Virtue: Aristotle or Kant?

I. The Problem

The concept of 'virtue' has a long history in moral philosophy. Its first full exposition was offered by Aristotle, and according to some it has yet to receive a better exposition. Nevertheless, thinking about virtue did not stop with Aristotle, and his ideas are not unanimously accepted. I wish to focus on one central respect in which some moral philosophers have had doubts about Aristotle's account of virtue. I think that to a large extent the conflict is misunderstood, but it is also illustrative of some larger issues in philosophy.

Aristotle describes the virtuous person as one whose passions and deliberation are aligned. The person takes pleasure in, or is not, at any rate, disinclined toward, doing what he thinks is best (NE I, 8 & III, 9). The virtuous person, according to Aristotle, is superior to the continent person, in whom deviant passions are in conflict with deliberation, and in whom deliberation manages to defeat the passions for the control of action.

Yet it is the continent person whom Kant calls virtuous (DV 393, 404) and to whom Kant ascribes moral worth (G 398). Moral worth is exhibited in the victory of deliberation over passions.

This conflict, most famously illustrated by the differences between Aristotle and Kant, raises the question: Which state of character is best described as virtuous?

II. Reassessing the Differences

I think some progress can be made toward answering this question by asking a further question: Why are we interested in the concept of virtue?

It turns out that Aristotle and Kant would give rather different answers to this question. And I think that it is because we are unclear about the answer we would give that the conflict is still with us and within each of us.

Briefly, Aristotle would say that he is interested in the concept of virtue (*ethike arete*: excellence of character) because he wants to articulate what kind of character it is best for a person to have: What kind of character best suits a person to live a fully human life (fulfill his *ergon*) and, thus, live a life of happiness (*eudaimonia*) as much as possible. To put the concept in a somewhat more modern fashion, Aristotle is concerned with the
kind of character it would be most desirable or fulfilling to have, or the one that is most conducive to personal well-being.[1]

Once we understand the question Aristotle is trying to answer, it is clear that Kant, in his characterization of virtue and moral worth, is not trying to answer that same question. Kant, briefly, is trying to answer a question more like: What kind of character is most deserving of moral esteem. While we may be happy for those who live well and easily, Kantians are more likely to esteem those for whom a good life is not an easy one.

Since Aristotle and Kant are not trying to answer the same questions in giving their respective accounts of virtue, it is not obvious that they are really in conflict with one another, at least in the way that was initially thought. Some insight can be gained by asking (or trying to ask) each of them the other's question.

It is hard to believe that Kant could deny that the most satisfying character for one to have would be one in which psychological conflict, between deliberation and passions, was not experienced. This sort of internal harmony, praised by Plato as well as Aristotle, would obviously be one's choice if one could choose between virtue and continence.[2] Indeed, near the end of the *Doctrine of Virtue* (DV 484), Kant acknowledges the importance of cheerfulness in the pursuit of duty (and see also *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, p. 19n.).[3] And Kant thinks of holy beings as ones who have no hindering impulses (DV 404).

Though Kant would, thus, agree with Aristotle on this point, there remains a residual, though different, difference between them: Kant is much more pessimistic than Aristotle is about the possibility of humans living a life without aberrant inclinations.

Kant, being a good Protestant, thinks that human nature makes this impossible (DV 382 & CPrR 133), and leaves us with continence as the most that we can hope for. (Virtue, as Kant understands it, does not even apply to holy beings.)

If Aristotle, on the other hand, could be brought to agree with Kant that virtue (as Aristotle understands it) was impossible for human beings, he would no doubt endorse continence as the next best character. Indeed, Aristotle himself recognizes that there are limits to how high in the scale of character-excellence humans can hope to rise, as indicated by his allusive discussion of superhuman virtue (NE VII, 1).

So, in answer to Aristotle's question, Aristotle and Kant do not differ in their rankings of the characters, so far as preferability goes, but only in their estimate of how high in the ranks a human can reasonably hope to climb. Each calls (what he takes to be) the highest humanly reachable rank 'virtue'.

This diagnosis of the difference (and similarity) between Aristotle and Kant suggests that this may be another good example for Nozick's distinction between a "best instantiated realization" mode and an "ideal limit" mode of structuring concepts (*Philosophical Explanations* pp. 51-56). What would Kant say about a possible world in which humans did sometimes (or often enough) achieve harmony of inclinations with duty? Would continence no longer count as virtue (though perhaps it would still retain moral worth). If it would not, Kant is implicitly employing a "best instantiated realization" conception of virtue. But more likely Kant would hold that continence would count as virtue regardless of the competition. On the other hand, when Kant contemplates (G 407-408) the possibility that no one has ever actually acted from duty, he still holds to the notion of virtue (in his sense) as an ideal, even if never realized. At this end of the scale (i.e., contemplating possible worlds that he takes to be worse than our own) he is employing an "ideal limit" conception of virtue.[4] Aristotle, I think, has a "best instantiated realization" conception of virtue at both ends of the scale. For Aristotle, virtue means excellent fulfillment of a thing's nature. In a Kantian world in which humans were capable of no better than continence, continence would be an excellent fulfillment of their nature.[5] In a world in which humans were generally capable of superhuman virtue, mere virtue would not be an excellent fulfillment of their nature and so not be virtue (*arete*) at all. This is one sense in which Aristotle's views are relativistic, whereas Kant's are absolutistic.

Let us now ask Aristotle Kant's question: Which state is most worthy of esteem? Unfortunately, it is not clear that Aristotle has the idea of esteem in a moral sense. Anscombe long ago ("Modern Moral Philosophy," in 1958) warned against trying to read

our moral sense of concepts back into Aristotle, and this would seem to be a perfect example.

The difference between Kant and Aristotle here can be traced to a difference over the nature of the will. For Kant, the will seems to be something that can be insulated completely from natural influences and inclinations. It is the only thing for which a person can be said to be completely responsible. And this isolated point of pure responsibility is the only proper subject of moral evaluation and hence esteem. Aristotle, on the other hand, has no notion of a point (or realm) of pure responsibility (if, indeed, such a notion makes sense). He is happy to discuss responsibility, which he does extensively, but not in the purified sense that concerns Kant. He praises continence (as well as virtue: NE VII, 1), but he cannot follow Kant in thinking (G 398) there is something more, beyond praise, that is distinctively deserved by virtue.

Perhaps, however, we can pursue the issue in a way that abstracts from the difference over the will: Kant is more impressed by the continent person than he is by the person who is virtuous in Aristotle's sense, whereas Aristotle is not.[6] Various things might account for this apparent difference:

Insofar as Kant expresses esteem for the continent person, he seems clearly to be assuming that the person is not responsible for the errant inclinations. One's inclinations act as external obstacles to duty just as much as enemy gunfire or rising floodwaters do. The continent person is heroic. According to Aristotle (NE III, 5), on the other hand, one is responsible, in the long run, for having errant passions, even though one with them cannot immediately be rid of them. The continent person is no more heroic than one who negligently allows the house to catch on fire and then scrambles through the flames to save the child.

Or it could be that when Kant imagines the person whose choice aligns with inclination he is imagining that the choice was determined by inclination. Since inclination is not a reliable guide to proper behavior, a character guided by inclination is dangerous: One might worry that inclinations are unsteady, whereas allegiance to duty is firm; or one might worry that inclination is not sufficiently responsive to the nuances of morally relevant features of a situation, whereas allegiance to duty is.

But insofar as Aristotle prefers the virtuous person to the continent person, it is important to recall his distinction between natural virtue and virtue in the strict sense (NE VI, 13). The person of mere natural virtue has proper passions without practical wisdom, and the person's actions are guided by, or due to, passions. Such a person might well be unreliable, and to that extent the continent person might be preferable to the person of natural virtue. But the proper comparison is with a person of virtue in the strict sense. Such a person is guided by practical wisdom and not by passion, though passion concurs with, or does not dissent from, action.[7] In the famous passage in Section I of the *Groundwork* (G 398), Kant does seem to be distinguishing the person of moral worth (whom Aristotle would call continent) from the person of natural rather than strict virtue.

Presumably it is counterfactually true of the person of strict virtue that if the person's passions did get out of line, reason (though no longer practical wisdom, since that requires proper passions) would still control the action. So the person would lapse into continence, rather than incontinence. Aristotle is willing to praise the person of continence, but only in relation to incontinence. He wishes to encourage the victory of reason over passion. Yet, he has no sense of praise in which the continent person is more deserving of it than the strictly virtuous person.

It might be thought, however, that what Kant esteems is not the capacity to defeat passion, which is indeed shared by the continent and the strictly virtuous person, but the actual defeat of passion--which is true only of the continent person.[8] But if esteem, for Kant, is limited to what is purely under the control of the agent and influenced by no element of external luck, then he surely could not require the actual victory of reason over the passions, for whether the agent happens to have errant passions that need defeating might itself be a matter of luck (bad luck, according to Aristotle). Given Kant's pessimistic view of the human condition, such opportunities might be thought inevitably to present themselves. (Even Aristotle, with his optimistic view, would admit that opportunities inevitably present themselves--during the acquisition of virtue, though not during the exercise of virtue.) But how frequent and how challenging the opportunities are is still a matter of luck. Furthermore, the fact that actual victory, as opposed to the capacity for victory, over the passions is something external to the notion of the good will itself convinces me that it cannot be the exercise of the capacity that Kant esteems--it must be the capacity itself.

Perhaps, finally, Kant is more impressed by the continent person than by the virtuous person because he is bothered by the epistemological difficulty of distinguishing natural virtue from strict virtue. We can only be sure reason, and not inclination, rules in a person when inclination fails to control action--and this is only clear in the continent person.

Aristotle is not bothered by this sort of epistemological worry. One way he might distinguish natural from strict virtue is by the fact that the person of strict virtue will have all the virtues. This follows from his unity of the (possession of the) virtues thesis (NE

VI, 13). There would be other signs, too, of the possession of practical wisdom, such as deliberation, and the ability to give a proper account of one's choices.

Kant, on the other hand, has to acknowledge (indeed, he does this at great length (G 406-408)) that even in an apparent case of continence we cannot be certain that it was reason that won out over inclination. We cannot be sure that "some secret impulse of self-love, merely appearing as the idea of duty, was not the actual determining cause of the will" (G 407). So epistemological considerations cannot explain why Kant is impressed by the continent person.

In sum, the differences between Aristotle and Kant are not what they appeared to be:

They agree about the ordering of character-types according to what sort of character one would like to have. But they differ about what character-types humans can hope to have (an issue in philosophical psychology), and they differ about how to structure the concept of 'virtue' (an issue in the philosophy of language). And these differences conspire to explain their different labeling of character-types.

They agree about which character-types deserve praise. But they differ over whether there is a specifically moral sort of praise, and they differ over whether, or the extent to which, people should be held responsible for their passions (both issues in moral psychology).[9] These explain their different attitudes towards continence.

III. Contemporary Options

In trying to decide which character-state deserves to be called "virtue" we may side with either Aristotle or Kant. But a common tactic (proposed, for example, by David Carr and by Robert Roberts) has been to offer a compromise.[10] Some virtues, e.g.,

compassion, generosity, and kindness--called "virtues of attachment" or "substantive and motivational virtues", are properly accounted for by Aristotle. But other virtues, e.g., courage and temperance--called "virtues of self-control" or "virtues of will power", are properly accounted for by Kant.

This bifurcation raises the Socratic question: Why call them all "virtues"? It is conceded that there is no internal psychological state characteristic of virtue, so what is their essence as virtues? (This is rather like the situation we faced with regard to concepts such as 'jade'--which turned out to straddle the minerals jadeite and nephrite--and 'consumption'--which turned out to straddle conditions such as lung cancer, tuberculosis, and pneumonia. It is also rather like the situation we may face with respect to concepts such as 'pain' and 'belief'.)

Supporters of the compromise have various options. One can be a functionalist about virtue--it is any character-state that plays a certain role in life or society. Hume, Pincoffs, and my colleague Julia Driver seem to exemplify this view of the nature of virtue. (We were functionalists concerning jade--we regarded the similar sensible characteristics of jadeite and nephrite which made them interesting to jewelers as more important than their internal differences. Similarly, some philosophers are functionalists about pain, taking it to be defined by its role in sensory processing and behavior.) This option usually ignores the inner aspect of the phenomena. There are no grounds for distinguishing continence from virtue.

On the other hand, one can take the Wittgensteinian view that a concept needs no essence, either internal or functional. Its unity lies in a variety of connections between its exemplars, but in nothing deeper. (This is how Wittgenstein describes the concept of a

game.) This approach is extremely anti-revisionary of the extension of the concept in question, for there is no basis for questioning any common usage of the concept.

We need not accept these compromising tactics, however. In the realm of what have come to be called natural kinds, there has been a strong tendency, since the time of Locke, to identify them with some internal structural essence. Leprosy was originally a generic term for chronic degenerative skin infections. After Hansen's work, in 1873, identifying the bacteria responsible for certain of these infections, the term 'leprosy' narrowed to denote the specific infection produced by that bacteria, also labeled "Hansen's Disease." The revised concept of leprosy excluded other superficially similar infections.[11]

Similarly, to take Aristotle's perspective, the fact that some people are inclined to think that will power (concerning fear or physical desire) is a virtue has little presumptive importance. The fact that people ideally would not need to struggle with these errant passions shows that such struggle is not virtue. Thus, the concept of virtue, like natural kinds, can be revisionary.

Roberts claims that the traits of will power must be considered virtues, since they are a "necessary part of our development as persons", and without them "the moral motives would too often be sabotaged by counter-moral impulses and the relative weakness of the substantive virtues; nor would these latter be gained in a morally important way." This all seems true enough, but why does it show those traits to be virtues, rather than praiseworthy traits that are means to the virtues? And from the Kantian perspective, one might take the so-called virtues of attachment to be serendipitous traits that sometimes crown, but never constitute, virtue.

Perhaps the best response to compromise, however, is to accept the differences between the traits and reject the concept that supposedly ties them together (as we did with ‘consumption', and as the eliminative materialists would have us do with ‘belief'). Insofar as the concept conflates disparate conditions, why not focus on the conditions themselves? Of course the concept might be useful (as 'game' is, and as 'consumption' ultimately was not), but this forces us to examine just what the usefulness of the concept is. In contemporary ordinary moral discourse, discussion of traits such as courage and generosity is not rare, but discussion of them as virtues is quite rare. Discussion of virtues as virtues is not well entrenched in our discourse, in the way that folk psychology, for example, is well-entrenched. The concept of virtue, removed as it now is from its home in Ancient Greek culture, and rare as it is in contemporary discourse, seems to do little more than give the illusion of unity. We try to make it encompass too many disparate concerns. Let us keep the concerns, and examine the character traits, but jettison the thought that there is something more to argue about. Only in this way can we appreciate the real differences between Aristotle and Kant.[12]

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NOTES

1. The element of egoism here must be understood in its Greek context, in which it is decidedly not what we would think of as selfishness.

2. The comparison with Aristotle, on this point, is not precise. When Aristotle praises virtue, it is not directly because it is the subjectively most satisfying character to have, but because it is the objectively most humanly appropriate character to have. Nevertheless, insofar as the choice is between virtue and continence, virtue would clearly be the more subjectively satisfying because of the lack of internal psychological conflict (and because continence has no independent benefits to offer). Thus, I think it is appropriate to claim that both Aristotle and Kant would agree that between virtue and continence, as Aristotle understands them, virtue is the more subjectively preferable. However it remains true that subjective preferability is not Aristotle's criterion for ranking character states. In fact, virtue scores no better than vice does, so far as internal harmony goes. This stands in contrast to Plato's comparison of justice and injustice in *Republic* IX, and Aristotle's own curiously deviant remarks in NE IX, 4.

3. This view of Kant, which emphasizes the positive role that emotions can play in Kant's moral psychology, is elaborated by Robert B. Louden, in "Kant's Virtue Ethics," *Philosophy*, 1986, and also by Nancy Sherman, in unpublished work.

A further, and relatively unexplored, respect in which virtue is a superior character state to continence is its stability. Aristotle would have doubts about the long-term stability of the continent character. It would not be a *hexis* (state). If one had on-going errant passions, this could well undermine reason's strength to overcome the

passions, or even undermine reason's confidence in its opposition to the errant passions, so that reason comes to think of them as proper after all. Or, to the extent that reason is able to overcome errant passions on a regular basis, one may expect those passions to wither. This seems to be the basis of Aristotle's ideas about moral education. In any of these cases, continence is fated to transform into some other character state. It is not an equilibrium position.

The passage from Kant that I cited, from *Religion* p. 19n, suggests that Kant, too, sees continence as an unstable position, at least if the errant inclinations are strong. But, in general, one gets the sense from Kant that he is more willing (than Aristotle) to suppose that duty and inclination can live in tension within the same person.

This difference between Aristotle and Kant probably derives from Aristotle's naturalism and Kant's non-naturalism. For Aristotle, since reason and passion both exist in the same naturalistic realm, long-term tension between them is problematic. But for Kant, since duty is a non-empirical or formal notion, its conflict with (empirical, material) inclination is not so bothersome. For Kant, since duty and inclination exist in different dimensions, their conflict is not in the same way problematic. It is simply characteristic of the human condition. Thus the difference between Aristotle and Kant on this point, at base, lies in their divergent metaphysical conceptions of the nature of reason.

4. So does Plato, at R 473 c-d.

5. Cf. Aristotle's discussion (*Politics* I, 13) of women, slaves, and youth. They all have virtues of their own, though none are capable of the character state that Athenian males

are. This stands directly opposed to Socrates' ideal limit conception of virtue, according to which virtue is the same for all (though none may, in fact, strictly achieve it), and is more in sympathy with Plato's view, in the Republic, that different classes have virtues in somewhat different senses. See the discussion of "civic courage" at R 430 a-c, and related remarks at *Phaedo* 82 b.

6. Though cf. Aristotle's remark at NE 1105a9-10.

7. To be guided by practical wisdom is not exactly to be guided by duty, but it is to be guided by a conception of the proper thing to do, as Aristotle often says, for the sake of the noble (to *kalon*; e.g., NE 1115b12).

8. Cf. Aristotle: "as in the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful and strongest that are crowned but those who compete (for it is some of these that are victorious), so [only] those who act win, and rightly win, the noble and good things in life" (NE I, 8); and also 1178a34-b2.

9. It appears that Anscombe was right in recommending that we must first do some preliminary work in philosophy of psychology before proceeding to ethical notions such as ‘virtue'.

10. E.g., David Carr, "Two Kinds of Virtue," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1984/85; and Robert Roberts, "Will Power and the Virtues," *Philosophical Review*, 1984.

11. See William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, 1976, pp. 154-5. Similar points can be made about the exclusion of fool's gold from the extension of 'gold', the exclusion of porpoises from the extension of 'fish', and the exclusion of sugar from the extension of 'sal' (salt). For discussion of the last case, see Karl Marx, "Notes on Adolph Wagner," in *Texts on Method*, 1975, p. 202.

12. In revising this paper I have benefited from comments by Marcia Baron, Julia Driver, Mark Hebert, Tom Hill, D.S. Hutchinson, Richard Kraut, Andrew Melnyk, Harlan Miller, Nick Smith, Eleonore Stump, Roger Sullivan, and Bill Williams.