** the first virtue discussed by Aristotle is courage order wise called bravery. It is a mean between rashness and cowardice. A brave person is one who faces and fears what should for the right reason, in the right manner and at the right time. He performs his actions for the sake of what is noble. A brave man is one who is fearless in facing a noble death. Courage is a mean with respect to things that inspire confidence or fear, in the circumstances that have been stated; and it chooses or endures things because it is noble to do so, or because it is base not to do so. The vice of courage is rash. The rash man is boastful and only a pretender to courage. The man who exceeds fear is a coward, for he fears both what he ought not and as he ought not, and all the similar characterizations attached to him.<sup>1</sup>

**Temperance:** temperance is a mean with regard to pleasures. The temperate man desires pleasurable things and chooses them because they are pleasurable; he is pained when he fails to get the object of his desire. A temperate person is moderately disposed with regard to pleasure and pains. He loves such pleasures as right reason dictates. It keeps the desiring part of the soul in harmony with reason.<sup>1</sup>

**Liberality:** this is a mean with regard to wealth. The liberal man is praised with regards to giving and taking of wealth, and especially with in respect of giving. A liberal man will give to the right person, the right amounts and at the right times. A liberal man takes adequate care of his wealth. Liberality or generosity does not depend on the quantity of the giving but on the habit of the giver, which takes into account the amount the giver has and

is able to give away. Liberality is a mean between prodigality and stinginess. By wealth Aristotle means all the things whose value is measured by money.<sup>1</sup>

**Magnificence:** according to Aristotle, magnificence is another virtue that also concerns wealth, but it does not like liberality extend to all the actions that concerns with wealth but only spending; and in these it surpasses liberality in scale. It involves giving large amount for suitable occasions. The mean of this virtue are meanness and excess. According to Aristotle, the man who in small or middling things spends according to merits of the case is not called magnificent, but only the man who does so in great things.<sup>1</sup>

**Pride:** for Aristotle, man is proud who think himself worthy of great things being worthy of them, for he who does so beyond his desert is a fool, but no virtuous man is foolish or silly. The proud man, then, is the man we have described for he who is worthy of little and implies himself of little is temperate, but not proud; for pride implies greatness, as beauty implies a good-sized body, and little people may be neat and right proportioned. It is a mean between too much and too little ambition which can be described as right ambitions.<sup>1</sup>

**Good Temper:** the virtue that is a mean with respect to anger is good temper. The excesses are irascibility or bitterness. On this Aristotle writes, “Good temper is a mean with respect to anger, the middle state being unnamed, and the extremes almost without a name as well, we place good temper in the middle position, though it inclines towards the deficiency, which is without a name. The excesses might be called a sort of ‘irascibility’. For the passion is anger, while its causes are many and diverse.”<sup>1</sup> An irascible person gets angry quickly and retaliates but forgets about it afterwards. A good tempered person is one who gets angry on the right occasions, with the right people, at the right time and for the right length of time. Aristotle writes:

*The man who is angry at the right things and with the right people, and, further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought, is praised. This will be the good-tempered man, then, since good temper is praised. For the good tempered man tends unperturbed and not be led by passion, but to be angry in a manner, at the things, and at the length of time, that the rule dictates; but he is thought to err rather in the direction of deficiency; for the good tempered man is not revengeful, but rather tends to make allowances.<sup>1</sup>*

Aristotle further says, “To good temper we oppose the excess rather than the defect; for not only is it commoner since revenge is the more human, but bad tempered people are worst to live with.

**Friendship:** this otherwise called friendliness, the mean between flattery and obsequiousness and quarrelsomeness. Friendliness depicts saying the right things in the right manner and also listening to things properly. According to Aristotle, “in the field of social life, those who make the giving of pleasure or pain their object in associating with others are termed friendly.<sup>1</sup>

**Justice:** justice for Aristotle is that kind of state of character which makes people disposed to do what is just and makes them act justly and wish for what is just; and similarly, by injustice that state which makes them act unjustly and wish for what is unjust. The just is the lawful and the fair but the unjust is the unlawful and unfair.<sup>1</sup> According to Aristotle, every lawful act in a sense is a just act. Thus he writes, “Since the lawless man was seen to be unjust and law abiding man just, evidently, all lawful acts are in a sense just act; for the acts laid down by the legislative arts are lawful, and each of these, we say, is just. Now, the laws in their enactment on all subjects aim at the common advantage either of all or of the best or of those who hold power; or something of the sort; so that in one sense we call those acts just that tend to produce and preserve happiness and its component to the political society.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Aristotle considers justice to be the greatest of all virtues, and it is complete virtue in its fullest sense, because it is the actual exercise of complete virtue .it is complete says Aristotle, because he who possesses it can exercise his virtue not only in himself but towards his neighbor also; for many men exercise virtue in their own affairs, but not in their relations to their neighbor.

Justice is classified basically as specific justice and general justice. Justice in a specific sense is concerned with honor, property, safety and such like. Justice in the general sense is concerned with virtue as a whole. Another subset of justice identified by Aquinas is distributive justice. This is a mean between two extremes of unfairness. However, whether justice in the specific sense or justice as a whole of virtue, it is defined in relation to the other people.<sup>1</sup>

#### 4. Aristotelian Virtue Ethics: a Panacea for Rebuilding Moral Probity in Nigeria.

What this section of the work will do, is to literally put the Nigerian system into an Aristotelian virtue box and see to what extent it can size up with the standard. This shall be achieved by using the Aristotelian key cardinal virtues as a yardstick and since justice ranks as the most important of all the virtues according to Aristotle, and then it shall serve as the ultimate yardstick for judgment.

##### 4.1 The Moral Situation in Nigeria:

The moral situation in Nigeria has become so alarmingly depraved. This is evidenced in all sectors of life in the Nigerian society which include politics, governance, religion, education etc.

In the political sector the politics in Nigeria is one characterized by selfishness, and “ethnicism”. Political parties of the country do not organize along basic human ideological principles of state-building but along self-serving common interests propelled by the drive for ethnic domination, fiscal corruption and political authoritarianism (shown in looting and embezzlement). Lamenting on the menace of corruption in Africa, K.O. Nwoye writes:

*The concept of political authoritarianism essentially denotes political system that is undemocratic and which is characterized by high-handed and autocratic leadership. In this type of rigid political system, the virtue of good leadership is ignored and the leadership is intolerant of opposing or dissenting views, and exercises absolute power and authority without regard to public consent, rule of law or public opinion. Thus the common good inbuilt in Justice becomes missing; such is the case in Nigeria (emphasis added)<sup>1</sup>.*

Nonetheless, K.O Nwoye opines that corruption in itself weakens the moral and social fabric of the society: “corruption can seriously erode the moral and social fabric of the society. Bearing in mind that illegality and covertness are the operative norms of corrupt practice, it follows that corruption can lead to the moral and social degeneration of any society- thus, creating a climate of secrecy, mistrust, cynicism, selfishness and greed.”<sup>1</sup> Writing on the decay of morality and the rise of corruption in Nigeria, Ehiakhamen writes, “corruption soars higher daily and weakens service delivery, distorts accountability and equity in allocation of national resources. It melts out a corrosive effect on our collective integrity and discipline, and contaminates society’s moral values by rewarding the unscrupulous and demoralizing the honest.”<sup>1</sup>

This misnomer created in the country's politics spills over to governance. A situation where leadership is not committed to the cause of common good – Justice, but in seeking personal agendas and in the pursuance of depraved ethnic goals. Thus the leadership in government fails in providing the people their basic human needs which is the very reason for government establishment. Consequently, the moral or virtuous life that aims at arriving at the ‘good’ via acting justly, honestly, temperately etc is lacking in the life of the contemporary Nigerian man.

In religion, the underlying principle that informs the Aristotelian virtue ethics which is the Mean is missing. This is the basic character of all virtues as enunciated by Aristotle. When this basic character is lacking in any act the tendency is a shift to extremism which generates violence, chaos and distress and hinders the good life. Such is the case of the Islamic Extremists-‘Boko Haram’, who in the name of religion, slaughter Christians in Nigeria whom they claim to be infidels. Quoting Aristotle, Lannstrom says, “It is unrealistic to live a good life in the midst of chaos and distress. If we have to live in constant fear and struggle for necessities, we are not going to be able to live a good life. Fear is disruptive, terror is even more so.”<sup>1</sup> And so the instances of extremist views and the violence that emerge out of it are all pointers to a basic lack in the moral system of the people practicing these religions. The exploitations that people most times unknowingly fall victim of are all consequences of this lack. The over emphasis and over stretching of the powers and domains of religions in solving human problems as witnessed in Nigeria are evidences of this lack. There is lack of mean signals and absence of prudence and moral probity is lost. Writing on the inter-religious tolerance, Francis Cardinal Arinze says;

*There are problems and challenges which demand collaboration between people of different religious persuasions, if they are to be adequately addressed. Some people abuse or exploit religion in order to promote violence. Often their real motivations are political, economic or ethnic. It may be a question of injustices suffered by past generations and hitherto.... People of religion, especially religious leaders, have a duty to see that religion is not misused in this way.<sup>1</sup>*

The educational system on its side has lost its intrinsic worth and qualities of engendering common sense, creativity and right living and has placed more emphasis on certificates, proficiency in foreign languages and culture encouraging a huge loss of cultural and traditional identity.

Social interaction, responsibility and cohesion have become missing as the virtue of friendship, liberality, and magnificence is not seen in the people's interaction with each other. This is evidenced in poor communication skills among Nigerians, the poor customer service in business and public services and lack of accountability in government, the low level of philanthropism in Nigeria and an attendant high level of poverty. All of these ills point to a basic loss of moral probity in the Nigerian society.

#### **4.2 As a Panacea to Rebuilding Moral Probity:**

How then can the Aristotelian virtue ethics be implored to ensure a moral upgrade in the Nigerian society. This can be brought down to one basic principle and the most important virtue in Aristotle's virtue ethics which is Justice. Justice being the most important of all virtues, for Aristotle, because it contains all the basic principles of all others, will act as a neutral background or tranquilizer in all human actions when genuinely applied.

Justice ensures moral probity in politics. When all relinquish their ethnic agendas, and biases .when all eschew egocentrism and build a healthy political ideological system that engenders the principles that ensure that each gets his due in the right proportion and in due course. When this is done then the principles of equity and egalitarianism will ensure a morally propitious community.

In governance Justice ensures that the principle of common good is upheld, that each contributes his quota and as well receives his due. Justice ensures that the socialist principle of "from each according to his ability to each according to his due" is humanely applied and sustained. This principle of common good is thus placed on the mean of social justice. In a wide sense, it is Justice that ensures that in the practice of religion, and prudence is given a significant place and is applied in professing one's religious creed. Temperance is applied in expressing one's religious sentiments and courage is shown in the case when one's faith becomes threatened by other extremist views.

In social interaction and responsibility a mixture of liberality, magnificence, and friendship is needed in encouraging and instilling the values of genuine philanthropism, mutual cooperation, accountability, and social welfare. Thus creating an 'open society' where new ideas exists, social interactions advocated for, laws and values maintained, freedom and right preserved, responsibility encouraged.

#### **5.Conclusion:**

In a wider sense when these values are properly engendered in the hearts of Nigerians Justice would have been done both on the individual level and on the collective level and the ultimate *eudaemonia* which is the natural end of each rational being will be relatively fulfilled in their hearts for happiness involves the fulfillment of the purpose of each being and this fulfillment cannot be achieved in isolation of Justice which is when one acts according to one's nature. Thus Justice plays a pivotal role in achieving *eudaemonia* in not only the Nigerian society but also in the life of each Nigerian. It creates the awareness and relationship with the 'other', responsibility for the 'other', therefore yielding a virtue-oriented progressive society. Quoting Levinas, Ukata writes;

*The face of the other is a unique entity that should not be reduced to a concept or phantom, rather it brings the self into being by calling it to responsibility and service. The face of the other reveals to me the injustice as well as the impossibility of my claim to sovereign freedom and egoistic enjoyment. The presence of the other calls me to service not only to that particular self but to all 'others'. Accepting my responsibility towards the other helps me to escape isolation and solipsism and become fully myself. It is this relation with the other that makes possible and gives rise to my consciousness.<sup>1</sup>*

The truth remains that we are in one way or the other responsible for the moral decadence, woes and crisis we experience today in the Nigerian society. In an attempt to return and live for better, Aristotelian virtue ethics is a good guide.

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