

Action and Character Formation: An analysis of The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle

Arvind Kumar Mishra*

ICSSR Doctoral Fellow, Department of Political Science, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi-221005

Abstract – The present paper is an attempt to analyse The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle in the context of the ongoing process of character formation. It explores the role of different types of Actions done by individuals in their character formation. It also critically analyses the limits and challenges caused by the human surroundings and conditions in individuals' life.

Key Words: Character, Action, Eudaimonia, State, Education

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First of all it is important to explain that, why does Aristotle give so much emphasis on character in his work *The Nicomachean Ethics*. For this, we need to interconnect both his major works *The Politics* and *The Nicomachean Ethics*. The ultimate aim of human life is to acquire happiness or flourishing that is *Eudaimonia* and for Aristotle, happiness is the virtuous activity of the soul. Aristotle says that *eudaimonia* is not a feeling or state of mind but the way of being and this way of being is largely dependant on Character, this shows that our character determines our way of being.

Human happiness or flourishing can only be achieved in *The Polis* or State that is a natural institution and the highest human association because "Aristotle believes that a state exists for the sake of the good or happy life, so that the best form of government will be one which promotes the wellbeing of all of its citizens" (Cohen eds. 2005: 654). The best form of government and thus state should be ruled by virtuous citizens or citizens with good character because statesmen with good character can only be able to make the best of their efforts to fulfil the aims of the state.

Greek terminology for character is 'ethos'. Aristotelian notion of character is linked with moral virtues or goodness and as we know according to Aristotle moral goodness is the result of habit. Thus we acquire and internalise moral goodness or virtues through habituation of our actions or *praxis*. Character or ethos is relatively permanent and once a character is formed is not easily amended. So our actions determine our behaviours and our behaviours in a long run define our characters.

Aristotle in book 3 of his *The Nicomachean Ethics* talks about types of actions; voluntary, involuntary or

non-voluntary. For the formation of characters, Aristotle says that individual's earlier willing actions are responsible and these willing actions are voluntary actions done by the actors. Talking about a voluntary action, Aristotle says that an individual is originator of his own action and there is no compulsion regarding the performance of the very action and choice is present before him.

In this particular question Aristotle clearly explains character in negative terms as he calls it ' a bad moral state'. Here he gives examples of drinking, licentious acts, dishonest behaviour, other forms of dissipation and similar activities. Before explaining these examples, I will quote Aristotle from chapter 5 of book 3 of *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

"Virtue lies in our power, and similarly so does vice; because where it is in our power to act, it is also in our power not to act, and where we can refuse we can also comply. So if it is in our power to do a thing when it is right, it will also be in our power not to do it when it is wrong; and if it is in our power not to do it when it is right, it will also be in our power to do it when it is wrong. And if it is in our power to do right and wrong, and similarly not to do them; and if doing right or wrong is the essence of being good or bad, it follows that it is in our power to be decent or worthless" (Aristotle 2004: 61).

My understanding from the text is that, for being just or unjust individuals themselves are responsible. A person who is drunken and hence commits a crime. The reason for this crime is ignorance of the person but the reason of this very ignorance is the result of his drunkenness. It was in his capacity not to be ignorant but he became so because of his negligence. There was always a choice before him not to drink but he himself

chosen to do so. The person who would not have been drunken, had not committed crime because according to Aristotle, a man with good character is one who is well capable to decide what is right or wrong for him.

The constant repetition of drinking by the person becomes his habit and this very habit of the person would tempt him to behave in a certain direction and this behaviour later becomes his character. To Aristotle all actions of this sort would lead to formation of bad character, and these all are voluntary actions of people such as licentious acts, drinking and other forms of dissipation which make people with bad character.

One may question that an individual would have done such wrong actions under compulsions but the point here is that a person may do a wrong or unjust action under compulsion but once or twice, not every time. Because once the person will do a wrong act and thus will be affected badly due to inherent nature of the act, so further he will avoid to do it. But if he keeps on repeating all such bad acts further then it clearly shows that he is willing to do and all this sort of actions are voluntary.

Talking about earlier discussed person Aristotle explains that " 'Well probably he is the sort of person who does not take care.' But people get into this condition through their own fault, by the slackness of their lives; i.e. They make themselves unjust or licentious by behaving dishonestly or spending their time in drinking and other forms of dissipation; for in every sphere of conduct people develop qualities corresponding to the activities that they pursue" (Aristotle 2004: 62-63).

Here I would like to give critique of Aristotle where he says that individual themselves are responsible for their characters which are formed by their own earlier willing actions. Talking about the formation of character, Aristotle does not keep in mind the role played by conditions and human surroundings. A person who is born and brought up in a slum where there is no education and where a large scale poverty exists, and henceforth the person found wrong surroundings and are experienced with an undesired process of socialisation, thus with the passage of time he develops a bad character with a life which is not virtuous. Here Aristotle would say that his character is the result of his own earlier willing actions that are voluntary. But the point is that his own earlier willing actions were not voluntary because choice that is a matter of deliberation was not present before him and actions done by him were due to the compulsions. This sort of persons do not get into this condition through their own fault (as contrary to Aristotle). Whatever bad activities or unethical acts they do, they do so because they are incapable to decide what is right or wrong for them due to their ignorance and for this ignorance they are responsible from nowhere.

However Aristotle does emphasise the role of education in his work *The Politics*. He says that legislators should provide the kind of education which will produce citizens with virtuous dispositions and good character. For the welfare and wellbeing of individuals, Aristotle argues for knowing the right end and selecting the right means also.

In *The Politics*, education has been seen as a means which aims at the best realisation of virtuous life and the attainment of a good character. Aristotelian notion of character must be understood with keeping both his major works in our mind because both his major works are complementary in nature. Character is a matter of high importance in Aristotle. Here I connected character with education because, education helps to end the lack of opportunities, make a person rational and well capable to decide what is right and wrong for him and uplift him. According to Aristotle when a person would be able to know what is right or wrong for him through education then he can only be able to perform just acts, and these just acts in a long run would correspond to the formation of a just character. What I have understood is that Aristotelian notion of education can end the contrast which I have mentioned above, that is between two things when Aristotle says that individual themselves are responsible for their characters which are formed by their own earlier willing actions and another side of the picture which reveals that in many cases individuals are not responsible for their characters; because their characters are the result of their actions which are affected by their human surroundings and conditions.

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Corresponding Author

Arvind Kumar Mishra*

ICSSR Doctoral Fellow, Department of Political Science, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi-221005

arvindpolitical@gmail.com