

ARETOLOGY (Greek ἄρετη [arete]—excellence, bravery, virtue; λογος [logos]—word, thought, reason)—one of the fundamental fields of ethics and moral theology. Its object is ἄρετη, how it is understood and the various conceptions, number, and classifications of areté, the correlations between its particular components, how it is achieved and preserved, and how it is related to happiness.

A basic achievement of ancient philosophers was that they perceived certain necessary connections between the elements that compose human life. They saw these connections independently of how they were conceived in any particular philosophical system. First of all, man distinguishes good from evil and acts accordingly, and therefore he possesses some sort of freedom of choice. Second, in his conduct man is always directed toward something, always acts for an end, and seeks to achieve something. This indicates, third, the fundamental fact of potentiality, the relative incompleteness of the human being. A perceived lack of something (a need) is the subjective reason for acting. Fourth, the fact that man is perfected in acting is evident—he is perfected not only in epistemological action (science or learning) or productive, artistic, and technical action (art) but also in his moral action. This results from the fact that man must be properly formed in his skills with respect to the goods proper to him in order to become complete in his existence. These goods are such that by obtaining them a man may reach fulfillment in all his aspiration and according to the measure of his humanity. Fifth, this state of fulfillment, happiness, is attainable so that “man’s desire would not be vain and futile” and life an unending pursuit of particular fragmentary goods incapable for completely satisfying man’s desires.

Every system of ethics as a theory of moral action must include a theory of virtues: if the human acts that compose action under the aspect of their moral good or evil are the objects of ethics, then virtue is that whereby man acts well and in a refined way, whereby he is a good man, and even the best of men (since ἄρετη means precisely “best-ness”, ἀγαθος-αριστος-αρετη [agathos-aristos-arete], apart from those cases where something turns out to be good accidentally and is thereby outside of human power. However, according to the ancient axiom that “by virtue we are good” (e.g., *Men.*, 87 d 8), no one becomes good by accident.

Since ethics is concerned not only with knowing what virtue is but also with how to achieve virtue, that is, how to become a good man, so by their nature the virtues are practical in character and very important in life (*E. Nic.*, 1094 a 22); the virtues must be realized in light of a theory of man that describes who man is, who he should become, and what should be his aim in acting, so that we may then speak meaningfully of a “good” man or a man who acts well. As a result, aretology depends basically upon a vision of man; in fact every anthropology is potentially a source of a particular aretology. It is therefore not a matter of indifference what kind of anthropology underlies ethical reasoning.

Plato and Aristotle had recognized the fundamental role that the political community or πολις [polis] plays in education. The community of the polis secured for its citizens the right conditions for leading a good life, i.e., a life according to ἄρετη. A wrong aretology (or the absence of any aretology) may have tragic consequences, not only for individuals but for entire societies. In the field of education it may lead to antipedagogy, indeed to the intellectual, volitional, and emotional destruction of man.

Although pluralism may be tolerated in certain respects in the area of theory, we should not tolerate an attitude of permissiveness for pluralism or the free choice of any arbitrary “option”. It is morally necessary to situate our own subjective views on good and evil within an aretology that springs from a realistic philosophy, otherwise there is the danger that we may replace virtue and the full good of the person with ideologies or fragmentary doctrines that treat the dignity of the person as an instrument for other ends and which have little in common with man’s real good, along with all the consequences of this.

Areté according to Plato. Platonic anthropology teaches that man’s genesis is divine and emphasizes the role of the immaterial component in the human being. In his essence man is a spirit joined by necessity with the body and doing penance in the body. He is not a reflection of the ideal image of spirit-soul: the spirit and soul, his perfect essence, struggle in him with their imprisonment and limitation in the body. This is a dualistic image of man in which the body and soul do not form a unity but an opposition of the perfect and the imperfect: the soul-spirit does not belong to the world of nature; its existence, operation, and cognition are not limited by anything. The body is a negation and limitation of the soul’s perfection and freedom, a source of enslavement, and an obstacle to the soul’s perfect life. Only separate from his body can the spirit-soul lead a true existence. The way to liberate the soul from its confinement is to know the truth. The truth has the power to liberate the soul fettered by the body and to save it. This is the case because the truth is not only the way to liberation but also the true life of the soul. So Platonic aretology emphasizes the role of knowledge in a truly good life, and true virtue is possible only when it is connected by knowledge with the idea of beauty: “ ‘Do you call it a pitiful life for a man to lead—looking that way, observing that vision by the proper means, and having it ever with him? Do but consider,’ she said, ‘that there only will it befall him, as he sees the beautiful through that which makes it visible, to breed not illusions but true examples of virtue, since his contact is not with illusion but with truth’ ” (*Symposium*, 212 a). Only a true philosopher is capable of such a vision. His task is to lead other people out of the “prison” of the body by organizing political life and the proper political system of government. The best system has three co-existing classes: the ruling class of philosophers, the guardians, and those who produce goods. The three centers of human actions—the rational, irascible, and concupiscible—correspond to these three classes. They are in harmony and are led by the reason. European civilization is founded upon the harmonization of man’s inner self and the structure of the state, submission to these structures, and the desire for truth.

Areté according to Aristotle. The model for Aristotle’s understanding of man is the world of animals. Although his reason sets him apart from the animal world, man is still a product of nature (cf. *Prot.*, 16). His soul is the result of organic changes in a body that has life in potency. Only the reason does not come from matter; hence it is a divine element and comes from the sphere of the Sun. Man like the animals is composed of body and soul. The soul is the principle that internally organizes man’s life and action (*De an.* 412 a–413 b). Man is a being composed of body and soul. He is also a potential being, one that is perfected over the course of its existence. Human life runs its course within three basic domains of activity: cognitive, practical, and productive. Culture is possible—the cultivation of these domains and the perfecting of human actions in particular aspects, which is synonymous to the acquisition of the successive virtues as particular refinements.

Thus man’s basic ability to read reality (νοῦς [nous]) becomes the basis of experience which—enriched by consideration and reasoning (διάνεια [dianoia]) and completed by an appropriate method—provides as a result scientific knowledge (ἐπιστήμη [episteme]). It is

possible to move from knowledge to wisdom (σοφία [sophia]), i.e., the understanding of the knowledge itself (and this is knowledge of the highest objects—*E. Nic.*, 1141 a 16), understanding of the consequences flowing from knowledge, the relation of knowledge to reality, and reality itself. The theoretical part of cognition by understanding becomes capable of reconciliation with reality, a faithful reflection, as it were, of reality within itself, hence the classical description of the reason refined in this way is “*recta ratio speculabilium*”.

Cognition in its practical function is closely connected with man’s appetitive powers. Cognition influences and informs these powers. It specifies the object of sense appetite (passions) and rational appetite (will). Aristotle also said that there was a reverse influence: strong emotion can disturb our judgment about an object (*E. Nic.*, 1140 b 17). Hence the ethical virtues concern both the appetitive powers (Aristotle—parts of the irrational soul, which however has a share in the reason and is influenced by the reason—, *E. Nic.*, 1102 b 25)), and the cognitive powers in their practical function. So the virtue of fortitude on the one hand will consist in mastering either fear or excessive daring in a dangerous situation, and on the other hand it will consist in applicable knowledge of what should be feared and what is essentially not dangerous. In a particular way this virtue concerns soldiers and policemen. Temperance is abstinence from desires and appetites in the sexual domain (purity) and in eating and drinking (moderation). Temperance is also the eliciting of desires and the performance of applicable actions, even when there are no desires, but it is also an applicable knowledge of the objects of desires. Justice is the virtue of social life. It consists in rendering unto each person (and receiving from them if necessary) what is their due, and it is also a knowledge about what is owed, to whom, and in what circumstances. Prudence has the leading role among the virtues. It was traditionally called the “driver” of the virtues, since it is the basis for the functioning of the other virtues, it is most dependent on the dianoietic virtues, and it consists in the harmonious connection of theoretical cognition with practical cognition. It informs the appetitive powers so that in effect it leads to the correct course in the decision process: the consideration of the means leading to an end, judging between these means, planning action, and guiding action. Hence prudence is defined as a disposition connected with a true judgment about correct action in that which is good and beneficial for man to live properly (*E. Nic.*, 1140 a 25). It primarily concerns deliberation as the core of practical cognition that serves the choice of means leading to an end.

Furthermore, prudence consists not only in adapting action to a particular situation and all the circumstances surrounding it, but also consists in the subject’s knowledge of himself and in adapting his actions to his individuality. It extends to family life, social life, and economic life (familial, political, and economic prudence). The reason refined in this way is called “*recta ratio agibilium*”.

All the ethical virtues are stable dispositions for proper actions. So they are certain states of the subject allowing him to act promptly, energetically, and with pleasure (*prompte, firmiter, et delectabiliter*) as opposed to the lack of these traits where the organization of action takes place painfully, with great effort, and internal obstacles which consist mainly in the accidental character of passions or the lack of a proper attitude to pain and pleasure. When the virtues are absent, there may also be vices consisting in the possession of dispositions to evil deeds.

In the life of the psyche the virtues influence each other and work together (apart from the obvious role of prudence, without which no other virtue can exist). When a person restrains himself from following pain or pleasure as his guides he opens the field for the reason.

Fortitude allows a person to do what is just in difficult and dangerous situations. In the domain of psychological life, justice consists also in saturating the entire life of the psyche with reason so that each virtue operates in its own domain and the person remains in harmony internally (*Polit.*, 443 d), which passes over to social life. Social life as well cannot take any arbitrary course but has its own form of perfection, namely friendship in its highest form which is not merely for the utility and pleasure it provides but also for the person of the friend and his true good as a person.

These four virtues are called the cardinal virtues. They are not the whole of moral life but are its foundation. They concern the necessary elements or domains of action. The cardinal virtues also have their own components. A man can produce other virtues in the form of dispositions in the light of prudence and the concrete needs of life (parental prudence, pedagogical prudence, the fortitude of rescue workers in mines and mountains, the patience of the watchmaker, etc.).

It is obvious that a man's productive abilities may be refined in many ways. This must be done in many arts (*τεχνη* [techne], Latin *ars*) where each art has its own rules for making things. A properly refined reason—“*recta ratio factibilium*”—in this case becomes the source for correct production leading to beautiful and useful products. This presupposes the proper theoretical knowledge and a consideration of the moral aspect of productive work so that the skillful employment of technical abilities does not become a cause of moral evil.

Areté according to Thomas Aquinas. On the basis of the Aristotelian image of man as a “rational animal” a new conception of man as a person arose in the third and fourth century AD as a result of Christological controversies. This conception was further developed in the thirteenth century by Thomas Aquinas. Man is not only a product of nature. He lives in the world of nature and is immersed in it, but he transcends all nature with respect to the source of his existence and his mode of action.

The person (following Boethius) is an individual subject capable of eliciting conscious and autonomous human acts, and so capable of conscious and sovereign acts of decision (*individua substantia rationalis naturae*). Man as a person is actualized in free action and manifests himself in it. This fact is accessible in both internal experience (the self-awareness of “I”), and in external experience (in the experience of “my” actions) (Krapiec, Dz. [Works] IX 261). Among free actions, four characterize man as a person. (1) Man has the ability to know the truth. All culture including technology shows man as a master of nature who subjects nature to the laws of the spirit (transcendence). (2) Man has the ability to love, the ability to go outside of himself toward other beings (persons), the ability to sacrifice himself for others, to exist “for the other” which gives fundamental meaning to his life and all his personal actions. (3) Man has the ability to perform sovereign acts of decision, that is, “self-possession”, “self-determination”, and “self-mastery”. (4) Man has the ability to perform religious acts. In religious acts, which only man can perform, man's openness to transcendence is revealed.

These four types of actions are not a work of nature or culture (upbringing). They transcend the powers of nature and the potency of matter. They indicate that a specific source of these actions must exist, a person. Furthermore, man differs from other beings by: (5) his dignity (he is the highest in this hierarchy of beings); (6) completeness (he has everything that is essential to humanity); (7) subjectivity (he is the bearer of personal laws specific to himself).

As such man is not, and cannot be, a product of nature. He is a source of actions that transcend nature, and he requires the existence of the Creator as the ultimate reason for his existence. Man's transcendence in action and existence is evidence of his openness to the highest good and truth, namely to God.

With the arrival of Christianity, aretology was enriched by a new dimension of virtues concerning religion and man's fulfillment in the perspective of the Absolute. From this arises the question of how the traditional (cardinal) virtues are related to the theological virtues, which is a particular aspect of the question of the relation between reason and faith. The answer is that imparted (or infused) virtues rest on the foundation of the natural virtues. They complete or cause natural virtues. So we may speak reasonably of man's justification in the domain of religion by piety. Piety protects man from exaggerated devotion, fetishism, anthropomorphism, idolatry, and other false forms of religion.

Thomas Aquinas brought together in one system the heritage of the great ancient conceptions (Aristotelian, Stoic, and neo-Platonic, and the content of Christian revelation, and formed an aretological synthesis. He employed the scheme of the three theological virtues and the four cardinal virtues. In addition he regarded supernatural virtues as God's special gift to man enabling him to live the Christian life. Aquinas emphasized the role of love as the form of all the virtues and itself the basic virtue (*S. th.*, II-II, q. 23, a. 8). He overcame the limitations of all the ancient ethical systems that considered man's fulfillment (*ἑυδαιμονία* [eudaimonia]) in empirical terms by way of various actions (virtues) or mystical practices. Aquinas showed that the transcendent Being is the only ultimate term of human desires and the only source of their fulfillment.

The traditional ethics of the virtues acquires another dimension: it is not threatened by automatism in how certain virtues are acquired because these virtues are ordered to the good of the person. This requires work toward freedom of will and reason to choose the true good. Man's true freedom and his openness is the ability to transcend the determination of nature both within himself and outside himself. This is manifested not so much in "dominion" over nature as in the sublimation of nature, for the operations of the reason and will have their subject in man's corporeal structure which determines and limits them. Man can do this by virtue of the reason and the will which are at his disposal. This power must merely be released and developed, and therein is virtue. Virtue primarily concerns the will as the source and beginning of every virtue.

The upright will (*recta voluntas*) is the will directed by the good of things. This good is inscribed in things in the form of the end. Some things have as their end utility, pleasure, to be means, but there are some good that have the end of their existence in themselves. These are goods or ends that cannot be treated as means. All our actions should be ordered to these goods. The other person in view of his exceptional character is such a good and end. All other goods of a lower existence can only be means in relation to this end.

The will as such reacts to the good itself, but the will does not read the nature of the good. In order to make a free and proper act of decision, the will must be supported by the reason. The reason shows the will the nature of the good (whether it is a useful or an honest or authentic good), and acquired virtues help the will perform the proper acts of choice and become upright (as opposed to a depraved or enslaved will).

True human freedom is therefore realized by an upright will, a will guided by the true good of things. The rectitude of the will depends primarily upon the collaboration of the will with the reason in reading the nature of the good. Hence its actions become fully free when the will, to which the reason presents the good, chooses it without being coerced by ignorance, habit, or any other external or internal force. This must be done in the context of an understanding of the final end of human life, which is the highest good—God. When the perspective of the ultimate good is absent, the freedom of the will is seriously limited.

S. Thomas Aquinas, *Opera Omnia*, (ed. Leonina), I–XCVIII, R 1882–1912; É. Gilson, *La thomisme*, Str 1919, P 1965⁶ (*Tomizm* [Thomism], Wwa 1960, 1998²); J. Pieper, *Kleines Lesebuch von den Tugenden des menschlichen Herzens*, Mn 1947; Woroniecki, KEW I–II; Krapiec, Dz. [Works] VII; R. Guardini, *Tugenden*, Wü 1963; A. MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, NY 1966, Notre Dame 1998² (*Kr&243;tka historia etyki* [Short history of ethics], Wwa 1995); D. Von Hildebrand, *Heiligkeit und Tüchtigkeit; Tugend heute*, Regensburg 1969; E. Fink, *Metaphysik der Erziehung im Weltverständnis von Plato und Aristoteles*, F 1970; Krapiec Dz. [Works] IX; P. T. Geach, *The Virtues*, C 1977; E. Howald, A. Dempf, T. Litt, *Geschichte der Ethik vom Altertum bis zum Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Mn 1978; B. Sutor, *Die Kardinaltugenden—Erziehungziele politischer Bildung?*, Mn 1980; A. MacIntyre, *After virtue*, Lo 1981, 1985² (*Dziedzictwo cnoty* [Heritage of virtues], Wwa 1996); M. A. Slote, *Goods and Virtues*, Ox 1983; R. Bosley, *On Virtue and Vice*, NY 1991; D. Carr, *Educating the Virtues*, Lo 1991; Adkins, *Human Virtue and Human Excellence*, NY 1991; J. W. Chapman, *Virtue*, NY 1992; J. L. Kvanvig, *The Intellectual Virtues and Life of the Mind*, Savage 1992; T. Irwin, *Virtue, Love, and Form. Essays in Memory of Gregory Vlastes*, Edmonton 1994; H. Meier, *Über Tugenden*, Vaduz 1994; D. N. Beauregard, *Virtue's Own Feature*, Newark 1995; A. Comte-Sponville, *Petit traité des grands vertus*, P 1995; J. Günther, *Die alten Tugenden*, Lahnstein 1994; Arystoteles [Aristotle], *Dziela wszystkie* [Complete works], I–V, VII, Wwa 1996–; H. Fechtrop, *Nachdenken über Tugenden*, Mr 1996; O. O'Neill, *Tugend und Gerechtigkeit*, B 1996; S. Tipton, *Res publica bene ordinata*, Hi 1996; G. H. Von Wright, *L'etica della virtù e i suoi critici*, Na 1996; C. M. Martini, *Die Tugenden*, Mn 1997; M. Baur, *Virtues and Virtue Theories*, Wa 1998; V. Wickert, *Das Buch der Tugenden*, Mn 1958; M. Bautz, *Virtutes*, B 1999; A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals. Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, Lo 1999; Platon [Plato], *Dialogi* [Dialogues], Kęty 199.

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