

Points of Wisdom Related to *Aretē* (Excellence or Virtue)

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"Virtue is a weapon that cannot be taken away." —Antisthenes

"Happiness is an activity of the soul that accords with perfect virtue." —Aristotle

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Note • The following points of wisdom come from the Cave's *Aretē: Excellence or Virtue—What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Aretē*. Points are organized by general topics (in **bold**). Sources are given at the end of each quotation.

Points of Wisdom Related to *Aretē* (Excellence or Virtue)

The Goal of Life Is *Aretē*

The Cynics hold that the goal of life is to live according to virtue—just like the Stoics. . . . Therefore, some have said that Cynicism is a shortcut upon the path of virtue. —*Diogenes Laertius*

The human good is the activity of the soul that accords with virtue. —*Aristotle*

Zeno [of Citium] was the first to say that the end or goal of life is to live in accord with nature, which is the same as living in accord with virtue, since nature leads us toward virtue. —*Diogenes Laertius*

God is always urging us on to virtue. —*Clement of Alexandria*

The *Aretē* Imperative

"My father sent me to Troy and insistently ordered me to always be the best and to stand out among other men and not dishonor or shame the family of my fathers who were the best in Ephyre and in wide Lydia."
—*Glaucus (in Homer)*

"Old Peleus enjoined his child Achilles to always be the best and to stand out among other men."
—*Nestor (in Homer)*

POINTS OF WISDOM ▪ RELATED TO ARETĒ (EXCELLENCE OR VIRTUE)

Seek after the means of life, and whenever you already have life, then seek after excellence.—*Phocylides*

Since evils are here in this realm, and since these evils “prowl about this realm by necessity,” and since the soul wishes to flee these evils, then “we must flee from this realm.” But what is the nature of this flight we must take? Plato says that it is in becoming like god—like the divinity. And this, he says, is found if one “is becoming just and holy, and in one who is beginning to live by means of practical wisdom” —which is to say the whole of virtue.—*Plotinus*

The Good of Aretē—Including Happiness

The only secure acquisitions are those tied to excellence.—*Sophocles*

Excellence, when it grows up with us in our hearts without alloy, is the one possession that abides with us in old age.—*Isocrates*

Plato held that the goal of life is to become god-like, and that virtue is sufficient in itself for happiness.
—*Diogenes Laertius*

Nothing in the world can contribute so powerfully to material gain, to good repute, to right action, in a word, to happiness, as virtue and the qualities of virtue.—*Isocrates*

Happiness is an activity of the soul that accords with perfect virtue.—*Aristotle*

The Stoics hold that virtue is sufficient in itself for happiness. . . . *It is the state of the soul that tends to make the whole of life harmonious.*—*Diogenes Laertius*

Virtue promises happiness and tranquility and a life that flows well.—*Epictetus*

The virtues have become one with living pleasantly. Living pleasantly is inseparable from the virtues. . . . We say that pleasure is the beginning point and goal of living happily.—*Epicurus*

The Nature of Aretē

Virtue is in one sense the perfection of anything in general, say of a statue. Virtue may be non-intellectual, such as health, or intellectual, such as practical wisdom.—the Stoics (*Diogenes Laertius*)

It appears, then, that virtue is a kind of health and beauty and good condition of the soul.—*Socrates (Plato)*

Virtue, or excellence, is the means by which a thing performs its function well. . . . The function of a thing is that which it alone can do, or what it does better, than anything else.—*Socrates (Plato)*

Moral virtue is a habit or disposition involving deliberate choice, consisting in the observance of a mean relative to us, as determined by reason, that is, as a wise and sensible man would determine it. Virtue is a mean that falls between two vices, that which is excessive and that which is deficient.—*Aristotle*

The Four Cardinal Virtues

Of the virtues, some are primary, and some are arranged under these primary virtues. There are four primary virtues: practical wisdom, moderation, courage, and justice.—*Diogenes Laertius (reporting the Stoic position)*

Of perfect virtue there are four kinds or forms: practical wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation. Of these, practical wisdom is the cause of right conduct, and justice is responsible for straight dealing in partnerships and commercial transactions. Courage is the cause that makes a man not give way but stand his ground in alarms and perils. Moderation causes mastery over desires, so that we are never enslaved by pleasure but live in an orderly manner.—*Diogenes Laertius (reporting Plato's view)*

Socrates drew no distinction between wisdom and moderation. But if a man knew and practiced what is noble and good, and knew and avoided what is base and shameful, then he judged that man to be both wise and moderate. . . . He said that justice and every other virtue is wisdom. For just actions and all forms of virtuous activity are noble and good. He who knows the noble and the good will never choose anything else. . . . So it is that the wise do what is noble and good.—*Xenophon*

For of all virtue, I say, and I repeat it, the beginning is intelligence or understanding, and the fulfillment is courage.—*Demosthenes*

Nearly everyone praises and calls “divine” and “holy” such things as courage and justice and practical wisdom and, in short, every virtue.—*Dio Chrysostom*

Socrates never praised Xerxes or any other king of Persia or Lydia or Macedonia, and not even a Greek general, except for only a very few—those whom he knew to delight in virtue, and to cherish courage with moderation, and to love wisdom with justice.—*Julian the emperor*

Doing and Getting, Training and Struggling for *Aretē*

Virtue is something you do—it is a matter of deeds. It doesn't require a stockpile of arguments or much learning.—*Diogenes Laertius (giving the Cynic philosopher Antisthenes' position)*

Listen, Perses, you big fool. I will proclaim all this noble knowledge for you. It is easy to grab at Deficiency (*Kakotēs*). It is there in abundance for you. The way is smooth to her, and she dwells very near to you. But the immortal gods have put sweat in front of Excellence (*Aretē*). The path to her is long and steep. And so, it is rough going at first. Nevertheless, when one comes to the highest point, then the path becomes easy.—*Hesiod*

It is said that excellence dwells upon rocky peaks that are hard to climb. . . . She guards a holy place. She may not be seen by the eyes of all mortals. Only the one who experiences heart-vexing sweat from within may see her, the one who reaches the peak of manliness.—*Simonides of Ceos*

Excellence is bought with blood.—*Aeschylus*

“The excellences advance by means of hardship.”—*Euripides (the Chorus is speaking)*

“King,” Demaratus said, “since you call on me by all means to speak the whole truth and to say what you will not later prove false, in Greece poverty is always widespread, but excellence is acquired as the achievement of wisdom and strong law. By constant practice of this excellence, Greece drives off poverty and defends herself against tyranny.” —*Herodotus (Demaratus, a former king of Sparta, is speaking to Xerxes, the king of Persia)*

You will find on reflection that every kind of virtue named among men is increased by education and practice.—*Xenophon (Socrates is speaking to Critobulus, that is, his good friend Crito)*

I notice that as those who do not train the body cannot perform the functions proper to the body, so those who do not train the soul cannot perform the functions of the soul—for they cannot do what they ought to do or avoid what they ought not to do. For this reason, fathers try to keep their sons, even if they are sensible and wise, out of bad company—for an association with good men is a training in virtue, but an association with bad men is virtue’s undoing.—*Xenophon*

The Cynics further hold that virtue can be taught.

—*Diogenes Laertius (offering the Cynic Antisthenes’ and the general Cynic position)*

Virtue enters the soul by means of training—not automatically as happens with vice.

—*(Pseudo) Crates of Thebes in a letter to Orion*

Moral or ethical virtue is born thanks to habit, which is to say customary behavior. . . . The [moral] virtues are engendered in us neither by nature nor yet in a way contrary to nature. Rather, nature disposes us to receive them, perfecting them by means of habit. We acquire the [moral] virtues . . . by doing them, by putting them into action, just as we do with the various arts or skills. For we learn an art or skill by doing that which we wish to do when we have learned it. We become builders by building and harpers by harping. And so, by doing just acts we become just, and by doing acts of moderation and courage we become moderate and courageous. This conclusion is attested, as well, by what occurs in city-states. Those who craft the laws make the citizens good by means of accustomization or habituation, that is, by getting used to good habits. This is the purpose of all legislators, and if they don’t do this well, then they miss the mark. Indeed, this is what distinguishes a good from a bad constitution.—*Aristotle*

The first rule in aiming at the mean is that we should point ourselves away from the extreme that is more opposed to the mean. . . . The second rule is that we should look into and examine the errors that we are most likely to commit. . . . then we must drag ourselves away in the opposite direction. . . . The third rule is that we must in everything be on guard against pleasure and what is pleasant. . . . These are the things we may do that will best enable us to hit the mean.—*Aristotle*

Socrates—the Great Exemplar of Aretē

“What would Socrates . . . do?” —*Epictetus*

All who knew what kind of man Socrates was, and all who care for virtue, all these men continue even now to miss Socrates most of all as the most helpful man in the pursuit of virtue. . . . He conferred the greatest benefits on all who dealt with him. He was . . . pious . . . self-controlled . . . wise. . . . He seemed to me the best of men, a truly happy man.—*Xenophon*

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