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Sense, Sentiment, and Civilization
Abstract

How can the study of core texts contribute to a sense of common humanity, gracious diction, and leadership in a chaotic world? Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy: Inferno* examine ideals of morality, friendship, and happiness in ways that still ring true. Aristotle's *Ethics* deal primarily with the ideal of mhde/n a!gan—nothing in excess. Human passions and desires are to be tempered by reason; likewise, human rationality is made complete by proper desires and sentiments. Dante follows Aristotle's ideas and brings them further, demonstrating that passion—or as he terms it, love—is a good thing so long as it is directed toward its appropriate object, and in proper measure. In both the *Ethics* and *The Divine Comedy*, true fellowship is found among the virtuous, who order their passions and sentiments according to what is good. Rationality and emotion are not to be divorced from one another. In order to develop a wise and gracious character—from which springs wise and gracious discourse—one must learn to love and value every good thing in its appropriate measure, and to approach every subject with a humble understanding of one's own limitation.
Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy: Inferno* examine ideals of morality, friendship, and happiness in ways that still ring true. Aristotle's model is centered around the concept of *Kosmos* (order) and *telos* (end or purpose), with nothing in excess. Human passions and desires are to be tempered by reason; likewise, human rationality is made complete by proper desires and sentiments. Dante follows Aristotle's ideas and brings them further, demonstrating that passion—or as he terms it, love—is a good thing so long as it is directed toward its appropriate object and in proper measure. In both the *Ethics* and the *Divine Comedy*, true fellowship is found among the virtuous, who order their passions and sentiments according to what is good. In order to develop a wise and gracious character—from which springs wise and gracious discourse—one must learn to love and value the good in its appropriate measure, and to approach every subject with a humble understanding of one's own limitation.

**Establishing the Model: the “Tao”**

An investigation of virtue presupposes, first and foremost, that there is such a thing as virtue, and that it can be known. It depends on “the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and that we are” (Lewis 18). To proceed without assuming the existence of some absolute system of moral values—some Chief Good or Natural Law—is not unlike attempting to understand algebra while dismissing belief in numerical value. “Unless you accept these … as being to the world of action what axioms are to the world of theory, you can have no practical principles whatever. You cannot reach them as conclusions: they are premises” (Lewis 40). In a lecture series later published as *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis takes a philosophical approach
to morality, observing the commonality between civilizations of various eras and locations, and their acceptance of such premises. He calls that system (for the sake of simplicity) by its Chinese name: the Tao, that is, the Way. It is, simply put, the Greatest Thing—the measure by which good is defined. “In the Tao itself, if we remain within it, we find the concrete reality in which to participate is to be truly human: the real common will and common reason of humanity, alive, and branching out … into ever new beauties and dignities of application” (Lewis 74-75) Once the presence of such a system is recognized, it is then possible to investigate its nature and begin to understand exactly what it means to live and thrive within it.

A study of the Core Texts (or Great Books) provides a historical conversation for the reader, by which one may contextualize his or her investigation as to what it means to live well, by examining how great thinkers throughout several ages have addressed the common issues of humanity. French essayist Montaigne noted that “By taking stock of the graces and mannerisms of others, [the student] will create in himself desire of the good ones and contempt for the bad” (Montaigne 115). This conversation, operating on the foundation of the Tao, creates a framework for understanding virtue in ways both abstract and concrete.

**Living in the Model: Aristotle**

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle classifies virtues according to their end and object, the goal being kosmos—order. “Aristotle says that the aim of education is to make the pupil like and dislike what he ought” (Lewis 16). His reasoning hinged on the formation of habit; as one begins to practice responding to desire and intellect in the right ways, then those responses eventually become second-nature: “men become builders by building … so too we become just by doing just acts. … It makes no small difference whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference” (Aristotle 952, 953). As a grafted branch
grows to be part of a fruit tree, such habits of action grow to be an inseparable part of one's character.

The virtues of *Nicomachean Ethics* lie in an ideal of balance. One must not give in completely to one's desires, yet neither should one reject them in favor of pure intellect. The two must, instead, be joined. “Those things that, being pleasant, make for health or for good condition, [the temperate man] will desire moderately and as he should, and also other pleasant things if they are not … contrary to what is noble, or beyond his means” (Aristotle 983). Inordinate passion leads to the vices of self-indulgence: greed, gluttony, lust, violent rage and recklessness. On the other hand, a deficiency of passion is also the gateway to vice; lack of empathy, ruthlessness, cowardice and cruelty may all stem from the absence of healthy emotion and desire. “Nor,” Aristotle says, “is a man a coward if he fears insult to his wife and children … or anything of that kind; nor brave if he is confident when he is about to be flogged” (Aristotle 975). Virtue, then, is in the habit of recognizing when it is appropriate to give into one's passion, and when it is appropriate to exercise self-restraint. Human passions and desires are to be tempered by reason; likewise, human rationality is made complete by proper desires and sentiments.

**Aristotle (cont.): Friendship as Example**

In the course of the *Ethics*, Aristotle discusses three classifications of friendship, which illustrate his ideas regarding virtue and vice. The first form is friendship from utility: the companionship that develops between two or more who require a service from the other or others. It is a sort of symbiotic relationship, lasting as long as those involved need one another. This kind of friendship may arise between coworkers, or between classmates working on a group project. The central element of this kind of friendship is cooperation. While there is nothing inherently wrong or vicious regarding this kind of friendship, it lacks the satisfaction that comes with human connection.

Therefore those who love for the sake of utility love for the sake of what is good for themselves,
and those who love for the sake of pleasure do so for the sake of what is pleasant to themselves, and not in so far as the other is the person loved, but as providing some good or pleasure (Aristotle 1060).

The members of this friendship are usually content to know very little about one another, beyond their function of utility.

Utilitarian companionship may resemble the character that is lacking in proper human passion. Such a character lacks empathy, cutting one off from healthy human connection. Virtue is action, which intellect alone cannot produce. Reason is an essential tool with which to discern truth, but when reason is given priority over all else, it fails to reach the fullness of human nobility. Compassion, courage, and companionship, while all guided by rationality, also require an element of human feeling. Indeed, without such feeling, reason becomes mere pragmatism; it turns inward, growing selfish and ruthless until it degenerates into base cruelty. C.S. Lewis termed such characters “men without chests.” Aristotle simply calls them “insensible”, since they can have no true appreciation for what is good and beautiful.

Friendship formed on the basis of pleasure is established between those who enjoy one another's company. Although it differs in motive, it is of a similar kind to utilitarian cooperation. Such friendship is frequently found among teammates, among those who share interests or have similar tastes, and between grade-school sweethearts. While a true and solid friendship should involve affection of this kind, the companionship that is founded on pleasure alone is often temporary, and ultimately lacks true connection just as much as utilitarian friendship. “Such friendships, then, are easily dissolved, … for if the one party is no longer pleasant … the other ceases to love him” (Aristotle 1060). The fellowship lasts only as long as both parties feel a pleasant affection toward one another. As soon as the pleasure is gone, the friendship dissolves.

The character that resembles a pleasure-based friendship is one that tends to display an excess
of passion, usually to the neglect of rationality and good sense. As the one deficient in passion tends
toward vices that are cold and ruthless, the one who has become accustomed to indulging his or her
passions is, by habit, hot-headed and self-indulgent. While more inclined to express empathy, the
inordinately passionate character may also be drawn into self-centered emotional gluttony. This, just as
much as the other, may breed cruelty. Homer's Iliad gives two examples of such characters, in both
Paris and Achilles. Achilles, in his inordinate rage, caused all of the Achaeans to suffer for nine years.
His indulgence in rage leads him to lose sight of his obligations as a leader and his loyalty to his
companions. Paris, on the Trojan side, allows his passion for Helen (or anything that can gratify himself)
to eclipse his role as a prince and leader. His self-indulgence drags his city into a grueling ten-year war
and ultimately to ruin. Those of self-indulgent characters—giving over to their excess of passion—fail
to consider the consequences of their actions, frequently doing harm to both others and themselves.

That which Aristotle termed “true” friendship may very well grow from either of the former
kinds. It is the companionship that comes about when those involved share not only interests, but a
deep understanding of each other, a desire for the good for both themselves and each other, and a
willingness to spur each other toward that good. “Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are
good, and alike in virtue; for these wish well alike to each other qua [without qualification] good”
(Aristotle 1061). This friendship, Aristotle goes on to say, can exist only among the virtuous: “good
men will be friends for their own sake, i.e., in virtue of their goodness” (Aristotle 1063). Such
companionship is focused on others rather than on oneself, allowing for a deep and intimate connection
of souls.

True friendship represents the virtuous character. Just as true fellowship balances affection and
rationality—focused on the other's good rather than one's own—virtue tempers strong feeling with
reason, and vice versa. Just as everything in Aristotle's universe has its perfect position, and each thing
fulfills its specific purpose according to its essence, likewise, human beings must have a proper order
tending toward a particular end.

**Living in the Model II: Dante**

Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy* is modeled after the classical ideal. Dante believed that wisdom of the ancients represented the very best of earthly virtue (even though it fell short of salvation and the full glory of Heaven). While Dante picks up many of Aristotle's ideas regarding ethics, he reshapes the model from one based on the proper balance of passion and reason to a model that is based on the appropriate priority of passion (or, as he calls it, love). In order to be virtuous, one must love the right things in the right measure. For example, it is appropriate to love the pleasures offered by a good meal, but inappropriate to love those pleasures more than the blessings of good health, or of fellowship with one's friends and family. By ordering one's “love” according to priority (by the same formation of habit that Aristotle discussed), one will be moved to virtue simply by habit of the will. In other words, if one loves good things according to their appropriate priority, one's actions will then be driven by that love.

If, according to Dante, virtue is an appropriate ordering of love, then vice is a perversion of love. Vice or wickedness come from loving good things in the wrong way, by loving the wrong things entirely, or, in the most extreme cases, by loving nothing at all. In the *Inferno*, Dante (the character) is guided by the shade of the poet Virgil through Hell, where he converses with the lost and condemned, observing, as the pit grows deeper, the increasing perversion and final deprivation of love.

The first set of sins Dante witnesses are sins of incontinence; the souls condemned to those circles were the souls who loved good things, but in the wrong way, lacking self-control. “When the miser prefers his gold to justice, it is through no fault of the gold, but of the man. … For though it be good, it may be loved with an evil as well as a good love: it is loved rightly when it is loved ordinally; evilly, when inordinately” (Augustine 510). The sins of incontinence, many of which seem forgivable
and harmless, are ultimately shown to cause the sinner to miss greater joys of companionship, fidelity and generosity.

Deeper down, the two poets encounter sins of violence. These vices, Dante demonstrates, do not come from loving good things in the wrong way, but from loving the wrong things entirely. These souls were those who did harm to others or themselves. Unlike the noble and courageous, who fight to defend a higher good, these souls wreaked havoc for its own sake. They loved the evil of bloodshed, and so spend eternity drowning in a river of blood. They are different from the wrathful (found in the circles of incontinence), because while the wrathful merely lost control over their rage (thereby letting it control them), the violent cultivated rage for its own sake.

Last of all, the poets observe the sins of malice. In those lower circles are found every variety of fraud, deceit, and treachery. There is neither love nor any pretense of love. There is only a devouring, gnawing selfishness, that not only ignores, but seeks to destroy what is good and noble and beautiful. “In the Circles of Fraud (the abuse of the specifically human faculty of reason) the ministers of Hell are no longer mere embodied appetites, but actual devils, images of the perverted intellect” (Sayers, “Notes on the Divine Comedy”, 185). The sinners in the bottom-most pit are frozen up to their necks in ice. Passion, pride and humanity itself have been eaten away.

**Dante (cont.): Depravity & Deprivation**

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante uses images of the afterlife to expose the true natures of virtue and wickedness. “Hell in the story is the place or condition of the lost souls after death. … In the allegory, it is the image of the deepening possibilities of evil within the soul” (Sayers, “The Greater Images” 68). The punishments for each particular sin are imagined to perfectly fit the crime. Hell strips away the glamour of wickedness, revealing its withering effect on the human soul and character. For Dante, the cost of perverted priority is the loss of humanity itself.
Like Aristotle, Dante focuses on formation of habit. While love—proper or perverted—is the driving motivator, it is action that ends up shaping and defining character. The best way, then, to become virtuous is by practice. Aristotle's virtue depends on practicing habits of moderation—responding to passion and reason in a balanced way. Similarly, Dante's virtue involves practicing habits that prioritize the right things. Unlike many of his classical predecessors, Dante does not divorce passion (or sentiment) from rationality, rather, he treats it as part of a greater whole. “It may even be said that it is by this middle element that man is man: for by his intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal” (Lewis 25). To practice virtue, it is not enough to know what is true and right, but to love it also.

Engaging With the Model: the Conversation

Dante and Aristotle offer two models for living rightly. They are not the only ones, nor do they operate in isolation. By interacting with the Core Texts, one enters into a conversation that has been carried on for millennia as writers, poets, and thinkers have built on, clashed with, and responded to one another. Fritz Hinrichs, scholar and educator, remarks in an essay, “We are part of the continuum of western history. In order to evaluate this stream of which we are a part, we must step back from it and discern the ideas that have shaped it” (Hinrichs) The beauty of this Conversation is that it is not closed off from the reader; it invites participation and continuation. It is the context that informs the present and leads one to a better understanding of the world and what has shaped it. “Some might take more effort than others, but that is the point—to exercise the mind. We accept that getting into physical shape will take determination, will-power and sweat. The mind demands no less yet offers so much more” (White 45) As one delves further into the conversation, drawing connections and following premises to their conclusion, the student develops skills as a keen observer, and becomes aware of the intricate complexity that is human nature. Such awareness gives way to humility (which then makes
way for grace), while still holding fast to a love of what is true and good.

The point of interacting with the Great Books is not to earn for oneself a badge of achievement. Indeed, the more one makes that interaction about him or herself and his or her pride, the less such a student stands to gain. While it is no small task to make one's way through the many often-difficult texts (and an even greater task to engage them with understanding), that quest is best undertaken when the aim is something higher than that: to nourish one's mind and soul, to foster grace and empathy, and to grow in wisdom. It is one thing to say to another “I have climbed an arduous mountain.” It is another thing entirely to be in awe of the view.

As voices in the Great Conversation, Aristotle and Dante deal with the issues that humanity has wrestled with in every culture and every century; their texts demonstrate what it means to reflect upon and pursue what is good, true and beautiful. Through engaging in their conversation, the student develops habits of reflection and discernment, an understanding of human nature, and the humility of wisdom. For those who desire virtue (operating within the Tao), the Great Books inspire the soul to continue its quest for the highest good, as one grows into deeper comprehension of what it means to be human.
Bibliography


