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978-0-521-62497-8 - Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty
Edited by Stephen Engstrom and Jennifer Whiting

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Introduction

STEPHEN ENGSTROM AND JENNIFER WHITING

There is a venerable tradition according to which ancient ethical thought and modern ethical thought are sharply opposed. The outlines of this view are clear in Sidgwick, and it has figured prominently in work of contemporary writers such as G. E. M. Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre. The differences between ancient and modern ethics are, according to this tradition, due largely to the influence of Christianity and its conception of morality as based on divine law. The story runs roughly as follows.

The ancients took as their starting point the idea of the good, particularly the human good, which they identified with *eudaimonia*, or happiness. Because they tended to view the good of a being as determined by its natural end or function, and to regard the capacities whose exercise enables a being to perform its function *well* as its characteristic excellences or virtues, they tended to view a being's good as achieved in or through the exercise of its characteristic virtues. But in spite of their emphasis on the human end and characteristic human virtues, the ancients were sensitive to the fact that this end must be sought and these virtues exercised in different ways in different circumstances. Right action is determined not by general rules but by the virtuous agent's perception of what the circumstances require. Ancient ethics is thus teleological and particularist: the end determines what sort of action is appropriate given the agent's particular circumstances.

The moderns, on the other hand, took as their starting point the moral code they inherited from medieval Christianity, which consisted roughly in a system of rules or commands grounded in divine law. But as a result of the religious disputes of the Reformation and the rise of modern science and secular society, the specific content of this code could no longer be justified by appeal to revelation. The central project of modern ethics thus came to be one of providing an alternative foundation. Though some sought a basis in human sentiments, the legalistic character of the code encouraged most

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Enlightenment moralists to seek a foundation for our duties in universal laws of nature ascertainable by natural reason. Modern ethics thus tends to be deontological and universalist: since the rules of duty are based on laws prescribed by reason alone, they bind all agents absolutely, without regard to their private interests.

This historical sketch no doubt captures some important differences between ancient and modern ethics, but proponents of the traditional view tend to regard these differences as symptomatic of a fundamental opposition, one thought to be most clearly exemplified by the paradigmatic representatives of ancient and modern ethics – namely, Aristotle and Kant. According to this line of thought, Aristotle is a teleologist who insists that all action be done for the sake of eudaimonia, while Kant is a deontologist who insists that moral action be done for the sake of duty alone; Aristotle's conception of practical reason is monistic insofar as he justifies all action by appeal to the single end of eudaimonia, while Kant's conception is dualistic insofar as his distinction between categorical and hypothetical imperatives reflects a sharp distinction between moral and nonmoral reasoning; and Aristotle sees right action as determined by the virtuous agent's perception of what is required by particular circumstances, while Kant sees duties as rules prescribed by reason alone.

This tradition exercises a pervasive influence on contemporary ethics. Many thinkers take the traditional opposition for granted, and thus see only a restricted range of options. Viewing their choice as one between ancient and modern, they overlook the possibility that there are important respects in which these outlooks are compatible and perhaps even complementary. Bernard Williams and Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, regard modern ethics, both Kantian and utilitarian, as products of an Enlightenment conception of rationality that is hopelessly flawed by its reliance on impartial and ahistorical universal principles. Because they take the traditional opposition for granted, Williams and MacIntyre think it necessary, in order to recover ancient insights about virtue and happiness, to reject features of modern ethical thought. Many theorists, however, continue to find some of these features, such as the emphasis on impartiality, attractive. If we value both the ancient insights and also such features of modern ethical thought, then we have good reason to reexamine the traditional assumption that ancient and modern ethics are irreconcilably opposed.

Moreover, the traditional view begins to look less plausible when we turn to the Stoics, who combine elements of these allegedly opposed ways of thought. Like Aristotle and other ancient ethicists, the Stoics are eudaimonists: they take eudaimonia to be the ultimate source of moral motivation and justification. This should, on the traditional view, distinguish the Stoics from Kant, who is supposed to focus on duty and to reject the eudaimonist's appeal

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to happiness. Nevertheless, the Stoics, with their emphasis on universal reason, articulate a conception of moral duty, based on natural law, that exercises a profound influence on Enlightenment ethics in general and Kant in particular. The Stoics thus provide not only a historical link between Aristotle and Kant, but also an illustration of how putatively ancient and modern ethical thought might be coherently integrated.

There are further challenges to the traditional view surfacing in contemporary work on Aristotle and Kant. Some commentators – for example, John McDowell and Jennifer Whiting – are now interpreting Aristotle in strikingly “Kantian” ways, while others – for example, Barbara Herman and Christine Korsgaard – are reading Kant in highly “Aristotelian” ways. There is thus emerging a convergence of interpretations of Aristotle and Kant, though one not yet widely appreciated because these Aristotelian and Kantian commentators have been working largely independently of one another. This independence is of significant evidential value since it renders their conclusions mutually supporting. Taken together, these interpretations pose a formidable challenge to the traditional view.

This emerging challenge, combined with that posed by recent work on the Stoics, suggests that the time is ripe to reevaluate the traditional view. To promote such reevaluation, we invited the authors of the essays collected here to participate in a conference entitled “Duty, Interest, and Practical Reason: Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics,” at the University of Pittsburgh in March 1994. We sought out scholars, some more and some less sympathetic to the traditional view, whose recent work suggested that they could be fruitfully paired with one another. Each session included one speaker working primarily on Aristotle or the Stoics, and one working primarily on Kant. In arranging the essays for this volume we have retained the original session topics and pairings of speakers, as indicated in the following synopses.

I. Deliberation and Moral Development

The striking similarities between John McDowell’s Aristotle and Barbara Herman’s Kant provided the original inspiration for both the theme and the format of the conference. Both reject standard classifications of Aristotelian and Kantian moral theories as, respectively, teleological and deontological. Herman even recommends that we read Kant’s ethics as focused, like Aristotle’s, on the good rather than, as traditionally claimed, on duty. And McDowell’s Aristotelian conception of practical reason is explicitly Kantian insofar as he denies that practical reason stands in need of external, or extraethical, validation. Both emphasize upbringing and perception rather than rules, and both reject elucidations of practical reasoning that reduce it to a weighing of the relative costs and benefits of competing alternatives.

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McDowell's contribution to this volume attacks what he regards as the dominant tradition, according to which Aristotle adopts a "blueprint picture" of the sort of deliberation involved in exercising *phronēsis* (practical wisdom). Deliberation proceeds, according to this picture, in two stages. One first formulates, in universal terms, an explicit blueprint for eudaimonia, or living well in general. Once explicit, this blueprint can then be applied to particular circumstances in a straightforward, perhaps even mechanical, way. McDowell rejects the blueprint picture because he believes that it can accommodate neither Aristotle's hostility to the idea of universal ethical truths nor Aristotle's association of practical wisdom with responsiveness to the details of particular practical predicaments.

McDowell claims that the blueprint picture is motivated, in spite of its patently non-Aristotelian rigorism, by a deductivistic prejudice of relatively recent vintage: modern moralists – because they tend to seek external foundations for ethical conclusions – tend to think that in cases of noninstrumental or specificatory reasoning, they can secure the sort of correctness required for "getting things right" only if they can represent the conclusion of deliberation as *deductively* warranted on the basis of independently acceptable starting points. McDowell's Aristotle is happily innocent of any such tendencies. In this respect, he resembles Kant: he takes the goodness of *eu pratein* (i.e., of good-willing-in-action) to be unconditioned and feels no need to ground it in the goodness of other goods whose value is independently accessible to those without a proper upbringing. McDowell concludes that categorical imperatives are not entirely alien to Aristotle's ethics.

McDowell believes that the blueprint picture fails because Aristotle's conception of eudaimonia is not such that it is clear in abstraction from particular practical predicaments what it would be for eudaimonia to have been achieved. Although he allows that the agent's conception of eudaimonia is a universal that gets applied in particular circumstances, McDowell claims that the content of this universal cannot be detached from the concrete psychological state, involving situation-specific perception, that constitutes its grasp. This state, which is the product of habituation, is simultaneously intellectual and desiderative: in learning to see certain actions as worth undertaking because they are noble (*kalon*), the agent acquires the concept of the noble *along with* the propensity to be motivated by its application. And this, according to McDowell, is all that we need in order for the concept of correctness to get a grip within the sphere of practical reason.

Though she doesn't herself put it this way, Herman's contribution can be described similarly. She rejects the idea that Kantian moral theory is committed to the blueprint picture. Given the traditional contrasts, it is less sur-

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prising to find the blueprint picture here, and more surprising to find it rejected here, than in the case of Aristotle, where its appearance may be due to the influence of Aristotle's Kantian and other "deontomaniac" interpreters. Herman nevertheless seeks explicitly to accommodate within the Kantian framework a perception-based account of moral judgment similar to that developed by McDowell. This, she claims, requires us to rethink traditional accounts of the relation between desire and motive in Kantian moral theory.

Because Kant views pure practical reason as the determining ground of the will, commentators have traditionally ignored the shape and content of the Kantian agent's desires. Kantian moral development tends to be viewed as the cultivation of a kind of "rational musculature" sufficient to yield morally correct action, even in the face of recalcitrant desires. Herman, however, takes Kant's claim that pure practical reason is the determining ground of the will to be acceptable only if it is interpreted as a claim about the *authority*, and not about the *efficacy*, of the moral law. And she denies that it follows from this that our motivating understanding of the moral law, what she calls our "effective moral motive," must be pure.

Herman claims that there is room within Kantian moral theory for something like the view Aristotle expresses when he speaks of the nonrational part of the soul as sharing in reason. On her view, Kantians can allow that it is a natural fact about us as rational beings that our desires are *reason-responsive* in the sense that their shape and content can – given the right sort of development – be affected by our appreciation of the evaluative situations in which we find ourselves, and indeed by our appreciation of the moral law itself. As Herman puts it, the desires of a mature human agent have been brought within the scope of reason, or rationalized, in the sense that they normally contain not only a conception of an object, but also a conception of the object's value – not only for itself and as determined by its fit with other valued objects, but also as its satisfaction comports with the principles of practical reason. The motive of duty can thus function in the virtuous agent not as a separate motive to be weighed against others, nor as something added to independent incentives to act, but as dispersed throughout the motives that satisfy the requisite constraints.

Herman concludes with the suggestion that the Kantian framework may have advantages that the tradition-bound Aristotelian framework lacks, especially in dealing with the sort of moral perplexity that arises as a result of encountering new and unfamiliar moral phenomena.

II. Eudaimonism

T. H. Irwin's essay examines in detail Kant's well-known criticisms of ancient Greek eudaimonism. Kant criticizes the ancients on the ground that they

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commit the general error of regarding the highest good, or eudaimonia, as the basis of morality. Some of Kant's criticisms seem to rest on the assumption that all rational action, except for action on the moral motive, rests on a desire for pleasure. These criticisms thus amount to the objection that ancient attempts to base moral principles on eudaimonia subordinate morality to pleasure. But since some Greek eudaimonists, such as the Stoics, do not share this hedonist assumption, and since it is in any case a questionable one, this objection is not convincing. Kant has further objections, however, which do not depend on this assumption. He argues that any attempt to base morality on some prior conception of the good must treat moral principles as hypothetical imperatives and hence make moral agency heteronomous. Since Kant supposes that a hypothetical imperative based on our eudaimonia cannot provide a sufficient justification for an action unless we have a sufficiently strong inclination for our eudaimonia and for the specific elements within it that will be promoted by the action, he thinks that eudaimonia cannot provide any reasons for action that are independent of the inclinations of the subject, so that any attempt to base morality on eudaimonia subordinates moral principles to inclination.

Irwin argues, however, that Aristotle and the Stoics do not accept Kant's supposition that we have no sufficient justification for pursuing our eudaimonia that is not inclination-based. Aristotle and the Stoics hold that we have reason to pursue our eudaimonia not because we desire it, but because it is our ultimate good, which depends on the sort of being we are, not on what we happen to desire. There is thus a sense in which for Aristotle and the Stoics there can be *categorical* imperatives of prudence. To forestall the misleading impression that this disagreement with Kant reflects a division between ancient and modern views, however, Irwin points out that Butler and Reid agree with Aristotle and the Stoics on this point. Irwin also suggests that Kant fails to identify any difference between prudence and morality that would warrant his idea that imperatives of prudence can only be hypothetical, and that Kant's failure to free himself from this idea leads to certain inconsistencies in his understanding of the Stoics. Irwin concludes by noting that if imperatives of prudence can indeed have a categorical and autonomous status, then there may be a sense in which a justification of morality requires an appeal to eudaimonia, and that a correction of the mistakes in Kant's criticisms of Greek eudaimonism ought to result in a salutary reconstruction of his moral theory.

Stephen Engstrom begins his essay by noting that Aristotle's ethics has an attractive feature that Kant's is often thought to lack. By taking happiness, or eudaimonia, as his starting point, Aristotle ensures that his ethics is grounded in a conception that gives unity to practical life and whose content

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has some claim to be our natural end. Kant, on the other hand, while he speaks of happiness, or *Glückseligkeit*, as a natural end, sharply opposes the pursuit of this end to the practice of duty and virtue. Engstrom argues, however, that the fact that Aristotle conceives of eudaimonia as an end that includes virtuous activity, whereas Kant conceives of *Glückseligkeit* as an end from which such activity is excluded, indicates that their conceptions of eudaimonia and *Glückseligkeit* are fundamentally distinct and hence not appropriate reference points for comparison. Engstrom proposes that there is another concept in Kant's ethics that does provide the sort of unity that the conception of eudaimonia provides in Aristotle's, namely, the idea of the highest good.

But there is an apparent obstacle to this proposal. Kant explicitly criticizes the ancients for taking the highest good, which Aristotle identifies with eudaimonia, as the starting point for their ethical reflection. Consequently, he and Aristotle appear to differ in their understanding of the highest good. Engstrom argues, however, that attention to the nature of Kant's criticism and to the manner in which Aristotle articulates his conception of eudaimonia reveals that, as Irwin suggests, Kant's criticism does not in fact apply to Aristotle (though Engstrom and Irwin have quite different readings of that criticism). Kant requires that the specification of the highest good be, not the basis for, but rather something that depends on, the specification of virtue. And Aristotle seems to honor this requirement in his account of the lives of contemplation and of ethical virtue.

Engstrom goes on to argue that there is considerable agreement between Kant's and Aristotle's substantive conceptions of the highest good. Kant's conception provides a distinctive kind of unity for practical life through its systematic ordering of goods and its specification of an internal (causal) connection between them: virtue is both the basis for the goodness of *Glückseligkeit* and the cause of its realization in the highest good. Through an examination of Aristotle's accounts of eudaimonia, virtue, and the goods of fortune, Engstrom tries to show that Aristotle's conception of the highest good involves a similar ordering and connection of goods.

III. Self-Love and Self-Worth

Allen Wood argues that the main difference between Aristotle and Kant on the issue of self-love lies in a difference in their "empirical conceptions of human nature." Both find the topic of self-love to be morally important owing to the tendency people have in loving themselves to employ the wrong conception of self. But Aristotle thinks the error can be corrected, yielding a rationally satisfactory conception of self-love, while Kant holds that that self-love is in itself morally problematic and indeed fundamentally irrational,

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riddled with psychic conflict and self-alienation, so that love is not an attitude that clear-sighted and rational people will have toward themselves.

Wood argues that Kant takes our self-love to involve a rationally based desire for happiness that is essentially comparative: we want to think of ourselves as better than our neighbors, and this leads us to compete for status in their eyes and always to measure our own happiness by comparing ourselves with others. This “unsociable sociability” has a natural purpose, which lies in the development of our capacities, but it achieves this end by producing discontent: competitive desires, in making us unhappy, spur us to perfect ourselves, but they are nevertheless bound ultimately to leave us unhappy.

A further aspect of self-love, as Kant understands it, is that self-love involves the claim that one’s happiness is objectively good, which it founds on a presumption of self-worth. Wood notes that in this respect Kant’s view has affinities with Aristotle’s view as interpreted by Whiting: both Kant and Aristotle take the value we place in our happiness to be grounded in judgments of self-worth. Wood argues, however, that Aristotle and Kant differ in that Aristotle allows that one person can be worth more than another, while Kant bases worth in the dignity of rational nature itself and thus holds that all rational beings have a worth that is absolute and radically equal.

Kant does allow for moral self-esteem and self-contempt, but maintains, in opposition to a long ethical tradition, that these attitudes are self-deceptive unless based on a comparison of oneself, not with others, but with the moral law alone. But Kant also holds that human nature includes a radical propensity to evil, or to self-conceit, which leads us self-deceptively to persuade ourselves of our absolute superiority over others. Thus, our nature dooms us to a conflict between two irreconcilable standpoints toward our self-worth. Nature’s plan is that our reason should develop through self-deceptive antagonism with others, but through this development we become aware that our true worth lies only in a rational nature that we all share.

Wood concludes that despite the fact that Aristotle and Kant agree on such important points as that our true self is rational nature, and that rational self-benevolence follows upon rational self-esteem, the inference that Aristotle quite naturally draws from these points – namely, that good people will be friends to themselves – is one that Kant’s empirical conception of human nature leads him to reject.

Jennifer Whiting questions Wood’s suggestion that Aristotle’s conception of good self-love is essentially competitive or comparative, and suggests that Aristotle may allow the virtuous agent’s conception of self-worth to be based

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on something like the sort of comparison of himself with the moral law that Wood claims to find in Kant. Relying on a passage in the *Politics* where Aristotle associates *nous* (reason) not only with God but also with (impartial) law, Whiting reads the good self-lover's identification with his *nous* (as opposed to his desire) as an identification not only with something divine, but also with the impartial principle that natural goods should be distributed, both to himself and to others, according to worth. Because Aristotle views God as maximally self-determined and maximally independent of fortune, the good self-lover, in taking God as the standard by which to measure himself, aims at a kind of self-determination and independence of fortune reminiscent of Kantian autonomy.

Whiting's contribution is essentially a commentary on *Eudemian Ethics* viii 3, a text whose remarkably Kantian tone she attributes to the Socratic legacy common to Aristotle and Kant. This text distinguishes (1) the *kaloskagathos* (or fine-and-good) man, for whom natural goods (like wealth and power) are both good and fine, both from (2) the merely *agathos* (or good) man, for whom the natural goods are good but not fine, and also from (3) the non-*agathos* (or nongood) man, for whom natural goods are neither good (because he is prone to misuse them) nor fine. Aristotle seems here to rely on the Socratic view that wisdom (or virtue) is the only unconditional good – a view echoed in Kant's claim that the good will is the only thing that is good without qualification.

Whiting focuses on Aristotle's distinction between the *kaloskagathos* and the merely *agathos*. She takes Aristotle's view that the natural goods become fine for the *kaloskagathos* because he chooses them for the sake of something fine as structurally similar to the Kantian view (according to Wood and Korsgaard) that rational choice is a "value-conferring property." Relying partly on the connection between something's being fine and its being a suitable object of praise, Whiting suggests that the *kaloskagathos*, who is a good self-lover, deserves praise or honor in a way in which the merely *agathos* does not, because the *kaloskagathos*, having made the transition from natural to authoritative virtue, has shed as far as possible the effects of constitutive luck and is thus responsible for who he is in a way in which the merely *agathos* is not. Whiting compares the merely *agathos*, who performs virtuous actions "coincidentally," to the Kantian agent whom fortune has endowed with a sympathetic temperament, and whose actions in conformity with duty (though not *from* duty) are said to deserve "praise and encouragement but not esteem." Whiting concludes that Aristotle shares many of Kant's concerns, including his concern with autonomy, a point taken further by Korsgaard (who also compares the merely *agathos* to Kant's person of sympathetic temperament).

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IV. Practical Reason and Moral Psychology

Christine Korsgaard examines an important question on which Aristotle and Kant are widely thought to be in sharp opposition. Whereas Aristotle holds it to be the mark of a good person to take pleasure in moral action, Kant seems to maintain that it is the person who acts from the motive of duty in the teeth of contrary inclination who shows an especially high degree of moral worth. But Korsgaard, like Wood, finds the real disagreement between Aristotle and Kant to lie not in ethics but in psychology. Ultimately, she traces the disagreement to different understandings of pleasure and pain.

Korsgaard argues that Aristotle and Kant share the following view of human action in general and morally good action in particular. What is distinctive about human action in general is that it is not driven by inclination or instinct, but governed by reason: such action is chosen and thereby endorsed by the agent's reason and conceived as good. What is distinctive about morally good action in particular is that such action – including its purpose – is chosen because it is *intrinsically* good. As Kant expresses this point, morally good action is done “from duty,” which means that it is chosen because it has the intrinsic form of a law; for Aristotle, similarly, morally good action is done “for the sake of the noble [*kalon*],” which means that it is chosen for its own sake and moreover because it is in accordance with the right rule of reason. Both thus agree that the moral value of action is determined by considering action just as action (as *praxis*) and not as the production or making of something. In addition, both think that the exercise of choice involved in morally good action constitutes a kind of rational self-command whereby we give shape to our own characters and identities. Kant calls this autonomy; Aristotle calls it nobility. And both take the presence of this self-command to distinguish someone with true virtue from someone, such as the naturally sympathetic person, who chooses morally good action for its own sake but without quite grasping the reason why it is good.

The difference between Aristotle and Kant lies in their attitudes toward the feelings of the naturally sympathetic person; in particular, about whether the presence of such feelings could contribute any moral character to actions. Korsgaard points out that the disagreement about whether and when such feelings are likely to be present is not as great as is often thought: Kant recognizes that we must cultivate virtues, which will lead us to be pleased when we achieve our morally obligatory ends, and Aristotle's remarks about courage reveal that he does in fact recognize that virtuous action can involve considerable pain and may even, when unsuccessful, fail to involve pleasure. The difference shows up, however, in the one case about which they do seem to disagree. Unlike Aristotle, Kant holds that the cold person who acts from duty is not any less good, morally speaking, than the person who acts from