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Textual Analysis *Ethics* Book IV, Chapter 8 (Wittiness)

As we have seen in previous chapters, Aristotle is laying out his description of what is becoming and unbecoming in terms of a moral virtue. He explains how excess of wit appears to be, and its counter – what deficit of wit looks like. The perfect balance of wit according to Aristotle is tasteful and not harmful to others. Wit should not be used in situations where it is inappropriate or vulgar, yet unappreciation and intolerance for jokes makes a “boorish” character. According to Aristotle, you do not want to be either of the above, and they are as bad as each other. Again, the motif of moderation resurfaces as the best way to act out a moral virtue.

Aristotle’s issue with excess of wittiness or jokes is the unpolished nature of the person who makes a joke from everything. He uses very strong language, translated as “vulgar buffoon” to describe the kind of person who will make a joke out of everything rather than “saying what is becoming” (1128a line 5). His way of speaking reflects his thoughts about these people, as if he is talking down to them. Aristotle has very little respect for them and is embarrassed on behalf of them because they tend to embarrass themselves with ill-timed and ill-willed jokes. Aristotle admits that the majority of people tend to see these buffoons as attractive and do not realize the vulgarity that occurs with their constant joking. Aristotle is potentially referring to Socrates as a buffoon because Socrates was known for irritating many people, especially other philosophers, with his ease for excess wit. One could

even say that it was his cause of death, as he reveled in making his debating partners look ignorant and foolish.

Aristotle is a believer, however, that some wit is necessary for human beings. To be able to enjoy life and have fun with family and friends. He says “relaxation and amusement are thought to be necessary elements in life” (1128b line 4). He thoroughly disproves of the “boor” who will turn up his nose at every joke and always find a fault in any humor. The person deficient in wittiness never tolerates any jests and such is a boring man who has no pleasure in his life.

Aristotle spends 2 out of 3 paragraphs on what man should do in terms of jest and notice that he introduces the word jest only when talking about the “intermediate man” and humor when talking of the “buffoon”. The distinction is important to note as jest is more often seen as a harmless form humor, whereas humor by itself can be harmful without being explicitly stated. Aristotle rarely uses the word wit in this chapter, despite the virtue being named “wittiness” which is interesting. This is due to the fact that wit can certainly be broader than humor or jest or joke. Wit also encases intelligence and the ability to use that intelligence to create humor, which is mentioned little by Aristotle. He only uses a very broad “joking of the educated man” (1128a line 21) to encapsulate the intelligence aspect of wit. This is because he deals with all different aspects of intellectual virtues in Book VI. There are several different overlapping intellectual virtues including practical wisdom, understanding and judgement. Thus, Aristotle just focuses on the humorous aspect of wit.

Another word mentioned often by Aristotle is “tactful”. He uses this when describing the intermediate man. Tactful humor involves having perspective on one’s audience when making a joke, and ensuring it does no harm to anyone listening. Tactful also points towards a certain level of education, or at least intelligence, that is required to have tact. In this vein,

another point Aristotle makes is about listening to humor. “The kind of jokes he will listen to will be the same; for the kind he can put up with are also the kind he seems to make” (1128a line 29). Tolerance is also key when talking about humor, for the educated man will tolerate most jests, but not those made with the intention to hurt or demean others. In comparison, the man with excess wit will tolerate any and all jokes, no matter the inappropriateness or distastefulness. This makes the buffoon in turn inappropriate and altogether a distasteful conversation partner.

The recurring motif of pain and pleasure, as seen throughout the book, returns in this chapter in response to jokes – made for pleasure or for pain. Jest made simply for pleasure are welcomed, as Aristotle believes that it is necessary for everyone to have amusement and levity in their life. However, those made for the pleasure of witnessing other people’s pain are entirely unacceptable, and Aristotle goes as far to mention that “there are things that lawgivers forbid us to use” (1128a line 30). Using this, he is suggesting that maybe there should be laws against what should be used to jest about, especially when considering the existence of the foolish buffoon. On the contrary, the well-bred and educated man does not need a law, “being as it were a law to himself” (1128a line 33). The intermediate man already has a law in place for himself where lines that are not to be crossed in wittiness are clearly drawn and adjusted when necessary. This quote argues that a good man does not need an external law to avoid abusive humor. In a perfect Aristotelian world, there is no need to have laws on speech as every man will be a good one, who knows how and when to regulate their own speech for the comfort and safety of those around him.

In conclusion, Aristotle remains steadfast to his conviction that all virtues must be had in moderation, in order for the man who holds them to be a good man. Too much jest makes a vulgar buffoon, whereas too little makes a boorish dull man. Amusement is necessary in life, but only in small, tactful doses.