

ARISTOTLE AND KANT ON KNOWING THE GOOD
AND THE MEANING OF HUMAN HAPPINESS

A WORKING PAPER

Rachelle Walker, Ph.D.
Colgate University
13 Oak Street
Hamilton, NY 13332

This paper is a study on the manner in which man can know what is good, especially as this ability to know pertains to ethics. With Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* as the foundation for its analysis, it will compare each work's vision of human knowing and the resultant conclusions reached concerning the ends or principles that define humanity and are thus the foundation for ethics. In conclusion, it will explore what the ethical man would look like according to these respective visions and what kind of education would be necessary to groom these two different faces of the "good man."

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* begins with ends; it seeks to uncover the purpose for which each thing exists. The lecture opens by observing that "every art and every investigation, and likewise every practical pursuit or undertaking, seems to aim at some good" (I. i. 1).¹ This initial premise, as well as the overall organization of the text, assumes that ethics cannot be meaningfully or rightly discussed without a view to the ultimate purpose of ethics as a whole. The study of ethics begins as the necessary conclusion of a wider and deeper discussion of what reality is, what human beings are, and in what way and to what degree human beings can know reality.

Not surprisingly, then, Aristotle starts by asking questions which establish the place of ethics within this wider philosophical context. He relies on the assumption that all humans know things, very important things (though that knowledge may be buried or distorted), and that on the basis of this shared knowledge we can together ascertain what "is fitting" for "the conduct of life" (I. ii. 2-3). To that end, Aristotle asks his readers why it is that humans strive to act

¹ All subsequent citations are from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by H. Rackham (Harvard: Loeb Classical Library, 1934).

ethically—what is the purpose, or end, of our virtuous acts? Clearly we do not seek courage simply to be courageous, but as part of seeking something even greater than courage. While each virtue has its own respective end, he explains that all of them in turn seek something beyond their immediate function. If this is so, we must ask what is the end for which all other ends are sought, the end which gives all lesser ends their respective dignity? What is the final end of human beings, the Supreme Good “at which all things aim?” (I. i. 2). Here, Aristotle is inviting us to ask with him nothing less than what the fundamental order of reality is. All ethics, for Aristotle, exists in relation to this daring question. Every act of courage, each well-spent dime, each dispensation of justice, is a response to and a step toward this Supreme Good. Each act works to bring man into harmony with a knowable reality. It strikes modern ears as strange that Aristotle’s ethics assumes with such gravity that we can substantively, if not completely, answer the question of the nature of reality—this is not even a tortured conclusion, but his primary premise! Aristotle roots his study in the belief that our minds are not hopelessly detached from the cosmos; a belief that makes ethics (and every other art) possible. For the more clearly that man sees past himself and into this Supreme Good, the more able he is to recognize and grieve the ways in which he is not meeting that end. Aristotle appeals to the most practical precepts of our common sense when he asks: “Will not then a knowledge of this Supreme Good be also of great practical importance for the conduct of life? Will it not better enable us to attain what is fitting, like archers having a target to aim at?” (I. ii. 2-3). If one is able to see the target of all things clearly, then out of that awareness of one’s purpose and concomitant knowledge of falling short of that purpose, comes ethics, the study of the human heart as it relates to the cosmos.

An Ethics Rooted in Habit and Happiness

Aristotle goes on to reveal that this Supreme Good, “the end of human life,” this thing which is sought only for itself, which “lacks nothing, and is self-sufficient,” can be nothing else but the condition of happiness (X. v. vi; X. vi. 2; X. vi. 3).² If ethics is imperfection’s reasoned response to seeing perfection, we find that happiness is basking in perfection itself. This basking, knowing, or beholding of the Supreme Good is happiness—the highest and final end of man.

In Book One, Aristotle takes pains to scrub away tarnished understandings of happiness, showing that it is not any of the lower things it is commonly mistaken for: it is not pleasure, nor a disposition, an activity which seeks something else as its object, nor an event which occurs in time (I. iv-v.). Instead, all lower pleasures point toward, and are sought insofar as they reflect, the fullness of a happiness that is “final and self-sufficient” (I. v. 8). Plato before him demonstrates this relationship of the low to the high in the *Symposium*, in which Diotima leads Socrates higher and higher in his appreciation of the beautiful, until he is finally able “to know beauty itself.”³ Though all lower things partake of beauty, she tells him that “only here, in seeing in the way that the beautiful is seeable” will he “engender true virtue” instead of phantoms. This remarkable claim, that the beautiful can open our eyes to truth, or perhaps that the good, the true, and the beautiful are one and the same, is more remarkable still when we are told that this is an encounter to which the best of human beings can testify. Only a very few men

² Diotima’s conversation with Socrates in the *Symposium* affirms the finality of the possessive nature of happiness: “‘Come, Socrates, the lover of the good things: what does he love?’ ‘That they be his,’ I said. ‘And what will he who gets the good things have?’ ‘This,’ I said, ‘I can answer more adequately: he will be happy.’ ‘That,’ she said, ‘is because the happy are happy by the acquisition of good things; and *there is no further need to ask, “For what consequence does he who wants to be happy want to be so?” But the answer is thought to be a complete one.*”’ Plato, *Symposium*, translated by Seth Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 204e-205a. (Italics added.)

³ *Ibid.*, 211C.

will climb high enough to “know beauty itself,” yet what do those few good men learn about all men when they glimpse the Supreme Good? Even for the many, even for the lowest of men wholly enslaved to their passions, the universal desire to be happy reveals that man is meant to participate in that which is eternal. In seeing the beautiful itself, Diotima tells Socrates that he “lays hold of the true.” This possession of the truth makes him dear to the gods and “if it is possible” for a human being, it will render him in some way immortal in that his soul is attuned to the eternal. So too with Aristotle, happiness is an act of *seeing*; an unclouded seeing which is by definition knowing. Such knowing is the highest form of possession; it is truly to “lay hold of” the truth. However, this knowing and possessing which occurs in contemplation is only possible for the good man, whose goodness makes such unclouded seeing possible. It follows that all things which are mistaken for true happiness are the result of attributing wholeness to something which is partial. This is the defect of the corrupted man, the cause of his blindness. To make such a mistake is to misunderstand and leave unfulfilled the essential nature of man.

It follows that the contemplative life is not one option among many that could fulfill man’s thirst for happiness—it is *the* best life because it alone can satisfy. All that is in motion passes away, the eternal alone endures. Man’s *nous*, his very ability to contemplate and wonder, is the defining characteristic of his being; this *nous* both demands contemplation and makes it possible.⁴ In turn, contemplation can only be sparked by a worthy object—by something dazzling, something eternal. Aristotle writes of this highest part of man that it “may even be held that this is the true self of each, inasmuch as it is the dominant and better part” (X. vii. 9)

The nature of happiness and man’s desire for happiness disclose something of the essential

⁴ Translating *nous* as either intelligence or as soul both have drawbacks in our post-Enlightenment and post-Christian era. Reason for Aristotle was a thing of order as well as mystery, and though his writings show none of the Christian guarantees of the soul’s eternal existence, there are some things which truly are eternal for Aristotle, and man’s soul does try to participate in those eternal things.

character of a human being as a human being—just as the end of any object tells us what that object is for.⁵ This “true self,” or *nous*, as Aristotle identifies it, exists for a purpose beyond itself; thus any attempt to study ethics without reference to the purpose which its existence necessitates would be a lamentable waste. One would be guilty of absurdity, blind to reality: “it would be a strange thing if a man should choose to live not his own life but the life of some other than himself” (X. vii. 9). To avoid living the life of “some other,” it is imperative that man know how to know himself.

Knowing and the Supreme Good

Integral to Aristotle’s ethics is his theory of knowledge and knowing, which is interwoven with his conception of the human soul, or the kind of thing that a human being is. This understanding is fused to his vision of a cosmic order which is ever straining towards, and finds its identity in relation to, the Supreme Good.

That Aristotle presents the Supreme Good as eternal and fixed answers the first question of knowing: is there something to know? Man, as a creature with *nous*, affirms that not only is there something to know, but that man is able and intended, at least in part, to transcend his temporality and know those things which are knowable. In the Aristotelian universe, some things are in motion, and some things are at rest, but the things in motion are capable of knowing or participating, in some important way, in the things at rest. The highest form of knowing, and concomitantly man’s highest end and happiness, is an act of transcendence: beholding, a

⁵ Thomas Aquinas visits this point frequently when wrestling with the freedom and fulfillment of the will. He writes that “the will must of necessity adhere to the last end, which is happiness.” This does not impede our freedom, however, according to Aquinas: we both desire happiness by nature and voluntarily choose happiness; happiness is desired “naturally and necessarily” in the same way as a thirsty man desires water (*Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 82). This contrasts sharply with Friedrich Nietzsche’s assertion that “man is the *as yet undetermined animal*,” the “sublime miscarriage” which has yet to find its end. Fredrick Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), Part III, 62, p. 74.

knowing and possessing that takes place through contact with an actual presence that is other than oneself. Such an act of contemplation is distinct from reason, which is concerned with phenomena that are as yet un-encountered in the literal sense. Reason is a motion, the mind deduces such things as “because proposition (a) is true and proposition (b) is true, it follows that proposition (c) must also be true.” Deduction is altogether different from truly *knowing* a thing; it is to infer from a series of logical propositions what a thing must be like. It is not to know it in its essence, or to possess it, at best it can draw an outline around that which is unknown.

Contemplation requires no reasoning; it is not to think, but to see. However, just as Diotima recognized that all beautiful things point to the beautiful itself, all reason is reflective of and meant to strain toward the full knowing found in contemplation. Aristotle’s theory of knowing was not in any sense gnostic.

Though the *Ethics* crescendos to a close with its discussion of contemplation, the good life does not simply consist in (or begin with) this divine seeing. The morally virtuous life, attained in the realm of action, is the requisite condition for contemplation. The moral virtues (temperance, liberality, etc.) which can only be learned through the painstaking creation of solid habits, are critical to the formation of the good man, the man who can see and know. Aristotle writes that while a man with moral virtue may lack intellectual virtue, “a wise man is also praised for his disposition” or his moral virtue (I. xiii. 20). Moral virtue precedes intellectual virtue, it makes it possible. Guided by nature and the praise and blame of good men, we acquire virtues by practicing them before we even have them, in the same way that one learns an art. Unlike sight or smell, nature has not given us the virtues ready-made, but only “the capacity to receive them, and this capacity is brought to maturity by habit” (II. i. 3). So it is that all things

hang together for Aristotle: motion and rest, the physical and the spiritual – the totality of our being and our capacities are required for our fullness.

The contemplative and the virtuous life are thus inextricably tethered to one another. Virtue makes us good, enabling us to recognize and receive the good, while seeing the good reinforces the rightness of virtue. This is the relationship which Diotima expresses so candidly: seeing the beautiful doesn't result in "phantom images of virtue" because the contemplative does not lay hold of a phantom—he lays hold of the truth. The man possessing truth can then give birth to "true virtue."⁶ This is why virtue is said to be a "disposition;" one's encounter with the good (through habit, through seeing) disposes you toward all that it is good.

Aristotle's Cosmos Under Siege

Until modern times, these Aristotelian truths about ethics were widely held and acted upon, at least by good men, who saw the right end of human beings as a reflection of the cosmic order. In the ancient and medieval mind, it seemed natural that ethics would be born in intuition and matured through practice and the use of reason. Gradually, as the medieval world gave way to the modern, influential thinkers began to reject Aristotle's "true self" or soul, along with the idea of a Supreme Good in which that soul finds rest. The understanding of reality—of the eternal, of man and his end—that justified Aristotle's ethics was chipped away by an industrious modernity. The soul, as the critical link from the temporal to the eternal, was the central target. By the time of the Enlightenment, the disconnection between man and the eternal was almost complete. The soul and the heavens that it testified to, though not destroyed, were thoroughly ignored, privatized, and completely out of fashion intellectually. The rationalist roots of the

⁶ Plato, *Symposium*, 212C.

Enlightenment grew ever deeper, effectively choking to death nearly all the other plants in the garden of European thought. But could any possible set of ethics blossom from such an ugly shrub? In Enlightenment thinkers haste to create a philosophical (that is, scientific and non-religious) basis for a strong political order, they had sacrificed much that is integral to the principle of order itself. “Knowing” in the Aristotelian sense was in danger of being thrown out along with the soul and the Supreme Good, leaving humanity without a defining end. In short, the Enlightenment had succeeded in “enlightening” man to more than his own past ignorance. It was beginning to teach that enlightenment itself was a dream only realizable within an ancient or classical understanding of the cosmos. The possibility of “knowing” was rapidly being debunked. A thorny question emerged: If we cannot even answer who man is, or what he can know, how can we presume to tell him how he ought to act? Cut off from their final end, Aristotle’s virtues were antiquated and groundless, reduced to nothing more than the optimism of an unlearned age.

In this hour when morality appears to be utterly imperiled, a voice from Prussia rallied to its defense. Immanuel Kant, distressed by the path of extreme skepticism which he felt was being blazed by figures such as David Hume, chose to come to morality’s aid. However, he does so not by challenging the tenets of Enlightenment rationalism, but by completely embracing it, determined to groom it to even greater heights. Kant sacrifices Aristotle’s conception of the “true self,” happiness, and the virtues as readily as the rest of the Enlightenment did—rejecting the ancient understanding of knowledge and knowing. The Enlightenment’s claims about the world are superior and irrevocable for Kant, in his eyes there is no possibility of returning to an

Aristotelian universe.⁷ However, Kant is just as firmly convinced that the Enlightenment is not a self-destructing construct, but a liberating, fulfilling movement which is capable of revealing the truth more fully than in any past age. In bowing his thought to enlightenment rationalism, Kant discards the claims of validity of almost all prior philosophy. For, as Kant observes, wisdom on its own “consists more in conduct than in knowledge” and is easily corrupted. Accordingly, tradition and common sense can provide some useful ethical guidance, but they can also be rationalized into all sorts of foolishness, which is precisely what happened in the past. Wisdom requires science to “provide access and durability for its precepts” (4:405).⁸ This is what Kant intends to supply, unveiling an ethics which is iron-clad, discovered and protected through the highest form of science, the purest precepts of reason.

From Kant’s perspective, the differing conclusions of past philosophers in their studies of ethics simply prove that most of what had been considered “reason” in the past consisted of attempts unworthy of the name, riddled with unscientific presumption. What pain Kant must have endured in reading in Book I of Aristotle’s *Ethics* that the students “must be content with a broad outline of the truth: when our subjects and our premises are merely generalities, it is enough if we arrive at generally valid conclusions”! This seemed prudent and reasonable to Aristotle, yet was utter folly to Kant because of his fundamental disagreement with Aristotle’s assertion that “it is the mark of an educated mind to expect that amount of exactness in each kind of which the nature of that particular subject admits” (I. iii. 4). Kant accepts the Enlightenment

⁷ Kant distances himself from Aristotle, barely mentioning him in *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* except to criticize the Aristotelian principle of locating a virtue as the mean between two vices, labeling such a conception as “false” and “useless” (6:404; 6:432). The lack of references to other works and thinkers is consistent with his understanding of knowledge, which requires no tradition or authority, but pure reason alone. “What is Enlightenment?” is a cry for the freedom of reason from the bondage of the ill-founded authority of the past.

⁸ All subsequent citations of the *Metaphysics of Morals* are from Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, translated by Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

judgment that “generally valid conclusions” are manifestly not valid at all. While for Aristotle habit makes us receptive to glimpses of knowledge attained in contemplation, Kant must begin with total moral knowledge; a moral knowledge that everyone, regardless of their habits, can see. For Aristotle, those who sought to become good and wise had to trust those who were already good and wise: authority was a necessary part of knowing. Kant argues that the right actions must be equally knowable to all, and equally and instantly available to all through the one untainted resource left to man, his own reason. Thus, before anything else can be done, Kant must engage in a “complete critique of our reason” to lay out exactly what can be known and how, thus combating the ambiguity and corruption of past philosophy. Once these errors in thinking have been swept aside, philosophy as it ought to be done, *practical* philosophy, will commence with a new level of legitimacy, producing a logically self-evident and universally valid moral code. Kant, according to his own standards of scientific purity, would become the first “real” philosopher.⁹

Kant’s Project: an Ethics rooted in Reason Alone

Kant’s task, then, is to prove that human beings have a real and discernible end even according to the rules of Enlightenment rationalism, and the flipside of this coin is to show that Enlightenment reason can make humanity “good.” To do this, Kant must first show that real, concrete knowledge can be attained through reason, answering the skepticism that was brewing

⁹ By any standard, Kant certainly exemplifies a very different kind of philosopher from that of the ancients. He is a self-described *practical* philosopher. He is totally and painstakingly un-erotic, as David Hart put it, “the single most boring man to ever darken a wigmaker’s doorway.” David B. Hart, “The Laughter of the Philosophers,” in *First Things*, 149 (January 2005): 31-38. He is assured of his answers, and his ability to collect truth from the cosmos like apples from an apple tree. He does not have to wonder, to woo, to risk rejection, or to accept mystery—he has a system, a taller ladder than all the rest. And that is all that is important to him: the number and quality of apples he can gather, not the existence of the tree, much less the meaning of the sky above it.

across Europe. Next, it must be shown that ethics can be discovered through reason alone, apart from any reliance on Aristotelian habit and “knowing” as discussed earlier. He needs to find something unchanging *without* turning to experience, to seeing, or to actual presence. His inquiry will not begin with the highest things, as Aristotle’s did. Instead he will attempt to discover something fixed in temporality, what he calls “transcendental ideas.” His great hope is that there is “something the *existence of which itself* has an absolute worth, something which as *an end in itself* could be a ground of determinate laws; then in it, and it alone, would lie the ground of a possible categorical imperative, that is, of practical law” (4:428). Compare this to the derivative way in which Aristotle presents ethics, as the conclusions drawn from deeper beliefs about man, nature, and an eternal order: all virtues are virtues only because they aim at an end greater than themselves. Kant must find a way to make our knowledge of ethics primary, independent from all metaphysical experiences and inferences about the cosmos. Such moral knowledge is an end in itself. He employs philosophy in order to accomplish this, but he only wishes to use it “practically.” His intent is to discover an ethics which requires no buttressing from other propositions. Philosophy is a task for morality, rather than virtue being the condition of philosophy.

While Aristotle located transcendence in pleasures which point toward the happiness of contemplation, Kant stakes his entire theory of ethics upon the transcendence of pure logic. The conclusions of this purest form of reasoning are themselves transcendent, making each ethical principle, from do not murder to do not jaywalk, a transcendent and fixed truth. For this reason, Kant’s ethics do not require prudence, nor are they in any way dependent on the outcome of the action. While virtues are fostered through habit, the morality of Kant depends on the intent of the will. Though this sounds radical, in practice Kantian and Aristotelian ethics would often

look very much the same: Kant's logic and Aristotle's prudence would yield similar ethical actions most of the time. The critical difference occurs at the metaphysical level: Kant is making ethics, once a secondary, reflective, and temporal thing, into a primary and transcendent thing. The most serious implication of this reversal is a division of man; his nature and desire for happiness are pitted against his will and duty. However, even at such a cost, as long as it truly can be maintained that ethics is transcendent, Kant has succeeded in finding a truth that is not arbitrary, yet still can be found in and fully achieved in time. He may have shown that real knowing is still possible in a world severed from the Aristotelian heavens.

Kant Dethrones Happiness as Man's End

Kant's moral man, then, is not destined for any particular end; rather he is subject to universal principles. Kant wastes no time rejecting the transcendence and permanence of Aristotle's happiness, rechristening it to be a state which is "always conditional" (4:396). He acknowledges that "to be happy is necessarily the demand of every rational but finite being," but states that our reason is not aimed toward happiness, but to a "far worthier purpose" (4:396). Man is at war with himself; his natural desires run contrary to the principles of duty he is subject to: "The human being feels within himself a powerful counterweight to all the commands of duty, which reason represents to him as so deserving of the highest respect – the counterweight of his needs and inclinations, the entire satisfaction of which he sums up under the name of happiness" (4:405). Happiness, for the Kantian man, is simply "complete well-being and satisfaction with one's condition"; it is the fulfillment of all desires, whatever those desires may be (4:393). As such, happiness has been drastically demoted: it is no longer man's highest end and the Supreme Good; rather it is simply an aggregate of satisfied desires which is actually at

war with the real duty of man. Though Kant does recognize that happiness and duty ought to go hand in hand in a better world, he always maintains that happiness is fundamentally secondary, a product of ever-wayward passions. Even though the desire to be happy is often vulgar, it is a powerful and universal vulgarity and therefore requires Kant's attention. Reason is our only salvation from being dominated by such a passion. Accordingly, he writes that "to assure one's own happiness is a duty (at least indirectly); for, want of satisfaction with one's condition, under pressure from many anxieties, and amid unsatisfied needs, could easily become a great temptation to transgression of duty" (4:396). Here, Kant sets the stage for introducing happiness' successor, the new principle by which man determines what the good life is. It is "in the will of a rational being," he writes, "in which...the highest and unconditional good alone can be found" (4:401). Happiness is valuable only in so far as it furthers and yields to this new "highest and unconditional good." When we are not overly burdened by our wants and are instead enjoying a state of moderate fulfillment, we are free from urgent distractions and can get down to the real business of humanity: moral duty!

What does moral duty as the first principle of human life mean for man? First, the fulfillment of man occurs temporally: the will bows to duty. This act is bound to and must occur in time. Since all wills are equally subject to duty, and man's moral duties are absolute, the perfected will would look exactly the same in every human being. Thus, the greatest end is achieved through the increasing universal harmony fostered through the mass of dutiful wills of individuals manifested in the course of history, or more exactly, in the unfolding of future history. Kant's philosophy is at all times oriented toward a future shaped by increasing enlightenment. This is a sharp departure from Aristotle's constant return to nature. While classical thinkers turned to nature as evidenced in the ancestral way, believing it to be a reliable

arrow aimed at the good, Kant recoils from nature as something disordered and obfuscating. It is low, bestial, and most importantly, a dismally unreliable source of information for moral knowledge. As such, it is of no help in identifying universally valid moral principles, and is often the enemy of such principles. Kant writes that practical precepts based on nature “can never be universal because the determining ground of the faculty of desire is based on the feeling of pleasure or displeasure,” and it follows that such arbitrary indicators as feelings “can never be assumed to be universally directed to the same objects” (5:26). We witness again Kant dividing what Aristotle thought to be a whole, pitting man’s nature against his duty. He is left with a morality that is independent of human nature, as a fixed mold that man must conform to rather than the reflection of his ultimate purpose.

In rejecting nature as a guide, Kant is also knowingly rejecting the teleological understanding of man that Aristotle’s work assumes. For Kant, nature is no more an oracle than the soul is a vision of the truth about the whole of reality. Kant does not turn away from nature simply because he understands nature to be “low,” but because he rejects out of hand the possibility of knowing anything high or divine in the classical sense. Past thinkers were too idealistic, too presumptive, he thought, if they believed that they could read in the reflections of a pond the secrets of the heavens. Kant divines what man is only so far as man can be known through rational self-knowledge. This necessitates that man defines himself only in terms of himself: our own rational will becomes our Supreme Good. This will is not arbitrary: it must behave according to the fixed precepts of reason, but Kant still treats our own “willing” as the ultimate good, or at least as the only good knowable to us. Pierre Hassner captures the weight of

this essential aspect of Kant's thought, observing that "the good will as good in itself independently of any effect that it might have in some measure replaces God or nature"¹⁰

The Good Man and the Moral Man

Two distinct types of man have emerged: Aristotle's good man, working to complete his nature by habitually pursuing the good, who is able to know that good though it stands outside of time; and then there is Kant's moral man, fighting against his nature to bend his rational will to eternal rational principles, which are fully discernible and applicable in time. What will such men look like, and what kind of an education would be needed for the making of each?

Aristotle's Good Man: The Judge of Virtue

Just as we by nature desire happiness and by nature have the capacity to know, so too by nature does the good man have the ability to judge what is good and bad, because he has seen (through habit, authority, and glimpses of actual presence) that which is totally good. This ability to know the good is possible because of the good man's virtue, his habit of practicing goodness, of constant prudence in all things. In this way, if we are seeking to cultivate a good man, it is not his reason that needs perfection so much as his character—the ability of his passions to listen to his reason.

The habits which make up good character come into being through the guidance of pleasure and pain, which are "employed in the education of the young, as means whereby to steer their course" (X. i. 1). Pleasure is a powerful motivator, as Kant too recognized; but is it

¹⁰ Pierre Hassner, on Immanuel Kant. In Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, *History of Political Philosophy*, 3rd Edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1987), 588.

anything more than that? As far as common knowledge goes, Aristotle observes that two common and totally contradictory understandings of pleasure abound: some hold that “pleasure is the Good itself,” while others maintain that it is “altogether bad” (X. i. 2). Aristotle recognizes both positions to be false, but bearing partial truths. He makes a case against the first group that pleasure is “*a* good” but not *the* Good, and answers the second group by writing that “disreputable pleasures” are not actual pleasures at all. What seems “healthy or sweet or salty to invalids” are not truly so, “any more than things that seem white to people with a disease of the eyes are really white” (X. iii. 8). If it is an illness or blindness of the soul which causes us to mistake true pleasures for false ones, or to treat pleasures as the Good when they are simply a good, it is clear that the healthy soul is the one capable of seeing all things as they truly are. This is absolutely central to Aristotle’s ethics, and the key to the good man: “we hold that in all such cases the thing really is what it appears to be to the good man” (X. v. 8). The good man, rather than Kant’s abstracted pure reason, is thus the standard of all ethics. Theoretically, this gives incredible power to the good man, but this authority is not arbitrary: the judge of true and false pleasure is the goodness within the good man. In that sense, it is as close as possible to the judgment of divinity itself, for the good man is good in so far as he has beheld, and in beholding become like, divinity. “If the standard for everything is the goodness, or the good man, qua good, then the things that seem to him to be pleasures are pleasures, and the things he enjoys are pleasant” writes Aristotle. False pleasures, on the other hand, only seem pleasant to “those who are in a condition to think them so”—to those whose vision is corrupted or diseased (X. v. 10). The good man knows that the good is naturally accompanied by pleasure, as is the pursuit of the good through virtue—however, he also knows that it is not pleasure which renders something good, for “we should desire [good things] even if no pleasure resulted from them” (X. iii. 12).

What does this mean for the education of the community? How ought the city to educate a potential good man? If “happiness is the actualization and complete practice of virtue,” as Aristotle writes in *The Politics*, the best regime is that which is “happy most of all!”¹¹ That is, one which allows for the pursuit of virtue *and* best shapes men toward achieving that end. Though part of the sweetness of virtue lies in freely choosing that which is good for us, our education has much to do with how clearly and readily our minds perceive that choice. Accordingly, Aristotle writes that “the soil must have been previously tilled if it is to foster the seed” and likewise, “the mind of the pupil must have been prepared by the cultivation of habits, so as to like and dislike aright” (X. ix. 6-7). Such an education is more readily attained if the man be “moderately equipped with external goods,” and if he has “performed noble exploits and had lived temperately.” The possibility of happiness is open to almost all, but is very unlikely for most. This necessary education in virtue is “difficult to obtain,” Aristotle writes, “without being brought up under the right laws” (X. ix. 8). In the law we find “a rule, emanating from a certain wisdom and intelligence, that has compulsory force” (X. ix. 12). In this way, the composite wisdom of good men is fixed and made systematic. The city stands on the quality of its tradition, as well as by the prudent counsel of wise rulers—Aristotle’s mixed regime. Few men will choose this highest virtue for its own sake, but many can borrow some of the happiness of living virtuously by living under a wise code of law. The rhythm of civic life constantly channels its citizens toward habits of goodness.

¹¹ Aristotle, *The Politics*, translated by Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1332a1 7-9.

Kant's Moral Man

Kant cannot accept the good man's discretion as the standard for moral action because for Kant truth does not lie inside the good man, nor is virtue a matter of discernment. Essentially, Kant denies the possibility of the process by which Aristotle's good man becomes good. The practice of prudence, the mark of a virtuous man, is irrelevant to Kant who blushes at the mere mention of virtue defined as the mean between two vices. Instead, Kant's moral man must will (with right intent) the correct moral choice, which is already evident thanks to Kant and his transcendental logic. Ethics takes the form of a true-or-false question. The moral man is guided *solely* by reason toward a rigid and demonstrable moral principle. There is no need for a *wise* man, simply a *dutiful* man.

The question of true versus false pleasure, so critical for Aristotle's good man, is unimportant to Kant because there is *no* pleasure which can be trusted for guidance. For "the practical necessity of acting in accordance with this principle, that is, duty," he writes, "does not rest at all on the feelings, impulses, and inclinations but merely on the relation of rational beings to one another" (4:434). Because morality is transcendent while pleasure is not, duty replaces wisdom, and reason dominates over nature. Pleasure is no more of a rudder for man to steer his course by than happiness, the desire for which is "a problem imposed on him by his finite nature itself, because he is needy and this need is directed to the matter of his faculty of desire." Such desire is rooted in "a subjective feeling of pleasure or displeasure underlying it by which is determined what he needs in order to be satisfied with his condition." For Kant, there is no one way to participate in happiness, because happiness is not the same for all men—for, though all desire to be happy, "it is still only the general name for subjective determining grounds, and it

determines nothing specific about it” (5:25).¹² According to this understanding, a regime or an education based on happiness would look like Pinocchio’s Pleasure Island.

Instead, Kant’s politics require very little art—and quite a lot of bureaucracy. The goal is to make the civil law conform exactly to the moral law, then to enforce it. The prudence of aristocratic rulers is unnecessary, as is the careful preservation of tradition. Instead, because especially clever men have worked out the literally irrefutable do’s and don’ts which are to govern society, all that is left is for that law to be promulgated and followed. The law itself will rule, as revealed through reason to elite thinkers, and enforced by what would essentially look like a bureaucratic state. Because all moral law stands regardless of context, this is the perfect foundation for a world-wide bureaucratic state, or at least a level of cooperation that might mirror such an arrangement. The moral man is not the judge of the good, he is the man who chooses the moral choice as an end in itself; that is, for no other reason than that because it is the moral thing to do. Such an act is a triumph over our nature, which is divided from our rational will and is wholly temporal and sensual, with no greater end than its own blind satisfaction. Such things we cannot even “choose,” we simply fall into whatever our passions desire. The rational will is critical, then, as it is the defining characteristic of human beings for Kant, and the only test of a truly moral man—the only “good man” in Kant’s universe. This is because to choose to follow the moral law, independent of all the desires of nature, even in defiance of nature, is a chance for man to choose something for its own sake, not as a means to sensual gratification. There is something of worth that is both transcendent and yet entirely within and

¹² Kant is very clear about the directionless nature of happiness, writing that “happiness is such an indeterminate concept that, although every human being wishes to attain this, he can still never say determinately and consistently with himself what he really wishes and wills...in short, he is not capable of any principle by which to determine with complete certainty what would make him truly happy, because for this omniscience would be required” (4:418).

fully understandable to a human being—the moral law. In choosing the moral law for the sake of the moral law, humanity is more than an animal, retaining a purpose that is in some way eternal. This highpoint of Kant’s thought, though it accomplishes exactly what he hoped it to, also puts him in an awkward position: he is very close to saying, and perhaps is saying, that an act of the will is the *end* of the will. Is the highest purpose of man his own choosing? How is it that a means became an end?

Josef Pieper, a twentieth century Aristotelian, succinctly raises the classical objection to this: “what is sought by the will cannot itself be an act of will—because all motion seeks rest (and rest is not in willing but in knowing).”¹³ This is requisite according to Aristotle’s understanding of both physics and metaphysics: we work so that we may be at rest, so that we might have leisure. In essence, all striving is directed toward the attainment of an object. The good man’s virtues aim toward the always-at-rest good. In the same way, pleasure guides us because it is not a mere motion, sensation or process, but something “perfect at any moment” (X. iv. 4). This means that pleasure is something out of time, something at rest, for “movement necessarily occupies a space of time, whereas a feeling of pleasure does not, for every moment of pleasurable consciousness is a perfect whole” (X. iv. 4).

When Aristotle opens the *Metaphysics* by stating that “all men by nature desire to know,” he does not mean simply that the desire to know comes naturally to us, or that it is a widely encountered phenomenon. Rather, he is observing that this is the *essential* nature of a rational being. Somehow, our will is both free *and* naturally oriented toward its end—an end which “the

¹³ Josef Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation* (South Bend: Saint Augustine Press, 1998), 68.

will is incapable of not willing.”¹⁴ Our will and our nature are fused in a way that is both inevitable and indivisible; that is the kind of thing a human being is for Aristotle.

Aristotle’s vision does not hinge upon his own brilliance or any novelty of thought, it is a purer vision of what most of mankind most of the time believed and acted upon. Perhaps that is why his thought is so enduring, why even today the average person would readily understand desiring happiness above all else. Kant, however, labors under the weight of his task as Atlas labors under the weight of the world: if his theory is disproved the whole castle of cards comes crashing down. It is a mission that looks on the one hand too desperate, and on the other too full of hubris. Kant plays by the Enlightenment’s rules in order to save the most important tenets of the old order, bypassing the embarrassing presuppositions that used to support and guard them. But if the rules of the Enlightenment should prove to be impossible to keep, Kant’s theory of ethics, of knowledge, and of man disappears into the void.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, II, Q. 10, A. 2.

Bibliography

- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. ed. Jeffrey Henderson. trans. H. Rackham. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Aristotle. *The Politics*. trans. Carnes Lord. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985.
- Hart, David. "The Laughter of the Philosophers," in *First Things* 149, January, 2005: 31-38.
- Hassner, Pierre, "Immanuel Kant" in *History of Political Philosophy Third Edition*. eds. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 1987.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Practical Philosophy*. ed. & trans. Mary JGregor. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- Pieper, Josef. *Happiness and Contemplation*. trans. Richard and Clara Winston. South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 1998.
- Plato. *Symposium*. trans. Seth Benardete. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001.