



Aristotle On Moral Education: Some Implications

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Aristotle wrote that 'there is a faculty called cleverness; and this is such as to be able to do the things that tend towards the mark we have set before ourselves, and to hit it. Now if the mark be noble, the cleverness is laudable, but if the mark be bad, the cleverness is mere smartness...?' (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144a 23) *Mere smartness*: Christopher Hitchens may have demolished Mother Teresa, on paper. No doubt in argument Nietzsche could have chewed up Florence Nightingale for breakfast and spat her out, as Lytton Strachey attempted in *Eminent Victorians*, while mentioning Strachey leads me to ask whether I would rather be with him or General 'Chinese' Gordon, another of his targets, were I in a tight spot calling for courage, humane understanding and leadership. I know in each case whom I would trust were it to come to knowing the right thing to do, and actually doing it; and it isn't the cleverer, more articulate arguer.

If argumentative reasoning on its own is insufficient to guide morality, what else is needed? Aristotle's answer is in terms of character, specifically in terms of the development of the four cardinal virtues, moderation or temperance, courage or fortitude, practical wisdom or prudence, and justice. And these need careful nurturing from the beginning. One hardly needs to be a child psychologist or an early years specialist to know that none of these virtues comes naturally or easily; being a parent or even just a moderately dispassionate observer of young children should suffice. Such was St Augustine: 'It is the physical weakness of a baby that makes it seem innocent, not the quality of its inner life. I myself have seen a baby jealous; it was too young to speak, but it was livid with anger as it watched another baby at the breast.' (*Confessions*, I.vi.8) Some virtuous motivation is required to counteract our other dispositions, and, while our better dispositions are not contrary to nature, they are not purely instinctive. They will need training so as to become habitual, for each virtue in its own way will involve restraint of other tendencies or vices to which we are all continually tempted: intemperance or unrestrained passion and excess; cowardice or taking the easy way out; the folly to which even the old are susceptible; self centredness and putting oneself first, rather than giving to others what they deserve or are owed. In different guises, each of these virtues appears in all the great moral traditions of the world, whether they be Graeco-Roman (in all their many streams), Hebraic, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, Islamic or indeed any other of which I am aware, including philosophical traditions, such as those stemming from the writings of Hume, Kant, and the utilitarians.

This pretty universal recognition of these and other basic virtues (and indeed of the correlative vices) – what C.S. Lewis referred to as the Tao – makes it look as if they are somewhat more fundamental to the life of humanity than the specific intellectual and theological contexts in which they are variously embedded and from which they *may seem* to derive support. Actually the process of support might go the other way round. The theological, philosophical and other machineries of justification may in fact be built on a prior recognition of their importance and validity, and developed as what come to be seen as implications of our starting intuitions regarding virtue, value and character. It is indeed arguable that Aristotle's own method starts from a prior recognition of the good and the desirable, and only then moves on to systematising, finessing and rationalising this recognition.

From a purely phenomenological point of view, Thomas Nagel may well be right in seeing value as entering the world with the emergence of life, and then, as human beings develop understanding, being recognised as goods in themselves, independently of desires, individual or collective, and of any instinct we have to survive and reproduce. In this sense, virtues would become self-sustaining and objective, in contrast to the view elaborated by Richard Rorty, according to which they are only ever epiphenomena of morally neutral desires: 'There is nothing already in existence to which our moral ideals should try to correspond... The answer to the question 'are some human desires bad?' is 'no'. But some desires do get in the way of our project of maximizing the overall satisfaction of desire... There is no such thing as an intrinsically evil desire'. (1) Am I alone in finding Rorty's view of desire and the role of ethical reflection (reduced to the working out of maximal desire-satisfaction – a view he shared with Richard Hare) surprising, if not profoundly wrong? The wonder, though, is that such a view would pass with very little sense of surprise or comment among many contemporary moral philosophers.

But beyond noting the phenomenological point about the objective way virtues present themselves to us and their ubiquity, I will nothing more here about their provenance or ontological status. What I want to emphasise, following Aristotle, is the way they require a process of formation in young children (and adults), so as to embed these habits, rather than negative ones to which we, as naturally self-centered as well as other centered, are also prone. But if I am arguing that these basic virtues are not purely intellectual and do not *depend* on some pre-moral intellectual support, I am not saying that reasoning is not involved in their deployment and development. Reasoning will be needed to reveal just how they might be sensibly and effectively applied in practical judgements, which is actually just the way Florence Nightingale operated. Far from being the moralistic dullard one might have imagined from reading Strachey, in 1858 she was elected the first female member of the Royal Statistical Society, not only having developed for herself a version of the pie-chart, but also having clearly demonstrated the link between hospital hygiene and survival, something ill-understood at the time, and even now, it seems.

Reasoning will also be involved in making practical judgements and, once we have them, in refining and developing the moral standards each of us inherits in one way or another. Once we have our basic moral orientation, we can, by reasoning, come to see that this should be extended or developed in directions we did not initially envisage. It is thus quite possible that the comparatively recent and growing realisation that racism is immoral and that even supposedly harmless jokes and insults are not actually so harmless had something to do with reasoning about what Peter Singer has called the expanding circle, whereby our moral attitudes are extended to wider groups whom we come to see are not relevantly different from those to whom we originally believed we owed moral concern. It is arguable, though, that even here changes in societal attitudes may often owe as much to non-rational factors, such as increases of empathy brought about by changes in the mood of a society, which are then given intellectual backbone by reasoning of the sort we find in Singer. (But maybe the medal produced by Josiah Wedgwood, with an enchained Negro slave, surrounded by the words 'Am I not a Man and a Brother?' contains all the philosophy needed. It remains to the eternal shame of educated Greeks like Aristotle that they were incapable of developing their insight and sympathy that far. I do not, though, think that this invalidates Aristotle's reflection on the nature of virtue and character, as opposed to implying that he himself had not developed either sufficiently.)

Whatever we might say about the causes of changes in social attitudes, however, from an Aristotelian perspective it remains the case that underlying and supporting any reasoning and refining of our moral practices, the ultimate ends to and for which each of us acts depend on whether or not our basic dispositions of character and desire are initially directed towards good things or base things. So, in view of the personal discipline and parental and social support needed in acquiring and sustaining these virtues, to quote Aristotle again, 'it makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all* the difference.' (*N Eth*, 1103a 33)

Nor is it simply a matter of the *habits* we form in our youth. Or rather, one of the habits we should form is that of attending to the judgements of those more experienced than ourselves: 'we ought to attend to the undemonstrated sayings and opinions of experienced and older people or people of practical wisdom not less than to demonstrations because experience has given them an eye to see aright.' (*N.Eth* 1143a30). Earlier Aristotle had written of Pericles and other men who are good at managing states and households as being those who could *see* what is good for themselves and for others, but it is a type of seeing which can be obscured by pleasures and pains coming between us and the ends at which we aim. (*N.Eth* 1140b6ff)

Aristotle goes on to develop the implications of his view in Book X, Ch 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. To live temperately and hardily is not pleasant to most people, especially when they are young. But without a character infused with habits of virtue and directed towards what he is unafraid to call 'nobility and goodness', base people will abstain from base acts only through fear of punishment. It is perhaps worth underlining here that by 'habit' in this context, Aristotle and his followers are not talking about mere behavioural reaction. The habits are a matter of attending to situations and seeing and reacting to them in a particular way, and so involve thought and perception and feeling right from the start; they are not dispositions formed through reasoning dispassionate ratiocination.

Aristotle goes on to say that those with contrary habits or dispositions, those 'living by passion... pursue their own pleasures and the means to them, and avoid the opposite pains, and have not even a conception of what is noble and truly pleasant, since they have never tasted it. What argument would remould such people? It is hard, if not impossible, to remove by argument traits that have long since been incorporated in the character'. (*N Eth* 1179b25ff) Aristotle is wrong if he is taken to mean that base people cannot be turned away from their baseness, and reasoning can certainly play a role in such a turning away, but where he is right is in insisting that it can never be a matter of reason on its own, and in the normal case, what we are inclined to argue for morally will depend very largely on the dispositions and feelings we have already acquired.

For it is not as if the difficult, base people are necessarily incapable of understanding arguments. Psychopaths and other people steeped in wickedness are often good at arguing, only too able to counter the points made to them, point by point. This may even be partly precisely because of their psychopathy: they understand the moves, but lack the virtue-based empathy which motivates right thinking. We hardly need Nietzsche to show us that there is nothing formally irrational or illogical in arguing in favour of immoralism. Plato's Thrasymachus had shown us that long ago, in cleverly and cynically defending the position that justice is what serves the interests of the stronger. Do Socrates or any of his philosophical successors ever satisfactorily answer Thrasymachus, without presupposing that there are occasions where the other has an absolute claim on me, which of

course is just what is being questioned? But as G.K.Chesterton pointed out, maybe we should not be too impressed by this: 'Maniacs are commonly good reasoners... The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason.' The point is that any position needs roots and first principles, and that what Chesterton calls 'detached intellectualism' has lost its roots in imagination and experience. (2)

For the situation in logic and reasoning is that any chain of reasoning sooner or later reaches a foundation, and in the moral-ethical case, often sooner rather than later. And whatever turns out to be the rock-bottom can always itself be dialectically challenged. Doing that will hurt him, infringe his basic rights, even kill him; thankfully, good enough for most of us, most of the time – because of the way we have been brought up and have come to live; but, if I am a moral sceptic or some form of political or religious fanatic (fanatic, most of us will say, but perhaps that in itself prejudices the issue), why should any of that worry me, the sceptic or the fanatic, especially if he is standing in my way or in the way of my cause?

At this point we may seem to have reached an impasse. Only someone with the right attitudes and dispositions can reason well about morality. People without the right dispositions will not reason well. But because they do not have the right dispositions, the arguments and considerations adduced by the moral reasoner will fail to sway them. And this is not a defect of reasoning in the abstract sense, but a defect of attitude. The way we have set this dilemma up has been in terms of moral upbringing and training in habits of virtue. But it is not just a question of children and upbringing. It is a *aporia* at the heart of morality itself.

For the situation with children is no more than a reflection of exactly the same situation which will confront adults attempting to argue about morality.

In 1367 Petrarch, in the course of his attempt to reconcile pagan and Christian thought, said this: 'the object of the will, as it pleases the wise, is to be good; that of the intellect is truth. It is better to will the good than to know what is true. The first is never without merit, the latter can often be polluted with crime and then admits no excuse, therefore those are far wrong who pursue their time in learning to know virtue instead of acquiring it'. (On his own ignorance and that of many others, Hillsdale College Course Outlines, p 537, lines 22ff) Who are the wise, in Petrarch's book? That this remark is in the course of a polemic against both Aristotle (or at least against fourteenth century Aristotelians) and Cicero need not force us to conclude that both Cicero and Aristotle would not have agreed with Petrarch on the point at issue, as would Socrates and Plato - for what is the decade and a half long preparation for philosophy in *The Republic*, but an education insensibility and in habits of virtue *before* entering into reasoning about truth and virtue?. In the nineteenth century, Ruskin put the point, 'reason can but determine what is true. It is the God-given passion of humanity which alone can recognize what God has made good'. (3)

And, in the last century, writing about the intellectuals of his own time, George Orwell had it, (*Inside the Whale*, The Penguin Essays of George Orwell, p127 : 'Patriotism, religion, the Empire, the family, the sanctity of marriage, the Old School Tie, birth, breeding, honour, discipline – anyone of ordinary education could turn the whole lot of them inside out in three minutes.' He added, 'But what do you achieve, after all, by getting rid of such primal things as patriotism and religion?'. Orwell's own answer was, for many intellectuals in the 1930s, the communist party; but if we think that we know better than that, please don't say, critical reason, for that would simply open up once more the age

old struggle between Socrates and Thrasymachus and all those who have, in one way or another, followed in their footsteps in one way or another.

On the initial acquisition of habits of virtue, Aristotle has this to say: 'Just as the body comes into existence earlier than the soul, so also the unreasoning is prior to that which possesses reason... while passion and will as well as desire are to be found in children even right from birth, reasoning and intelligence come into their possession as they grow older. Therefore the care of the body must begin before the care of the soul, then the training of the appetitive element.' (*Politics*, 1334b27-8) For the training of the body and the appetitive element, he recommends the traditional Greek programme of gymnastic and music, and in particular music which is a stimulus to virtue and which accustoms them enjoying themselves in the right way. However, leaving aside the particular details (or prejudices) involved in what an Aristotelian might say about music and gymnastic, what is clear is that from an Aristotelian point of view character must be formed before the child can reason, both because in a child desire, passion and will precede reason and intelligence, but also because character of the right sort is necessary for reasoning of the right sort about what we should do.

Both pagan and Christian thinkers would see character development as essential not just to right judgement and good reasoning about human life in general and morality in particular, but also as liberating, as part indeed of any education which could properly be called liberal in the sense of freeing us from servitude. The servitude in question is servitude to passion and desire and vice of all sorts, including sloth, the countervailing mastery being above all self-mastery. It is easy to see the liberating qualities of each of the cardinal virtues, temperance as freedom from excesses of all sorts and from what drives us to excess, courage as freedom to stick to our goals without being deflected by force inside or out, prudence as freedom from haste and bad judgement, and justice as freedom to enjoy the fruits of genuine community. It is far less easy, of course, to have and exercise these virtues in the face of opposition, temptation and seduction, and, particularly when confronted with evil, all too easy to reason ourselves into acceptance of seduction of one sort and another.

Nor is it the case that possession of a virtuous character guarantees outcomes which will suit us. The gods are capricious, rain and other blessings of nature fall on the unjust as much as on the just (or sometimes, it seems, more so). It is not coincidental that it was the people for whom tragedy was the highest art were also those who articulated most clearly the nature of the cardinal virtues. As demonstrated by 'English Gordon, stepping down sedately into the spears', it is the self-mastery acquired in the possession of those virtues rather than our reasoning ability that might enable us to bear whatever the fates are preparing for us.

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Footnotes

1. The Rorty quote is from his *An Ethics for To-day: Finding Common Ground Between Philosophy and Religion*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2010, p 15. Nagel's views on the status of morality are most recently expressed in his *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist and Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*, Oxford University Press, 2012. R.M.Hare's on moral reasoning can be found in his *Moral Thinking*, Oxford University press, 1981.

2. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, London, John Lane, the Bodley Head, Ltd, 1908, pp 9 and 14.

3. Ruskin again: 'We usually fall into much error by considering the intellectual powers as having dignity in themselves, and separable from the heart; whereas the truth is, that the intellect becomes noble or ignoble according to the food we give it... It is not the reasoning power which, of itself, is noble, but the reasoning power occupied with its proper objects. Half of the mistakes of metaphysicians have arisen from their not observing this; namely, that the intellect, going through the same processes, is yet mean or noble according to the matter it deals with, and wastes itself away in mere rotatory motion, if it be set to grind straws and dust. If we reason only respecting words, or lines, or any trifling and finite things, the reason becomes a contemptible faculty; but reason employed on holy and infinite things, becomes itself holy and infinite.' John Ruskin, *Stones of Venice*, Vol III, Ch IV, section VI. 'Mere rotatory motion': a lot of that in academic philosophy.