

# Aristotle's Concept of Virtue in the Context of Contemporary Nigeria

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## Abstract

For over two decades now Nigeria has been named among the most corrupt countries in the world by transparency international. This is surprising considering the religiosity of its citizens. Nigeria is a very religious country with the three major religions (Muslim, Christianity and traditional religion) having a good number of adherents. The question that spurred up this research is; why is Nigeria lacking so much behind in virtue in spite of its seeming religiosity? In attempt to answer the question, the researcher was forced to agree with Aristotle that, words alone do not spring up virtue in humans. Aristotle believes that virtue does not arise in man by chance but through forced habituation. He believes that humans when left uncontrolled would always tend towards the vicious, because their souls are being led by the passions instead of reason. To allow reason to rule, the passions need to be forced to subject to the ruling of reason. This force is therefore necessary, because the passions cannot be persuaded by mere words to listen to reason – it is only the language of force that could compel the passions to the good. This paper believes that if force through the law as Aristotle advises is employed in Nigeria, the country would produce virtues. This is necessary, because Nigerians have proven Aristotle right, by showing that words and advice alone do not prop up virtue.

**Keywords:** Concept, Virtue, Context, Contemporary, Nigeria.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Aristotle ethics which enshrines his idea of virtue is a response to the Sophists teachings and also a building on the ideas of his mentors (Plato and Socrates) who had already opposed the Sophists. The Sophists – “a group of teachers who emerged to teach the arts of public debate and persuasion” (Charlesworth 8) argued that “ethical judgements cannot be universal but are subjective in that, what is considered right or just and what is considered wrong or unjust depends on an individual's perception which is linked to what is convenient for the individual” (Guthrie 68). The Sophists propagated the view that knowledge and truth are not attainable and that man should not bother to seek what he can never find. They instead upheld the Protagoras dictum that everyone should measure matters according to his nature and needs, since he is the measure of all that exists.

Socrates criticized sophism on the ground that if genuine knowledge cannot be found, then the presumption of Protagoras and his disciples to instruct others on worldly success could be misleading. For these “students and teachers might after all be doing the wrong thing, since they did not have any positive knowledge” (Popkin & Stroll 189). For Socrates, since neither the teachers nor the students had any knowledge, it means the blind (sophists) were leading the blind (students). Socrates therefore, was convinced that one could only act on the basis of the truth. This truth is situated in the Forms. The “highest good is therefore, knowledge of the Form of the good. When this is known, an individual would know good from bad, right from wrong” (<http://www.thedivinesoul.net>).

The highest good, Plato thinks, can only exist for the individual, the society and the state, if there is an exemplification of justice in the way component parts harmonize among themselves. He states that justice is a virtue of the soul and injustice is its vice. For him, things have virtue by their functions and that the function of the soul is to govern and advise a person through life. If the soul is deprived of its proper function, it cannot perform well. Virtue for him is the health of the soul whereas vice is the disease of the soul.

Aristotle's ethics is based on Platonic ideas but it is less ‘ethereal’ and ‘metaphysical’ than is Platonic Philosophy. For Aristotle virtuous character entails intellectual and moral virtues, “intellectual virtue is taught through experience and time, moral virtue is formed by habit” (Edel et al 35). Moral virtues entail practicing the middle of extremes through habituation and forced training.

This paper attempts an application of the Aristotelian ideas on virtue to the Nigerian socio-cultural situation with the hope that this would foster a better and more virtuous Nigeria.

## 2. ARISTOTLE ON VIRTUE

Aristotle just like Plato sees man as a sort of hybrid between an animal and a god. On one hand, human beings have an animal nature with their actions if uncontrolled; being led by emotions and desires and on the other hand they also have a rational part. The rational part enables man to resist his emotion and desires and to act in accordance with moral virtues. Thus for Aristotle, when reason is in control of the emotions and desires virtue arises. He asserts:

Reason and appetite are in agreement in the vicious as well as the virtuous. However, in the vicious the

agreement is the passion to reason. The virtuous are those in who reason rules, and rules without opposition (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1178b20).

He contends further:

Appetite ought by nature to obey reason for reason is what makes human to be human and not just animal ... what is decisive for virtue and its development is the subordination of appetite to reason (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1179a5).

Aristotelian ethics therefore, involves doing what is virtuous, and doing what is virtuous cannot be done without achieving a balance between reason, emotions and desire. This balance is Aristotle's happiness. Therefore, according to Aristotle, "he is happy who lives in accordance with complete virtue" (Adler <http://radicalacademy.com/adleraristotleethics/htm>).

Aristotle lists out a number of virtues such as: courage, temperance, liberality, truthfulness et cetera and provides a framework within which human beings are able to deliberate and choose actions which are in accordance with moral virtues. He claims that each moral virtue has two opposites or vices, one being an excess, the other a deficiency of the activity in question. Each of the virtues is a state of being that naturally seeks its mean relative to us. According to Aristotle, the virtuous habit of action is always an intermediate state between the opposed vices of excess and deficiency – too much and too little are always wrong; the right kind of action always lies in the mean. Thus, for example, with respect to acting in the face of danger, courage is a mean between the excess of rashness and the deficiency of cowardice. With respect to the enjoyment of pleasures, temperance is a mean between the excess of intemperance and the deficiency of insensibility. With respect to spending money, generosity is a mean between the excess of wastefulness and the deficiency of stinginess. With respect to relations with strangers, being friendly is a mean between the excess of being ingratiating and the deficiency of being surly; and with respect to self-esteem, magnanimity is a mean between the excess of vanity and the deficiency of pusillanimity.

Aristotle proposed this doctrine of the means, to aid individuals to determine what constitutes moral virtue in different circumstances, with "the mean not being a mathematical mean between excess and deficiency" (Charlesworth 42); but a mean determined by the moral agent perception (which is likely to be influenced by the convention of the particular society of which the moral agent is a member) as to how to "feel and act towards the right person to the right extent at the right time for the right reason in the right way" (Charlesworth 43). Aristotle's doctrine of the mean therefore, makes allowance for societal conventions with the societal conventions of a particular society being reflected in its civil law.

The question now becomes, how do virtues act arise? Do virtuous conducts arise by chance? Aristotle answers these questions in his ethics showing how good laws are necessary for the development of virtue. He argues that virtue does not develop in man through the spontaneous operation of nature, although one by nature may have the capacity to be virtuous (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1103a30). Virtue for him is ingrained by habituation which is a product of education. Once a man has become virtuous by proper training, he will almost automatically make the correct choice with regards to conduct (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1103b5).

Since virtue can only be gotten through education which is the proper responsibility of the state; and since the state aims at the most supreme of all goods (Aristotle, *Politics* 1252a5), it follows that the state is instituted to make men virtuous, to make them conform to what is highest in them by nature (<http://www.reasonpapers.com>). In other words, virtue which is based on nature requires choice, but making the right choice depends on habituation; habituation depends on good laws that through pain and pleasure teach the right behaviour (<http://www.reasonpapers.com>). Thus, for the state or polis to be described as perfect, it has to realize its own true form, which is to provide all the conditions necessary for a complete human life (<http://www.reasonpapers.com>). That is, it has to provide the conditions necessary for virtue to thrive. This is because:

The end of community, which is the fundamental justification for its existence, is the good and happy life, in the sense that the fundamental reason individual have for living in communities and for engaging in a wide variety of community relation is to lead good and happy lives, that is to realize themselves and be virtuous (Owens 70).

Thus, according to Aristotle, a state which fails in this task is actually a failed state. Aristotle's teaching that, virtue is a function of the state through the instrumentality of good laws which, through pain and pleasure, teach the right behaviour, brings up a pertinent question: can a man be forced to be virtuous? Aristotle's answer is in the affirmative, after all, parents force their children to be virtuous; so also strong laws can force men to be virtuous. His argument according to Owens is that

With time, right conduct become easier, through the development of reason and the emergence of the ability to properly see what is right for man by nature. But before then the force of habit, instilled through the laws or parental authority is necessary for the development of virtue (75).

Aristotle believes that man must be forced to be virtuous by proper habituation; after virtuous habits are ingrained in him, later in life he would come to do virtuous acts without force, because then his reasons must

have taken charge. This is because Aristotle believes that for the common man, passions rule the intellect. Since the intellect is here ruled by the passions there is no way such a man can become virtuous by mere teaching. The passion need to be forced by external laws to make the man virtuous. After a considerable time when out of forceful habituation, the passions are made subordinate to reason, the man acts virtuously onward without force. But the passion has to be subdued first. He observes:

Arguments and teachings, I am afraid, are not effective in all cases; the soul of the listener must first have been conditioned by habits to the right kind of likes and dislikes, just as the land must be cultivated before it is able to foster the seed. For a man whose life is guided by emotion will not listen to an argument that dissuades him, nor will he understand it (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1179b5-10).

According to Aristotle therefore, men when left alone pursue what is pleasant. But in order to become truly human one must be able to moderate the passions. This is painful, but through the function of good laws, he claims; good moral habits are developed. Words alone, he says, cannot achieve this. For him:

Words only seem effective with those already in love with beauty and the noble. The many remain untouched. Words cannot turn them towards what is beautiful and good ... they obey the rule of fear not of shame, and shun what is base not because it is ugly but because it is punished (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1179b20-30).

He believes that "he who lives as the passions directs will neither hear argument that dissuades him, nor understand it if he does ... in general passion seem not to yield to argument but force" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1179b30). However, "once habituation under coercive laws has preceded, then words can have their effect and convert law-generated love of beauty into fully fledged virtue" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1144a35).

As we have discussed already, Aristotle's denial that the 'many' can become virtuous is owed to his beliefs about the soul and its parts. According to him,

Appetite ought by nature, to obey reason, for reason is what makes human to be human and not just animals. In the many, the appetite or passions fails to obey reason, while in the continent or virtuous reason has the upper hand and the desires yield to reason. Clearly what is decisive for virtue and its development is the subordination of appetite to reason. Such appeals to reason could only work if reason were in control, but in such cases reason is 'ex hypothesis', not in control (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1119a20).

For Aristotle therefore, making men virtuous is not a task of teaching but of forced training. This training ought to begin as early in youth as possible, because the passions would dominate reason if nothing is done early in life to correct it. He believes the training must start at home but needs to be backed up by the political power is less resentful (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1180a20-25). The state therefore, for Aristotle is to undertake the task of training or educating the young.

### 3. VIRTUE IN NIGERIA

Nigerians are very religious people. But religion seems to have no impact in their lives; because almost on a daily basis one hears of cases of people being swindled of their monies, or of people corruptly enriching themselves. The existence and manifestations of corrupt and fraudulent practices have eaten so deep into the fabric of our society that a former United States of Chief of Defence Staff, General Collins Powell, had to assert that, it is in the character of Nigerians to defraud (Inoka 129). This statement may be considered as too sweeping, considering the fact that Powell is not a Nigerian, but when we consider other statements more defamatory than Powell's own, made by Nigerians themselves, it may become undeniable that Nigerians truly are 'virtueless.' Alhaji Shehu Musa for instance said with regards to Nigeria that, it is not just that officials are corrupt, but that corruption is official. Anyone who does not do so is seen as a fool (Musa, This Day, Oct; 5, 1997). General M. Buhari puts it in stronger words:

Nowhere else in the world can one find a society tolerating the theft of its precious resources in broad day light with nothing happening to the thieves ... few societies seem to reward embezzlement with 'honours' as does our own. Instead of putting rascals on trial, we put them in position of leadership (Buhari, in his AREWA House Lecture of May 15, 1998).

John Ekanem also laments:

daily the citizens are keeping dates with violence, hunger and insecurity, as security forces brutalise, maim, kill, assassinate ... helpless citizens who dare to express curiosity, about the evaporation of the millions of dollars accruing from crude oil every day (76).

Nwala also observes:

Today, the nation is hostage to corruption. Materialism has taken charge of the nation. Corruption and materialism have become our religion and have permeated our sacred institution including the religious, educational and traditional institutions (169).

Ekwuru also pointed out that

Today, various forms of fraudulent activities characterize the normal life: exploitation, extortion, embezzlement of public funds, looting of private and collective properties, awarding of false contracts and mostly the vicious culture of bribery and corruption (100).

Even the police force which ought to be the enforcer of the law is not left out of the corruption malaise in the country. The Human Right Watch reports that

On a daily basis countless Nigerians travelling on the country's road, buying or selling at markets, running daily errands or working in their offices are by armed police officers demanding bribes (<http://www.hrw.org/2010/08/17nigeria-corruption-fuelling-police-abuses>).

The description of these notable men of the level of corruption in Nigeria has been confirmed severally by the anti-corruption organisation, because for nearly two decades now Nigeria has been named among the ten most corrupt nations. Soyinka calls her "the open sore of the continent" (2). Others refer to her as; "Africa's richest nightmare," a country of noisy people' ... a country where nothing works ... big for nothing" (Ncha 28). Considering the state of Nigeria, one would not hesitate to postulate that Nigeria is in a stage Durkheim would call 'anomie.' Anomie here connotes something unusual, unexpected, a deviation from a particular pattern, a threat to a status quo, a catastrophe. Coser puts it better; anomie characterizes a condition in which individual desires are no longer regulated by common norms and where as a consequence, individuals are left without guidance in the pursuit of their goals (133).

For Durkheim, since human happiness must be attained within the ambit of the socially approved norms of the society, a gap is created in the circumstances in which these norms collapse and the individual person consequently finds himself/herself in the state of personal disorganisation which is called anomie (Raison 128).

Durkheim advises suicide as an escape route to this anomic situation. But Nigerians are too resilient to subscribe to this Durkheimian advice: they rather see corruption as the escape route. For Durkheim, suicide would free one from the anomic situation created by the collapsed norms, but for Nigerians, corruption remains the answer. An examination of the Nigerian social ontology and its social structure would make it clear that Nigerians are in an anomic situation and corruption is seen by them as the escape route.

#### **4. ARISTOTLE'S CONCEPT OF VIRTUE VIS-À-VIS CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA**

For Aristotle, virtue both in its subordinate and its highest forms is the product of a good regime (<http://www.aristotledophile.com>). Thus through the proper function of good laws, good moral habits are developed (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179b5). Aristotle holds this opinion because he believes that people obey the rule of fear, not of shame, and shuns what is base not because it is ugly but because it is punished. Thus, through the counsel of Aristotle, Nigerians could be made virtuous through the instrumentality of good laws. Aristotle would see Nigeria as a nation whose citizens are ruled by the passion and not reason, because those ruled by the passions necessarily act not in accordance with virtue. He observes:

Reason and appetite are in agreement in the vicious as well as the virtuous. However, in the vicious the agreement is the wrong way round. Reason is here subordinate to passion, not passion to reason. The virtuous are those in whom reason rules, and rules without opposition (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1178b20).

Thus, in order to become truly human, one must be able to moderate the passions, so that the truly human aspects of the soul may be developed (<http://www.reasonpapers.com>). What would moderate the passions according to Aristotle are good and coercive laws. Coercive laws force people to the right whether they like it or not. Aristotle does not believe a typical human being could be made virtuous through the mere use of words, for him words only seem effective with those already in love with beauty and the noble. The many remain untouched – words cannot turn them towards what is beautiful and good (<http://www.reasonpapers.com>).

Aristotle is not far from the truth here, for if words were to be enough for virtue to thrive, Nigerians would be very virtuous people. Nigeria is a very religious nation, with a lot of churches and other religious bodies springing up on a daily basis. If words were enough for virtue to develop, the words and teachings in these many religious houses would have produced unprecedented virtue in Nigerians. If words were enough, the various crusades, campaigns, protest, seminars, lectures et cetera against corruption in Nigeria would have yielded excellent results. If words were enough, the various pleas, admonitions, rebukes, curses directed at the Boko Haram, kidnappers, ritualists, arm robbers etc would have stopped their menace. But as Aristotle has rightly asserted and has been confirmed in the happenings in Nigeria, words and teachings cannot spring forth virtue in human beings. Therefore for corruption to give way for virtue to thrive, good laws that will guide properly all the spheres of the economy must be provided and well enforced.

Nigeria is a country where the weight of the law is not felt. This is probably because; justice is for sale to the highest bidder (<http://www.hrw.org>). Everybody in Nigeria knows that it is only those with no means to buy justice that the law catches. This is perhaps the reason (Aristotle would agree with this) why corruption is so endemic in Nigeria. Aristotle believes that the 'many' obey the rule of fear. They could be coerced into doing the

right through coercive laws. But in a situation like in Nigeria where the laws have refused to bite and thereby exerting fear in people, there is no way virtue can develop. Coercive laws according to Aristotle are supposed to help subordinate the passions to reason instead of the other way round. But in Nigeria the laws are not coercive; the laws carry no force; nobody especially the highly placed fears the law because they know how to wangle out of it when caught.

The police and judiciary that are supposed to be the custodian and enforcers of the law are ever ready to sell justice to whomever is willing to buy it and sometimes even the unwilling are forced to consent. The Human Right Watch for instance reported that “police officers have on numerous occasions severely beaten, sexually assaulted, or shot to death ordinary citizens who failed to pay the bribes demanded” (<http://www/hrw.org>). Several officers interviewed by Human Right Watch indicated that these ‘returns’ are passed up in the senior ranks in the force, which creates a strong disincentive to hold subordinated accountable for extortion and other abuses (<http://www/hrw.org>). The US based organisation noted that it was worrying, the rate at which police officers in the country used illegal means to punish innocent Nigerians, saying extortion and bribery had become institutionalized in the force, alleging that many junior officers in the Nigeria Police bribed their superiors before they were recruited, while many of them had bribe quotas they must meet in order to retain their jobs and duty posts. The report was based on interviews with more than 145 victims of and witnesses to police corruption in Nigeria. These people included market traders, commercial drivers, sex workers, criminal suspects and victims of common crimes. Senior police officers, according to the report, were also alleged to have embezzled staggering sums of public funds meant to cover basic police operations. This it is claimed had left the police with limited investigatory capacity. The report further showed how government ministers and officials charged with police oversight, discipline and reforms, had failed to root out systemic corruption. Public complaint mechanisms, internal police controls and civilian oversight were said to have remained weak, underfunded and largely ineffective. If the police which ought to be the bedrock of the rule of law in the country is so rotten, then one will not be surprised that virtue is hard to find in Nigeria.

The judiciary too is not different from the police force, Jiti Ogunye pointed out the deficiency inherent in the judiciary making it unfit to wield the wheel of justice. He wrote:

It is also plain that our courts of justice have varying operational difficulties, ranging from inadequate infrastructure, insufficiency of judicial and non judicial personnel, debilitating delay in hearing determination of cases and appeals, inadequate emolument, and lack of a reliable research resource. The judiciary is also beset by serious ethical problems, including an increasingly nepotistic mode of appointment of judges and elevation to the higher judicial benches and cases of corruption and perversion of justice (Ogunye <http://www.saharareporters.com>).

Nigeria has good laws, but these laws lack that coercive force that Aristotle describes, that through pain and pleasure, teach the right behaviour (<http://www.reasonpapers.com>). Having good laws that carry no force is like having no law at all. Since Nigeria has laws that do not bite, it invariably means Nigeria has no law. Aristotle advises therefore, that laws are necessary for virtue to spring forth, is a call to Nigeria to make its law have a sting. It is when the laws in Nigeria begin to sting that the exam malpractices, the lukewarm attitude of teachers to teaching, the sexual harassment of students by lecturers, the victimization of students and all other misconducts that have plagued the educational sector in Nigeria for years will begin to wane. So also if the weight of the law begins to be felt by the police, then the endemic bribery, selling and buying of justice, the inhumanity to humanity by the police, the denial of justice to the poor and all other police bottlenecks will begin to shake off. The same is true for all other spheres of the economy. If the force of the law is strong and could be seen and felt in all strata of the economy, Nigerians would be coerced to do the good, not actually because they like the good but because of fear of the long arm of the law. Until the fear of the law begins to reign in the heart of every Nigerian, that there will be hope of breeding morally good Nigerians.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Looking at Nigeria from Aristotle lenses would undoubtedly reveal that Nigerians are the way they are because their passions still control their reasons. When passions control reason, words and advice that teach virtue are not heard and when heard are not understood. This is because; it is only reason that hearkens to words and advice. Thus, in a situation where reason is subordinate to the passions, teaching would not have any effect. Teachings would begin to have effect when the passions through force have been made subordinate to reason. This Aristotle believes could be done through coercive laws. Thus, drawing from Aristotle’s teachings, when good laws are enacted and properly enforced, good moral habits would develop in Nigerians.

This work therefore, following the teaching of Aristotle urges the government to enact good laws and enforce them appropriately. The police force and the judiciary that are the primary enforcer of the law need to be sanitized and strengthened, so as they would be better equipped to do their work.

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