

about: ignorance is a recipe for acting disastrously, both to ourselves and to others. But what the heart suggests we do, after reason and experience have found where we are, is another thing. Even basic, unambitious concerns, such as the solidarity with others or the respect for rules that were defended in sections 12 and 13, depend on sympathy. And that sympathy is not mandated by reason alone. The plight of others gives us reasons to act, certainly, but not Reasons. There may perhaps be some formal limits on our preferences: there is something 'irrational' about preferring A to B, and also at the same time preferring B to A (although it is often all right to be in two minds about things). But there are no substantive restrictions on our passions imposed by reason alone.

This could be put in terms of a contrast between *description* and *prescription*. Reason is involved in getting our descriptions of the world right. What we then prescribe is beyond its jurisdiction. Reason is in fact wholly at the service of the passions. It is just because we must act in the world that we need to know about it: 'Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them'.

## 17. Being good and living well

As we touched upon in section 11, Aristotle thought that the *telos* or goal of a human being is to live a certain kind of life. But what kind of life? Obviously one in which certain basic biological needs for food, warmth, shelter, and perhaps sex are met (sex gets the qualification because you don't die from lacking it). Aristotle, however, managed to equate the 'intended' life for a human being with the virtuous life. He also connected it with life lived according to reason. And this may seem to give us a kind of foundation for ethics. The vicious or depraved or insensitive or callous are failing to exercise reason, the supreme human capacity.

But first of all, why think that the 'intended' or natural life for human beings is a life of virtue? On the face of it this equation

requires a pretty sunny view of the human animal. We need not subscribe to a Grand Unifying Pessimism to fear that evolution has thrown up a human nature with significant elements of selfishness, aggression, shortsightedness, cruelty, and so forth. And some fairly nasty people are healthy, to judge by what the contemporary philosopher Bernard Williams nicely describes as 'the ethological standard of the bright eye and the gleaming coat'. Conversely, there may be circumstances, one would think, in which virtue requires us to sacrifice something of our own health or happiness. At the limit, virtue and duty may require us to lay down life itself. So there is no automatic alignment between behaving well and looking after ourselves.

Aristotle himself was not quite as optimistic as it might sound. He emphasized that it takes education and practice in order to become virtuous. It does not just happen, like growing taller or hairier. But the education is a matter of drawing out a latent potential, at least in the best people (Aristotle is an elitist). The tradition that follows Aristotle is sometimes called the tradition of 'virtue ethics'. It heroically tries to squeeze together what is natural for people, a life lived according to reason, a happy life, and a virtuous life. Its main device is the social nature of the self. Within society, the knave or villain cannot generally flourish, either in the eyes of others, or ultimately, in his own eyes. The life of injustice is apt to be a life of care and insecurity. If someone prospers by thieving or cheating, his prosperity is likely to turn to ashes.

Perhaps this is likely, but it is not at all certain. Still, it is good to notice that for many purposes that may be enough. A general correlation between an agent's lapse from virtue and her decline from flourishing is enough for some purposes. It is enough, for instance, for the purpose of the educator with the subject's interest at heart. The educator will not countenance a habit of finagling or lying or taking opportunistic advantage of others, since these things generally diminish the agent's well-being. We should educate people for whom we care into the habits that are most likely to