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Handout 14

Moral Philosophy
Virtue Ethics

Two philosophers dominate what has come to be known as *Virtue Ethics*. The first is Aristotle; the second is Alasdair MacIntyre. We will be concentrating on Aristotle. MacIntyre was responsible for reviving philosophical interest in Aristotelian ethics during the 20th century.

So what is Virtue Ethics (sometimes known as *Virtue Theory*)? Aristotle's basic idea is that every action is thought to aim at some good (not necessarily moral good). Everyone wants to achieve a state of *Eudaimonia* which roughly translates an 'flourishing'. Some secondary literature suggests that *Eudaimonia* can be construed as 'happiness'. This is not wrong but it can be misleading. Aristotle wasn't a utilitarian and did not conceive of happiness in merely in terms of pleasure or a psychological state related to a particular event. In other words, he didn't think of happiness as pleasure derived from a particular event, such as receiving a nice birthday present. Think of a life that flourishes and thrives. If someone asks how you are and you say, "I'm thriving" or "I'm flourishing" – that says much more than "I'm happy"! Aristotle believed that *Eudaimonia* is a state of being (a way of living) rather than just particular responses to the various happenings in one's life; it is closely related to a person's character.

Unlike Kant or Mill, Aristotle focussed less on the rightness or wrongness of particular actions and more on character. There are two main differences between Mill and Aristotle. The first centres on their respective understandings of happiness. Mill construes happiness very much as a psychological state – one directly related to pleasure; by contrast, Aristotle considers it as a form of flourishing rather than just a feeling (psychological state). A flourishing life can only be had by someone of good character; someone with (what Aristotle calls) practical wisdom (*phronesis/phronimos*). Good or worthy moral actions would naturally be made by someone of good character. A person merely performing actions of a particular kind in order to be seen as virtuous would not be a person of good character. –In pursuit of *Eudaimonia* Aristotle accorded great importance to the role of emotion and the intellect; each moderating the other. In this way it can be seen that he also differs greatly from Kant, who believed that emotions were often destructive to a morally good life. While both Aristotle and Kant put the intellect at centre-stage, the role they assigned to it was very different. Kant's system was ultimately founded on pure reason devoid of emotion; it was a system that required us to work out whether one could legitimately universalize the action guiding principles (maxims) that supported individual actions; Aristotle, by contrast, the saw the role of the intellect as achieving *arête*.

Arête roughly translates as 'excellence', although it is also translated as 'virtue' (hence virtue ethics). However, one needs to understand what is meant by excellence. It does not mean excellence as in 'high standards' although that is certainly a dimension of it. Think about the now (sadly) slightly outmoded phrase that describes someone as "an excellent chap"! In this case, we are not just referring to high standards but to a quality of character. Thus, when we describe someone as "an excellent chap", we are referring to him as a man of good character; and, of course, part of that will mean that he maintains excellence in professional standards too. Hopefully you can now see that excellence in this sense (arête) has a much broader meaning than the kind of excellence that is referred to in, for example, Bridgestone tyres' tagline "passion for excellence". This (latter) kind of excellence refers merely to high standards rather than to character.

Before moving on, it is worth noting some of the similarities and differences between *Virtue Ethics* and Utilitarianism. Firstly, Aristotle does not think (as we have already seen) that flourishing is the same kind of thing as happiness (as both Bentham and Mill construed it). Thus, Aristotle did not believe that a form of calculus could be used to ascertain right from wrong in this respect. He did however, develop and advocate the *Doctrine of The Mean* which is something we shall look at shortly.[1] One could, perhaps, see the Epicurean idea of the pursuit of pleasure as a little closer to the sort of thing Aristotle had in mind. Like Epicurus, Aristotle was not a hedonist; he did not pursue pleasure for its own sake. Epicurus, you will recall, believed that the ultimate pleasure was wisdom, since it allowed a person to distinguish between those pleasures that might result in greater pain later on and those which would increase overall happiness in one's life. Whilst Aristotle did not think in terms of happiness in the same way as Epicurus, he did believe that one shouldn't just fall prey to sensual pleasures- sex and gluttony, for example. One final similarity to note is that both Utilitarianism and Virtue Ethics are teleological theories; that is, they're concerned with purpose. In the case of utilitarianism the purpose is greater overall happiness; in the case of Virtue Ethics, the purpose is achieving *Eudaimonia* (flourishing).

Having said all that, it must be noted that whilst Aristotle's conception of the good life (i.e. that pertaining to *eudaimonia*) is teleological, the achievement of *eudaimonia* (as such) has no further purpose.

According to Aristotle, moral virtue is not innate but neither can it be wholly achieved through teaching; rather, it is acquired through continuous practise and application, and can be lost if allowed to fall into disuse. Put another way: a moral virtue is not merely intellect or emotion. What provides our capacity to be moral is character; character is what makes a person act and choose well and it develops through a way of living that involves attention to judgement. Choosing well is a matter of choosing a good way of life. But what does that amount to?

To deal with this question, Aristotle introduces his *Doctrine of The Mean*; this is a central aspect of Aristotle's virtue ethics. Roughly speaking, it amounts to the mean (as in average) or middle ground between excess and deficiency. Aristotle uses several examples: to be virtuous (to achieve

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[1] This is not a calculus however!

arête) one should avoid drinking too much (excess) but also avoid drinking too little (deficiency); in conversation one should avoid talking too much but also avoid talking too little; to be courageous one must avoid rashness but also avoid cowardice. Achieving *arête* – becoming virtuous and cultivating good character – relies on developing the skill of understanding how to achieve the mean. There is no one way of doing this - neither is there a set way of behaving that constitutes the mean; it varies from person to person. Aristotle provides an analogy to force home this point: an Olympic athlete requires a different amount of food (and, often, food of a different kind) to a novice runner. We have to find out what the right (mean) amount of everything is for ourselves; it cannot be prescribed by someone else. That is why moral virtue and character are neither innate (because we have to *find out* what the mean is for ourselves) nor wholly teachable (because everyone is different). It is also vital to understand that virtue (*arête*) does not just concern actions but also emotions. We can have too many fears, or too few; too much anger or too little; too much melancholy or too little and so on. Once again, there is a right amount of each that we have to discover for ourselves and that is appropriate to each of us individually; it is application of intellect and judgement that allows us to do this. Thus, virtues are, in themselves, means: courage is the mean between rashness and cowardice, for example. Having said that, there cannot be too much of a virtue but one can talk too much or drink too much.

Even though we are always supposed to work towards the middle ground in one way or another, this should not be understood as the cultivation of mediocrity. Once we have understood what the right amount of conversation is in a particular situation, or what it takes to be courageous, or how much and what kind of food to eat, we have – according to Aristotle – the right prescription to achieve good character and *arête*.

Aristotle does exclude certain actions and passions from his *Doctrine of The Mean.* Both murder and jealousy are excluded; one cannot have too many or too few murders! Neither can one have too much or too little jealousy. In both cases, the intellect does not play any kind of role in tempering excess or deficiency. Jealousy, no matter what the amount, is always undiluted emotion, and there can never be a mean number of people one should kill! Is there an objection here?

Understanding what it takes to achieve *arête* requires another virtue that, thus far, has remained unexamined – namely, practical reasoning or practical wisdom (*phronesis*).[2] It is required to achieve moral virtue, for without it we might do the wrong thing no matter how well-intentioned we are. – Acting spontaneously in a crisis, for example, may well do more harm than good even if one's intentions are honourable. Practical wisdom helps us avoid such scenarios. Whilst it is necessary in these cases - and

whilst it demands intelligence – practical wisdom could be used for evil purposes if not combined with other virtues. Only when it is tempered by moral virtue will it always act as a force for good. That achieved, we can be said to have acquired wisdom. Nonetheless, this argument sounds circular: it seems that I need moral virtue to become wise but need wisdom to acquire moral virtue. It is not as circular as it looks however. Recall the well intentioned man who did not possess practical reason. According to Aristotle, certain people possess 'natural virtues' such as good intentions. When these natural virtues are combined with practical reason they become fully fledged virtues and practical reason becomes wisdom. Of course, there is still the problem of those people who do not possess natural virtues; in this case, the argument does indeed look circular. Nonetheless, this approach might help advance aspects of the discussion we had last lesson. Recall the discussion that centred on whether it would occur to someone to take for themselves money they found on the street, or hand it in to the police. Perhaps a lack of temptation is consistent with possession of natural virtue? If that is so, it might throw a different complexion on so called 'reformed characters'. Do they have natural virtue that gradually, with the right encouragement, develops and combines with practical reason to yield wisdom. I'll leave you to think on this.

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[2] Wisdom as such (i.e. not practical wisdom) = *sophia* in Greek. Hence philosophy meaning "love of wisdom" (*philos* = love; *sophia* = wisdom.).