ACT AS A VIRTUOUS PERSON WOULD ACT: UNDERSTANDING VIRTUE ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

The Role of character building and the cultivation of virtue is the primary component of virtue ethics. It does not advance much of emphasis on the performance of duty nor to act in a certain manner that could bring about noteworthy consequences. Rather, it is to act just as a virtuous person would act. Virtue ethics finds its genesis in the writings of Aristotle. He was of the opinion that virtue consists in building a noble character. Virtue is the product of one's own internal disposition that has to be pruned and moulded so as to become a permanent character. This article highlights the above-mentioned nature of virtue ethics; moreover, it lays down the general conceptual understanding of utilitarianism and Kantianism, so as to find a different philosophical ground for virtue ethics.

Key words: *Virtue Ethics, Kantianism, Aristotelian Ethics, Ethical Justification.*

INTRODUCTION

Present-day virtue ethics is one response to a mounting frustration with deontological and consequentialist moral theories. Virtue ethics attempts to develop an alternative theory to those which have been so prevalent and, in the view of proponents of virtue ethics, unsuccessful in modern analytic philosophy. It is distinct from these more traditional theories in that it revolves around the adaptable and varying character of the agent rather than an irreducible element such as a universal duty or fixed goal. The roots of virtue ethics are often said to be found in the philosophy of Aristotle, whose moral theory grows out of the conviction that human nature itself possesses the power to inform and instruct us in moral dilemmas. With the shift away from an abstract, universal ideal outside the human condition to the character of the moral agent him /herself, comes a return to the Aristotelian focus on virtue. Moral virtue, as a cultivated disposition, is the primary concept in virtue ethics and replaces the duty and goal at the centre of deontological and consequentialist theories. As the nature of moral virtue is quite different from a fixed duty or goal, the structure of the theory itself changes. Aristotelian morality grows out of his conception of human nature, which can only be properly developed through action and education within a community- we learn what is good not by reference to an external ideal, but rather from the good people around us. To understand how we should live, we must cultivate from youth certain habits of character under the guidance of good laws and moral exemplars. In the absence of a structured community, specifically a *polis,* we simply cannot become moral Creatures. For Aristotle then, the relationship between ethics and politics is a Fundamental and necessary one. Assuming ethics and politics have a necessary and often overlooked

interdependence in Aristotle, does recognition of this essential relationship enable his work to become the source of and model for a working alternative to today's predominant moral theories? To answer this question, we must first analyse the nature of this relationship as presented by Aristotle in some detail. With this understood, we can then determine how a theory which depends on such a relationship might be maintained today. If virtue ethics is to use Aristotle and succeed in its project, it must find stability not in the interaction between the individual and a neutral, external standpoint, but between the individual and the dynamic political sphere. Despite this seemingly slippery foundation, I will argue that an Aristotelian approach does offer us a strong alternative moral theory.

THE ORIGIN OF VIRTUE ETHICS: ARISTOTLE

Before going into an examination of contemporary virtue ethics, I will, as stated in the introduction, give an overview of some of the key features of Aristotle's ethics.6 With this in mind, we must begin with the understanding that Aristotle's view of the world is teleological — every species has a particular nature which defines it and which implies for it a distinct end: "each species has its own good and its own perfect state of realisation"(Coleman, 2000: 91). A truly good life for any given species requires the perfect and complete realization of all those potential(s) particular to that species. Ethics then, which concerns the human species, must make explicit the human end, for; the excellent fulfilment or realization of man's natural end embodies the good specific to him. This necessarily locates "the good" within man's nature, not in something unlike or external to him: even if there is some one good which is universally predicable of goods, or is capable of separate and independent existence, clearly it could not be attained by man; but we are now seeking something attainable (Irwin, 1999). In defining and understanding ethics in this way, Aristotle gives priority to the human being. This focus on the moral agent combined with his teleology results in a theory which is derived from and contingent upon the specific human psychology and biology. Only in recognizing this connection and prioritizing in this way, Aristotle insists, can man understand and actualize his good.

NATURE AND FUNCTION OF MAN

Man is a complex being in that he has the potential not only for physical life but for intelligent life as well. Therefore, unlike other simpler creatures, he has: more indeterminate freedom to become different kinds of characters (Coleman, 2000). Such indeterminacy makes man inherently variable and imprecise (Glendening, 2002). However, like all living things, he is ensouled. Sorabji describes man's soul as "a set of capacities...related to each other in intimate ways so as to form a unity" (Anstey, 2000). What are these capacities? According to Aristotle, the human soul is divided into two basic parts; one rational, the other, irrational. Each of these parts is again subdivided in two, such as, mathematical axioms and the heavenly bodies. The other part is the practical part, concerned with deliberation, which is to say, choice and action about matters in the world which we have the power to change. The irrational part of the soul is split into a vegetative or nutritional part, concerned with man's most basic bodily functions and needs, and an appetitive part, which is the source of our desires and passions. The term irrational" however, is not entirely appropriate for the appetitive part of the soul. For it, unlike the vegetative part, is subject to the influence of the rational part of the soul - that is, reason, or *logos.*Reason, or *logos,* is crucial to our understanding human nature for it forms the crux of Aristotle's argument in establishing man's *ergon.* To determine the *ergon*of a living thing, he claims, we must discover what is unique to it: “we are seeking what is peculiar to man. As man is distinguished from other living things by *logos,* it is the key to grasping his *ergon.* The Greek word *logo is* however, difficult to translate directly. In preserving the rich meaning of *logos,* we see that it is distinct from Kant’s reason for, while it clearly "elevates" man, it cannot be isolated from the contingencies inherent

in an actual human life. *Logos* then, by its very definition, can only be realized within the specific human condition. More precisely, it remains dormant in the individual and actualized only when heacts within a *polls.* Because the presence of *logos* differentiates man from other living beings, alive which uses it, Aristotle concludes, is the proper life for him

I want to examine the two main theories from which virtue ethics strives to distinguish itself - deontological morality (specifically Kantian) and consequentialism (specifically utilitarianism). I want to make clear from the start however, that the summaries which follow are in no sense comprehensive. Rather they seek only to lay out an outline of the theories and a general picture of where they have been shown to fall short so as to provide a context in which current virtue ethics can be better analysed.

KANTIAN THEORY

At the core of Kant's morality is a universal law, the categorical imperative. Stated simply, it requires that we ought never to treat another person merely as means to an end (Wendel, 2000). As "transcendent subjects", Kant claims that it is our moral duty to act in accordance with this law. Kantian morality is thus "duty-based" (Dworkin, 1973). An action is moral only if it is that which the categorical imperative prescribes. In fact, our association to the categorical imperative is even more profound — we must not only conform to it, but do so consciously. Actions have no moral worth if done without the cognitive awareness that we are acting in accordance with the categorical imperative. In this, the categorical imperative serves as an external, universal and fixed law. While both circumstances and people change, the categorical imperative is always and forever the same. Our duty, in Kant's view, is inflexible and resolute. As moral agents we must consciously apply the categorical imperative in every situation in which we find ourselves. While the immutability and universality of the categorical imperative endows Kant's theory with a good deal of power, just how it functions within such a complex world is less certain. There is no denying that the categorical imperative provides Kantians with a commanding ideal to which they can appeal in moral crises. The abstract, invariable nature of the categorical imperative, the fact that it is contingent on nothing within the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves, should ground, stabilize and successfully guide human beings through thorny moral dilemmas. But can we really use such an "objective" law? Critics of Kantian ethics see his moral theory as deficient in a variety of ways - most of which arise out of precisely that attribute which gives it strength, its abstract and fixed universality. Anscombe, for example, faults Kant for his inability to remove ambiguities which arise out of the distance between our rich and complicated lives and the stark, invariable nature of the categorical imperative (Wendel, 2000).

UTILITARIANISM

Utilitarianism represents a theory quite different from that proposed by Kant. It is based on the premise that, given a defined good, the morally right thing to do in any situation is to strive to produce as much of that good as possible (National Research Council, 1999). Whereas Kant's categorical imperative gave us a duty based theory, utilitarianism is an "end" based theory. It is concerned with consequence, with performing actions which have the end result of maximizing "the good". Good actions are, quite simply, those which serve this goal. In this, utilitarians have a distinct decision making procedure (indeed, almost mathematical, according to Bentham). By putting this principle to use, moral dilemmas can be solved systematically for the utilitarian. When confused as to what action to take, as to what we should or should not do, we must simply ask and determine the answer to the question, or some variation of it: What will maximize utility? Moral actions are reduced to variables in an equation and we can make our way relatively easily through complex

moral dilemmas (Page, 2012). If, for example, we are given the potentially distressing choice of having to kill one person in order to save a ten, we must, according to utilitarian criterion, kill the one. In accepting utilitarianism, we are given tools with which we can make our way through what might otherwise be crippling situations. But does this really work? Is the idea of maximization of the good really as simple as it appears to be? If, for example, the ten lives mentioned above are those of viscous killers and the one is a genius who holds in her head a cure for AIDS, the seemingly obvious solution prescribed by utilitarian becomes ambiguous. How do we measure happiness? Do we look only to those lives immediately affected, which would seem to support saving the ten killers? As we flesh out the hypothetical situation, we see that the theoretical device provided by utilitarian theory is difficult to integrate into practice. Like Kantian morality, utilitarianism also has its pitfalls. For example, there is no specified limit as to when, if ever, we can stop applying its grounding principle.

CONCLUSION

As a concluding observation, for contemporary virtue ethics to succeed, it must re-examine Aristotelian ethics without completely relinquishing his conception of human nature and reason. This in turn will better indicate and define the role of the political sphere. Virtue ethics must admit to the necessity of context in a moral theory, but it must give it, like Aristotle, a more active role. The political sphere is not simply that which passively gives meaning to our moral concepts, assuming that we will be able to criticize and change them if we want. It must recognize that this ability to criticize and change — in short, our capacity for rational thought requires active cultivation, for ultimately we have only the potential for reasoned thought. Recognition of this need for reason's development does not require that communities have consensus on a specific good — a demand that would be impossible in today's pluralistic societies. We must only understand that an ethical theory cannot provide us with simple straightforward answers in times of moral crisis: only close attention to life together with use of reason can help us find creative and workable answers. Because of this, our reason needs to be developed, and the political sphere, properly conceived and structured.

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