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A Stable Genius Walks into the Agora

*Erik Van Aken**

Rocky Mountain College, MT, USA
*Corresponding author. Email: erik.vanaken@rocky.edu

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Abstract

The article argues, using Aristotle's ethics, that Donald Trump lacks the virtues essential for human flourishing while highlighting the moral responsibility to judge character in politics.

To invoke the humour of Dr Seuss only slightly, I do not like Donald Trump. I do not like him as a person, a politician, or a man. I do not like reading about him, hearing him speak, and writing about him. Why endure?

Because I want to recover something we've lost, something we've buried under partisan distraction and blinding noise. We've stopped seeing clearly. What I want to say has, in countless variations, become like a parable we repeat without understanding. As T. S. Eliot wrote, 'We had the experience but missed the meaning.'

What I want to say is that Trump is not excellent, not in the sense that matters. Let the apparent banality of the claim wear thin for a moment. I invite you to challenge a single one of the following claims that have been made about Trump: he is a liar, a scoundrel, a bully, a criminal and a would-be tyrant. He is selfish, reckless, callous and insecure. He's incurious, petulant, dangerously rapacious and predictably petty. He embodies the textbook definition of a jerk and a fool.

Wherever you fall on the political spectrum, whether you agree with me or not, I implore you to keep reading. I do not write this article to muckrake, nor is it an *ad hominem* attack (an attack against the person). It is not actually about politics. It's about the human good. It's about the urgent need to see more clearly.

What follows rests on a particular framework – that of Aristotle. I assume a few things: that Aristotle teaches us something enduring about what it means to be human, and that virtue, how we choose to act, matters. It would be difficult to challenge either assumption. Nonetheless, I highlight Aristotle's account of excellence as it best allows me to clarify what I find so profoundly lacking in Trump.

'Agora' is the Greek word that means 'marketplace'. It refers to the meeting place where citizens would often gather to discuss politics or offer critical ideas for public debate.

Today, we often use the word 'excellent' to mean simply 'very good'. A child paints a picture, and we say, 'Excellent work!' Last week I ate 'an excellent steak'. The Greeks understood excellence (*aretē*) as something far more profound. *Aretē* is not simply praise or preference; it's about purpose. It means fulfilment, the realization of a thing's nature or potential. In Aristotle's ethics, *aretē* (commonly translated 'virtue') isn't merely moral virtue (Latin *virtus*, originally connoting martial valour), but a

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broader excellence, one grounded in a thing's capacity to fulfil its natural function at the highest potential. A knife has *aretē* if it cuts well; a horse if it runs powerfully. We come closer to the classical sense when we say, for instance, that a Cold Steel SRK is an excellent knife or that Secretariat was an excellent horse.

It's easy to identify the excellence of a knife; someone made it for a purpose. But what is our function; what is our purpose, if any? Aristotle argues that a living thing's function (*ergon*) is determined by its nature, not imposed by an external designer. Though he posits a 'first cause' or unmoved mover, Aristotle's account of function is not contingent on intelligent design. (Later medieval thinkers, in particular Thomas Aquinas, explicitly integrated Aristotle's natural teleology with the Christian concept of a divine creator.) Drawing on careful biological observation, Aristotle believed we could discern an organism's function by studying its structure and characteristic activities. Lions excel at pursuing prey and fighting, horses at running or bearing riders. Human beings, he argued, are more complex.

For Aristotle, every living thing possesses a *psuchē* (soul), the organizing principle that gives it its function. He separates the soul into layers: the nutritive soul of plants enables growth and reproduction; the sensitive soul of animals allows sensation and self-movement. Human beings share these powers but uniquely possess a rational soul.

Because a thing's function lies in what sets it apart, ours must lie in reason.

Reason, the practical wisdom to discern and choose the good, guides how we live and shapes our choices. Critically, to reason well is to live well, and to live well is to act consistently following virtue. Just as the excellence of a guitar-maker is revealed in the beautiful music the instrument produces, human excellence, virtue, is shown in the beauty of character expressed through well-reasoned action. For Aristotle, virtue enables us to succeed in being

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human precisely because it consistently aligns our choices with what reason identifies as good. For each of us, this is deeply personal and contextual: *This is enough wine for tonight; this is how much money I should donate; now is a moment I should feel anger; here is where I need to step in – or step away*. To reason towards such fitting, virtuous action is precisely what it means to thrive.

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Living excellently is not a means to some further end; it is the fulfilment of our nature. To be *eudaimōn*, deeply flourishing or truly happy, is to live in this way. Instrumental goods such as health, wealth, pleasure or honour matter only insofar as they support this rational, virtuous life.

This can sound unintuitive. But think of it this way: imagine a man who is extremely wealthy and powerful. We can still meaningfully ask, 'Yes, but is he happy?' If we knew someone to be generally happy, we wouldn't ask, 'Yes, but are they rich?'

My earlier comments now cut more deeply. I'll repeat it, with Aristotle's weight behind it. Donald Trump is not excellent. He's not even close. He's a knife so dull and chipped, so unintuitive in the hand, so unbalanced, we wouldn't keep it around to mash boiled carrots; he's a horse continually walking backward.

Virtue – temperance, wisdom, courage, truthfulness, etc. – according to Aristotle, is always a mean between two extremes, a deficit and an excess. Courage, for instance, is a mean between recklessness and cowardice. Truthfulness is the mean between dishonesty and tactlessness. The question, if we're honest, is not whether Trump is virtuous in the Aristotelian, Confucian, Catholic, or any other sense. The question is whether the man does *anything at all* that does not immediately satisfy his porcelain ego. Given a thousand lawn darts, even some lesser animal, to avoid explicitly insulting it, could find the centre of a hula-hoop in the corner of my yard. Can you honestly say the same for Trump? If there is anything remarkable about him, it is that he seems *always* to miss.

I mentioned *ad hominem*, commonly known as the fallacy of argument against the person. The British philosopher Bertrand Russell famously quipped that *ad hominem* was the last breath of a dying man. Russell was right. When you're losing an argument, unable to address its premises rationally, you instead attack the person making it. It's a common tactic for five-year-olds. I never said Trump wasn't interesting. The man has been on his last breath for at least a decade.

The point is not just that Trump has done immoral or appalling things, though he has. The argument is that he does not think well. He is without virtue. He is not excellent.

But why does any of this matter? Why bother naming the absence of excellence in another person? I do not condemn for its own sake. The point is to help us become more excellent: to reason, to live virtuously; to understand why character matters. We strive for excellence by refusing to support or look the other way in the face of iniquity. In doing so, not only do we build a better world, but we also become happier and more fulfilled. And this isn't just ancient wisdom. Recent studies have affirmed the link between virtue and well-being.

I'll anticipate some likely replies.

There's no doubt that Aristotle's work on ethics is one of the outstanding achievements of human thought. And Aristotle was, in many respects, a towering figure. He was a profound philosopher and scientist. He studied at Plato's Academy for twenty years and later tutored

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Alexander the Great. He helped shape what we now recognize as formal logic. Yet, of course, he was imperfect. He held misguided views about women, about non-Greeks and about those he deemed intellectually inferior. Aristotle is not a guru or a god. Nonetheless, his account of *eudaimonia*, human flourishing through reason and virtue, remains one of the most enduring insights in ethical philosophy. If nothing else, his vision of human flourishing has proven remarkably prescient about those questions we are too reluctant to ask: how shall I live, and who should I become?

Some have argued that virtue ethics of the kind I'm peddling here is ultimately egoistic. After all, the aim is to achieve *our* (singular) good. But this misses the point entirely. For Aristotle, living well is not a private pursuit; it is inherently bound with others. As he writes, 'The excellent person is of benefit to others, not just himself.' And really, is there anything more fundamental, more worth teaching our children, than to be good, to think critically, to cultivate the kind of character that finds beauty in that?

But who am I to judge? Especially a person whom I've never met. Am I not being at least slightly hypocritical in speaking about virtue and saying the things I've said here? In short, no. To make this complaint is to miss the critical distinction between fair and unfair, or valid and invalid, judgement. It's a longer story, but the idea that we're being improper, mean or misguided by making *any* judgement is an unfortunate reaction against the dogmatic certainty once sought and falsely proclaimed during the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment periods. Suffice it to say, judgement has a bad rap. In some ways, this is both understandable and morally justified. We should not judge others by their race, gender, nationality, or in a host of other unfair ways in which we have and often do today. But throwing judgement out entirely is both dangerous and lazy. Was Hitler wrong? Is the paedophile, the rapist or the bully wrong? Lest society collapse into nothing, the answer must be yes.

Here's the distinction more clearly. Imagine I'm invited to speak at a conference. Upon arriving, a group of students mock my appearance, perhaps my height, or a scar on my face. Would we call their mockery 'fair judgement'? Clearly not, because these things are beyond my control. Now, imagine instead that I arrive visibly inebriated, shout racial slurs and assault campus security. Am I wrong? Clearly yes, because my actions are within my control. Agency primarily (though perhaps not exclusively) grounds the distinction: it is fair to judge others based on what they say and do; it is not fair to judge them on factors outside their control.

But does this distinction hold for people like Christians? This is a significant question, not least because I have heard many Christians hide behind the veil of total non-judgement: 'Does it bother you that he mocked a veteran, a person with special needs, or said, "Grab 'um by the –"?' 'Oh, I am not one to judge!' To borrow the biting phrase from Elizabeth Anscombe, 'Come now', of course you are.

Jesus indeed said, 'Judge not lest ye be judged' (Matthew 7:1). It is also true that Jesus taught humility, kindness, especially towards 'the least of these' – the foreigners, the poor, the vulnerable – non-violence and self-sacrifice. But what Jesus is teaching us is to avoid self-righteous judgement, judging others while exempting ourselves. We see this clearly in his immediate reminder in Matthew 7:3–5 to ignore the speck in your neighbour's eye until you first remove the plank from your own. There is, then, one obvious way Christians are called to judge: look in the mirror and search your own heart.

But there are others. In Matthew 7:15–16, Jesus says, 'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.' Jesus explicitly tells his followers to identify false teachers by their actions, an act of moral discernment made possible via rational judgement (this is bad fruit; this is false, etc.). Similarly, in John 7:24, Jesus explicitly calls for fair judgement: 'Do not judge

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according to appearances, but judge with right judgement.'

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The Apostle Paul adds to the clarity. In 1 Corinthians 6:2–3, Paul reminds Christians of their responsibility to judge, asking rhetorically, 'Or do you not know that the Lord's people will judge the world? … Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!' Paul is emphasizing that Christians are called to judge, precisely because mature believers must discern clearly between right and wrong. Indeed, Paul rebukes the Corinthians for failing in this responsibility, suggesting that their unwillingness or inability to judge shows immaturity. Likewise, in 1 Thessalonians 5:21, Paul instructs believers to, 'Test everything; hold fast what is good.' One cannot 'hold fast' without the ability to say, 'This is *not* good.'

I'd be remiss to leave unacknowledged the rich theological context and interpretative nuances of these passages. Even so, the call is to judge fairly, without vindictiveness, prejudice or blanket generalization, not to *abandon* the faculty of judgement. Jesus himself exemplified this (he called the Pharisees 'hypocrites' and overturned the tables in the Temple in defence of moral truth).

Finally, to the charge that morality has no bearing on politics, I have two things to say. First, the most obvious and logically damning: one cannot have it both ways. If morality has no place in political judgement, then we cannot chant 'lock her up!' and declare opponents corrupt simply because they belong to another party or hold different values. We cannot morally condemn Hunter Biden's failings or Clinton's marital infidelity, then pretend morality doesn't matter when evaluating our own candidate's integrity. Inconsistency is easily identifiable once you recognize what it is.

A semi-savvy reader might think that I've conflated legal and moral domains. Fair enough, there is a difference. But I'm not the one conflating them. Trump and his defenders do this constantly. They make bold, legally charged declarations – 'Lock her up!', 'He's committed treason!', 'She's a traitor!', 'The election was stolen!' … without ever producing a single trial or conviction.

Moral outrage enters the room dressed in legal robes, and the question of character is set aside. The conflation isn't accidental. It's a red herring, designed to shift the conversation from moral fitness to fictional criminality. This tactic serves to cast Trump as a champion of justice, or at least (note the hypocrisy) the 'lesser of two evils', by burying the opposition in baseless, manic lies.

The result is a moral argument told by an idiot – full of sound and fury, signifying nothing (save a desperate need to distract us from the small man hiding).

Second, and more crucially, morality is precisely what gives politics its significance. Politics without morality is nothing but a power struggle, a battle of raw interests and brute force, a game of chess played with no rules. Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao, and every tyrant have reduced humanity to pawns on a blighted, lawless board. Aristotle himself wrote (*Politics*): 'Man, when perfected, is the best of animals; but if he is isolated from law and justice, he is the worst of all.' Law and justice mean more than courtrooms; they embody the very principles of moral reason and excellence. Leaders shape the moral landscape of society. They influence policy, yes, but also the character and values of their citizens. When we look at political figures

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we admire, the Lincolns, the Churchills, the Roosevelts, we find respect not merely for effective policy but for moral courage and personal integrity.

Aristotle's insight enables us to see more clearly: we can strive towards excellence, becoming 'the best of', or we can abandon reason and virtue, becoming 'the worst of all'.

Erik Van Aken

Erik Van Aken is Instructor of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Rocky Mountain College, MT, USA.

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