Introduction to Aristotle, virtue ethics, and this book

An overview of Aristotle's philosophy

Aristotle is widely thought to be the philosopher of common sense *par excellence*. According to Aristotle, what intelligent adults believe about the world is true on the whole, though their opinion needs some refinement, or occasionally some alteration.[1]

Socrates, by conspicuous contrast, has little respect for the opinions of distinguished citizens, or any other opinions for that matter, about ethical issues. His method is to show that people are ignorant where they – unlike Socrates himself – claim to know. Plato goes from there to claim that real knowledge is not about the world of space and time at all. What is truly real, the object of certain knowledge, is the eternal Idea. Here as elsewhere certainty has a powerful grip on philosophers. Throughout much of the history of Western philosophy there have been thinkers who asked how we could have certain knowledge of anything, other than perhaps the contents of our own minds, or mathematics. And if that sort of knowledge was hard to find, it was harder still to find some basis for ethics, some sound answers to the questions "What ought I to do?" and "What reason have I for doing what I ought to do?" These questions seemed beyond the reach of human opinion, even of science. Only philosophers could handle them, according to some philosophers.

Aristotle does not think this way. He does not demand ironclad certainty; he does not worry greatly about our knowledge of the external world, or of ethics. He typically begins his investigations in ethics and elsewhere by looking at some commonsense views that we, or at least the wise among us, share. These he calls *ta koina* – common things. But though he begins with common things, he does not regard our

[1] Almost any interpretation of Aristotle will be controversial. My views, which owe something to many commentators, are in the mainstream of recent critical work, I think.

apprehension of them as an immutable foundation on which all knowledge is built. On the contrary, his method tidies up common sense and makes it coherent. His conclusions – his views on form and matter, his definition of the soul, his conception of well-being – are subtle but not radical. For example, his notion of a person of good character sounds right and insightful to us, as it must have to his contemporaries. He does not put forward altogether new conceptions of courage, justice, or friendship. He does not in the least suggest that becoming a good person is a superhuman achievement, though it is neither easy nor very common. The effect of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is not to undermine our ideas about ethics but to sharpen and rationalize them. He also brings his findings on biology and psychology to bear on ethics, as each of his studies builds on what he has learned earlier.

The development of Aristotle's philosophy

First and most basically, Aristotle addresses the idea that there are individual material objects in space and time and that we can have some knowledge of them. That may seem obvious, but Aristotle wants to defend the position against some attacks. Heraclitus challenged it in claiming that everything is changing all the time, with the result that identification and reference are impossible. Plato challenged it from the other direction by arguing that secure identification and reference are indeed possible but require Ideas as their real objects. But it is not clear how Plato's view shows that we can do what we ordinarily want to do: talk meaningfully about an actual river continuing to exist, remaining the same over a period of time, if the water is constantly changing.

Aristotle solves the puzzles by distinguishing between the form (or essence or, occasionally, nature) of a substance and its matter or accidents. A thing may appear to be a combination of form and matter, but it is in fact identical with its form: it always has matter, but not necessarily the same matter permanently. So when we say that a thing has lasted over a period of time, we are in effect saying that its form has lasted, while its matter or some of its accidental characteristics (weight, color, etc.) may have changed. The Ohio River remains the same river even though the water that constitutes it is constantly changing. A tree remains the same tree even as its leaves come and go and it grows new wood. (As it happens, the Greek word *hyle* means both matter and wood.)

Aristotle sometimes uses artificial objects like a discus or a lintel as illustrations. In the former case, the shape is the form; in the latter, the position above a door or window is the form. But artificial objects present hard questions. If over time we replace all the boards in a ship, does it remain the same ship? And if it does, what can we say about the ship that could be constructed out of the discarded boards? Fringe cases of this sort do not worry Aristotle, particularly when they involve artificial things. He believes that one cannot always draw bright lines, but that discourse is not impossible for that reason. In any case, only natural things are true substances.

Substances have primacy over qualities and similar items in the sense that the latter are modifications of substances, and may attach to substances for a time but then go away while the substances persist. These modifications, or properties, of substances depend for their identity and persistence on the substances that they modify. Time and space too are parasitic on substances, according to Aristotle, since he defines both of them by reference to substance, in particular by reference to the movement and change of substances.

One of the capacities of natural substances is the capacity to change, and in particular to grow to maturity. One way of explaining what happens in the world is to note that an animal has the capacity to move (and more), or that an acorn has the capacity to become an oak tree. In this way events in the world are dependent on the substances that participate in them. Thus far Aristotle remains consistent with common sense, for better or worse, though his elaboration and his defense of his position are sophisticated. His task becomes more complicated when he turns to the nature or essence of the human being.

The substance that has a soul

By the time he writes the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle has in his pocket not only common opinion but some views about substances from the *Metaphysics* and about persons that he has reached in *De Anima* by a dialectical process similar to that used in the mature books of the *Metaphysics*.[2] He also brings some findings from the *Physics;* those support and are supported by his metaphysical work. So

[2] About Aristotle's progress I agree largely with the account of Irwin (1988, chapter 1).

Aristotle begins his ethics with a certain view of humankind. A human being is a substance, and what makes a human a substance rather than just a pile of flesh and bones is the set of capacities that we call a soul or mind. What makes a person a person in particular, as opposed to a dumb animal, is the characteristically human ability to reason. You can reason abstractly in sophisticated ways, and even design a life for yourself as a member of a *polis* – what we now call a city-state – and a participant in its governance. From this it is no great leap to the claim that what makes a human being excellent – the word *arête* can be translated as virtue or excellence – involves sociability and, distinctly, rationality. To act accordingly is to live well. The life that you are able to design for yourself should take into appropriate account your own rational capacities. It should also attend to your limitations and your opportunities, including those associated with your being necessarily a sociable creature – a citizen, a friend, and a family member.

Aristotle and Newton: science and persons

So Aristotle embraces the commonsensical rather than the otherworldly and unattainable. But he also embraces the commonsensical rather than the scientific, in our sense of the word, and there will be problems where science and common sense diverge.

Aristotelian science is radically different from, and less successful than, the modern conception of natural science. We need to consider whether Aristotelian ethics is inferior to modern ethics for the same reasons.

Aristotle is not wrong in taking humankind to be a part of nature. It makes sense, too, to explain some events in the world by reference to substances, including persons, actualizing their potential or not. When botanists, of whom Aristotle is one, talk about plants, they seem ready to say on the basis of careful observation what causes this or that species to flourish and what counts as flourishing for the species. Facts about nutrition and growth form the basis of their judgments about which plants are faring well and which are not. McKinnon (2005) discusses this point at length and draws an analogy, as Aristotle does, between the flourishing of plants and animals and that of human beings. One can speak intelligently about whether young Andrea will fulfill her potential, though this does not sound like the sort of language that can support an exact science.

When Aristotle says that one event or one thing is the efficient cause of another, he is not presupposing, as most modern philosophers do, that there is a law of nature linking the first with the second. He does believe in final causes, and therefore in teleological explanations – that is, explanations that indicate the purpose that something serves or the end that it achieves. Teleological explanations make sense in a universe in which there are natural movements of natural objects towards natural final destinations. Aristotelian science, based on neither careful measurement nor highly systematic observation, does not contemplate a universe that works according to universal and immutable laws that support causal claims; still less does it countenance laws linking unobservable entities. Aristotle seems to believe that some relationships hold only most of the time and that, in part for that reason, our understanding is sometimes only approximate.

Newton, improving on Descartes and Leibniz, takes a different view, which on the whole prevails today. Nature is rational just in the sense that it is law-governed. The point of Newtonian science is to use universal scientific principles to explain particular events and states, as opposed to things, and it has been successful in the sense that it can predict future events and states and explain past ones. Aristotelian science has never known that kind of success; so we have reason to infer that the differences between Aristotle and Newton are in Newton's favor.

We may also be inclined to infer that what makes one sort of science better than another would also make one way of thinking about ethics better than another – that ethics too ought to be based on universal principles, that what is primarily right or wrong is a particular act (i.e., an event) according to whether or not it is consistent with a universal ethical principle, rather than a person (i.e., a thing) according to whether the person achieves his or her natural end. In the Newtonian universe things and events do not proceed towards their natural ends. How useful are explanations and justifications of human behavior based on the notion that people proceed in that direction?

The place of persons

The Newtonian view of the universe does pose a problem for us. What place in this universe has the human being, a willing, feeling, creating organism? One answer, offered by Descartes and others, is

that the human being is not a merely physical being subject to the laws governing physical beings. A person is primarily mental; the body is a vehicle, a repository for the mind. Some philosophers see the body as something of an encumbrance, since it implicates us in emotion, selfish desire, and all manner of evil. Rationality, the faculty characteristic of the mind as opposed to the body, is good. Moral goodness requires that we overcome the body and its ways.[3]

Some philosophers, including Spinoza (and Democritus, one of Aristotle's predecessors), reduce mental activity to physical activity. They see no special kind of substance of which mental events are made, no exemption from physical laws. According to Kant, the greatest of the Enlightenment philosophers, freedom of the will requires that our rational will, uncaused by physical states and directed only by rationality, causes our actions despite the otherwise law-bound inexorability of nature. Our thoughts should obey the laws of reason, the rule-maker in the realm of the mental, which are even more reliable and inexorable than are the laws of nature. Morality too is based on reason, according to Kant.

Kant and many other Enlightenment philosophers take rationality to be the savior of humankind, with respect to both science and human good. Without it we cannot solve our scientific problems or build anything that requires engineering. Without it we cannot organize our lives. When it is absent or overwhelmed by emotion or desire, we cannot think usefully, together or on our own, about what there is or what we ought to do. We might look to religion for guidance, but not all of us will look to the same religion. We may then be plunged into murderous religious conflicts because we have no rational way of reconciling differing accounts of religious truth or, therefore, of moral truth. That is the lesson that some Enlightenment figures drew from the horrors of the Thirty Years' War (see Toulmin, 1990, especially chapter 2). We may be inclined to think that the philosophers of the Enlightenment were unduly optimistic about the power of reason, but theirs was perhaps an understandable reaction to the spectacle of Christians killing one another *en masse* over transubstantiation.[4] We

[3] I shall not try to distinguish morality from ethics. Many different philosophers have drawn the distinction in many different ways.

[4] In truth, in some religious conflicts the combatants are motivated more by hatred of the other than by religious conviction. But the absence of reason is a problem in any case.

might infer that ethics ought to concern itself with reasonable principles applicable to all.[5] In the absence of any detailed conception of the good life, whether based on religion or philosophy, Enlightenment philosophers typically enshrined the individual's autonomous choice in this and other areas.

Positivism: facts and evidence

At the very peak of the modern age, during the brief flowering of positivism in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, the reconciliation of science and human values was effected by some no-nonsense philosophers in a way that Descartes and others had resisted: science just took over. All meaningful propositions were, it was argued, logical or empirical propositions, the latter being testable in the court of experience. Propositions about morality were neither. Kant had made a similar distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions – those true or false by virtue of the meaning of the words expressing them and those true or false by virtue of describing the world. "All bachelors are unmarried" is an analytic proposition: the predicate is contained in the subject, and the sentence is an analysis of the concept of bachelor. "All bachelors are happy" is a synthetic proposition, which brings together the notion of bachelor and the logically separable notion of happiness. It purports to tell us something about the world, and it can be tested by reference to experience. The distinction has come under heavy fire, most famously by Quine (1980, chapter 2), who argued that susceptibility to the court of experience is (to oversimplify) a matter of degree, and that meaning proves on inspection to be a slippery notion. Others have joined Quine in rejecting the claim that our empirical knowledge can be built up from immediate acquaintance with foundational bits of knowledge. Today there are few philosophers who will claim that our knowledge starts from a perfectly certain foundation of immediately observable facts, with no implicit or explicit reference to any background, theoretical or otherwise. Far more philosophers hold that our ability to describe what is readily observable, including some mental events, requires us to have learned a public language.

[5] But some Enlightenment philosophers, such as Hume and Kant, took virtue seriously.

Positivists typically dealt with mental entities by reducing them to dispositions to act. They did not believe that science left any room for freedom of the will, or therefore for ethics. But no matter: the propositions of ethics, being neither analytic nor synthetic, were nothing more than the expression of emotion, with no truth value. According to a less radical view, since no normative statement could follow from a statement of fact, normative statements were primarily prescriptive rather than descriptive. R. M. Hare, a postpositivist, argued (in Hare, 1952, for example) that "Murder is wrong" does not mean "Yuck! Murder!" but instead entails "Do not murder." But can I not know that some act is wrong and yet encourage you to do it, and do it myself? Not quite, Hare would respond. I shall argue in Chapters 1 and 2 that Aristotle would probably say that anyone for whom a virtue does not have a positive emotional connotation lacks knowledge of that virtue.

Aristotle had seen humankind and human purposes as part of the natural world in part because he had a teleological view of the world. Descartes and Kant had separated humankind from nature in some important ways. The empiricists of the twentieth century readily assimilated humankind to the natural world because they had a reductionist view of human nature, as of ethics, history, and much else. Their views have had a not altogether fortunate impact on social scientists, including scholars of management.

Where we are today

Now we find ourselves in an era that combines some of the characteristics of previous eras. We still regard science as providing outstanding examples of knowledge, but we are no longer sure that the world is quite as ready-made for a unified scientific theory and language as Newtonians believed. We do not believe that all questions worth trying to answer are scientific questions or that all of science, including biology, reduces in any important sense to physics. As Aristotle says, it is a sign of erudition not to demand more precision of a subject matter than it admits of, and ethics does not admit of geometric precision – or, we would add, the kind of precision we now expect of science. In drawing distinctions in ethics we find ourselves asking, "But where do you draw the line?" Sometimes that question is impossible to answer in a straightforward way even when the distinction is worth drawing.

It is conceivable that humans might be subjects for natural science in a sense that Kant would not accept, but there is no present prospect of that. We believe that there are ways of explaining and criticizing human behavior that do not fit the standards of natural science, even less austere natural science as we understand it now. In particular, we have reason to believe that human behavior is explicable by reference to reasons even though humans often act unreasonably, and even though psychology is not strictly a natural science (Davidson, 2001). And while we find psychology and sociology and therefore organization theory and organizational behavior useful, we do not – or at any rate we should not – suppose that either individuals or organizations are suitable subjects for natural science alone. In fact there are moral reasons for avoiding reductive social science.

We do not regard mind and body as separate substances, but that gives us no reason to stop talking about the mind. We believe that mental events and their related actions can be described and explained in ways that do not apply to standard physical events. Aristotle has a similar view: he claims that mental events and physical events are not separable, but are related as form to matter. Recall that the form or essence of something is what makes it what it is; the matter or accidents of the thing may change while the thing persists. The soul is what makes flesh and blood a human being. Aristotle allows that a particular physiological event within a certain context can be a sufficient condition of a psychological event. (For further discussion see Hartman, 1977.)

Many of our explanations of human behavior we state in terms that are to some degree normative. A common sort of explanation for why Jones did something is a reason that Jones had for his action: it indicates what Jones was trying to bring about. In most cases the explanation succeeds only if you understand that the desired outcome was in some way good for Jones. If I tell you that Jones broke into the hardware store because he wanted to drink a can of varnish remover, you will probably think that I have failed to give you a satisfactory explanation.

Virtue vs. principles

We would expect followers of Newton, who believe that the universe runs according to universal laws, to believe that ethical actions are

ones done according to universal principles, such as those based on utility, fairness, and rights. We identify some property of an act that makes it right or wrong because (here is the principle) all acts that have that property are right or wrong as well. In Aristotelian science, on the other hand, it is substances that are primary. In Aristotelian ethics, as Chapter 1 details, the good human being is the focus of ethics, what explains and justifies human behavior. A good act is something that a good person does; a good person has a certain character, a set of virtues rather than vices. Virtues are prior to good acts, which they cause.

Aristotle accepts principles as an important part of ethics, but the principles that he contemplates admit of exceptions and are consistent with his emphasis on relationships like friendship and citizenship. Some of them are in effect definitions of virtues. Aristotle focuses on the particular, the specific, as well as on what states and events have in common. So a generous person, for example, must be attuned to the features of a situation that will make an act of assistance more or less appropriate. He sets great store by emotions and habits as well as reason. He takes the context of acts seriously, and stresses our duties to our friends and fellow citizens – obligations following from our sociable nature.

Enlightenment ethics, on the other hand, characteristically values humankind in all times and places. According to Kant, for example, one must act on principles that can be made universal, and must treat humanity in all its forms as an end in itself and not merely as a means to one's own ends or another's. Smith's "impartial spectator" treats humanity in all its forms without favoring any form, or any human.[6] This sort of principle embodies a noble sentiment, but I shall argue that it does not guide our actions any more clearly than does virtue-based advice.

Principle-based theorists can argue that what is wrong with virtue ethics is just what is wrong with Aristotelian science: there are no reliable rules. Virtue ethics does not even aspire to perfect reliability. It demands that we act from virtues like justice and courage, but it seems at first look to offer little help in distinguishing good acts from bad ones, and still less in justifying the basis of the distinction. It seems

[6] But Smith is a virtue ethicist, similar in some ways to Aristotle. See Calkins and Werhane (1998) and Werhane (1999).