

In Quest for Virtue: Learning From a Great Tradition

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The founding Greek vision on *virtue/areté* (*ἀρετή*) offers a significant pathway to continuously reflect upon and understand, to activate and improve our own potential in promoting human well-being. It eventually leads to the value of wisdom in life, so much needed in tumultuous times of the current multilevel crisis; the moral one deeply affecting but also challenging to problem-solving the individual and society alike in the context of the axiological disarray we have to deal with. Highlighting the aretological approach as it has been developed from the Presocratics to the Hellenistic philosophers sustains the effort of comprehending the necessity of virtue in reaching and experiencing human well-being; hence the invitation to (re)learn from a great philosophical tradition focusing on the ethical nucleus-value articulated through the ancient “cardinal virtues” and that persisted over the centuries till the nowadays’ “technomoral virtues”. We aim to raise awareness about the *royal way of virtue* by exploring and appropriating its meaning worth to be constantly disclosed for an authentic human life enlightened by the ideal of *eudaimonía* (*εὐδαιμονία*).

Keywords: virtue/areté, Greek philosophy, human well-being

Introduction

The multilevel crisis we are grappling with entails an in-depth reflection on ethical plan, for the restoration of our moral identity and, in general, for the human well-being.

We are more and more aware of the necessity to find viable pathways of re-discovering our authenticity in its best articulations, in connection with which we must work to defend, maintain, and improve the *human well-being* within the entire flux of life, as an urgency of our times. Knowing, revealing, and appropriating the offer of the Greek moral philosophy especially as regards the question of *virtue/areté* (*ἀρετή*) represent fruitful trajectories worth following.

From Pre-Socratics to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and then, in the Hellenistic period, with the Stoics and Epicureans, we discover an impressive manner of thinking about and searching for a good life in its inner-outer relevance as a continuous working upon what really matters for human living. The ancient *sophoi* provide us a wise learning to understand the value of *moral virtue* and the necessity to cultivate it for reaching the human authenticity, that is, perhaps at the tremendous level of comprehension, even the *excellence* in moral order. Covering both the aim and mean for an authentic human well-being, *virtue/areté* deserves to be known, studied, and practiced, to be assumed as a key-value of life. It supposes to eventually unfold an aretology, which is revealing from the whole Greek philosophy, so much needed in the present context of a serious global moral crisis. On the ground of *areté* developed within the explanatory and interpretive approaches belonging to outstanding thinkers of Ellada, we get a philosophy of responsible participation, inquiring about the meaning of

life linked to the ideal of *happiness/eudaimonia* (εὐδαιμονία), contributing to the human well-being. Following an aretaic route in accordance with the teachings of Pythagoras of Samos and Heraclitus of Ephesus, Plato and Aristotle, Epicurus, Chrysippus and Epictetus, we can find guidelines in forming a powerful and healthy perspective of living. Nowadays, they represent landmarks for valuation and nuanced understanding of the human condition in so troubled situations; and consequently, the Greek aretological perspective leads us to fully appreciate the value of *wisdom in life* in finding opportunities to overcome a chaotic style of existence in a world of excessive materialistic consumption, of superficialization and artificialization, of insecurity, anxiety, and alienation, of many epidemics, etc., wisdom being itself one of the *virtue's* embodiments. Neither ignorance nor indifference can steer to achieve the human well-being, but merely strong knowledge, good will and deep comprehension, experience and conscious act, tenaciously practiced, bear humanity to morally manifest within the plenitude of life. Thus, it is worth ceaselessly digging in the beginnings of Western philosophy and uncovering what the Greek philosophers have achieved to bring into light by encompassing the *royal way of virtue*.

Virtue and Well-Being

We tackle the problem of *virtue* to be reevaluated as a force of human being to better comprehend the priorities, the possibilities, and necessities in a global evolution. At the same time, the question of *virtue* guides in learning to harmonize the own aspirations and ideals with the characteristics of the real context in which we can act to improve the *human well-being*. At stake is the *virtue* getting a variety of hypostases, like: wisdom, temperance, courage, justice, duty, respect, trust, tolerance, solidarity, mutual understanding and support, care, sympathy, benevolence, friendship, etc. Through such forms, *virtue* is revealing as an important function of health and progress, of self-fulfillment and accomplishment together with the others, of dignity on the basis of freedom and self-creativity of human being.

In the territory of the ancient philosophy, a definition of *virtue*, lasting for centuries, is to be disclosed in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: "the virtue or excellence of man will be such a moral state as makes a man good and able to perform his proper function well" (Aristotle, 1106a 20). *Virtue/areté* has been emphasized like a continuum over time, until contemporary approaches, as the frame of reflecting and sustaining a notion of moral good within the living tradition of a community (MacIntyre, 1984), as "the vehicle of moral conduct" and "the bedrock foundation of human society and culture" (Tymieniecka, 2000, p. 598).

Embracing many forms, *virtue* imposes itself as a climax notion for ethics, upholding the total moral expression of the human being. It functions as a generic concept in defining, at the highest level, the human beingness-in-becoming from a state of fact that no longer satisfies to an eternal project of elevated metamorphosis, balancing between an ascertained, an estimated, and long-expected dimension of existence, pertained to the real, but also to the ideal. This moral-philosophical category covers both the axiological and normative nature of the ethical referential of life. It decisively counts for the good of individuals, society, and geo-cosmic environment, hence the quest for virtue and its education especially in the present context of the globalizing process' turmoil with positive and negative effects. Activating *virtue* illuminates on the distinctive *human* meaning of life, and significantly marks its advancement into well-being.

As a reply to the moral decline mostly generated by ignorance and frequent violations of the ethical principles, we stress the importance of the call for virtue. It implies to consciously choose the positive values, to have confidence in them, to adhere to them, and to acquire them. No less, it implies a focused action on their

realization, strongly defending them as a ground for a good settlement, construction, and progress, for creative transformation in resonance with our aspiration to human elevation, respectively, the affirmation of moral *virtue/areté* through authenticity. The urgency of this task is obviously to be perceived in connection with the digital transformation by which human being—receiver and consumer of what is speedily and aggressively propagated by means of captivating social media—slides quickly towards the fragile border between the status of moral “agent” and that of a “patient”. In the process, man’s status as an autonomous being, with free will and with the ability for rational decision making, one who should be an “end in itself”, speaking in Kantian terms, is seriously threatened. Consequently, a minimum *wisdom* in life is required, as a form of virtue manifestation, along with the chance to be conducted in the effort of overcoming our present somehow decadence. It is eloquent that, among the “technomoral virtues” (Vallor, 2016), the greatest one is precisely named “technomoral wisdom”, comprehensively integrating the other virtues (technomoral honesty, self-control, humility, justice, courage, empathy, care, civility, flexibility, perspective, magnanimity), which is by priority requested in the digital world.

Technomoral wisdom is ... a *general condition* of well-cultivated and integrated moral expertise that expresses successfully—and in an intelligent, informed, and authentic way—each of the other virtues of character that we, individually and collectively, need in order to live well with emerging technologies. Each of the other eleven technomoral virtues find their highest expression when integrated in the actions of a person with technomoral wisdom. (Vallor, 2016, pp. 154-155)

It is clear that more than ever we need turning and (re)learning from the much valued Greek *phrónēsis* (*φρόνησις*) and *sophía* (*σοφία*). The exercise of *wisdom* is used to be shared in the framework of philosophizing since the early times in European culture. Just mention the Delphic precepts, “because this was the manner of *philo-sophia* among the ancients, a kind of laconic brevity”, as Socrates says in a Platonic dialogue, speaking about the Seven Sages/Seven Wise Men of Greece and their wisdom (Plato, *Protagoras*, 342e-343b). We refer to the in so far famous formulas: *Gnothi seauton* (*Γνωθι σεαυτον*)/“Know thyself” and *Meden agan* (*Μηδεν αγαν*)/“Nothing too much” (“Nothing in excess”). Such determinations of the creative self interest us especially from the point of view of the moral experience focused on the human fulfillment for which the *wisdom* is a virtue of prime order. It can be found within the whole Greco-Roman philosophy, keeping a prominent place among the other virtues, and orchestrating a real art of living. Valuing the cardinal virtues in the “class of divine goods”, Plato teaches us that “Wisdom is the chief and leader; next temperance, courage and justice follow” (Plato, *Laws*, I, 631). Cicero considers *sapientia* as an *ars vivendi*; wisdom is “the first of all virtues” (*princeps omnium virtutum illa sapientia*), as “the ability to perceive what in any given instance is true and real, what its relations are, its consequences, and its causes” (Cicero, *De Finibus*, I, 42; *De Officiis*, I, II, 5).

On the ground of wisdom and practicing it, we reach to comprehend the play of contradictions and equilibrium alike, in the individual, societal, and natural life. Closely related to an *aretaic* perspective, the experience of wisdom leads us to understanding the supreme order, the cosmic one, by reviving the awareness of a basic idea in the Greek philosophy: the connection between wisdom and the “principle of *harmonia*” that inserts order into chaos (Laertius, VIII, 33). It deserves to cultivate wisdom as purpose of life, since this form of virtue brings trust and respect, enlightens and strengthens us in the struggle of discovering and following an upward trajectory within the flux of life, becoming able to “living well” that “requires responsible choices and adherence to the common virtues” so necessary in a “disheartening time” (Allen, 2004, p. 6).

In conjunction with wisdom, the value of *measure* reveals its significance for the moral experience of life. Actually, the concept guides us to the manner Aristotle has explained virtue: “the midst way between excess and deficiency” (Aristotle, 1107a 5-7). Not at all easy to be realized, this middle way could facilitate the endeavor to identify and appropriate a suitable direction and frame for human well-being, particularly in a world of extremes on multiple levels. Merely that possesses *measure* gets durability and sustains a healthy route of beingness-in-becoming. We could say, as Plato urges in *Politikós*, that even an “art of *measure*” deserves to be put in act. To the “right measure”/to *metrion*, we need to report ourselves as to a *principle*; because it expresses “that is adequate”. The Stranger in the Platonic dialogue argues that the “right measure” consists in “that is timely ..., all is necessary, and ... everything there is living in the middle of the distance between extremes” (Plato, *Statesman*, 286d; 284e). Long before, Cleobulus formulated the dictum: *pan metron ariston* (πάν μέτρον ἀριστον): “moderation is best in all things” or “all in good measure” (in Laertius, I. 89-93). Heraclitus addressed measure from an ontological and cosmological point of view: “This world, which is the same for all, no one of gods or men has made; but it was ever, is now and ever shall be an ever-living fire, with measures kindling and measures going out”; and “The sun will not overstep his measures; if he does, the Erinyes, the handmaids of Justice will find him out” (Heraclitus, Fr. 30; Fr. 94). Also, an anthropological vision was held by Protagoras through the famous statement: “man is the measure of all things, of the things that are how they are, and of the things that are not how they are not” (in Laertius, IX. 50-56). Keeping in mind such remarks, we recognize the incontestable valences of measure, the *golden middle way* for a life worth living. Measure is the factor that assures the balance between what we *would like* to do and we *know we ought* to do within the present bewildered context, both individuals and communities; and thus, to face and find solutions of many challenges in today’s world we have to deal with.

The quest for virtue comes to meet the attempt of working for the good of the entire existence, through a *wise* activation of the *moral health of beingness*, as a possibility of rescue and progress in life. It does sustain our concern for what we call *moral health*; the experience of life’s plenitude through the dynamic harmonization of the self and the environment (cultural, socio-professional, technological, and geo-cosmic) is taken into account as one of the nowadays’ priorities. Connected to the moral category of *character*, the concept of *moral health* leads to the *human well-being* as “the central problem of ethics” circumscribed in the horizon of the “best life for all” (Bond, 1996, pp. 208-209)—a certain learning for a *fulfilled life*, for achieving the moral value grounded on *happiness/eudaimonia* of the individual in the community. It means “the health of the body and the soul’s freedom from disturbance”, maintaining the tranquillity and serenity of a life of moderation, according to Epicurus (1940, pp. 31-32), and eventually achieving the moral end in itself, or the *good*: “it has been well said that the Good is That at which all things aim” (Aristotle, 1094a-20). Certainly, for such a *telos*, we really need to know and to exercise (the) *areté*.

Conclusion

Cultivating *well-being* in a moral order demands cultivating *virtue*; it supposes to *harmonize* manners of *being in the most inner self*, in itself and *with* itself, and of *being beyond the strict individuality*, for the world, in and *with* the world; to rise to the level of *homologouménos bios* (ομολογουμενος βιος) from the Stoic philosophy (in Laertius, VII): a “harmonious life”. Thus, human being manifests itself as a valid candidate for humanity, with the capacity for self-fulfilling both its uniqueness and its universality; by attaining the balance between human differentiation and integration in a more globalized world. Here comes the extraordinary role

an aretological vision plays for a better understanding of the human effort to shape and develop a sense of *well-being* in the tension but also the reconciliation between *is*, on the one hand, and *ought to be*, on the other hand; opening towards the chance of living under the classical ideal of *kalokagatheia* (*καλλον και αγαθον*). Restoring the value of a virtue-based style of living can be a viable response to the serious problems of the current context of “capitalism in chronic crisis” with the “inequality and war as the fundamental long-term reality in people’s lives” (*Building post-capitalist futures*, 2018). And a good path to wisely follow is to be learned from the Greek philosophical tradition.

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