

【논문】

Taking Pleasure in Acting Virtuously

—Aristotle on Virtue and Pleasure—*

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【Subject Class】 Virtue Ethics, Aristotle, Moral Psychology

【Keyword】 Aristotle, Virtuous person, Virtuous action, Pleasure, Pain, Inner conflict

【Abstract】 The main aim of this paper is to argue, as Aristotle would agree, that the mere fact that a person feels pain while acting virtuously is not sufficient to claim that he is defective as a virtuous being. After providing a plausible interpretation of the moral psychology of Aristotle's virtuous person, I am going to propose my own version of an Aristotelian virtuous person. For a virtuous person, although the fact that his action is virtuous would be pleasant, the fact that he has to give up precious things for the sake of it at the given particular situation might be painful, as in Aristotle's example of a brave person. Insofar as the opposing desire causing the pain, taken by itself, is a permissible one, such pain does not indicate that the person's character is less virtuous; rather, if the opposing desire in the dilemma situation is good in itself, feeling no pain while acting virtuously indicates that the person is less virtuous. Moreover, being pained by acting virtuously is different from experiencing inner conflict while so acting. Although a virtuous person sometimes might be pained by conflicting desires, he performs virtuous actions willingly and decisively. To sum up, while a fully virtuous person

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always virtuous person always takes pleasure in the fact that his actions are virtuous, there are situations where he feels pain while acting virtuously.

“...Someone who does not enjoy noble actions is not good.” (*NE* I.8.12 1099a)¹⁾

I . Introduction

Aristotle’s ideal virtuous person is known as one who always takes pleasure in acting virtuously. This model of a virtuous person is often criticized, because even a fully virtuous person sometimes seems to feel pain, rather than pleasure, in acting virtuously. Marcia Baron, for example, doubts that we would always think better of the person whose feeling were fully in line with what he judges to be virtuous. Suppose that a man saved a seriously injured stranger, repressing his strong desire to look after his slightly scratched son first. In a case like this, the person with some inner disharmony, and thus with pain, seems more virtuous than one without.²⁾

In this paper, I will argue, as Aristotle would agree, that the mere fact that a person feels pain while acting virtuously is not sufficient to claim that he is defective as a virtuous one. After giving a plausible interpretation to the moral psychology of Aristotle’s virtuous person, I am going to propose my own version

1) Abbreviation for Aristotle’s work.

NE Nicomachean Ethics (trans. By Terence Irwin, Hackett, (1999)).

2) Marcia Baron, Philip Pettit, and Michael Slote. *Three Methods of Ethics: A Debate*. Blackwell, (1995), p. 43.

of Aristotelian virtuous person. For a virtuous person, although the fact that his action is virtuous would be pleasant, the fact that he has to give up precious things in order to perform the virtuous action at the given situation might be painful. Insofar as the opposing desire causing the pain, taken by itself, is permissible one, such pain does not indicate that the person's character is less virtuous; if the opposing desire in the dilemma situation is good in itself, to the contrary, feeling no pain while acting virtuously indicates that the person is less virtuous. Moreover, being pained by acting virtuously is different from experiencing inner conflict while so acting. A virtuous person performs virtuous actions willingly and decisively, regardless of whether their overall state of mind is pleasant or painful in performing them.

II.

1. Aristotle and Virtuous Person's Pain

Aristotle's ideal model of a virtuous person has often been mistaken for one who always performs virtuous actions with ease and pleasure.³⁾ I suppose the following remarks have led many philosophers to interpret the psychology of Aristotle's virtuous person in this way:

...Actions in accord with virtue are pleasant by nature, so that they both please lovers of the fine and are pleasant in their own

3) e.g. see M. W. Baron (etc.) (1995), p. 41–44 and Karen E. Stohr. "Virtue Ethics and Kant's Cold-Hearted Benefactor" *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 36 pp. 187–204 (2002), p. 192.

right.

Hence there people's life does not need pleasure to be added [to virtuous activity] as some sort of extra decoration; rather, it has its pleasure within itself. For besides the reasons already given, someone who does not enjoy noble actions is not good; for no one would call a person just, for instance, if he did not enjoy doing just actions, or generous if he did not enjoy generous actions, and similarly for the other virtues.

If this is so, actions in accord with the virtues are pleasant in their own right. Moreover, these actions are good and noble as well as pleasant; indeed, they are good, noble, and pleasant more than anything else is, since on this question the excellent person judges rightly, and his judgment agrees what we have said. (*NE* I.8.1099a)

But we must take someone's pleasure or pain following on his actions to be a sign of his state. For if someone who abstains from bodily pleasures enjoys the abstinence itself, he is temperate; if he is grieved by it, he is intemperate. Again, if he stands firm against terrifying situations and enjoys it, or at least does not find it painful, he is brave; if he finds it painful, he is cowardly. (*NE* II.3.1104b)

Based on these remarks, many philosophers regard Aristotle's virtuous person as one who acts virtuously with no conflicting desires and feels pleasure thereby. As opposed to this model, a continent person is characterized as one who performs virtuous actions resisting to conflicting desires. For example, Baron interprets Aristotle's temperate person and continent one as follows:

Do I act with pleasure if *I wish that the action weren't morally required*, but given that it is, accept it as my duty and, enthusiastic about doing what is right, act without a grimace and even with cheer? If so, this still is different from Aristotle's picture of the virtuous person-i.e. the temperate person-because Aristotle's temperate person *feels no regrets, no wish that the moral chips lay elsewhere*. The continent person, whom Aristotle regards as less than fully

virtuous, could be cheerful in the way just described; his desires pull him in the opposite direction, but he resists, and there is no reason to suppose that he couldn't take pleasure-personal-in resisting. The temperate person, by contrast, has *no conflicting desires*.⁴⁾

Pace Baron's supposition, it is not the case that Aristotle's virtuous person is one who feels no regrets, has no wish that the moral chips lay elsewhere, or has no conflicting desires. Aristotle himself admits that even for a virtuous person it is sometimes painful and not so easy to act virtuously. I do not think Aristotle believed that the difference between virtuous person and continent one lies in whether one has conflicting desires or not.

This point is supported by the part of his *Nicomachean Ethics* where he describes bravery as a virtue:

As we said, then, standing firm against what is painful makes us call people brave; that is why bravery is both *painful* and justly praised, since it is harder to stand firm against something painful than refrain from something pleasant. Nonetheless, the end that bravery aims at seems to be pleasant, thought obscured by its surroundings...[T]he brave person will find death and wounds *painful*, and *suffer them unwillingly*, but he will endure them because that is noble or because failure is base. Indeed, the truer it is that he has every virtue and the happier he is, the *more pain* he will feel at the prospect of death. For this sort of person, more than anyone, finds it worthwhile to be alive, and knows he is being deprived of the greatest goods, and this is *painful*. But *he is no less brave for all that; presumably, indeed, he is all the braver, because he chooses what is noble in war at the cost of all these goods*. It is not true, then, in the case of every virtue that its active exercise is pleasant; it is pleasant only insofar as we attain the end. (*NE* III.9.1117a-b, italics added)

4) M. W. Baron (etc.) (1995), p. 44 (italics added).

As these remarks shows, even a fully brave person experience pain, and this point can be generalized to other kind of virtues. How, then, can we explain that a fully virtuous person always takes pleasure in acting virtuously, but sometimes feels pain at the same time?⁵⁾

2. Propositional Pleasure and Pain in a Dilemma Situation

To solve this problem, I will make use of Erik Wielenberg's convenient conceptual tool. This tool is the concept of *propositional* pleasure or pain, as opposed to bodily pleasure or pain. According

5) Before we solve this problem, we need to understand what Aristotle means by saying that virtue's active exercise "is pleasant only insofar as we attain the end" here. Christine M. Korsgaard claims that Aristotle thought that "it is only *successful* virtuous action that will necessary bring us pleasure, and that in only a limited way". (C. M. Korsgaard "From Duty and For the Sake of the Noble" in *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoic: Rethinking Happiness and Duty*. ed. S. Engstrom and J. Whiting, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 222) I suppose that she reads 'only insofar as we attain the end' as meaning 'only insofar as the action succeeds in attaining the end.' But we should not read 'to attain the end' as meaning 'to realize an intended *state of affair in the actual world*.' If we do, Aristotle would become a sort of consequentialist, which he is not. Here, to attain the end should be understood as *to act virtuously*; that is, to act virtuously is itself an end here, without any external end. Recall Aristotle's claim that action is different from production in that the end of the former is acting well itself while the latter has its end in something other than itself (cf. *NE* VI.5.1140b). The expression 'only insofar as' is misleading because it suggests that to attain the end—i.e. to act virtuously—is the condition of feeling pleasure. Instead, this expression should be interpreted as meaning 'it is pleasant *so much that* we attain the end of acting virtuously.' According to my interpretation, it just means that a virtuous person takes pleasure *in the fact that* her action is virtuous and it is entirely possible to feeling pain about other aspects of the situation at the same time.

to Wielenberg, propositional pleasures are propositional attitudes and hence intentional states. This concept allows us to discuss about *from consciousness of which fact* we feel propositional pleasure or pain. For example, when a woman is getting married, she might take pleasure in the fact that she can live with her lovely husband, while being pained by the fact that she has to leave her parents. This kind of pleasure and pain is obviously distinguished from sensory ones.⁶⁾ There would be no one who would not feel pain when someone pinches her arm (of course, with the exception of some physically disabled ones); likewise, no one can help but feel pleasant when someone physically touches her sexually sensitive areas. With this convenient tool, Wielenberg analyzes the psychology of a temperate person:

A temperate person, recognizing his own abstinence as virtuous, takes propositional pleasure in such abstinence. He is pleased by his abstinence because he values virtuous activity. Moreover, a temperate person does not take propositional pain in the fact that he is not getting bodily pleasure, nor, obviously, does he take propositional pain in the fact that he is abstaining from bodily pleasure.⁷⁾

Wielenberg also provides a plausible account for brave person's psychology in performing a brave action. According to him, a brave person "can be pained at the thought of death and yet take propositional pleasure in the fact that she is standing her ground."⁸⁾ That is, a brave person can take pleasure in the fact that her action

6) Erik Wielenberg, "Pleasure as a Sign of Moral Virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*" *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 34: 439-449, (2000) p. 442.

7) E. Wielenberg (2000), p. 443.

8) E. Wielenberg (2000), p. 444.

is brave, getting pained by the fact that she has to give up precious things in performing that action. Wielenberg generalizes this point to a virtuous person in general: “Virtuous actions may sometimes be painful to a virtuous agent, but the virtuous agent will nevertheless take propositional pleasure in such actions.”⁹⁾

It might be misleading to say that even a fully virtuous person sometimes feels pain in performing *a virtuous action*. Suppose that a particular action *X* is virtuous at a particular situation-e.g. fighting against the enemy in a battle situation for the sake of the noble. And suppose that *X* can be described in a different way: e.g. as abandoning one’s own family and happy life. Here, it seems hard to say that *X* is a virtuous action as such. In performing *X*, the virtuous person would take propositional pleasure in the fact that he is fighting against the enemy in a battle situation for the sake of the noble, while taking propositional pain in the fact that he is abandoning one’s own family and happy life.

We can see that a virtuous person feels pain while acting virtuously if he is faced with a *dilemma* situation, where his conflicting desires cannot be acted on at the same time. In such a situation as battle, for example, a brave person would perform what Aristotle calls a ‘mixed action.’ He says:

These sorts of actions, then, are mixed, but they are more like voluntary actions. For at the time they are done they are choiceworthy, and the goal of an action accords with the specific occasion; hence we should also call the action voluntary or involuntary on the occasion when he does it...For such [mixed] actions people are sometimes actually praised, whenever they *endure something shameful or painful as the price of great and fine result* s...Other things are involuntary in their own right, but choiceworthy

9) E. Wielenberg (2000), p. 446.

on this occasion and as the price of these [goods], and their principle is in the agent. *These are involuntary in their own right, but, on this occasion and as the price of these [goods], voluntary.* (NE III.1.1110a-b, italics added)

Although sacrificing one's life would not be choiceworthy in its own right, it may become choiceworthy in the particular state of war. In this sense, an action in a dilemma situation would be a sort of mixed action and the agent's emotion is mixed or ambivalent as well in such a dilemma situation.

Since Aristotelian virtuous person not only acts properly but also *feels* properly, there should be an appropriate feeling about what one *cannot* do as well as what one can. The circumstances an agent would be placed is not entirely up to his own choice. There always is a room for luck to play its own role. It is entirely possible that a virtuous person faces a circumstance where all the available choices are what he does not want to do. For example, politician's 'dirty hands', which is acquired when circumstances permit only a choice between evils, would be a case in point. Even a perfectly virtuous person cannot help but feel strong agony in such a dilemma situation.

3. Analysis of a Virtuous Person's Psychology

Now, let us examine Baron's example more closely:

Imagine an accident in which one's child, whimpering and shaking with fear, needs only comfort and reassurance, while others have been injured and need medical attention. One would like to be able to attend fully to one's child right away but know that it would be wrong to neglect those in far greater need. (Let's assume that there are no others on the scene who could help those in urgent

need of medical attentions.)¹⁰⁾

It seems that the man in this example (let's call him Ed) would be more virtuous to cure the injured while feeling propositional pain over the fact that he cannot take care of his son. It is entirely possible that two or more permissible or even good desires cannot be satisfied due to the conditions of the given situation. For example, the situation in this example does not allow Ed to satisfy both of his present desires at the same time. He must give up a good desire-i.e., to appease his son-in order to act on a better desire-i.e., to cure the injured-in this particular situation. There is nothing morally defective in Ed's feeling regret, or wishing that he could take care of his son. The painful feeling he experiences does not render him less virtuous.

In this example, we should pay attention to the kind of desire going against the will to do the noble thing. Ed's desire to attend to his whimpering child does not seem wrong; rather, taken by itself, it seems a desire good to act on. The problem is just that this particular situation does not allow him to act on both desires at the same time. While there might be something wrong in his *acting* on this desire to take care of his son in this situation, there is nothing wrong in *having* the desire to take care of him. Rather, if he does not feel agony from the fact that he cannot take care of his son, this very attitude would be what renders him less virtuous.

Since the pain over not being able to take care of one's child is a right feeling to have and helping the injured is a right action to do, there is no reason not to call him virtuous. The best he can do in this situation is to have the right desire-i.e., to take care of his

10) M. W. Baron (etc.) (1995), p. 43.

child-and thus feeling pain from the fact that he cannot act on this desire, and do the noble thing-i.e., to help the injured. Although it would mean that he feels pain in acting virtuously, it does not matter. What is important is the kind of desire that causes the agent to feel pain in performing virtuous action. Sometimes it is more virtuous to feel regret, and sometimes not. Ed would be more virtuous when he feels regret that he cannot help his son, than when he does not. The mere fact that one has conflicting desires and thus feels pain while acting virtuously cannot serve as the litmus paper distinguishing a virtuous person from one who is not.

The pain caused by such conflicting desires should be distinguished from that comes from what I call *inner conflict*. By inner conflict, I mean the conflict between the desire to do *what one wants* to do and the will to do, to use Aristotelian term, *the noble thing* to do. Unlike feeling a propositional pain while acting virtuously, experiencing inner conflict makes the agent hesitate to act virtuously. It does not mean a mere *wish* that one were doing something else while doing what one sees one ought to do, since it does not affect one's motivation to act.¹¹⁾ The inner conflict makes the agent unable to perform virtuous actions willingly and decisively.¹²⁾ If the conflict is

11) Baron seems to take such a view. See M. W. Baron (etc.) (1995) p. 41

12) Philippa Foot claims that the dilemma concerning a virtuous person's inner conflict can be resolved only when we stop talking about difficulties standing in the way of virtuous action as if they were of only one kind. I agree with this point. But she goes one step further:

The fact that a man is *tempted* to steal is something about him that shows a certain lack of honesty: of one thoroughly honest we say that it 'never entered his head', meaning that it was never a real possibility for him. But the fact that he is poor is something that makes the occasion more *tempting*, and difficulties of this kind make honest action all the more virtuous. (P. Foot, "Virtues and Vices" (1978) p. 11).

between the desire to perform a virtuous action *S* and the desire *not* to perform that very action, experiencing such a conflict renders the agent less virtuous. This is because this kind of conflict, i.e. the conflict between *contradictory* desires, is bound to affect the agent's motivation to act virtuously. In Ed's example, the conflict between the desire to cure the injured and the desire to take care of his son is due to the condition of the particular circumstance, hence contingent. By contrast, the conflict between the desire to cure the injured and the desire not to do so is necessary. Thus, a fully virtuous person would not experience the latter kind of conflicting desires, while a continent person would.

Let me make further remarks to make the point clearer. I have shown that the fact that a person feels pain while acting virtuously does not necessarily disqualify him as a virtuous person, since there are many cases of dilemma where it is permissible to feel pain in

I do not agree with her claim that whether the difficulties come from the individual or the circumstance should be the standard of sorting out. The fact that the man has overcome a stronger temptation to act wrongly does not make him a more *virtuous* person; rather, it just reveals his continence or strong will. Although this strong will might be something praiseworthy in the sense that reason overcomes the strong bad temptation, it is not yet a virtue, since a virtuous person would not feel such a temptation from the beginning. This is why continence does not qualify as a virtue, while temperance does. The difficulties that come from the unfavorable circumstances rendering the temptation stronger do not make the poor person's honest action more virtuous; rather, they just render it more difficult to become virtuous. Such unfortunate situation only makes the honest action more difficult, and this fact may imply that it is harder for him to become a virtuous person than others. The reason why a poor person's honest action is praised more than that of rich one is not because the former is more virtuous but just because it is more difficult.

giving up to do the alternative action. If it is, however, the very consciousness of doing what the agent believes to be right or noble that gives pain to the person, then he is undeserved to be called a virtuous person; he would be a continent person, at best. Admittedly, consciousness of the fact that he is performing a virtuous action would make a virtuous person feel pleasure; but at the same time, it is possible for this virtuous person to feel pain that comes from the consciousness of not being able to do what he wants to do. In Baron's example, if Ed is virtuous, he would take pleasure in the fact that what he is doing-i.e. treating the injured-is virtuous. His agony comes from the fact that he cannot take care of his own son. If he could both give a medical attention to the injured and attend his child at the same time, there would be nothing bad about his in doing both. It would be even better to do so. What a virtuous person feels in such dilemma situations can be seen as an ambivalent feeling in this sense.

Let me make some modifications to Baron's example to see the point more clearly. First, suppose that Ed's son is not within his reach and there is nothing he can do for the child. In this case, if Ed is virtuous, he would take pleasure in helping the injured. If he gets annoyed about helping him just because he does not want to bother himself to give a helping hand, with nothing else he wants to do, it shows his defective as a virtuous person. Even though he actually gives a medical treatment to the injured, he would be no more than a continent person. Here, it is the way he feels that disqualifies him as a virtuous person: he takes propositional pain over helping the injured. What if he does take pleasure in helping the injured, but only because he believes that that action will bring his financial reward or good reputation? There would be nothing

wrong about his action; yet since the pleasure is not from the consciousness of the fact that he is acting virtuously, but from the hope for external goods, we should say he is not a virtuous person.

Next, suppose that there is no one who needs urgent medical attention, and only Ed's son is crying next to him. There is nothing wrong for him to take care of the child and feeling pleasure in doing it; rather, it is what a virtuous person would do and how he would feel in this modified situation.¹³⁾

The example of a brave person I have cited previously shows that Aristotle would agree with my view on a virtuous person's pain (cf. *NE* III.9.1117a-b). There is nothing wrong in the brave soldier's desire to preserve his life or to spend time with his family. Also, there is nothing defective in his wishing that he were not placed in a state of war. Aristotle says that the fact this soldier acts virtuously in the teeth of the severe pain of giving up all these goods renders him even braver, for this man chooses what is noble in war at the cost of all these goods. For this reason, no finite human being can maintain the overall state of pleasure all the time. Also, this is the reason why we can take pleasure in acting virtuously in one sense, and at the same time feel pain in the other.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, as Aristotle would agree, feeling pain while acting virtuously is a direct indication of the person's being defective as a

13) For sure, this is what most fathers, not just virtuous persons, would do and how they would feel. But it does not matter, since I just wanted to show here that there is nothing wrong in taking this kind of action and feeling in such a situation.

virtuous one. Although the fact that one is acting virtuously itself is pleasant, the fact that one has to give up precious things for the sake of it at the given situation might be painful, as in Aristotle's example of a brave person.

A person's virtuousness does not depend on whether he feels pain at the moment of acting virtuously; nor it depend on whether he has conflicting desires at that moment. Insofar as the opposing desire causing the pain is permissible in itself, such a pain does not make the person's character less virtuous; rather, if the opposing desire is good in itself, feeling no pain while acting virtuously even indicates that the person is less virtuous. Moreover, being pained by acting virtuously is different from experiencing inner conflict while so acting. Although a virtuous person sometimes might be pained by the conflicting desires, he performs virtuous actions willingly and decisively. To sum up, while a fully virtuous person always takes pleasure in the fact that her action is virtuous, sometimes he feels pain while acting virtuously.

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국문요약

덕행에서 즐거움 느끼기 — 아리스토텔레스의 덕과 즐거움 —

엄성우

본 논문의 목적은 덕행을 할 때 고통을 느낀다는 사실만으로는 덕인이 되는 데 결격 사유가 되기에는 불충분하며 아리스토텔레스도 이에 동의할 것임을 보여주는 것이다. 아리스토텔레스의 덕인의 도덕 심리에 대한 한 가지 해석을 제시한 후, 이에 근거해 필자 자신이 보는 아리스토텔레스적 덕인에 대한 심리 분석을 제시할 것이다. 비록 덕인에게 있어 덕행을 한다는 그 사실 자체는 즐거울 것이지만, 아리스토텔레스의 용감한 사람 사례에서 볼 수 있듯 어떤 특수한 상황에서 덕행을 위해 소중한 것들을 포기해야만 하는 사실은 고통스러울 수 있다. 고통을 야기하는 대립 욕구가 그 자체로만 고려되었을 때 허용할만한 것인 한, 그러한 그 고통은 그 사람의 덕이 모자람을 나타내지 않는다. 만약 대립 욕구가 그 자체로 볼 때는 좋은 것이라면 그 경우 덕행을 할 때 아무런 고통을 느끼지 않는 것이야말로 덕의 부족을 나타낼 것이다. 또한, 덕행을 함에 있어 고통을 느끼는 것은 내적 갈등을 경험하는 것과 다르다. 비록 때로는 덕인도 욕구들의 갈등에 의해 고통을 느낄 수 있지만, 덕행의 수행에 있어서는 항상 자발적이고 단호하다. 요컨대 완전한 덕인은 자신이 덕행을 한다는 사실로부터 즐거움을 느끼지만, 어떤 상황에서는 덕인도 덕행을 할 때 고통을 느낄 수 있다.

주제어: 아리스토텔레스, 덕인, 덕행, 즐거움, 고통, 내적 갈등