
Moral theories

Aristotle's ethics

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The phrase 'medical ethics' is ambiguous between (a) the application of moral concepts to medical practice, and (b) the application of medical concepts to moral thinking. Aristotle leaves (a) to others (and to us); (b) is for him a rich and recurrent theme. Only if we understand Aristotle's emphasis on (b) can we hope to pursue (a) ourselves in an Aristotelian manner. (The reader will have to tolerate some allusive if elementary use of obsolete concepts of Greek medical theory; for my purposes it would be more or less possible to replace them by perennial generalities, but at the cost of hiding the inspiration that Aristotle, himself the son of a doctor, found in the medical science of his day.)

In Aristotle's ethics the end of action, and starting-point of deliberation, is *eudaimonia*, standardly translated as 'happiness', but glossed by him as 'activity of soul exhibiting excellence, in a complete life' (*Nicomachean Ethics*, as always below unless otherwise indicated, 1098a16ff). No one deliberates whether to be 'happy', just as no doctor deliberates whether to heal. (This is Aristotle's own analogy, 1112b12f. Of course, I may deliberate whether to be a doctor.) But the point is formal, almost verbal: just as I'm not 'doctoring' unless I am trying to make a patient well, so I'm not 'deliberating' unless I am trying to live well. It is not clear that any options are yet closed. (If any are, that needs justification.) Unlike Jeremy Bentham's pleasure, Aristotle's 'happiness' is a determinable, not a determinate, end (ie it is an end whose content is still to be fixed). What we need to do next is not to calculate means towards an already specific goal, but to specify what is to count as achieving the goal. But who is to settle what fills the bill of 'activity of soul exhibiting excellence'?

Not the moral philosopher, except in a general and schematic way. For our object is practice, not theory, and 'practice is concerned with particulars' (1141b16). Now 'particular cases do not fall under any art or precept but the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion, as happens also in the art of medicine' (1104a6ff). It is with an 'eye' derived from experience that older men

can 'see' rightly (1143b13f). Such questions as how far one can on some occasion permissibly deviate from what is best 'depend on particular facts, and the decision rests with perception' (1109b22f). Aristotle may possibly have had in mind here the Hippocratic *On Ancient Medicine*, which denies (ch 9) that for fixing a correct diet there is any measure, either number or weight, to give knowledge exact enough to risk only slight deviations other than 'perception' (whether the doctor's or the patient's).

So Aristotle excludes grounding practical decisions upon appeal to *a priori* principles. This emerges again when, in discussion of 'equity' or natural justice, he supports treating written laws like the flexible rod used in making the Lesbian moulding: the rod 'adapts itself to the shape of the stone and is not rigid, and so too the decree is adapted to the facts' (1137b31f). Aristotle expects a judge (in the manner of Lord Denning) not to be bound by the letter of the law, but 'to say what the legislator himself would have said had he been present' (1137b22f). Now there is no suggestion here that agents are to dispense with principles: judges aren't, after all, simply to ignore the laws. Even 1104a6ff (quoted earlier) need no more deny the utility of practical principles than of medical textbooks (useless though the latter may be to those with no experience, 1181b5f). Moreover, the internalisation of principles is implicit in Aristotle's general conception of moral development, which he adapts from truisms about physical training: just as bodily strength comes from habituation to food and exercise, and the strong man can take most, so, for example, temperance comes from habitual abstention from pleasure, and the temperate man can do this best (1104a30ff). For what is habituation but the adoption of practices that can be spelt out in general descriptions or prescriptions that define what counts as going on in the same way? However, principles need, like laws, to be modified in the light of experience. This we may do either by adding specific qualifying clauses (thus 1137b23f mention what the legislator 'would have put into his law if he had known'), or by the general qualification 'for the most part' (which leaves it to the agent to decide in each case, or at least in any extraordinary case, whether to apply the principle).

The upshot may be deemed a kind of

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'situationalism'. Indeed, the best modern equivalent of Aristotle's practical 'perception' is perhaps David Wiggins's 'situational appreciation'. But there are varieties of situationalism, of which Aristotle's (like Wiggins's) is among the more elusive. Joseph Fletcher's curiously celebrated 'situation ethics' is just a poor relative of act-utilitarianism (and so hardly a 'new morality', as he has called it). By contrast, as we noted, Aristotle's 'happiness' is not a determinate goal in the manner of Bentham's pleasure. What then is to determine the practical decision in each case? Terms like 'perception' or 'situational appreciation' indicate that any rational decision must be a function of the details of the particular case: they don't themselves reveal *what* function, or how a decision is to be reached in the light of the situation. What we need, at least, are some criteria of relevance: what features of things should an agent take into account?

Something of an answer might be sought in Aristotle's conception of the 'natural' virtues (cp1144b1ff). A man may be naturally brave from birth, in a way. In what way? Consider an earlier remark: 'Rashness is thought liker and nearer to courage, and cowardice more unlike' (1109a8ff). Thus it is rash to adopt the rule 'Always stand your ground', cowardly to adopt the rule 'Never stand your ground'; yet the rash rule is far more nearly acceptable than the cowardly one. Perhaps natural courage coincides with this kind of rashness, so that it is simple principles of rashness that are innate to the naturally brave. (I take this suggestion from Buridan's medieval commentary.) If so, natural courage will often be enough, backed by the simplest perception of, for example, the approach of the enemy. However, this is a very provisional (as well as partial) identification of the relevant. Nothing has yet been said to discriminate natural virtues from natural vices. And, anyway, natural virtue isn't virtue proper. *That* will require exceptions or qualifications to the simple principles, exploiting and demanding a more sophisticated eye for facts. But what kinds of fact? That remains the question.

Courage proper achieves a 'mean' between cowardice and rashness (even if it is closer to the latter). How are we to understand Aristotle's famous doctrine of the mean? Its minimal content is just this: take any right act you like; there will be two broad ways of acting wrongly (not just one), which you may loosely characterise relatively to the right act as 'going too far' or 'not going far enough'. Though not wholly vacuous (and distinctively indicative of why it is difficult to hit off the right act), this offers no help towards identifying the right act in the first place. It is not that the extremes are given initially, and the agent has only to calculate a mathematical midpoint between them, as an analogy from diet illustrates: 'If ten pounds are too much for a particular person to eat and two too little, it does not follow that the trainer will order six pounds' (1106a36ff). Yet there is also a more substantial aspect to the doctrine, which Aristotle took over from the

medical theory of his time (and of a long time to follow). A body is healthy when its humours (hot, cold, moist, dry) are not opposed to one another, but blended in due proportion (for example *Physics* 246b4ff), a proportion that may vary in different things or at different times (1173a24ff). Analogously, any act exercises (and reinforces) a variety of emotions or impulses (*pathé*); an act is right if it fulfils (and maintains) a blend of reconciled impulses. It will then achieve the mean, not in itself, but in relation to the agent (1106b7). Thus with the rational decision of the brave or temperate 'all things are in harmony' (sc within the soul, 1102b28). On the other hand, those who habitually miss the mean suffer from impulses that are insatiable or conflicting: in irrational men 'the desire for pleasure is insatiable even if it tries every source of gratification, and the exercise of appetite increases its innate force' (1119b8f); moreover, 'their soul is rent by faction, and one element in it grieves when it abstains from certain acts, while the other part is pleased, and one draws them this way and the other that, as if they were pulling them in pieces' (1166b19ff). The avoidance of such discomforts becomes an internal criterion of achieving the mean: acts are viewed as symptoms of a conflict or crisis of impulses, and the underlying subject of moral evaluation is psychological losses and gains.

In fact, the relation of morality to physical health is more intimate than mere analogy. Emotions involve a bodily process (cp *On the Soul* 403a16ff): for example, 'Anger is productive of heat' (*On the Parts of Animals* 650b35), while 'Fear is, indeed, a kind of chill' (*Rhetoric* 1389b32). The hot temper of youth and the cool temper of old age, to take two extremes, are corollaries of physical extremes, of literal heat and cold respectively (*Rhetoric* 1389a2ff). In general, moral as well as bodily excellences are supervenient upon physical states; specific to moral excellence is what it supervenes upon, *viz* bodily pleasures and pains (*Physics* 246b3-247a20, an early passage not relevantly superseded). Health and virtue are both grounded upon the physiological condition of a psycho-physical entity.

Yet it is hard to view the physiology of virtue as more than a general precondition. It more satisfactorily identifies natural virtue than virtue proper. The blood of young men is heated by nature (as though by wine), so that they are hot-tempered and hopeful; this makes them less timorous and more confident, and so more courageous, than the old (*Rhetoric* 1389a18ff). But the properly brave man is one 'who faces and who fears the right things and from the right motive, in the right way and at the right time' (1115b17ff). Now it is true that perceptiveness depends upon a good physical state: for example, men with too large a heart are prone to fear as their blood is easily cooled (*On the Parts of Animals* 667a15ff), and fear gives the coward the illusion that the enemy is approaching (*On Dreams* 460b3ff). But the detailed sensitivity to external factors that Aristotle expects of agents is not readily explained by the

demands of internal peace. Aristotle faces the same problem that Plato faced with his similar conception of justice as mental health: there is no reason to assume that acting *morally* (notably towards others) will coincide with being or becoming *well* (medically speaking).

We can only speculate how Aristotle might have spelt out a properly nuanced relation between health and morality. One possible approach might be precisely through that facet of Aristotle's ethics that has, in itself, least to do with human nature, and even with other men. It is man's privilege to be able to transcend his own nature: 'We must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us' (1177b31ff). This is theoretical reason, which is shared with the gods, and hence cannot be essentially supervenient upon matter (even if *we* exercise it with the aid of physically dependent images). The ultimate object of its contemplation is Aristotle's own god, the unmoved Prime Mover, whose unending and unchanging mental life the intelligences that direct the heavenly bodies imitate as best they can in unending and continuous motion. Now it is a problem for Aristotle (as, perhaps, for any religious thinker) how to reconcile the claims of private contemplation and social morality. But it is plausible that love of God, not being itself an egocentric or self-referential attitude, should inspire a wish not only to imitate God oneself, but that others should imitate him also. So through loving contemplation of God I will come to desire continuous

activity, and the psycho-physical stability that underlies it, not only for myself, but for others as well. This should motivate me to act in ways that not only express my own internal well-being, but also generate or perpetuate the same in others. Such action is more likely to be specifically moral action.

The reader may be disconcerted that, even on such a central issue, interpretation of Aristotle should be speculation. But that is certainly a feature of Aristotle's ethics as we have them, and may well be a feature of ethical theory as he conceived it: 'Our discussion will be adequate', he remarks, 'if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of' (1094b11f). Aristotle does less to answer practical questions than to explore the nature, at once rational and physiological, of the species that can never make an end of asking them.

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