

What Aristotle Can Teach Us About Personality Disorder

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Why turn to Aristotle to better understand personality disorder? After all, Aristotle is an ancient Greek philosopher who wrote over 2000 years ago, before the science of psychiatry and allied fields like neurobiology, experimental psychology, and psychotherapy had developed at all. He also had some strange ideas about biology: he believed the organ of thought was the heart, and that the brain functioned as a kind of refrigeration system for blood! What could we, with our more advanced science and understanding, possibly learn? In my view, the surprising fact is that we have a lot to learn. Contemporary psychiatry is plagued by a rift between neurobiological and psychotherapeutic models of the mind. If we want to advance our understanding of psychiatric disorders in general, and personality disorder in particular, we need to mend this rift. Aristotle can help us do this.

Aristotle wrote during a period when there was no academic division between the natural and the human sciences, and no attempt to reduce the latter to the former. Nature was one. He held that man – and woman, as we would now add – is a social animal. That phrase is so often quoted that it is easy to lose sight of its meaning. But its meaning is striking and important. We are *social animals*. So, we are *animals*: objects that fall under the laws of the natural sciences, including physics and chemistry as well as biology and neurology. But we are also essentially *social*: animals whose nature and, hence, wellbeing, cannot be understood apart from social bonds and interpersonal relationships. Aristotle held that such wellbeing requires the capacity for *virtue*, a capacity which is developed over time, taught by parents, and learned by children. In his ethical writings on virtue, Aristotle offers us a natural framework for explaining both the development of the character traits that define personality disorders, and also why they cause such distress and dysfunction to those who possess them.

Aristotle's Idea of the Good Life

According to Aristotle, all animals have capacities that, given the kind of animal they are, it is good for them to have. An owl needs the capacity to see in the dark, or it cannot hunt. So, it is good for an owl to be able to see in the dark. A deer needs to be swift of foot, or it cannot escape its predators. So, it is bad for a deer to be lame. A chimpanzee needs to have a large set of skills, like cracking nuts, and reading social cues, or it will not survive. So, it is good for a chimpanzee to have the capacity to learn these and other skills. In the case of human animals – *our* case – Aristotle holds that we need the capacity for virtue, or we will not live a good life, where we are able to take part in the various

activities and relationships that make life worth living. These include, for Aristotle, friendship and family life, work and productivity, and physical and intellectual pursuits and pleasures.

Whenever we think about what makes life worth living, it is essential to recognize the existence of cultural and individual differences in what is valued and what is enjoyed, and respect other perspectives. Different things can make life worth living for different cultures and individuals, and it is wrong to presume that we inevitably know what these things are for others. But that said, Aristotle is surely right that most people care about friendship, family, work and pleasure. It is not easy to see how a life without these things could that be a good life, a life of value that felt to its subject to be worth living. Furthermore, he is also right that we need virtue to achieve these goods.

By virtue, Aristotle means the possession of a stable set of character traits, that allows us to think, feel, and act in the right way, to the right degree, at the right time – to think, feel, and act as the situation confronting us demands. For Aristotle, virtue is a mean – a balance – between extremes. In contrast to virtuous character traits, traits that lie at the extremes do not allow people to think, feel, and act as the situation demands. To illustrate this idea, consider a favourite ancient Greek example: the demands of war and battle. At one extreme in battle is the coward. The coward cringes and flees when confronted with the enemy, no matter the importance of the cause he is fighting for, allowing thoughts of death to possess him, and his fear to overcome him. This is not to think, feel, and act as the situation demands. At the other extreme in battle is the rash man. The rash man rushes into battle without thought and consideration, overcome by his own arrogance and aggression. He has no thought for the reality of the situation – that he might, for instance, be killed, leaving his children without a father, his wife without a husband. He is foolhardy, and impetuous. Again, this is not to think, feel, and act as the situation demands. Finally, in contrast to both these extremes, and lying between them, is the courageous man. He rightly appreciates the danger he faces, and potential cost to him and his loved ones. But he masters his fear and acts with assurance, dignity, and self-possession. Afterwards, if he is successful, he may take pride in his achievements, but he will not mock his slain enemies. He shows virtue, both in his courage, and in his compassion.

The ancient Greek battlefield is of course literally far removed from today's society, but metaphorically it is an apt expression of what many people, especially those who suffer from personality disorder, face daily. We each have our own battles, and the challenge for each of us is to find a way to handle ourselves with virtue when confronted with demanding, difficult, and painful situations: to think, feel, and act in the right way, to the right degree, at the right time – as the situation demands. To find the mean between the various extremes that pull us in opposing and less than ideal directions. Doing so requires a host of stable character traits, such as courage and compassion, but also moderation and temperance, justice and fair-mindedness, generosity and empathy, patience and persistence, productivity, trust and love and respect for ourselves and others. We need these traits in order to live the good life, and, especially, to have good friendships and relationships with our family, and to find work and goals and pleasures that we value, and are able to pursue with commitment and success. We need virtue – a stable, reliable set of character

traits conducive to the good life – so that, whatever life throws our way, we are best placed to handle it in a measured and balanced way that maintains our values and goals alongside our relationships with others. That is how wellbeing can be achieved for us humans, given the kind of animal we are.

At different times in all our lives, this mean between extremes is very difficult to achieve. Perhaps we act in anger as opposed to considered reflection when we perceive that someone has wronged us. Or we let fear of retaliation stop us from standing up for ourselves or others when we are mistreated or bullied. But it is especially difficult for people with personality disorder to strike this balance. Personality disorder is characterized by character traits that involve patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that are markedly different from social norms and expectations, as well as – and this is key – pervasive and inflexible. This means that these patterns are set and rigid, as opposed to flexible and responsive to the situation at hand. These traits are such that the person finds it difficult, if not impossible, to find a mean between extremes: to appraise each situation, objectively, in its own right, and respond accordingly with appropriate thoughts, feelings, and behaviour.

From a psychotherapeutic perspective, we can understand such pervasive, inflexible traits as relics of the past, enacting entrenched patterns and habits that may have no rightful place in the present. This radically affects a person's capacity to maintain good, strong relational ties with others and so compromises their friendships, family life, and work life. If one sees the present through the veil of the past, and the past is such that one naturally finds it hard to love, to trust, to empathize, to show generosity, patience, fair-mindedness, then one is cut off from good, strong, stable, relational ties with friends, family, and colleagues. They will struggle to understand and to maintain a solid bond of good regard and affection. At worst, they may withdraw from the relationship, increasing the experience of isolation and distress in those with personality disorder. That kind of pattern of relationship is something that people who suffer from personality disorder (and those who care for them and work with them) are all familiar with.

Aristotle's account of the good life offers a simple, elegant explanation of why the kind of pervasive and inflexible character traits defining of personality disorder cause such severe distress and dysfunction to those who suffer from it. The explanation is that good, strong relational ties with others require the capacity to find the mean between extremes, to appraise each situation on its own merits, and to think, feel, and act accordingly. And the basic facts about human nature, namely, that we are social animals, mean that the good life – a life worth living – is not possible without these relational ties. So put succinctly: Aristotelian virtue is necessary for good relations with others. And good relations with others are necessary for wellbeing. That is simply what it is to be human – it's our nature.

Impulsivity and its Effects on the Good Life

To further illustrate this, let us consider one of the core diagnostic traits of personality disorder: impulsivity. Impulsivity is one of the extremes that contrasts with Aristotle's virtues of moderation or temperance. Moderation and temperance are sometimes called the 'executive virtues' because of their central role in the good life quite generally. In some sense, these traits constitute the basic capacity to find a way to balance between extremes, and do what the situation requires despite pressures, from within or from the world, to behave in ways that are not for the best. Impulsivity – a tendency to act without thinking, out of whatever desire or emotion grips you in the moment – stands in the way of moderation and temperance. Traits that lie at the other extreme from impulsivity perhaps include an excess of duty, a lack of spontaneity, a kind of perfectionism. These too express, if not a lack of moderation or temperance, then too much of it.

Why is impulsivity detrimental to wellbeing? Most obviously, if you act without thinking, on the spur of the moment, you may act out of anger, or fear, or shame, and so may behave in ways that you later regret. Such emotions do not typically lead to actions in your own or others' best interests. But impulsivity does not just lead to regret. It also compromises the possibility of strong and stable relationships – with others, but also, I suggest, with your future self.

Aristotle would recognize the adverse effect that impulsivity can have on interpersonal relationships. If you are impulsive, then others cannot rely on you to keep promises and see through commitments, or to look out for their best interests when in the grip of strong desires and emotions. An impulsive person is unpredictable and volatile, rather than reliable and measured, and this naturally compromises their relationship with others. But impulsivity also has an adverse effect on a person's capacity for self-autonomy and self-creation. These are central post-Enlightenment values, much more important to us in modern society than they were in ancient Greece. If you are impulsive, it is not simply that others cannot rely on you. You cannot rely *on yourself* to keep your promises and commitments and look out for yourself either – to maintain a reliable, measured way of being over time. For this reason, impulsivity is equally bad for your relationship with yourself. Your present self cannot be trusted to act in your future self's best interests. And even more, your present self cannot trust your future self to act in its own then best interests. This may be part of what makes changing entrenched patterns so hard for those who are impulsive. Why should you make the effort to change entrenched patterns today – an effort which will demand great willpower, if you are impulsive – if you cannot trust yourself to do the same tomorrow? Consider, for example, an addict struggling to abstain from their drug of choice. Forgoing the drug is hard. Perhaps it is their habitual way of coping with intense psychological distress. There is little reason to break the cycle of use and make the effort to abstain today, and bear that distress, if they cannot trust themselves not to relapse tomorrow. Why bother?

This is why impulsivity not only compromises a person's capacity for relationships with others, but equally their capacity for self-autonomy and self-creation. It blocks a person's ability to shape the

course of their life over time – to fashion a life that expresses their long-standing, well-considered, values, hopes, and goals, as opposed to whatever desires or emotions grip them in the moment. To use the language of modernity, it stops a person from making their life *their own*. It thus presents a double impediment to the good life as we now understand it.

Aristotle's Account of the Development of Virtue

I suggested above that a psychotherapeutic perspective on the kinds of character traits associated with personality disorder would see them as relics from the past. Aristotle would agree. Aristotle saw not only that virtue was necessary for the good life, but equally that virtue had to be learned through the process of what he calls a 'proper upbringing'. He thought that children were born with a set of desires and motivations – an innate disposition – that was not necessarily conducive to virtue. Consequently, he thought it was essential that parents teach children to be virtuous – just as chimpanzees must teach their offspring various skills for living successfully in their group. But according to Aristotle, parents must not do this simply through criticism and punishment. Rather, parents must teach children to be virtuous by helping them find *pleasure* in virtue, so that they see *for themselves* that it is a good way to be, not only for others, but for *them*. It is this pleasure that cements the capacity for virtue into a reliable and stable character trait.

To make this vivid, consider for a moment the development in children of a single, specific virtue: the capacity to share. As we all know, children don't always like to share! At first, they often need to be told that they must and made to do it, so that it becomes a standing expectation they have. They need to get into the habit of sharing. But Aristotle's point is that parents must not develop this habit in children through criticism and punishment. Rather, they must help children to come to enjoy sharing, to find pleasure in giving, and so to learn for themselves that sharing is good for all. It is, of course, a constant struggle for all parents to know how best to do this, and Aristotle alas offers us little in the way of practical tips or enlightenment! But it is natural to think that at least some of the following characteristics help. Parents need to be clear and firm about the expectation that children share, but not angry when they fail. Parents need to acknowledge the genuine struggle to share that children face, and praise them when they succeed. Finally, parents need to make sure that children are equally the recipients of sharing – that they get the chance to experience how nice it is to be shared *with*. It is this sort of stable, loving, and fair-minded upbringing that will show children the potential pleasure to be had in sharing, ultimately cementing the capacity for generosity into a reliable and enduring character trait, that the child values *in herself* and wants to act on – at least some of the time – *for herself*. Not just because she knows that she should or has been told that she must. She herself sees the good in sharing and so desires it.

Aristotle saw very clearly that virtue was essential for the good life for humans, but also that a certain kind of upbringing was essential for its development. Very strikingly, neurobiology seems to confirm Aristotle's basic developmental account. Expressions of love and positive reinforcement

have been shown to have the combined effect on children of producing pleasure alongside neuronal growth in the orbitofrontal cortex, which is one of the areas of the brain that seems to underpin the capacity for moderation and impulse-control. Most people who suffer from psychiatric disorders quite generally, and personality disorder in particular, have not had this kind of upbringing. Personality disorder is not correlated with expressions of love and positive reinforcement, but rather with psychosocial adversity, including childhood physical, sexual and emotional abuse or neglect, parental psychopathology, family breakdown, institutional care, war, poverty, and migration. This is why Aristotle would agree with the psychotherapeutic idea that the character traits associated with personality disorder are relics from the past. They have been learned in adverse circumstances. People with personality disorder have not had the sort of past that we all need to be able to find the mean between extremes. They need to be given the opportunity to develop this capacity – to learn to find the balance.

Character development is a continuous process. It does not come to a sudden end with adulthood. Long-standing patterns and habits can be unlearned, and new ways of thinking, feeling, and acting slowly put in their place. People can change. This is what effective treatment for personality disorder must aim to achieve. If Aristotle is right, people with personality disorder need to be given the opportunity to re-shape their personality by developing the capacity for virtue. But they need stability, support, care, and positive reinforcement to help them do so. The capacity to find the mean between extremes depends on the opportunity to find pleasure in doing things for your own good and the good of others. Perhaps too, it depends on recognizing that it is within your power to make your life *your own*. Psychotherapy of various bents, sometimes in conjunction with medication, is now recognized as an effective treatment for personality disorder. It is sometimes thought that such therapy needs to be painful and hard to be effective. Perhaps the final lesson to be learned from Aristotle is that this may not be right. It may be pleasure that motivates and cements the process of learning and change. Maybe therapy, like childhood, should contain as much pleasure as possible.