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Aristotle (versus Kant) on Autonomy and Moral Maturity

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On the one hand, we are persons, thus free morally, and we are capable of becoming morally mature. On the other hand, we are social animals. Often these sides of human life seem at odds. I will compare Kant's modern view with Aristotle's classical view of freedom and moral maturity to illustrate that how we philosophically describe our freedom makes a difference for how we understand our goal of moral maturity.

Kant emphasizes autonomy as the essence of morality, and this autonomy or freedom contains both a negative *from* aspect and a positive *to* aspect. The individual's moral life is free *from* two things especially: desires and other people. He emphasizes freedom from the passions because the passions, as entwined with the body, are one way in which we are determined by the laws of physics. This aspect of freedom is especially emphasized in the *Groundwork* and in the second *Critique*. According to his epistemological metaphysics, we have no direct access, as knowing beings, to the noumenal, to the real in itself. It is in the moral life alone, through our willing of the moral law, which we break through into the noumenal. The will, in willing the rule of reason, is free from the phenomenal realm and its laws, but when we allow our passions to determine what we do, we give ourselves over to the phenomenal and to physics and are thus not free. In "What is Enlightenment?" freedom from others is Kant's focus. To be morally mature is to be autonomous from other persons. This, also, is grounded in Kant's conception of the moral law. Each person, having reason, has equal and easy access to the moral law, the categorical imperative. The equality of access here is important. The moral law is built into reason, and the willing of the moral law is in fact nothing other than the willing of reason. Because all persons have reason, we all have the moral law given to us directly, rather than through others. The ease of access is important here, too. Kant claims to merely formalize and defend philosophically, what we all know intuitively: the golden rule, consistency of action, treating persons as persons. Making some individuals more authoritative morally offends against both the ease and the equality of access to the moral law. Being determined by desire subjects the will to the laws of physics; by looking to others as moral authorities, we abdicate our sovereign throne as persons with reason and as containing the moral law within us. In both cases, freedom *to* exercise our essential dignity as persons requires freedom *from* desires and others lest we displace our own inner moral authority, estranging ourselves from the moral law and from our own authenticity as persons with reason. Of course, in being truly free, we are also bound. Instead of advocating lawlessness as freedom, Kant maintains that freedom is binding oneself to duty. Thus, moral maturity is giving oneself the law that defines one's essence as a person and gives one dignity.

Kant's ethics focuses on autonomy or moral maturity as rationality and freedom from

heteronomy. Aristotle's ethics does not focus on these concepts, but rather on the inborn human *telos*, happiness, the virtues and their exercise, prudence, friendship, and contemplation – anything that goes into a human life turned out well, to use Robert Spaemann's rendering of *eudaimonia* (19). I would like to force Aristotle to speak in our modern idiom. What does he have to say about us in terms of autonomy and moral maturity?

If we focus on the end of *De Anima* III.11-12 (434a and 434b), we see that freedom first arises for Aristotle in the non-rational voluntary movement of animals. Having sensation, animals also experience pleasures and pains. The lowest level animals have touch and an indefinite imagination, but lack the distant senses of sight, hearing, and smell and lack the capacity for forward movement. Even these "imperfect animals," like jellyfish, perform the voluntary local motion of taking in desired things and rejecting undesired things. So-called "perfect" animals, having some distant senses, also perform forward movements, exercising a mobility to pull toward or push away from objects that cause pleasure or pain. This is a freedom *to* move, but it is not a raw freedom – it is bound to a particular sensed thing as it shows up as good in pleasure and desire. At the next level, most animals also have a definite imagination, a quasi-sensory discernment of objects not immediately given to the five senses. This is an additional level of freedom: freedom *from* the immediate, sensed present and freedom *to* pursue or flee the sensible thing not here but just around the corner. By rejecting as absurd the denial of voluntary movement to children and brutes, Aristotle insists that all this movement in response to sensed and imagined things is willed movement. It is on this ground that true, human freedom is built. The highest level of animal life is the adult human, but it remains part of this continuum of animals. As *De Anima* III.10 explains (433b), we have not just a sensory imagination but also a "calculative" imagination by which we can consider and weigh several goods together, and with a deeper memory and longer sense of the future, we discern many more goods to compare and weigh. With reason we can recognize the best and decide upon certain goods among many. This opens up the possibilities of continence and incontinence, and of deliberation and of choice. In *De Anima* III.9-12, reason appears mostly as multiplying the number of things that we can discern and desire. From *Nicomachean Ethics*, we also know that reason opens up new type of goods: reason itself as both practical and theoretical is good, and it is so not merely as a new tool to get more of the same lower-level goods.

At each level of animal life, voluntary movement involves two key factors, a faculty of discrimination or knowledge (e.g., touch, sight, imagination, and thought) and a faculty of desire (e.g., hunger, fear, and wish). Voluntary movement requires a particular object to be apprehended and to be desired, so voluntary movement is always bound to how things appear to us. Notice how Aristotle distinguishes between touch and taste, on the one hand, and sight, smell, and hearing, on the other; then between sensation and imagination; then between a sensory and a calculative imagination; and then between imagination and thought. These are all faculties of discrimination, but at each level the animal increases its range, apprehending objects further away in space or time. Aristotle hierarchically orders the levels of animal life according to the degree of freedom from the immediately discerned and desired sensory objects. At each level, the expanded range of discrimination out of the sensed present opens up a new range of freedom, and that means a new set of desirable objects shows up. But

movement is still always bound to an object apprehended and desired. For Kant, we must in being morally mature not allow our will to be determined by particular desired goods. For Kant, we must, rather, declare independence from the appearances and always will the good will itself. In contrast, for Aristotle, our sensory apprehension of and desire for goods do not undermine freedom or voluntariness but form its ground.

For Aristotle, reason both enhances and catapults us beyond this apprehension and desire for material goods. Thought, wish, and choice are part of the hierarchy – the continuum, in animal life of the discernment of objects, the desire for goods, and self-movement – but reason also transforms all of this upon which it is built. In the adult human, thought often opposes desire for material goods sensed or imagined, giving rise to continence and incontinence. Most of the practical virtues deal with mundane material or interpersonal goods, many of the same type that animals can discern and desire, such as food, safety, victory, power, and sex. But we have the ability to deal with these animal goods in a human way, by infusing our desires and actions with reason. In doing so, we can get not only more of these goods or get them more securely, but we also get to accomplish noble or beautiful actions with them. One need only recall one's last activity involving such animal goods as sex, food, or power to realize the extent to which reason humanizes these goods, transforming them and making our actions with them more beautiful or more ugly than any animal movement could be. Like his account of voluntary movement, Aristotle's ethics allows us to understand both the continuity of human life with brute life and the radical changes that reason brings to the animal aspects of our lives. Because Aristotle does not share Kant's conception of the forces of matter as completely and perfectly deterministic, freedom for him does not require autonomy defined against the desires the way it does for Kant. Freedom for Aristotle arises within nature, not against it, and in action we are always aiming for a particular good as it appears to us through the imagination. The morally mature man is not free from the apparent good, but he is the one who uses reason to ensure that the good appears to him truly.

What about autonomy from others? Authority is the function of those capable of directing others to the true or the good. The virtuous person successfully trains his desires to harmonize with the good. This training must start in childhood. The need for others' authority, especially in childhood, follows from the non-rational foundations of voluntary movement. Virtue does not consist in the mere habituation of one's desires, but it does require it. And this starts in childhood by means of authorities praising or blaming our non-chosen but voluntary movements, so that we begin to understand responsibility and so that our pleasures and pains are connected with their proper objects.

That chosen virtuous actions by adult humans emerge out of the pre-chosen voluntary movement of children shows that others' authority has a positive, even crucial, role in ethics, at least in childhood. What about adulthood? For Aristotle (as for Kant), the virtuous person is autonomous from others' direction and is a law unto himself (*Politics* 1284a14). But as Aristotle claims in the *Rhetoric*, the moral law is not expressible in any finite formula. Our best access to this moral law is the matured faculties of the virtuous person. The virtuous person is the measure, and like the measuring stick from Lesbos, he bends with the oddly shaped situations to measure them correctly when the letter of the law fails because of its generality and inflexibility. Although raised by others and by the law, the virtuous person has

not merely adopted others' views or assimilated well to his culture. With their help, he has acquired for himself a sensitively tuned faculty to discriminate the good and bad in his own and in others' actions. He can even recognize the inadequacies of the law that have cultivated this sensitivity in him. Though Kant sees as necessary, for a historically limited time, a tough but enlightened authority, like Frederick II of Prussia, who can set the ground for a people to progressively enlighten themselves, Aristotle does not think the multitude of people can reach moral maturity. For Aristotle, virtuous people really are permanently invaluable as moral authorities for the multitude, which is stuck in the middle in continence or incontinence.

Aristotle denies both the equality and the ease of access to moral correctness, the two features of Kant's categorical imperative that allow Kant to denigrate, as a form of immoral heteronomy, the exercise and honoring of moral authority. Many people do not become fully virtuous, and for them the law and others' authority remains important throughout life. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle quotes Hesiod: "Altogether best is he who has insight into all things, / But good in his turn is he who trusts one who speaks well. / But whoever neither himself discerns, nor, harkening to another, / Lays to heart what he says, that one for his part is a useless man" (1095b). Although autonomous insight is best, we who lack insight into all things are foolish if ungrateful for authorities with better understanding than ourselves. Aristotle also denies the ease of knowledge of right and wrong. In a rejection of anything like the categorical imperative, Aristotle denies that any formula or single principle is an infallible guide to moral action. All actions deal with particulars, and general principles are good but imperfect guides. The morally serious and virtuous person may not need moral authorities, but the difficulty of knowing the best course of action may make other virtuous people epistemically useful even to the morally mature man. Aristotle tells us that it is easier to perceive, and thus enjoy contemplatively, the good actions of others. Moreover, in good friendship decent people make each other better "by putting their friendship to work and by straightening one another out, for they have their rough edges knocked off by the things they like in one another" (1172a). It might also be easier to perceive the *imperfection* of actions done by others. Other people's opinions and actions would then take on a positive role in Aristotle's ethics, even for the virtuous person. The happy life of the person who puts virtue to work throughout life is "self-sufficient" (1097b), but this self-sufficiency requires the virtue and happiness of friends, as well.

Finally, Aristotle does come closer to Kant when he denies that reason is merely another natural thing. For Kant, the radical independence of reason from nature makes freedom and a good will the ultimate goods for us: it is with reason's freedom that I attain the real me, affirming the authentic dignity of my personhood, and here I break away from the appearances and get through to the really real. We need to understand reason and freedom as radically different from nature in order to be persons, and to be free from the determinism of nature, according to Kant.

Likewise, for Aristotle, I am most truly my intellect, and true self-love means acting reasonably, serving and exercising this highest part of me most of all. And likewise for Aristotle, reason is not just another part of nature. It is ultimately god-like and immaterial. It is simultaneously part of us and beyond us, and with it we can really, though imperfectly, be united with the most real beings in and behind the cosmos. Nevertheless, Aristotle draws a

quite un-Kantian conclusion from the non-naturalness of reason and the identity of the core of the person with the intellect. After all, Aristotle does not have a problem explaining free movement *within* the physical world, as Kant does. Rather, it is in the *theoretical* operation of the intellect that the moral life is culminated and surpassed, in our knowing and not in our doing. Moral maturity and autonomy of the person, for Aristotle, is found most of all not in willing but in knowing, in this superhuman ability in which we only share but in which we should strive to share as much as possible.

For both Kant and Aristotle the person is most of all his reason, and moral maturity requires a certain autonomy from desires and from others' opinions. But for Aristotle our freedom arises out of nature rather than as a completely separate domain. Because of this and because knowledge of the moral law is not given easily or equally, to act morally we need a prudence that is based in the full maturation of our animality (i.e., our desires) and a willingness to submit to proper authority when it speaks. A deterministic view of nature mixed with a dedication to the freedom and dignity of persons leads Kant to distance the person from his animal side, and Kant's view of the ease and equality of access to the moral law leads him to denigrate authority and others' roles in our moral activity. But does not moral maturity require maturation of the whole person, including the animal side? And is it not morally mature to recognize when others speak with authority in an area new to us and to recognize that others are an integral part of our own moral life? Kant would doubtless also answer these questions affirmatively, but Aristotle's psychology and ethics allow us to recognize these facts more easily than Kant's do and so better illuminate human freedom and autonomy for us. Aristotle allows us better to understand our complex nature as part of the continuum of animal life, while also showing how reason transforms and allows us to surpass the merely animal. Moral maturity is not just the autonomous rule of reason, but it is really the maturation of the whole person: animal, social, and rational.

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