

# Aristotle's Principle of Proportion

By William De Witt Hyde

President of Bowdoin College

THE fundamental condition of a good life, the stuff that all virtue is made of, is the selection of some considerable sphere of common social good to be our end and aim. There is no goodness or badness in elemental appetites or isolated acts. For many years I have challenged class after class of college students to find a single example of any elemental appetite or passion which is intrinsically bad ; which in all circumstances and relations is evil. Never yet has any student brought me one such case. Goodness and badness depend on the relation in which acts stand to the main end of life. Any act that is the best means to the best end, by virtue of that relation becomes thereby good ; any act which promotes a bad end or hinders a good one, by virtue of that relation becomes bad. Nothing is either good or bad in itself. It is impossible to cut life into two antithetic halves and say that some things, like eating vegetables, and drinking cold water, and going to bed at ten o'clock at night, are intrinsically good ; and other acts, like drinking beer, and playing cards, and dancing, and going to the theater, are intrinsically bad. All attempts to put poverty above riches, virginity above motherhood, obscurity above fame, are, from this point of view, immoral ; for they all assume that there can be badness in external things, wrong in isolated actions, vice in elemental appetites, and sin in natural passions ; whereas Aristotle lays down the fundamental principle that the only place where either badness or wrong or vice or sin can reside is in the relation in which these things stand to some worthy or unworthy end the man is seeking to promote. There is no morality quite so blind and perverse as the notion that riches or reputation, sexual love or alcoholic drink, dancing or card-playing, or anything else in the world, is intrinsically

and universally evil. Carried to their logical conclusions, this idea would lead to murder when a glass of brandy might save a life ; compel us to share contentedly with swine their husky bill of fare ; and end in race extinction.

Morality depends on clearly grasping some picture of large good for others as well as for ourselves ; and then translating that pictured potency into energetic fact. The test of our rank in the moral scale is this : how large a section of the world do we care for in a vital, responsible way ? The size of the ends we see and serve is the measure of our soul's dimensions. The will is not an entity which we carry in our spiritual pockets ; it is an energy precisely commensurate with the work we try to do. Precisely the same external act is good for one man and bad for another. Political office for a man who has solved his own problem, and has time and strength, energy and capacity with which to solve the problems of the public, is the very gateway of heaven. To the office-seeker who is aiming to get out of the public a living which he is too lazy or incompetent to earn in private employment, this same office becomes the broad and easy descent into hell. For a woman who has her heart in her home, and has fulfilled all the sweet charities of sister, daughter, wife, or mother, the life and work of the woman's club is a way of salvation. No angel in heaven is better employed. To the woman who enters the club to get away from her home and her children, from duty and drudgery, for the sake of flattery, excitement, and social importance, though she does not a single thing more than her angel sister who sits by her side, her public work is the act of a devil. It is not what one does ; it is the purpose expressed in the doing that measures the worth of the man or woman who does it.

Aristotle's second doctrine is that we

must have tools to work with, some furniture of fortune. General Gordon told Cecil Rhodes that he once refused a whole roomful of gold. "I should have taken it," replied Mr. Rhodes; "what is the use of having great schemes if you haven't the means to carry them out?"—a truly Aristotelian reply. Yet Aristotle is no gross materialist, no mere money-getter; to make these things the ends of life he denounces as degrading and unnatural. Degrading as ends, they are essential as instruments.

His third principle is that in the use of these instruments we must take just so much of them as best promotes the end at which we aim. This is the famous doctrine of the mean. Diet, exercise, rest, recreation, wealth, office, work, are all to be regulated by this searching principle. The problem of the athlete preparing for the contest is the problem of the moral man every day of his life. We must take so much of the good things of the world as will best serve our purpose; remorselessly cutting off whatever would interfere. Pleasure on this point is no reliable guide. The epicureans and the hedonists are people who go around with a clinical thermometer under their tongues and expect the world to be warmed with love in consequence. Not the gratification of the particular appetite, but the effective promotion of our ends, determines the limit of indulgence.

Wisdom shows us how ends and means are related in the great universe. Prudence shows us how to take advantage of these relationships in our specific tasks. It is the application of principles to cases; and it comes only with long experience. The most essential and yet the rarest kind of prudence is that considerateness which sensitively appreciates the point of view of the people with whom we have to deal, and which takes proper account of those subtle and complex sentiments, prejudices, traditions, and ways of thinking which taken together constitute the social situation.

Temperance and courage are twin sisters. Temperance rigidly excludes from life everything, however pleasant, that would defeat our end. Courage

takes on everything, however painful, that is essential to promote our end. Temperance is not abstinence. It is not indulgence. Neither is it moderation, in the superficial, mathematical sense of that term. To know whether a man is temperate or not you must know the end at which he aims and the strictness with which he foregoes all things which would hinder it. Courage likewise derives all its worth from the end it serves. "True courage must be for a noble object."

The crown of a good life is friendship, which Aristotle defines as "unanimity on questions of public advantage and on all that touches life." Conventional people and evil people are incapable of friendship. Friendship is the mutual recognition and respect of intense individuality in others by persons who are highly individualized themselves.

Aristotle's teaching lacks only the democratic principle introduced by Christianity to make it a complete and ultimate account of life. The rights of man as such, whether native or alien, male or female, had not yet been affirmed. Widen Aristotle's conception of the end by the Christian principle; make it include the welfare of the humblest man, the dignity of the lowliest woman, the happiness of the most defenseless little child, and Aristotle's doctrine thus broadened into Christianity becomes the final and universal ethics. His teaching may be summed up in ten Aristotelian commandments:

Thou shalt devote thy utmost powers to some section of our common social welfare.

Thou shalt hold this end above all lesser goods, such as pleasure, money, honor.

Thou shalt hold the instruments essential to the service of this end second only to the end itself.

Thou shalt ponder and revere the universal laws that bind ends and means together in the ordered universe.

Thou shalt master and obey the specific laws that govern the relation of means to thy chosen end.

Thou shalt use just so much of the materials and tools of life as the service of thy end requires.

Thou shalt exclude from thy life all that exceeds or falls below this mean, reckless of pleasure lost.

Thou shalt endure whatever hardship and privation the maintenance of this mean in the service of thy end requires, heedless of pain involved.

Thou shalt remain steadfast in this

service until habit shall have made it a second nature, and custom shall have transformed it into joy.

Thou shalt find and hold a few like-minded friends, to share with thee this lifelong devotion to that common social welfare which is the task and goal of man.

## Toki the Lord Priest

By Charles Fessenden Nichols

A MESSAGE came that at twelve Horui Toki, Lord Priest of Buddha from Japan, would "humbly visit" me, a doctor in Boston.

They came, bending nearly prostrate; the priest in a yellow robe, his youthful face dignified by his square black cap, the friend in a black coat.

The interpreter, Nomura, wiry, square-capped, wore a dull purple robe, and bore small gifts. He now stood erect, and while the others again prostrated themselves, said: "The Lord Priest Toki would express the thoughts of the Japanese Government for your kindness to friends who have visited Boston. The Lord Priest has explained his religion at the Religion Congress." Hereupon the doctor invited all present to lunch at the hotel near by. A pretty cousin, a grave bluestocking, who happened in accompanied by a young gentleman of sober deportment and dress, agreed to join the party. The interpreter now said, semi-aside, yet in a tone quite audible to the lady, and not without embarrassment on his part, Would Sekini, the friend, be pardoned if he took "no notice of that lady," since he, a Shintu, "believes women to *have no souls*"? This difficulty was readily arranged, and I must say Sekini's manner toward the soulless afterwards proved most deferential.

Priestly yellow is now exchanged for a slaty robe, very shining-decorous; betasseled and becoming to the gentle, boyish face. His soft eyes, racially black, droop as he modestly describes through the interpreter his pilgrimage lately in India, but now and above all to Boston, shrineest of shrines, "with Bunker Hill

so necessary to be seen." He is as naïve as if his country were young; he appreciates our Mecca, and I feel like asking him to be my guide and friend. We shall see hereafter how Buddha does not prove unwilling.

Unknown to his host, an element of danger has lurked in this lunch—the chief guest can eat none of it! Of course a Priest of Buddha is a close vegetarian, constrained to pity and preserve each little bird, and give even to an oyster the benefit of questioning if it have nerves of pain. "My friend Sekini" (the Priest speaks quietly and points toward his friend), "his trade is war, he has a perpetual contract to furnish guns for the Japanese Government; yet I love him. He can eat meat with you."

However, not a few dishes new to the Lord Priest are easily prepared from tomato, artichoke, and asparagus. "We rested," observes Sekini, "at the beautiful land of the sandwiches" (he meant the Sandwich Islands), "but even there the Lord Priest Toki could eat only fruits."

Picture now our young lady accepting tidbits of game from the friend, graceful compliments translated, and sly counsel when our ways seem to excite his sense of the ludicrous—assiduousness might word the attitude of each toward all. At dessert all eat fruits, and an element but half suspected in the "frozen pudding." This experiment proves a subtle success; Toki, who has no objection to *sake*, the national beverage, thus partakes of a little weak wine.

The Lord Priest is now asked if Buddha had used a microscope before justifying the eating of fruits; for are there not many organisms, living and helpless,