ARISTOTLE AND THE STARTING POINT OF MORAL* DEVELOPMENT: THE NOTION OF NATURAL VIRTUE

Cristina Viano
(CNRS, Paris)

1. ‘Natural Virtue’

In *Ethics* VI, 13, Aristotle shows how practical wisdom (φρόνησις) and moral virtue (ἀρετή) must necessarily work together to bring about virtuous action: the first works out the means and the second supplies the end. Aristotle distinguishes practical wisdom from cleverness (διευνότης), which is a power just as capable of producing results consistent with a given aim, except that the aim in question need not be noble but may equally well be perverted. In this context Aristotle compares the relationship between cleverness and practical wisdom with the relationship between natural virtue (φυσικὴ ἀρετή) and virtue in the fullest sense [of the word] (κύριω)

The case of virtue, in fact, is akin to that of practical wisdom in its relationship to cleverness. Though the two are not identical, there is at any rate a similarity between them, and natural virtue is related in the same sort of way to virtue in the strict sense. Indeed everybody thinks that each type of character belongs to its possessor in some sense by nature (φύσις ποι)-for from the very moment of our birth we are just or inclined to self-control or brave and so on. But yet we seek something else, namely the good in the strict sense (τὸ κύριον ἀγαθόν)—we want such qualities to belong to us in another way. For both children and animals possess natural dispositions (φυσικοὶ ἐξεταῖ), but, without the accompaniment of reason, these dispositions appear to us as harmful. This much, at any rate,

---

* Translated from the French by Christopher Strachan.
Cristina Viano

is evidently there for anyone to see: just as it happens that some powerful creature deprived of sight may fall heavily when it moves because it cannot see, so it is with the dispositions of which we are speaking. On the other hand, once reason is acquired, a fundamental change occurs in the realm of moral action and the disposition that up to this point only resembled reason, becomes reason in the strict sense. Therefore, just as in the part of us that forms opinions there are two distinct qualities, cleverness and practical wisdom, so too in the moral part of the soul there are two types of virtue, natural virtue and virtue in the strict sense, and of these two virtues, virtue in the strict sense does not occur unless it is accompanied by practical wisdom. [E.N. VI, 13, 1144b1–17]

In this very condensed passage we have the most important reference to the notion of natural virtue in the entire Aristotelian corpus. This notion, in common with many others which quite specifically concern powers of the soul, never constitutes in Aristotle the object either of an analysis or a specific definition, but it appears frequently in the Ethics and plays a fundamental part in the make-up of the moral individual.

Here natural virtue presents two basic characteristics: it is insufficient to bring about moral action properly so called and it is innate. In effect it appears on the one hand as something resembling virtue without however being identified with it—a sort of diminished, incomplete virtue posited not as an alternative to it but rather as a component of virtue in the fullest sense. On the other hand it is natural and a constituent element of individuals, determining their particular moral character (ἦθος) from birth. Natural virtue is a disposition (ἐξετός) of the soul of the highest order. Animals and children, who are irrational beings and therefore non-moral, have for their part natural dispositions (φυσικοὶ ἐξετοὶ). Indeed, if Aristotle speaks of natural virtues in animals, he does it by means of comparison.2

I should now like to examine the notion of natural virtue in Aristotle, seeking in particular answers to the following three generically distinct questions:

a) What form precisely does the relationship between natural virtue and virtue in its fullest sense take? And, more particularly, what role does it play in the Aristotelian theory of the unity of the virtues and their mutual involvement?

2 Cf. the well-known passage on “traces of psychological states” (ἵνα ἄν των περὶ τὴν ψυχὴν τρόπον) in animals in Hist. anim. VIII, I, 588a 19–25. Aristotle compares them to the traces and seeds (ἵνα καὶ σπέρματα) of future character in children.