

**A NEW MORAL THEORY:
SYNTHESIZING ARISTOLE AND KANT'S MORAL THEORIES**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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Submitted to Honors and Undergraduate Research
Texas A&M University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as an

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

Approved by
Research Advisor

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May 2014

Major: Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The Problem of Aristotle's Virtue Ethics. (May 2014)

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My research is on the ethical theories of Aristotle and Kant – the two most influential ethical theories in Western history. Despite their persuasiveness, each presents a different view with regards to the notion of morality and how we ought to act in our lives. This conflict between the two equally compelling ethics forces us to choose one while giving up the other. My goal is to synthesize the two theories and present a new comprehensive ethical theory which, if successful, will encompass the virtues of both theories while avoiding inherent contradiction. I am going to analyze the moral frameworks of Aristotle and Kant represented in *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* respectively and compare and contrast them with the focus on their notion of morality. If the new comprehensive moral theory turns out to be convincing, it will spare many people an ethical dilemma between the two conflicting views when they try to make sense of morality and to make moral decisions.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“How should we live?” Most of us have asked this question at least once in our lives. However, we often find either there are none or too many alternatives that offer to give the real manual of human living. In the 4th century, Aristotle asked slightly different questions “What do we live for?” and “What is the highest good there is?” and provided an insightful treatise on ethics which survived through the fragmented forms his students supposedly took as the reproduction of his teachings, now collectively known as *Nicomachean Ethics*. The work became arguably the most influential ethical treatise in Western history. Aristotle begins with the question “What is the good?” and concludes the good is “that at which all things aim.”¹ Aristotle identifies the highest good with the Greek notion of happiness (*eudaimonia*) and states we all strive in the end to become happy, that is to live the most full, enriched life possible.

Aristotle’s ethical notion that appears in *Nicomachean Ethics* seemed to be the standard treatise on the subject until German philosopher Immanuel Kant came up with his own model which swept the ethical arena when he published his short but powerful work *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). Kant, like Aristotle, starts with the notion of the good, but unlike his predecessor he defines it as that which is accompanied by the good will. Nothing, he writes “could be considered good without limitation except a good will.”²

¹ Baird, F. E., *Philosophic Classic: Ancient Philosophy* (Upper Saddle River, 2011), p. 378.

² Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 7.

Then he develops his powerful argument for “duty ethics” and introduces his signature idea of a “categorical imperative” which commands reason to obey with no other incentives.

How should we make sense of these two different accounts of the good and the purpose of the action? Which one should we accept as the true description of the good and right prescription for good actions? For those people who would ask these questions above, I have ventured this project to give them some help to find the way out of the dilemma posed by the two seemingly equally persuasive moral accounts. In the end, both theories of Aristotle and Kant attempt to answer the ultimate question “How should we live?” In this paper I, too, in my part, attempt to offer my own answer to this imposing question that has haunted philosophers and thinkers throughout human history.

I have chosen to use the dialogue form because in my opinion it can engage a reader more directly and powerfully than the conventional academic paper format. This form allows the readers to follow the debate with ease and enjoyment. The dialectic format has been used by many preeminent philosophers from Plato to Hume. I have tried to imagine how Aristotle and Kant, if they happen to meet in the imaginary world after their death, would have a discussion on morality. Due to my lack of knowledge and research on Aristotle and Kant’s other work and their lives, the conversation may not convey the accurate personalities of each philosopher. Instead I have tried to imagine how I would proceed in the argument if I were Aristotle and Kant, having the knowledge of their theories that appears in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals*. I hope my readers will find the imagined discussion between the two philosophers to be an enjoyable and enriching experience for both their moral philosophy and their ethical lives.

CHAPTER II

PREFACE: ARISTOTLE MEETS KANT

- Aristotle: Hello, Kant. It's my pleasure to have met you here in this limbo and be able to have a conversation with you!
- Kant: What is this? Am I dreaming? Are you really Aristotle?
- Aristotle: Yes, I am that famed Aristotle, whether you believe it or not.
- Kant: It's very strange because I am speaking German and you Greek but somehow we can understand each other.
- Aristotle: Yes, that's the rule here that whatever you say in whatever language, it will make sense to others.
- Kant: If I'm not dreaming, I am indeed in a very strange place! Where am I and what are we doing here?
- Aristotle: I will explain later where you are and what you came here for. First, we have to take care of our important business.
- Kant: What is that important business?
- Aristotle: It seems that you have put forward another moral framework during your lifetime, which became very influential in modern history?
- Kant: I don't know how influential my work has gotten to be, but it is true that I have written my own moral theory in several of my works, although I am not sure which one you have in mind specifically.
- Aristotle: I know you have written several on the topic, but for now I am interested in your short but very powerful argument in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* published in 1785.

- Kant Oh, that little pamphlet! I never knew that it would become that influential when I wrote it. That was only a guideline for the more ambitious work that came afterwards such as the *Critiques* and the longer *Metaphysics of Morals*.
- Aristotle Here we will have a discussion on your ideas in comparison and/or contrast to my own that appears more or less in the fragmented but fair form in the collection of my students' notes that collectively are now known as *Nicomachean Ethics*. I am sure you have read it during your lifetime?
- Kant Of course! Your ethical ideas, I don't know if you are aware, have been the dominant ethical theory since the very time of your composition. However, your ideas, though powerful and immensely influential, have gotten somewhat outdated by our time commonly known as the Enlightenment, during which we preferred to begin from our reason and a priori assumptions rather than from any common assumption of experiential beliefs or dogmas. British empiricists such as Locke and Hume criticized the classical view of the world and Utilitarian thinkers like Bentham have criticized the classical view of morality. In an attempt to rescue the autonomy of reason and morality from being reduced down to mere instrumentalism, I have set out my own arguments in various works.
- Aristotle I see, but here let's begin our discussion on morality right away and not waste any more time on the trivial things.
- Kant Sounds good to me. I have read your work several times, but if you don't mind, I'd appreciate if you could cite some of the passages in your work as we discuss. And I will do the same for mine, since I doubt you have read mine unless you did so here after you died.
- Aristotle Yes, I have read your work but I will still ask you to cite the passages that may be necessary as we have our conversation.
- Kant Agreed. Now, since you have brought up the discussion, you get to start with whatever topic or question that may seem appropriate to you to do so.

CHAPTER III

WHAT IS GOOD?

Aristotle Let's first start with the definition. How do you define the *good* ?

Kant I define "the good" as something that is always accompanied by "the good will":

It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will (*Groundwork*, Section I)

It is not really *my* definition but the universally agreed notion of the good. You see, Aristotle, no one will say an action is good when it is done with an evil intent. For example, if you rescued someone's life because you believed him to be rich and so expected a reward, your action cannot surely be called good. Would you not agree that the motive is what determines good action?

Aristotle I certainly do agree with you, Kant, and it is very interesting because I never thought about the good that way. I thought the good was something "at which all things aim":

all knowledge and every choice is directed toward some good
(*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.1).

Let's see whose definition of the good seems more reasonable. You defined the good as something which is accompanied by good intention. Wait a minute. You seem to define "the good" with yet another "good". How can it be? May I define a pencil, not in terms of its physical materials or its function, but merely that a pencil is a pencil? No, it is not a definition but mere re-statement of what it is.

Kant Yes, I did define the good yet with another "good" which seems to be a very

inadequate definition, but let me explain further what I mean by this. I think a word such as “good” is so complicated and used in so many different circumstances for different meanings that it is almost impossible to come up with any appropriate, while useful, definition of “good” that everyone can agree with. One thing may be good for someone while bad for another, and vice versa. How could there be a notion of good that everyone can agree with, unless there is the good that is absolute and objective?

Aristotle Precisely. That’s why I defined the good in this very sense – objective and absolute, common for everyone, namely the very object that we all aim at in our actions. If we define it this way, we can avoid the disagreement of people, for certainly everyone will say they aim at something good in whatever action they do, won’t they?

Kant You’re right that we *think* what we do will be or result in something good for us in one way or another. However, that is only what we think, and there is *no* guarantee what we think is good should turn out to be indeed good for us. A child may think eating chocolate every day is good for her (at least, that’s how she unconsciously thinks; good in the sense that it’s pleasing to her) while we all know that it is not.

Aristotle I understand that. I didn’t say that what we think is good has to be good. I only defined what the good is, if it can ever be defined. The good is that which we aim at, either correctly or mistakenly. Should we agree with this notion of good before we continue?

Kant I still am not quite sure if that’s really a good definition of the good.

Aristotle Perhaps there can be another definition of good as you just said so. You said you were not sure if my definition was a good definition. What do you mean by a “*good* definition”? You mean the kind of definition that is useful for our discussion? Or that mirrors what is real? If you mean the former, then we have another definition of the good: it is something that helps achieve a certain goal. We want good definitions because they are necessary for a

meaningful discussion. This kind of definitions is good precisely *because* it helps us achieve a certain goal. If you mean the latter, namely that good definitions are what mirror the truth or reality, then we face a great challenge since there is no scientific method we can conduct to verify if the definition of an abstract notion such as good do really does reflect the truth, since there is no *good* that we can perceive physically. This is precisely *why* we are struggling to give out a sufficient definition for it. We must be content with the general outline of such a notion.

Kant I can agree with the first notion of good, namely that the good is something that helps achieve a certain goal. A good soccer player is good because he is very skillful at playing soccer, and so he helps the team win the game. If he were useless in winning the game, then he could never be said to be a good soccer player. Likewise, a good food is the kind of food that helps, and does not deter, in gaining health. A good flute player is the one who produces great music, i.e., one who helps the flute be at its best in what it is for. This in fact is your famous teleological definition of things: defining in terms of their purposes.

Aristotle Let's then start with this notion of good that we agreed with: the good is which helps achieve a goal whatever it may be.

Kant However, when I defined the good in the *Groundwork* I did not mean this broad notion of the good. I tried to define the *moral* good.

Aristotle Oh, I see. Here we are then facing the different kinds of good: one that is good for an instrumental way, while there can also be the good in the moral sense. Since we are focusing on moral theories for our present discussion, let us then focus on the moral good.

Kant Yes.

Aristotle You have suggested that the moral good is the action done with a good will.

Kant Correct.

Aristotle And you have characterized the “good will” as the good in itself:

A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes, because of its fitness to attain some proposed end, but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself (*Groundwork* 1.1)

This definition surely refutes our earlier agreed definition of “good” because we said the good was good *because* of its effects – because it helped achieve a goal.

Kant Yes, the earlier notion of the good is not good in itself but only in relation to its effects. We call some things good such as a good definition, but they are good only in a subordinate sense. However, the moral good must be accompanied by the good will.

Aristotle You mean something like that Hitler was a good leader (because he was very good in uniting Germans under the common objective), but he was never a morally good leader, right?

Kant I have not heard that name before. Was he a military leader? Are you sure he was German?

Aristotle Oh, I am sorry. He came long after your time. He was the German leader in the 20th century and turned the entire world into unprecedented chaos and utter destruction, though he was eventually stopped by the opposition forces.

Kant I am dumbstruck at the fact. I am greatly ashamed that he was of German lineage. How could anyone from such a noble and rational tradition do such an atrocity? When I wrote my ethical theory, it was precisely to prevent such outrageous action!

Aristotle Yes, I am sure you did for a noble cause, but history unfolds itself in its own way, you know that. At any rate, we have sidetracked. Let’s get back to our discussion of morality, if you don’t mind.

Kant Yes, please continue your questions.

Aristotle I can see your point is that the only morally good action is the action done with a good will as anyone can see clearly from the example above. On the other hand, I have never thought the good action *has* to do with the performer. I always thought there is such a thing as a good action apart from the performer. For example, when I am faced with an enemy in the battlefield, the good action might be either to fight or to retreat, depending on the command of the superiors or/and the turn of the battle. A prudent soldier should first figure out what is the moral action to do at that moment and choose to do it. In other words, a good action is good in itself and is never deprived of its goodness by the quality of will of the performer.

Kant But think of the following situation: when I save a man drowning in the water wishing I can get much reward from him, no one would say my action was morally good.

Aristotle I would say that your action, namely saving a man's life in danger is itself is commendable. However, the good action you have done wouldn't make you a good person, since you have done with the wrong motive.

On the other hand, it seems to me we are not at much disagreement here. I think we are simply using different terminology for the same thing. It does not really matter whether we call a certain action good or non-good as long as we agree that the action should be encouraged accompanied by the good motive.

Kant Yes, but the good motive must be derived from the right principle, and that's what matters really in the end, not the action or how 'pure' the motive seems to be. Rather, the only good motive is that which is determined in a certain way.

Aristotle What do you mean that the morally good action must be derived from the right principle?

Kant That is the core of my moral theory in *Groundwork*. What distinguishes the

good action from the bad one is the maxim or principle on which it is based. If you resolve to save the man from drowning because you believe you should never pass by someone drowning when you can save him, then your decision to save him came from the right principle (and thus your action would be morally good). However, if you decide to save him for the reward, the motive was wrong because the motive came from the self-love, which is the wrong foundational principle from which to derive one's motive. Thus, the action whose motive was based on this wrong principle cannot be a morally good action.

Aristotle I see. But I still think what we should take into consideration is whether the action is morally right (or appropriate), whether it is virtuous action. Whether an action is morally good does not depend on my will but on the external circumstances.

For example, when I can save one's life by telling a lie to the pursuing psycho-killer, telling a lie in this case would become the morally good action, regardless of my will or however my will was determined. If I were a virtuous person (morally good person) then I would *want* to save the lives of my friends. However, you seem to say that if I lie to the murderer with the wrong motive, say, to satisfy my own inclination or simply out of the fear of evil reputation, then you will say the action itself would be morally wrong.

Kant Yes, I will say the action of yours is *done* in the morally wrong way, while your action of saving one's life itself is praiseworthy and should be encouraged.

Aristotle Then we have to first settle with what we mean by morally good and bad, since we seem to disagree here on the terminology. I attached the predicate "morally good" to objective actions and people independent from the performer and his will, while you hold no action is morally good apart from the will of the performer (more precisely, the mechanism of the motive, i.e., how the motive is formed).

- Kant Yes.
- Aristotle Since it does not matter which way you choose to follow because it is only a matter of labeling, let us follow your way. We are simply changing the rules in labeling words a bit. So from now on, I will be content with holding the position that no action is morally good in itself but only in relation to the performer's will. Only when the performer has right intention the action would be morally good.
- What about the performer himself? Can we say he who performs morally good actions (that is, actions with good will) is a morally good person (or virtuous person)?
- Kant Yes, he who decides his actions based on the right maxim is a morally good person.
- Aristotle Here we disagree again, since I believe that the morally good person is one who *enjoys* and therefore keeps doing morally good actions throughout his life. But it seems that for your morally good person, one does not necessarily have to enjoy his action, am I mistaken?
- Kant You are right. I hold that a morally good person can be someone who may or may not necessarily enjoy a virtuous action as long as he respects his maxim and chooses to follow the actions that were made based on his principle. A good servant does not have to enjoy his master's command; he only needs to follow it faithfully with respect. Respect for the law is all you need to perform a morally good action. Whether you enjoy doing so is only a secondary matter.
- Aristotle I see your point. But how could a morally good person *not* like performing actions that are morally good? How could your morally good person just respect the principle of his and not enjoy following it? For example, everyone has to pay his taxes whether he likes doing it or not. While *my* morally good person not only obeys the law but also enjoys doing so since

obeying the state law is morally virtuous (unless the state is corrupt), *your* morally good person seems to need only to obey the law and not like doing it as long as he respects the law and chooses to obey it?

Kant Yes, he does *not* have to enjoy the action. In fact it's even clearer if he does not enjoy the action because that way we can see that he is acting from the respect (or from duty) only and not from his inclination of emotion, while if he enjoys doing it, we cannot say for sure whether he acts from duty or from inclination.

Aristotle I think I understand your point, but I cannot accept it

Kant Why? What do you think is wrong with my reasoning?

Aristotle If one truly respects a certain law, it is impossible, in my judgment, to dislike or even remain indifferent about following it. How could one, if he truly *respects* something, not *enjoy* following it? In my opinion respect and love always go together. Can you love your father without respect or vice versa? Can you respect your country without love or vice versa? You see, that respect is only a different face of love. If you love something you inevitably have respect for it. If you do not have respect for it, then you do not truly love it. One may object and say that you can only respect something you revere, but you can love something which you don't necessarily revere like a baby since no one will say she reveres babies. However, we *do* revere the innocence and purity and the value of life that are apparent in babies and this is in part the reason (if not the main reason) we love babies for. Thus, when you truly have respect for something or someone, you must also love it as well. And if you love something then you must enjoy doing it or following it. If you love your state, you would inevitably enjoy following the state laws as though you are following your father's commands. If you do not enjoy doing so, that may be the evidence that you do not in the end love your state. Was I too harsh on the notion of love and respect?

Kant You talk sensibly but I am not sure if I can accept your notion of love and

respect, as you said, for being too narrow. But let's grant your notion of love and respect. What will follow then?

Aristotle If we accept my notion of love and respect, then one *must* enjoy doing according to what one respects. If one respects the law, then he must enjoy obeying it. If he does not enjoy doing so, he does not respect it in the real sense but only pretends he does. If the morally good person is the one who respects his principle, then he must also love or enjoy following it.

Kant Hmm, I have never thought about it that way. But what happens if I do not accept your notion of love and respect? Then your conclusion cannot stand, can it?

Aristotle It seems so at this point. But we will see more clearly as we proceed our discussion. Let's try to summarize what we have discussed so far: we have tried to come up with the sound definition of what is "good" and by this we mean "morally good". Then we have assessed your definition of moral good. Although we had an initial disagreement as to what a morally good action was, you holding that it depends on the motive of the performer, while I held it does not, but we have decided to go with your view. Then we have assessed whether a morally good person should or does not have to enjoy doing morally good action. Here again, we had a disagreement, but here I could not yield to your view because your view in my judgment is impossible (or contradictory) based on my notion of respect and love. Whether my notion is adequate or not, we will have to find out. But let's move on now to the vocation of reason: what human reason is for and why.

CHAPTER IV

THE VOCATION OF REASON

Aristotle: How do you define *reason*?

Kant: Wait a minute. I do not like keep being asked as if I were being litigated. Why don't you begin this time explaining your ideas first and then I will do mine?

Aristotle: Oh, I am sorry I made you feel litigated by my questioning. You know I am in a way a direct student of Socrates, since I was a student of his student, Plato. That's why I have been, without realizing, conducting Socratic method myself. Yes, your suggestion sounds agreeable. I will share my definition of reason first.

Kant: What is your definition of reason?

Aristotle: I define reason as something that only humans retain uniquely from all other animals, something that nature marked us distinctively for whatever purpose there may have been. In this way, men can be defined as rational animals – capability of reasoning is *the* definitive feature of men. Do you agree with me with my definition of reason and men?

Kant: Yes, I certainly do agree with you that it is only us humans that have reason, which, I think, legitimately gives us superiority over all other animals. Reason is the hall-mark of being a human. Without reason, no one can say we are any better than any other animals. In fact, we are very weakly equipped by nature if she hadn't given us this precious gift. But you haven't given me the essence of reason – what it *is* – but only what it *seems*. Reason *seems* to be something only humans possess and no other animals. But the fact that only we have reason does not explain what reason is. This is in fact what I have learned from Socrates: a good definition should capture the

essence of the thing, not mere description of it. Reason can exist without the notion of a human being. We can imagine other animals with reason, for example, monkeys that *think*. In fact, we do not know if such highly developed animals can actually think. We only *assume* they cannot. In a way, we want to believe so.

Aristotle

Excellent point, Kant, you certainly are a better student of Socrates than myself. I agree that what I have given was only a mere description of reason that only humans *seem* to have reason while no other animals do. However, let me defend my definition. In fact, it is in this way we define *anything*, especially when we define something abstract and conduct any meaningful communication. We shall never *know* what love or justice is but only what they *may* be or how they are *understood* by us. Plato used to think such abstract ideas exist by themselves distinct from us and we *can* discover their essence as we can discover how nature works. However, I am afraid we may not have access to what they really are, if they ever do exist. That's why I only gave a 'mere' description of reason, how we make sense of it.

I did the same for the good earlier. I only gave the definition of the good based on how the notion is generally received and used: the good is something we aim for in our actions. Likewise, reason is something only humans have (or seem to have). You mentioned that we could never know whether it is only humans that have reason. I think we can say only humans do for two reasons. If some other animals also have reason, then what *are* we? We wouldn't be distinguished from other animals with reason. We wouldn't just be rational animals then, because reason wouldn't *define* us anymore. We would be deprived of what had defined us. However reason *must* be our definitive feature because of the crucial importance of reason for humans. Other animals are equipped with all sorts of things that enable them to survive. On the other hand, deprived of reason, humans are the least equipped and least capable creatures of all animals, and we wouldn't be able to protect even ourselves. Without reason, humans would be nothing but

hairless four limbed creatures that are good for nothing. It is through reason that we can survive even for a short period of time. Through reason, we can make tools, communicate with each other, and build the society and even a civilized state like Athens. However, nature made every creature for some good, for some purpose. Birds can fly, fish can swim, monkeys can climb trees and so on. Humans should also be able to do something, and it is reasoning. That's why I believe only humans *shall* have reason. Nature has bestowed us the very gift that enabled us to rule over all other animals, although it seems that the gift is not precious enough to enable us to live very harmoniously with one another. There is still this very danger of reason of being abused.

Kant I take your point, Aristotle, that it is very hard, if not fruitless, to define such abstract notions as reason accurately in its essence. And I also know exactly what you mean by the possibility of reason being abused. You are highlighting the significance of one's motive in his using reason or in any other action?

Aristotle Yes, I certainly do think that motive is very important in our action. Depending on our motives, we can use reason for the good or for evil. What I am saying is that we are sadly not equipped with the wisdom with which to use our reason.

Kant That, I think, is because nature respects our *will*. If nature gave us so-called wisdom in using reason, then we all would be very "wise" in using it; in a way everyone is forced to behave in a certain way. Although it sounds like an ideal society where everyone acts wisely, there wouldn't be freewill, since everyone would have to act in a certain way. I think that is why nature did not give us such wisdom in using reason.

Aristotle Do you believe then nature also gave us so-called freewill?

Kant Yes, freewill and reason are the two gifts nature has bestowed on human beings alone.

Aristotle What do you mean exactly by freewill?

Kant Freewill is our capability of not obeying our instinctive desires. We can *choose* to disobey our bodily desire but follow what our reason recommends instead. In fact, it is only when we act in this way that we should be rightly called *free*. In other words, we are free only when we follow our reason, at times against our natural inclination.

Only a rational being has the capacity to act *in accordance with the representation of laws, that is, in accordance with principles, or has a will . . . the will is a capacity to choose only that which reason independently of inclination cognizes as practically necessary, that is, as good* (*Groundwork*, Section II)

Aristotle Your description of freewill resembles my notion of “choice” in *Nicomachean Ethics*. Yes, we humans can make voluntary actions and for the good purpose.

“The acts of a morally weak person are accompanied by appetite, but not by choice, while a morally strong person acts from choice, but not from appetite” (*Ethics* III, 2).

It means that only a free person can make choices, that is, that only he can act in accordance with virtue.

Kant Yes, you may understand “freewill” in terms of your “choice”. They are in fact very close. However, you can make choices *because* you have free will. In this light, freewill precedes choice. Free will can be correctly exercised only when it is used according to reason just like choice can only be made in accordance with virtue.

Aristotle If that’s your notion of freewill, then I can agree that such freewill is also nature-given as I believe only rational beings can make moral choices and so do virtuous actions.

Let’s now talk about the role of reason next. As we agreed earlier, I will present my view first. I think reason can be used in two different ways: for

intellectual and moral (or practical) purposes. Since we are discussing morality I will focus on the latter. I think that the proper role (vocation if you will) of reason is to find the perfect *mean* in every situation, i.e., to know what to do and when and how. More simply speaking, reason is given to us to help us find what the appropriate action is in a certain situation. Of course, it is *very* hard to know the exact mean in every situation. We strive to get close.

Kant

I am aware of your famous theory of the “mean”. Although at first glance it seems to make sense, it’s hardly applicable in real life. Do you really believe there are only two polar opposites in every situation? For example, when I am not sure what I should do, say, whether to lend money to a notoriously prodigal friend, what two polar opposites are there that I should consider in order to find the exact mean in between? Is it being prodigal and spendthrift? Is it between being naive and overly-suspicious? Is it between being a money-detester and a money-lover? In most cases, if not all, there are more than just two polar opposites one needs to consider; it’s not always clear cut that there are only two opposites as you seem to think and as you used in your examples. Also, doesn’t it depend on how you think? One may think a certain action is audacious while another may think it is cowardly. Can there be really *the* appropriate action in a given situation that virtually all can agree with?

Furthermore, your ‘mean’ theory cannot stand unless you believe in moral absolutism. There is more than just one pair of two extreme actions in a given situation but many – since such extremes are based on the common sense (or general consensus). The general standards, as you know, vary among communities and cultures. Do you believe that the Athenian ethical standard was superior to that of Persia?

Aristotle

So Athenians believed. However, I realized while I have been here and looking at how human history has unfolded that such an egocentric world view was at least partially responsible for the racism which has dominated

the modern history. Yes, it seems that if we agree that there is no one superior ethical standard among cultures, then my notion of the moral action, namely the mean of two extremes, loses the ground to stand since there will be two different means in two different cultures which cannot be both correct at the same time for it would be contradictory. And I do not at the same time accept the argument of moral relativism which says there is no absolute moral values and that it's a mere human invention.

You are right that in *Nicomachean Ethics* I was not explicit enough as to what I mean by the mean in every situation. Perhaps as you say there is more than just one mean in a given situation, and if there is more than one mean, the mean wouldn't be a mean. It seems as if you have a better idea. What would you say about how reason should be used?

Kant

Reason is meant to produce *good will*. This is clear if you look at the distinction between humans and other animals. We agreed that reason and freewill are what distinguish men from other animals. Other irrational animals are merely driven by their instincts because they have no reining force that works against their instincts. They are given nothing else other than instincts. Animals obey their instinctual sense of pleasure and pain; they do what pleases them and avoid what would give them pain. For that purpose, namely pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain, instinct seems to be the best guide given by nature. Even among humans, we can see the use of instinct in this purpose:

“the more a cultivated reason purposely occupies itself with the enjoyment of life and with happiness, so much the further does one get away from true satisfaction” (*Groundwork* Section 1).

Don't you think those common people who never bother to ponder complicated thoughts seem to be more content and at ease in their lives? On the other hand, the people of reason do not seem very happy, but rather always discontent.

Aristotle I can't agree with your last point that those who use reason seem to be less happy than those who do not as much. Perhaps you are using the word "happiness" differently from I do. Your notion of "happiness" sounds to be associated with physical pleasure – good feeling – while mine has to do with the overall quality of one's life as a whole.

Kant You are right that I used the word "happiness" to refer to good feeling which is a very different notion from yours.

Aristotle We will have a discussion on happiness subsequently after the discussion on reason, giving it the appropriate attention that it deserves. So for now, let's not be dragged into the discussion on happiness. Please continue your discussion on the vocation of reason.

Kant From this I concluded that *if* the vocation of reason *were* the same as that of instinct, namely pursuing pleasure (or happiness in my sense), then reason is *not* the best tool to be used and actually much less useful than instinct. Therefore, if we agree that nature could not have granted us something that is not only helpful but indeed hindering for its own purpose, then the function of reason must be something radically different from that of instinct. Do you remember what I said about what separates us from other animals? It was reason *and* will. Will is our ability to act according to reason. Then we can reasonably guess that reason was given to us by nature to produce good will. And **"since reason is nevertheless given to us as a practical faculty, that is, as one that is to influence the will . . .the true vocation of reason must be to produce a will that is good, not perhaps as a means to other purposes, but good in itself, for which reason was absolutely necessary"** (*Groundwork* Section I).

Aristotle Hmm, you mean that since reason was given to us by nature to *influence* our will, the proper use of it will produce good will?

Kant Correct. Then do you agree with me that reason was given to produce good will?

Aristotle Yes, but before I can agree with you that the vocation of reason is to produce good will, you will have to first demonstrate what you mean by “good will”.

Kant Yes, I will certainly do so. The good will in short is the will produced by the correct principle or maxim. It’s just as we said earlier in our dialogue on the good. Earlier in our discussion I defined “the good” as something that is always accompanied by the good will. A good will is good in itself:

A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes, because of its fitness to attain some proposed end, but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself (*Groundwork* 1.1)

Aristotle Yes, you have mentioned this quote earlier in our discussion of the good, and I still clearly remember your discussion. So you take good will to be something that is good in itself.

Kant Yes, that is so.

Aristotle Then this “good will” would be intrinsically good?

Kant Certainly

Aristotle Is the good will the highest good?

Kant Yes, the good will is the highest good there is.

Aristotle I thought the highest good was the happiness.

Kant Yes, that’s what you wrote in *Nicomachean Ethics*. However, I reject your notion of “eudaimonia” (happiness) because it is not plausible.

Aristotle What you do mean it is not plausible?

Kant You wrote that happiness just happened to fit the description of the highest good which is “**pursued as an end in itself . . . [and] never chosen as a means to something else**” (*Ethics* 1.7). Then you wrote “**this description seems to apply to happiness above all else; for we always choose as an**

end in itself and never for the sake of something else” (Ethics 1.7).

However, your idea tries to appeal to common sense and beliefs rather than to be rationally proved for what it is.

Aristotle Do you think we can be precise on an issue like happiness?

Kant Yes, if anything, happiness and morality *must* be analyzed rigorously just as any other topics must be.

Aristotle This then will naturally lead us to our next topic “happiness”

CHAPTER V

HAPPINESS

- Aristotle Your notion of happiness in *Groundwork* refers to physical well-being (or contentment), but not necessarily a “good life”?
- Kant Precisely. My notion of happiness is that of a contentment or desires being satisfied, not the grand notion of yours. In fact, this notion of happiness is closer to the notion of happiness when one thinks of happiness, for most of people do not act for some kind of good life or “eudaimonia” but for their simple personal desires to be satisfied.
- In fact, there is seldom such notion of Greek word “eudaimonia” in modern European languages, and thus we have had much trouble translating and understanding that term into our own. Since I have finally met you here, can you explain what you meant by happiness?
- Aristotle Gladly. I can understand how there could be much difficulty understanding the notion that was used roughly two thousand years ago. I will try my best to explain the notion of “eudaimonia”. At the beginning of our discussion, we started out with the premise that nature does nothing in vain. Do you agree with this premise?
- Kant Yes, I can. In fact I also had this as my fundamental assumption when I developed my argument that the role of reason is to produce good will.
- Aristotle I sensed that too. In our time, that is, antiquity for you, there was this notion people considered as the highest value, that is, to live happily. From the ancient sages to tragedians, people wrote about what might constitute a so-called “good life” and who actually might have led such lives. It was considered as an objective outcome, not subjective as modern people may think. The fact one thought he was happy alone did not guarantee that he was

actually happy. On the other hand, regardless of his own opinion and even that of others, one's life was either well-lived or not, at least so the ancients thought. In fact nobody knew if one did live well or not. We could only give our opinions on his life, but no one has really the final verdict. Only gods knew it. Therefore, we all strove to live well (or be happy) in every aspect of our lives through every means – of course based on our own definitions of “good life”, which varied more or less from one to another. Some believed it was being wealthy or famous while others believed it depended on good works. In general, I think we can safely translate the term “happiness” (eudaimonia) as “human flourishing”, “good life”, or “well-being” in the modern sense.

Kant How do you know such a thing as happiness even exists and whether it can be attained by us?

Aristotle In fact, I pursued this very question in *Nicomachean Ethics* and concluded that happiness must be attainable from the premise that nature does nothing in vain. We all desire to achieve a certain goal in our actions. However, this goal is desired not in itself but yet for another goal. For example, the young people exercise and go through all kinds of drills daily in gymnasium in order to get stronger or faster. They strive to get stronger and faster in order to compete at the Olympic games, eventually to win the competition which symbolizes the greatest honor for athletes. However, even this honor should be desired for yet another good – whether consciously or not – that is, living a good life.

Kant Yes, I am much familiar with your notion of the final good, but I always couldn't quite accept it. Why do you not think that virtues such as justice and honor are not pursued for their own sake? I believe we can and do strive to fight for justice because we believe that this is the right thing to do, not because we want to live a good life. You may argue that we desire to do the right thing not because it is right but because, unconsciously, we want to live a good life. However, that supposition is not persuasive or even desirable. I

would rather believe we strive to do what is right for its own sake, not for the sake of our happiness.

Aristotle Oh, don't get me wrong. I am absolutely with you that those virtues can be pursued for their own sake. What I mean is that there is an even more worthy and desirable virtue than all the other virtues combined. That is happiness. That's why I said that even virtues such as honor should be pursued for an even greater virtue.

Kant I see what you mean.

Aristotle Let me continue then. So there is this final good (or highest good if you will), and I call this happiness because happiness is what people want most in their lives in general (besides virtues such as justice or honor). Everyone desires a good name or wealth or power ultimately for this end. Don't you think so?

Kant Well, so it seems. But I am afraid such an argument has too many holes if it stands on general agreement, not on rational conclusiveness. What if someone does not agree with you that one does not desire wealth for happiness but rather for itself?

Aristotle That's quite possible. Then I will inquire with him a bit, and we will see more clearly who is talking sensibly. Let me ask him "then for what sake does one desire wealth?" How will he answer?

Kant I suppose he will answer "because he wants to wield power over other people or to live a comfortable life not doing any laborious work."

Aristotle Then I will ask "why does he want to wield power over others or to live a comfortable life?"

Kant Suppose he'll say because that's what he wants?

Aristotle Yes, he wants power and a comfortable life. However, will he still want those things *if* he believes that they won't bring him comfort and contentment, or even a sense of worth and meaning?

- Kant Of course not! That is precisely why he wants them. He want these things *because* he believes they will bring him comfort and contentment. If he does not believe so at all, then he will surely cast them away or not desire them at all.
- Aristotle Precisely. Then he desires power and a comfortable life not in themselves but for another good, for example, comfort, contentment, or sense of worth. Right?
- Kant Yes.
- Aristotle Will he desire comfort, contentment, or a sense of worth even when he is convinced that they have nothing to do with an overall good life? In other words, will he still want these things if he is assured that they will lead him to a miserable and wretched life? I know it's hard to imagine how this could be since we believe that a life of comfort, contentment or a sense of worth is anything but a miserable and wretched life because we tend to take comfort and misery as opposites. However, they are *not*. The opposite of a miserable and wretched life is a *happy* life (or well-lived life). Happiness is the objective universal result. It is not a personal feeling or subjective assessment such as comfort, contentment or even the sense of worth. That is why it is possible to imagine one who *feels* comfort, contentment, or sense of worth in his life and *yet* is also assured that his life is wretched.
- Kant I see, although there's still some difficulty accepting such a possibility. But I can at least accept the possibility of this case: if he can somehow be assured that his life will be miserable and wretched despite his feeling of contentment, comfort, and sense of worth, then he will not desire these things. Now I see where your argument is leading. You are arguing that comfort, contentment, and even the sense of meaning are not pursued in themselves but for the overall good of life, namely happiness.
- Aristotle Precisely. I am assured that happiness is the final good everyone desires in all of their actions, of course with the exceptions of some virtues such as

justice and friendship.

Kant I agree with you. But you haven't explained how happiness is attainable.

Aristotle Thank you for your reminder. It is easy to see how happiness *must* be attainable if we accept our premise that nature does nothing in vain. If what everyone ultimately desires in their actions is happiness, then it surely must be attainable. There are lesser natural desires such as desire for hunger, sleep, or sexual gratification, and they all surely can be satisfied because these desires were given by nature. If anything, the desire which all other desires are directed toward must surely be put in us by nature. If so, then the desire for happiness must be able to be satisfied. Thus, happiness is surely attainable. Happiness is not just attainable but attainable only through one's deliberate effort, not mere chance.

It is better that happiness is acquired in this way [through virtue] rather than by chance . . . To leave the greatest and noblest of things to chance would hardly be right – *Ethics* 1.9

It also agrees with the commonly accepted maxim: **“the good and noble things in life are won by those who act rightly”** (*Ethics* 1.8)

Kant I see what you mean. What do you say about how we can achieve happiness?

Aristotle In short, we can achieve it through virtue. **“happiness is attained through virtue and some kind of learning or training”** (*Ethics* 1.8) and **“virtue of a man will be a characteristic which makes him a good man and causes him to perform his function well”** (*Ethics* 2.6).

Because happiness is nothing other than the continual habitus of one's life. How can you say whether someone has lived a good life if his life does not seem to be virtuous at all or only virtuous at times? Although we can never know for sure whether someone has lived a good life even at his death, we can make a guess based on the life he has lived. Then the question is how can such a consistent mode of life be achieved? It is through habit and inclination. You can only acquire a new habit by

practicing it repeatedly. Once it becomes the habit it will start forming your character which will get closer to being virtuous.

- Kant How do you know if a certain action is virtuous or not?
- Aristotle You have four standards: Consciousness, Voluntariness, Motivation, and Consistency: First, the performer must be *aware* of his action. He must know what he is doing. Secondly, he must do it voluntarily: he must be doing it knowing what he is doing, and the possible consequences of the action, and not against his will. In other words, he should *want* to perform that action. Thirdly, he should want to perform the act in itself, not for any other end. For example, when helping others, he must want to perform it because he believes it is the right thing to do, not because he believes he can get reward from the action. Lastly, the action must be consistent (or repeatedly done). One virtuous action does not make one's life virtuous just as one sunny day does not make a summer. Only virtuous actions that are performed with consistency over time can make one's life virtuous and so happy.
- Kant Hmm, so there exists such a thing as happiness, the end of all actions, the highest good there is.
- Aristotle Yes, if we accept the premise that nature does nothing in vain.
- Kant And *also* only if one accepts your conception of the good and that all our actions aim at some kind of good, and then again for another good, and in this chain of goods there must be a final good which happens to fit the description of happiness. Thus you identify the final good with happiness, right? However, while the reasoning may sound logical, somehow it doesn't really compel one so much. You have not explained specifically how we can be virtuous. You have only said that we should consistently perform virtuous actions in order to become virtuous ourselves. But you have not told us how we could know what the virtuous action would be in every situation other than merely recommending to **“sail in the second best way and take the**

lesser evil”:

In every case we must be especially on our guard against pleasure and what is pleasant, for when it comes to pleasure we cannot act as unbiased judges. . . .Our attitude toward pleasure should be the same as that of the Trojan elders toward Helen . . . for if we dismiss pleasure as they dismissed her, we shall make fewer mistakes (*Ethics* 2.9)

On the other hand I offer a very specific guide as to how we can know what is the appropriate action in any circumstance.

My argument is that the good will is the highest good there is. Without the good will, nothing is good, and I define the good will to be a determination of respect for the principle or maxim which I call the “categorical imperative” according to which one ought to **“act only in accordance with that maxim through which [he] can at the same time will that it become a universal law** (*Groundwork*, Section II).

Aristotle I am also very familiar with your famous notion of imperatives. Could you elaborate more?

Kant First, I defined an imperative as the formula of a command:

The representation of an objective principle, insofar as it is necessitating for a will, is called a command (of reason), and the formula of the command is called an imperative (*Groundwork*, Section II)

Then I divided the imperatives into two: hypothetical and categorical:

Now, if the action would be good merely as a means to something else the imperative is hypothetical; if the action is represented as in itself good, hence as necessary in a will in itself conforming to reason, as its principle, then it is categorical (*Groundwork* Section II)

The categorical imperative is that one should act as if the maxim of his action were to become a universal law of nature by his will.

Aristotle Let's summarize what we have said so far. We have had different notions of happiness. Mine referred to the objective state and quality of one's whole life (in the way one's health can be objectively judged, of course, to only a certain degree), while your notion of happiness is complete contentment (or all your desires being satisfied). Whose definition should we follow? Or do we need to accept one and abandon the other? Or can we somehow embrace both? What if I use the term "eudaimonia" instead of happiness so that we can distinguish the two notions which are very different?

Kant That is a good idea.

Aristotle Then let's do so. Can you accept that there is such a thing as eudaimonia, an objective state of one's life?

Kant In order for there to be any objective state or judgment, there must be the objective standard by which our lives can be evaluated. What is the absolute standard for you, Aristotle? Is it that of the Greek gods? But as Socrates protests in *Euthyphro*, the Greek gods do seem to disagree on many important issues and definitely on this most important issue that whether one has lived a good life. On the other hand, if your standard is not that of the gods, then what other standard do you have left?

Aristotle Well, I surely believe in the Greek gods although that does not mean I believe in all of the stories about them. Even in our time, many people believed different stories about their gods and always argued over them. I also believed some and discarded others. But my objective standard is not that of the gods but that of nature. I believe there is the truth in our world – true and false. One's life has been either well-lived or not well-lived. Of course there is a whole spectrum between these two extremes: well-lived life and a poorly-lived life. Most of us lie in between these two. Yes, it is extremely difficult, if possible, to reach either extreme. However that does not mean there is no white or black, only greys, for example. We do call some objects white, some black, and still others grey based on our

commonly acknowledged consensus on colors. Yes, there can be disagreement on this. I may call this object white while another may call it light grey. Of course, it is not absolutely white in itself, but I consider it to be close enough to be called white while he does not think so. Am I more right or wrong than this person? Not necessarily. It is only a difference of labeling. On the other hand, there is still an objective truth about whether the color of this object is closer to white or to black, or right in the middle (i.e., perfect grey). Also, when there are two grey objects, we can say one is lighter or darker than the other and this wouldn't be mere personal choice but an objective truth. In this way, we can assess one's life based on the two extremes of a well-lived and a poorly-lived life. Of course, the question still remains as to what defines these two kinds of life.

Kant Exactly. You have only explained that there can be objective truth in whether one's life can be said to be better-lived than the other's. However, the main question is rather *how* the good or bad life can be *objectively* defined.

Aristotle I do admit that everyone has a different definition of a good life from everyone else to various degrees. However, that does not mean there is no such thing as a good life in the objective sense. Then how do we know what the correct definition is without submitting ourselves to a divine authority? Well, I have written in *Nicomachean Ethics* that the good life can be defined to be the life that is lived fully in the way that it is supposed to be lived. For humans it would be living in accordance to virtue (through reason).

Kant Well, it's simply *your* teleological definition of a good life (or rather based on our common use of the term "good"). You have still not explained how in the world your definition of the good is necessarily the correct definition.

Aristotle Do you want me to be very precise on this point? Well, I do not think we should be precise on matters like this. I do not think we can ever get precise on the topic of ethics, and so **"we must be satisfied to indicate the truth with a rough and general sketch"** (*Ethics* 1.1)

Kant Yes, *that* is what I cannot accept because the general consensus is based on

our experience. But the good life must be able to be derived a priori, if we want it to be absolute and not subjective.

Aristotle It seems that we also differ in term of our approach to the problem of the good. We have agreed to use your way of calling an action good *only if* the action is accompanied by a good will (or motive). I also agree that motive is important; one should do a good action for no other purpose than doing it in itself.

 However, Kant, you seem to go even a step further and say a good action requires a good will which ought to be derived from the respect for the *universal maxim*, namely that one should act in the way he can will his action to be a universal law.

 However, I held that one should will to perform the appropriate (or morally good) action by choosing the *mean* between the two extremes. However, you had the right objection that any single action can be understood to be more than just one mean between one pair of extremes but many indeed. And, if we approve the plural means, there is the danger of moral relativism which we should guard against.

Kant I do agree with you, Aristotle, that moral relativism is seriously mistaken.

Aristotle . . .

Kant What is it? You suddenly seem very serious and thought-provoked.

Aristotle Wait a minute. . Why can we not just embrace our theories *at the same time*? Why can't both our theories be true?

Kant What do you mean?

Aristotle Your theory may fit (or work) for some people, while mine for others. As we were having our discussion, I just happened to think about the very question which should have been at the center of our discussion: *What is the purpose of ethics*? Then I came to the conclusion that the goal of ethical theories, in

my opinion, is not to discover the *truth* as metaphysics or epistemology, but to help individuals become *good people* and thereby form a good society. Isn't that so?

Kant Of course, the primary purpose of ethical theories or simply ethics is providing a sort of guide or handbook, giving people assurance, or, if necessary, even persuading them to become good human beings both as individuals and citizens of states, and so eventually create the ideal states where there is no injustice and unwanted bloodshed. If an ethical theory which is in itself irrefutable and rationally sound proves itself to be utterly inapplicable in real life, no one would consider such ethics desirable or even qualified to be called ethics – for ethics is the study of how one *ought* to behave not only in theory but also in *real* life.

Aristotle Yes, that is what I believe that ethics is for. Then why can we not embrace both your and my ethics? Then we wouldn't have to quarrel over which theory is superior to the other.

Kant But, Aristotle, the truth can never contain contradiction. If our theories do conflict in a significant way, there has to be contradiction in embracing both theories.

Aristotle Not necessarily, if we take the choice of ethical theory as that of one's preference.

Kant What do you mean?

Aristotle We don't argue over which dish has superior taste in the objective sense because we all know that it is just a matter of personal taste and preference. We all would admit that no one's taste is objectively superior to another's. Strawberry flavored ice-cream is not superior to chocolate flavored ice-cream. In this way, the choice of an ethical theory does not have to involve contradiction when two people make different choices for their ethics.

Kant You can't be serious, Aristotle, telling me that ethics is just a matter of

personal taste.

Aristotle Ethics, of course, is not *just* a matter of personal taste. What I mean by the analogy is that the choice of an ethical theory can *work* as a personal preference, or more precisely, as one chooses his dress according to his body and personal style. In this way, ethical theories can be chosen based on individual preference and what fits his or her temperament and circumstance.

Of course, however, there is the *limit* with regards to the appropriate ethics. The good ethics must not set one's own interest over other people's. As long as the ethical choice is made from the pool of the theories that respect other people no less than himself, the choice shall be made based on one's preference and whatever works best for him. Like we said the purpose of the ethical theory is to produce good individuals, it does not really matter which theory one chooses as long as a theory does achieve this purpose, What matters is whether a theory does *work* for the people in their lives, i.e., whether the ethics does help them become good. However logical and "true" an ethical theory may be, it can't surely be a good ethical theory if it is useless in bringing about better individuals and better societies.

Kant I am not sure, Aristotle. You are confusing me.

Aristotle Come, Immanuel, I will explain more in detail.

CHAPTER VI

MORAL PLURALISM

- Aristotle Let's start with ethics. How do you define ethics?
- Kant That indeed is a hard question, Aristotle. Many philosophers have disagreed on what ethics is and how it should be treated. I would define ethics as nothing other than the system of the moral principles that govern human behaviors. Simply speaking, it is the study of how one should behave.
- Aristotle I do agree with your definition. Ethics, which came from the Greek word *ethos* that refers to one's character, is the intelligible moral framework that explains what morality is, i.e. what good and evil are, either in itself or in relation to human beings. Do we have consensus so far?
- Kant Yes.
- Aristotle Now, if the ethics is the system of moral principles or, simply speaking, the study of how one should behave, it seems that there is no question as to how ethics should be *used*.
- Kant What do you mean?
- Aristotle Take, for instance, a road map to a certain destination. The primary purpose of the map is to *guide* the reader to the intended destination. No one would say it is to entertain or to merely inform how to get there theoretically, right? The good road map, if it's to serve its real purpose, should indicate all the existing structures and items in real life so that the reader can benefit not only in getting knowledge but also in actually arriving at the intended destination.
- Kant Obviously.

Aristotle Then, if we consider ethics to be a sort of a road map, its primary purpose would be to get readers to the intended destination?

Kant Yes. But do you think ethics is a kind of a road map?

Aristotle Yes, I whole-heartedly believe so. Just like the study of politics, whose end is “**not knowledge but action,**” the goal of ethics is not understanding but living (*Ethics*, 1.1). In fact, politics is nothing other than the study of how to make people virtuous citizens, while ethics is the study of how one can be virtuous. Ethics is the road-map, while politics is about providing the “correct” ethics –the ethics that does work, i.e., that makes people more virtuous. The two are so interrelated that one can’t talk about politics without ethics.

Kant I am still not convinced, Aristotle. I do believe that ethics is about what the good is and how one should behave and that if one reads an ethical theory properly, either yours or mine, and understands thoroughly, she will be able to distinguish the right from the wrong, the good from the evil, and so she will act accordingly. However, does it mean the purpose of ethics is to create better individuals? It seems to me that there is a distinction between what something is about and what it is for (i.e., between *what* something is and *why* it is). Can ethics never be written for the sake of itself? Can a moral philosopher not simply write an ethical theory in pursuit of his own curiosity or passion for truth without necessarily having in mind the goal of guiding other people to become better individuals?

Aristotle You have brought up the important point. However, you have not distinguished the *activity* of writing ethics from ethics itself. To understand the distinction, let’s think back to our agreed notion of the good in the beginning of our conversation. We defined the good as something that helps achieve a certain goal, didn’t we?

Kant Yes, we did, though we agreed that the moral good is a different kind of

good from this one.

Aristotle Yes, but it still is a valid notion of the good, perhaps not so separated from the moral good itself. From this notion of the good we can infer that the good road map is none other than the one that helps readers achieve the goal, that is to get to the destination. So far so good?

Kant Wait a minute. What if one reads the map just for fun or simply to get knowledge?

Aristotle Yes, that is very possible. However, we wouldn't call a map good if it only entertains the reader but is useless in anyway getting to the destination, because the very purpose of the map is to *guide*, not to entertain or to inform.

Kant I see. Yes, you are right that the primary purpose of the map is to guide one to the destination.

Aristotle Thus, the good map is good because it helps achieve the goal.

Kant Right.

Aristotle Then, if the good ethics were a kind of road-map to a certain destination, then it would be good because it helps to achieve its primary purpose, that is to guide people?

Kant Yes.

Aristotle So the question is whether ethics is really a kind of road-map, that is whether its primary purpose is to guide readers to become better individuals.

Kant Precisely. If ethics does turn out to be a sort of a guide-book, then its purpose is to guide, not to entertain or to inform.

Aristotle What kind of ethics do we call good or bad ethics? For example, imagine you are somehow convinced that your ethical theory in *Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals* proves itself to be utterly inapplicable in real life, i.e., if no one were able to respect any principle without love for it or if no one

were capable of any imagination and therefore universalization, would you still call your ethics good while being completely useless?

Kant Of course not! I proposed my ethics to the world *because* I believed my ethics *can* rescue reason from agnostic or even relativistic views of empiricism and thereby help people hold their faith in reason and a rational way of life which would, if followed correctly, inevitably lead them to a virtuous and moral life. If people were *irrational* by nature (i.e., being without reason), my ethics would have been completely mistaken and therefore useless. In fact, the truth and practicality always go together indeed in moral philosophy. If ethics does not reflect the truth, it will be inapplicable, while if it does contain the truth, then it will surely be applicable.

Aristotle Then we have agreed that in order for ethics to be good, it should both contain the truth and be useful. In fact, it seems if one has one, one is guaranteed the other as well.

Kant Yes

Aristotle What do you mean that ethics is useful or applicable?

Kant A useful ethics is that which can help people either hold their moral beliefs or guide them in their behaviors.

Aristotle What if people do not act according to their beliefs? Don't we call them "hypocrites" whose actions do not parallel what they say or believe?

Kant Yes, we should strive to avoid being one of them.

Aristotle Then ethics is not for helping people *just* hold their beliefs but *act* accordingly?

Kant Yes.

Aristotle So we could simply say the ethics is about helping people in their actions

only since actions do implicate their real beliefs?

Kant Right.

Aristotle And when you said that ethics is about guiding them in their behavior, do you mean guiding them to act appropriately?

Kant Yes.

Aristotle Then the ethics is useful *if and only if* it does guide them in their behavior?

Kant Logically

Aristotle We have concurred above that a good ethical system is that which reflects the truth and is useful or applicable?

Kant Yes.

Aristotle We have also said a useful ethics is none other than which that guides people in their actions. Then we can conclude that the good ethics is that which helps guide people in their behaviors. Do you agree?

Kant Yes I agree.

Aristotle Then we can then say a good ethical system is that which guides people in their actions well. From this, we can conclude the purpose of ethics is to guide them in actions. We have just proved what we have set out to do.

Kant . . . I see. . . This is indeed a very weird feeling. I can totally understand why people got confused and even angry by Socrates' inquisition. You have just done the same to me! I am just joking with you. Yes, I am convinced that the primary purpose of ethics is indeed to guide people in their actions.

Aristotle You are a very humorous man indeed, although many people have thought exactly the opposite.

Kant Really? Probably because I seldom had any conversation outside the circle of my closest friends and acquaintances and seldom on non-academic topics.

Aristotle So we have agreed on the notion and the primary purpose of ethics, haven't we?

Kant Correct. But why did you bring up the definition and the purpose of ethics rather abruptly?

Aristotle Because I think not taking the purpose of ethics into consideration when one talks about it is a serious misstep. Let's see what follows then from our agreement. If ethics is a sort of road-map or rather a guide for moral actions, then should there be just *one* as such? I mean, for instance, if I want to go from one point to another, is there only one path?

Kant Of course, not. There are indeed infinite number of paths available to get from one point to another. But there is only *one* most effective or fastest way, that is, the straight line.

Aristotle Of course, there is only one straight line between two points. However what I mean is that there can be more than just one path available to get from one to another point just as there is more than one path to use hike up a mountain.

Kant Yes, of course.

Aristotle Let's hang on to the hiking example for a while. Is there only one effective way, or the effective way to hike a mountain? Or does it depend on the hiker?

Kant It of course would depend on the hiker – based on his or her capability or preference.

Aristotle Right, I also think there is no single best way to hike a mountain, but rather it is relative to the hikers. For the elderly, a more gradually rising slope would be more suitable than the rough, rocky, quick path, which energetic youngsters would prefer.

Kant You want to say ethics is just like this, right? There is no best ethics out there, but "the best" depends on the individuals based on their preference and circumstances.

Aristotle Exactly. You can almost read my mind, Kant.

Kant However, Aristotle, it's no different from moral relativism that you have denounced earlier.

Aristotle No, it's not. Consider the same example of hiking. We have agreed that there can be many ways to hike a mountain. Does it mean every way there is will lead one to the peak of the mountain?

Kant Of course not. All paths, except for several paths, will *not* lead to the top of the mountain.

Aristotle Why cannot the same be said for ethics?

Kant Could you explain more?

Aristotle If we agree on the notion of the good, we do not fall into the trap of moral relativism. While you have defined the good as that which is accompanied by the good will and I have defined it as that which our actions aim toward, we all can agree that the morally good person is the one who takes care of others as much as, if not more so, than himself., i.e., one who, as you wrote, respects and treats others as an ends in themselves, never as a means.

Kant Yes, I can whole-heartedly agree with that.

Aristotle Thus, only a limited ethics and ethical theories will help one become morally good while all other ethics that do not respect others won't and they will be cast out as false and inferior ethical theories.

Kant Do you mean that "false" ethics and ethical theories are inferior in the absolute sense or simply to the eyes of the morally good? Or in fact, how do you say there is a "morally good person" in the absolute sense? Do you have the absolute standard by which one can say one ethics is superior to the other?

Aristotle Yes, the highest values are the value of co-existence and value of life. With these as the absolute standard we can judge ethics objectively.

Kant However, how can you justify your so-called absolute values? What ground do you have?

Aristotle I do not claim to have a ground that can be rationally proven, but I can say that human nature does support the claim that these are the highest values.

Kant What do you mean?

Aristotle Look at it in this way. Nature has made humans as rational beings, right?

Kant Yes.

Aristotle It means that humans have both instinct, which strives to survive, and reason that wills something beyond mere survival.

Kant Yes.

Aristotle We can then derive from this that all people want to survive and so in order for as many people to live on this planet, we have to have the value of co-existence.

Kant Wait a minute. So we simply have to have co-existence so that as many as possible can survive?

Aristotle Yes, because that's we *want*, at least physically. We have to first survive to do any rational activities in addition. Nature has put the desire to survive and the desire for rational activities in us. Then we should follow these desires since that's what nature has arranged. If nature has arranged things that way, then the value of survival and so the value of life must be the highest values.

 Let's not quarrel over which is "superior" theory but accept both of our theories as long as they work for people to become better individuals and so for creating better societies. That's what matters in the end – the primary purpose of the ethics.

Kant I don't know what to say, for you are not arguing rationally but dogmatically imposing your values on me.

Aristotle No I am not, Kant. I am telling you to stop being a philosophy professor, but an actual philosopher – the one who cares for human beings and their well-being. Socrates called for the good life of people, *not* the good-theories of ethics.

Kant You are not being Aristotle, Aristotle!

Aristotle I am being myself, Kant, whoever I am. I am being more sincere than I have been in my entire life.

Kant Really?

Aristotle Yes

Kant Can you not persuade me by rational argument?

Aristotle I can try to explain the value of co-existence and love but I can never prove any of it via reason. It can only be proven by *experience* as a human being, never by reason alone.

Kant I see. You are not being anti-reason then, are you?

Aristotle No, I am not, Kant. You know how much I love reason and logical thinking. However, when it comes to values and ethics, I came to realize we should stop being dogmatically insistent on reason and rational proof when you can feel and experience what's of real importance and worth. When we tried to deny our experience and try to reason it out, we are doomed to failure and mere verbal fights.

Kant I see.

Aristotle Do you mean you can understand what I have said?

Kant Yes, I think I now can come to see what you are up to and why. And what you have said are indeed very sensible things

Aristotle Then do you accept co-existence and love as the highest values, or at least

can you believe that's what your experience as a human being assures you?

Kant Yes, I can.

Aristotle Good! Then we are on the same page again and can continue our discussion.

Kant What else is there left still to talk about? We have indeed been talking forever!

Aristotle Haha, you're right, we have indeed been talking for a while. But we have still things to cover, and please bear with me a bit longer. We are after all almost there.

Kant I will. So what do we have next?

Aristotle So are you now assured that we are safe from moral relativism?

Kant Yes, I understood that what you have proposed is not moral relativism.

Aristotle What we have to do now is to figure out what kind of people would fit my theory and what kind of people would yours, so that people can choose on their own based on what they believe themselves to be.

Kant Sounds good to me.

CHAPTER VII

WHICH ETHICS IS MOST SUITABLE FOR WHOM?

- Aristotle Let us first try my ethical theory and see who would find it most suitable for them to apply in their lives. First, let's go over the general framework of the theory.
- Kant I will try to summarize your theory and let me know if you think I got it right.
- Aristotle Let's then hear your sparknote version of my theory.
- Kant You started with the general fact that our actions are directed to some kind of good or that which we think to be good. Then you also observed the fact that the goals (that we consider to be good) of many of our actions are not desired in themselves but only as means for still higher goals (or goods). Then we can at least theoretically come to the *final* good which all of our actions are supposed to lead, and this has to be also true in reality because this desire for the highest good was put in us by nature (and this reason is effective based on our premise that nature does nothing in vain). Then you have also observed the theoretical essence of the supposed highest good (namely, self-sufficiency and its being desired in itself and never for any other good) happened to be identical with the generally received essence of "happiness". Then you explained the notion of goodness (or happiness) for man in terms of his proper function – which you conclude to be **“an activity of the soul in conformity with a rational principle [or virtue]”** (*Ethics* 1.7). Then you talked about how happiness can be achieved and concluded that it is to be attained **“through virtue and some kind of learning or training”** (*Ethics* 1.9). You then discussed what constitutes virtue, the virtuous man, and virtuous actions both based on the generally accepted notions and on logical coherence. Did I get the general framework of your ethical ideas?

- Aristotle Splendid. You have just told me the heart of my ethics. Now, let us talk about who would find my theory suitable. How should we start? Perhaps we can begin by asking why *anyone* would find it persuasive.
- Kant I think those who *want* to become virtuous persons will come to understand what may constitute virtue and virtuous actions with the help of your ethics. Although you haven't provided any sort of formula for good actions, except that one should find the mean in every case, you have given much freedom for people who want to be left to decide on their own what the appropriate actions are in every situation, while those who want to know *how* one can find what the good actions are in general should consult my ethical philosophy that provides the specific method.
- Aristotle I like your assessment. Let's then go over your theory in outline. You start with the general notion of the good as that which is accompanied by a good will. Then you discuss what the good will is and how it can be called good, namely that one should have the right principle from which one's will should be derived – which you called *duty*. You then develop the notion of duty and introduce the notion of a categorical imperative which commands men for no other purpose than itself and how it all works. Then you conclude that rational beings as a legislator of moral laws must always be considered as ends and never as means for something else. How do I sound so far?
- Kant Yes, I think you have got the most fundamental points of my theory although they were not sufficiently explained.
- Aristotle I think it's enough for our purpose. Let's now talk about what kind of people will find your ideas suitable for them to apply in their lives. I think those who are duty-minded or those who want to understand and act the good actions should follow your ethics – for it offers a very specific guide as to how one should know what the appropriate actions are in any situation, namely by thinking if one can will a certain action to be a universal law.
- Kant Sounds good to me

Aristotle

I think it's time for us to wrap up our discussion. In this discussion, we have begun with the definition of the good and found that we did not differ much on what an action would require to be called good, namely that the motive must be pure in itself.

Then we have discussed the notion of reason and its proper role. We agreed on the main essence of reason and freewill (voluntary choice). Reason is what distinguishes men from other animals, and the fundamental role of reason is to figure out what the appropriate action is in a given situation (and you have added to it that it was also to produce good-will, which was the more important role of reason for your ethical system).

Then we have briefly discussed my notion of "happiness" (eudaimonia) and the theory of the mean which you criticized rightly to be not very applicable. We have realized that most of our disagreements came from our very different approach to the topic. You insisted on being precise and thorough, with passion for rational proof while I was content with a general sketch of morality that corresponded with reality since I thought of it as impossible and unwise to be precise on such topics as ethics.

In the midst of our quagmire, a flash of light came to my mind that reminded me of the very reason of our discussion: what are we arguing for in the end? The purpose of ethics, I suggested, must be to help individuals become better persons and members of the society, which you have agreed with. Then, behold, upon this agreement, we have been able to abandon all the technical differences and embrace the two different moral philosophies at the same time without falling into the trap of self-contradiction. Ethics (or study of morality), we agreed, was a special subject different from any other topics in philosophy, which should serve humanity for its coexistence and happiness, not humanity striving for the "truth" as in other subjects. What do you think of my summarization?

Kant

I think you have done brilliantly. Although I still think there should be some

merit in our effort to find the better ethical theories (or truth in moral matters), I agree there is a danger of digression from the primary purpose of ethics, ending up with endless verbal fights over technical differences without the actual change in our behaviors and character which we hoped for.

Aristotle I am glad that you have realized the danger and have finally come to the real problem which faces us every day: the problem of how to live. Although many will still continue to fight over words and ideas as to what is “the best” ethics, let’s hope that the discussion will always end with the agreement on the purpose of ethics and that we should strive to bring about actual *change* in the behaviors of people with the end of creating a society where all people will be able to live harmoniously and with respect and appreciation for one another.

CHAPTER VIII

EPILOGUE

It is not surprising if readers would find themselves baffled at the sudden turn of the discussion from the conventional philosophical arguments on morality to the existential ethics which results in the unexpected, if not abrupt, resolution of the problem at the end. Let me explain the choice of my approach to the problem and the choice of a resolution.

The debate between virtue ethicists and duty ethicists has had a long and fierce history in western philosophy since the appearance of Kant's ethics in the 18th century. Covering all the important points and problems for each theory would be in itself a tremendous volume, too ambitious in account of my capability and circumstance. Thus, instead of consulting numerous secondary sources on each ethics, I have decided to focus on the main argument in each theory that appears in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Kant's *Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals* and proceed their debate in my own imagination, touching their most obvious and fundamental points without going too much in depth. Because of this, some may find the debate rather superficial and un-informative, especially if they are already informed about each ethical theory. In that sense, the current work is intended mainly for the general reader, not the scholars in ethics.

However, my intention is not merely to inform readers of two of the most influential ethical theories in history or contribute to the scholarly understanding of each but to remind them of what we should focus on when talking about ethics. We too often forget and miss what the ethics really is about and treat it as another philosophical topic. In the end, what is

ethics all about? If we simply agree or disagree on the matter of ethics, will that be *enough*? In the last couple of chapters, I tried to propose a “new” definition and role for the ethical studies: they should be about how to better human beings as individuals and members of society, instead of the usual, and often too fruitless, discussion of the good and evil.

In this light, we should focus less on the technical differences between the ethical theories and more on how ethics shall be applied in our lives. The role of moral philosophers, if they are to be worthy of the name “philosopher”, should be that of helping and encouraging people to become better individuals and citizens in every way possible. Socrates gives us a clear example of such a moral philosopher. Socrates would not simply argue over whether Aristotle’s virtue ethics was more “true” than Kant’s virtue ethics. Each simply begins with a drastically different starting point and offers significantly different route. Yet they have the same destination in mind for mankind: being morally good persons (or being humans as they should be). The efficiency of each theory (whether it will actually work for people) does not depend on the truth of its arguments as much as on the effort and desire of each individual to become good. As long as people do follow either ethics, they will become good – good in the practical sense that most of us can agree with. Ethics should be comprehensive, not exclusive, for people to have various choices to make from, helping them achieve their goal – becoming good.

Throughout the work, I have presented the moral account of Aristotle and Kant and the possible problems in each, and towards the end I have resolved the conflicts between the two by going back to the main purpose of ethics and by embracing the two as equally valid and capable theories of achieving the goal each sets itself to pursue. I hope that the future

discussions on morality will be about how different ethical theories shall be presented in the way many people can understand and accept as ethical guides in their pursuit of the good.

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