

November 2013

Virtuous Acts as Freely Chosen

- I. Introduction: Last time we talked about the virtues and habits that are inculcated by repeated acts. Today we continue and turn to the fact that these habits are not unthinking habits that makes us like automatons, but rather habits of choosing well. They give rise to good *free* acts.
- II. Virtues are habits of choosing well.
 - A. Some habits require thinking and choosing and some do not.
 1. Definition of a habit: an internal, fixed disposition to act in a certain way (*fixed* means not easily changed like emotions which come and go).
 2. Some habits operate without any thinking. They give rise to unreflective and un-chosen acts. Examples: the habit of biting one's nails; the motions of your fingers in typing (you actually *want* to be able to do it without thinking).
 3. The moral virtues are habits that give rise to actions *only through choices*. This means you have to *think* about what you do.
 - B. The moral virtues give a person a fixed disposition to choose good actions.
 1. As habits, moral virtues are fixed dispositions to a kind of action, such as facing difficulties (fortitude), resisting distractions (temperance) or respecting others' rights (justice).
 2. But, in each particular situation, you have to choose what to do.
 - a. Example: by the virtue of temperance, you are disposed to eat the right amount. But here and now you have to figure out what is the right amount. Then you choose to eat that amount and not more.
 - b. The general disposition does not lead to act except through the mediation of thinking and choosing.
 3. The moral virtues are disposition to choosing good action. A person with a moral virtue will consistently make good choices (and so act well).
- III. Virtuous acts are free acts that require thinking.
 - A. Choice is free (will not ask whether we possess free-will, but will assume we do).
 1. To be free means you could do otherwise; when we choose to do X we could choose to do Y or choose to do nothing at all.
 2. We are in control of our own lives (for the most part); we determine what we do. We are not creatures of instinct (habits are not instincts).
 - B. To choose you have to think about what you will do.
 1. You have to be aware of the options.
 2. You have to be aware of why you are choosing them (what goal).

3. This is called *deliberation*. This thinking can happen very quickly or take a long time (e.g. a choice about where to go to college).
4. Prudence: the virtue by which you are able to figure out what to do in a situation; it is the fixed disposition of deliberating well about how to act.

IV. To educate in virtue is to educate a person to make good choices.

- A. Cannot be misled by the fact that the virtues are habits; you are educating a person to assume his freedom and use it well; i.e., make the choices that will produce a happy life (these are virtuous acts).
- B. The goal is that the person can direct his own life by thinking about what would be good and then choosing it. This requires the affective habits, because without them a person will fall into moral incontinence (know what is good, but lack the strength to choose it). But it also requires education of the thinking part (inculcation of prudence)
 1. To make good choices, people need *to have the right ideas*.
 2. A big portion of educating in virtue is to give them these ideas (the education of the moral imagination); we will talk more about this aspect later.
- C. The goal is to educate the person to be able to act on his own; with clear thinking and strength of will. As in most teaching, the goal is to equip them to be able to act well consistently without you.