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Why Does Aristotle Make so Much Sense?

A Philosophical Analysis of Aristotle, Kant, and Mill's Moral Theories

Submitted to

Professor Alex Rajczi

By

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For

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Introduction: An Intuition about Virtue Ethics

Throughout my experience as a student of philosophy these past four years, the philosophy that has interested me the most has been that which gives us something to take back to daily life or the ‘real world’ with us. As a result, I’ve been strongly drawn to ethics, what I see as the area of philosophy with the most direct application to daily life. My junior year, I took an ethical theory class with Professor Hurley of CMC that explored the three main schools of ethics — virtue ethics, deontology, and consequentialism, discussing their merits, their drawbacks, why one might be drawn to one over the others as a guide to life, etc. I found myself deeply invested in the debate between the three schools that has been a large part of the western philosophical tradition, with a strong affinity for virtue ethics, especially the ideas of Aristotle. Some of the questions that I really found myself grappling with in that class were ideas of moral motivation, such as how do we convince the everyday person to act morally? How do we convince the people that don't act morally to do so? I find myself strongly agreeing with Aristotle’s picture of human functioning that presents virtue and happiness as aligned, giving us an abundance of reason to follow morality. However, I know that there is plenty of support for the other two schools out there in the world (perhaps more so than virtue ethics as a matter of fact!) so the question that I am exploring in this paper is if there is something special about Aristotle’s virtue ethics compared to the philosophies of the seminal philosophers of the other two schools of ethics, John Stuart Mill for utilitarian consequentialism and Immanuel Kant for deontology.

Mill’s utilitarian consequentialist theory focuses on the consequences of our actions as a means of assessing moral worth, looking to maximize the greatest good for the greatest number of people through creating laws that guide us to act morally. Kant’s deontological theory looks to

the rules and duties that we have as persons, suggesting that we take up the “point of view of the universe” in assessing our actions in order to determine whether or not the action is something that we would endorse everyone doing. Aristotle through virtue ethics suggests that the moral life is the happiest life, focusing on the virtues of moral character and claiming that in developing these, almost as a set of abilities, we can lead a moral and as a result happier life.

In focusing so narrowly on the ideas of these three philosophers, I do not intend to generalize their opinions as constituting the attitudes held by the more general utilitarian, deontological or virtue ethical approaches to ethics. However, I do intend by the end of this paper to convince the reader that there is in fact something special about Aristotle’s virtue ethics as an approach to ethics that the other two ethical theories fail to capture.

In all three theories the objective is to live a moral life, for which we are given a guide, instructions, or set of metrics on how to live. This objective factors strongly into the idea of philosophy as a way of life, an idea which has been strongly advocated for in the modern era by the philosopher Pierre Hadot, who claims that philosophy should be less of an academic pursuit and more of an integrated part of everyday life. Under this definition, philosophy is a guide to the happy and flourishing life, which Hadot claims is how philosophy was practiced in ancient times. I find this concept to be compelling, and so what I will focus on in Chapter One is evaluating these three schools of ethics based on their ability to lead us *as human beings* to the good life, looking at the moral psychology presented by Aristotle, Kant and Mill. I take a fundamental aspect of human life to be the tension between self interest and morality, which is what these various moral theories are grappling with, and as such I think it is a reasonable idea to evaluate how well these theories deal with this tension, which is what I will be doing in Chapter One of this paper with what I call the problem of convergence.

In Chapter Two of this paper I will come back to Pierre Hadot to discuss philosophy as a way of life, discussing whether this could be something about Aristotle's philosophy which stands out as special or different from the other two. I specifically focus in on the aspects of the three ethical theories that his theory brings out as pertaining to what Hadot describes as 'spiritual exercises', practices within a philosophical school or theory that are aimed at changing the way one might see the world with the goal of improving one's life.

In Chapter Three, I will discuss the works of Gilbert Ryle, a well known moral psychologist and philosopher of the mind who claims that virtue is not a kind of knowledge or skill but a kind of caring. This will be the third concept I explore in my project to discover what is so special about virtue ethics.

The intended audience for this paper will be larger than just those deeply entrenched in academia, and as such I have tried to walk the line of giving enough explanation for those outside of philosophy and not so much that those within philosophy are bored to death or feel that I have over simplified/generalized a concept. Please excuse me if I have erred to one side or the other.

Exegesis of Viewpoints: Aristotle, Kant, and Mill

In the first part of this paper I will give a brief account of the works of the three philosophers outlined above. In doing so I will lean on James Fieser's description of the three schools of ethics from *Moral Philosophy Through the Ages* in order to detail the finer elements of Kant and Mill's theories. In giving my account for Aristotle I will lean on descriptions that I have given in a previous essay, "Susan Wolf's Meaning in Aristotle's Flourishing Life".

Mill

One of the dominant ethical theories in today's world is the consequentialist theory of Utilitarianism. This moral theory is as old as philosophy, showing up in ancient Greece through the teachings of Epicurus and others. As James Fieser states, this theory did not stand up to the test of time, falling into disuse throughout the Middle Ages.¹ However, in the 18th century utilitarianism received a massive revival by philosophers such as David Hume, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Mill popularized this moral theory with his work, *Utilitarianism*, which argues that morality should evaluate actions instead of reasons to act, and specifically focus on outcomes when assessing the moral worth of actions. Mill's principle for assessing such actions is that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."² This relies on an assumption very similar to that made by

¹ Fieser, James. *Moral Philosophy through the Ages*. Mayfield, 2001. p192

² Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. Edited by George Sher, Hackett Publishing Co, Inc, 2001. p7

Aristotle: the only thing desirable as an end is happiness, or as Mill puts it “pleasure and freedom from pain.”³

Mill claims that there is a disconnect between morality and reason in everyday thinking, described by the fact that some motivations to act come from what is best for oneself, aligned with reason, and some motivations come from what is best overall, aligned with morality. Mill sees one’s own happiness as the only true end of human life, and as such argues that this needs to be brought into closer alignment with the good of everyone, morality. To bring these two into closer alignment, Mill argues that there is a responsibility of the state or government to structure society in such a way that people following their own self interest are guided to actions that bring about the best outcome for all. This can be done through implementing rules and consequences for actions.

There is an ongoing debate as to whether Mill is an act utilitarian (described above as one who would support assessing the utility of individual actions to determine their moral worth) or a rule utilitarian which holds that we should be assessing the rules that guide these individual actions and how well they tend to promote pleasure and reduce pain. In the case of murder, an act utilitarian would look to the consequences of the individual action to determine moral worth — does this single act of murder promote general happiness or detract from it? A rule utilitarian would look to the consequences of a rule against murder to determine whether implementing this law would promote general happiness or detract from it. Without delving too deeply into this debate, Mill can be seen as an act utilitarian in his overall assessment of morality, he does see actions and their consequences as fundamental, but a rule utilitarian in his beliefs about how this

³ Mill, Utilitarianism, p 7

morality should be carried out in human life. As such I will deal with Mill as a rule utilitarian as the actual implementation of these different ethical theories are what I am most concerned with.

The way that Mill's rule utilitarianism plays out is an interesting one, as in focusing on rules Mill emphasizes the role of government in leading people to morality through external sanctions. He claims that the laws of society should be structured such that people following their own self interest will be guided towards acting morally, and we can see this practice in our own societal laws today where acting immorally such as speeding in a car, can cause one's self interest to be negatively impacted by getting a ticket from the police. However, Mill doesn't just rely on external sanctions, looking to the force of internal sanctions as well, which will come up later in my discussion of the binding force of morality. To Mill, these internal sanctions are one's own conscience or the limits that one places on oneself. If one were to refrain from speeding due to one's internal sanctions, this might be recognized as understanding that the negatives of speeding such as risk of harm to oneself and others, environmental impacts, etc. detract from the general happiness far more than being on time for your appointment contributes to it.

Kant

Deontological ethics are perhaps the oldest form of ethics in human history, as almost every religious ethical theory can be considered as deontological. Why shouldn't we cheat, steal or kill? Because God told us not to. In short, deontological ethics are rule based ethics based on inviolable rules that must be followed regardless of the consequences. This is best understood as a sort of foil or opposite to utilitarianism. Just as utilitarianism looks to the consequences of actions, deontology looks to the nature of the action themselves to judge moral worth. For example, to the deontologist, murder in any capacity is wrong, even when you can get something

good out of it or avoid something bad (think of the classic superhero example where they must choose between killing an innocent or allowing the world to blow up) whereas to the utilitarian murder is wrong only when the negatives of the act outweigh the positives.

The man who brought deontological ethics to the modern era was Immanuel Kant, one of the most influential philosophers in history. His account begins, like most ethical theories, with an account of the ultimate good. He argues that the only thing that is good in and of itself is a good will. Kant's conception of the will is based off of refuting the very different picture of human freedom rationality and morality that is presented by David Hume. Hume argues that reason is a slave to the passions, and as such the actions that we take are much more determined by the warring passions bottled up inside of us rather than human rationality and reason — Hume doesn't see us as very free creatures at all.⁴ However, Kant disagrees, claiming that an essential part of human life and simply waking up in the morning and getting on with one's day is that *we take ourselves to be free*, and as such, we are free. But Kant doesn't stop there as he further states that free will must be caused by something, but that something can't be 'alien' causes (causes outside of oneself) because if that were so, then one would not be free. Instead he claims that this free will is caused by the law that one gives to oneself, which is the moral law, what Kant calls the categorical imperative. In taking ourselves to be free (as we must if we are to be free creatures) we are then bound by the moral law.

Kant also holds the common belief that there are two types of motivations to act — self interest and morality. He defines a good will as acting *from duty*, rather than in accordance with duty, meaning that one must make moral actions *simply because morality tells you to* rather than because it also serves your interests. This is what Kant calls the categorical imperative, saying

⁴ Hume, David. A Treatise of Human Nature. Project Gutenberg Ebook, 2010. Section 3

that this categorical imperative allows us to test all actions by taking up the “point of view of the universe” to test whether an action follows laws that one would universalize. “Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”⁵ If the rules that govern your actions are rules that (from the point of view of the universe) you would endorse everyone doing, then it is a moral action. The way that one can determine this is through the four parts of the categorical imperative test. Any maxim which passes these four criteria is, according to Kant, a maxim which will lead to moral action.

The first test is the formula of the law of nature. “Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.”⁶ This instructs us to make sure that the maxims or laws that guide our actions (don't lie, don't steal, don't kill, etc.) are consistent with the laws of nature.

The second test is the formula of the end itself which states “act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.”⁷ Don't treat humans as mere means, but ends in themselves – it would dishonor both the person in question and the categorical imperative to treat someone as a means. An essential part of recognizing our own freedom and importance as a human being is recognizing that same freedom and importance in others.

The third is the formula of autonomy, which states “So act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxims.”⁸ The aim of this test is similar to

⁵ Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. Translated by Thomas k Abbott, Digireads.com Publishing, 2017. p31

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Fieser, *Moral Philosophy through the Ages*, p179

⁸ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, p31

the second in recognizing one's own dignity as a human being — when we act we should make sure that these actions and the maxims that guide them are truly worth what we put into them.

The fourth test is the formula of the kingdom of ends. “So act as if you were through your maxims a law making member of a kingdom of ends.”⁹ Not only must we consider each and every person as an end in and of themselves, but also, we must recognize that we are all together a ‘kingdom of ends’ or, as Fieser calls it, a “moral community”¹⁰. Similar to the utilitarian model, we must think of the good of the whole when we are creating the maxims to guide our own actions, going back to the idea of making laws that are universalizable, not only must they apply to everyone but they must also be for the good of everyone.

Aristotle

Aristotle's great work on ethics is the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which gives an account of what he takes to be the flourishing human life, and practical advice on how to obtain it.¹¹ He starts as all the other ethical theories do, with an account of what we should be striving for — the good. Aristotle holds that all rational (human) knowledge and choice aims at some good, which is the final aim of any activity or undertaking. ‘The good’ is the ultimate thing that we desire *for its own sake*, and everything else for the sake of it. Aristotle claims that for human life in general, that good is happiness. But to Aristotle, this “happiness” is not quite the same as what we consider happiness to be today. The original Ancient Greek word used was *eudaimonia*,

⁹ Fieser, *Moral Philosophy through the Ages*, p180

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Before I dive in I would like to state that I do not aim to, in my presentation of Aristotle's work or in my discussion afterwards to offer support some interpretation or another for his views, nor do I hope to go down the rabbit hole of ‘we don't know what Aristotle really says’ seeing as this is most likely a set of lecture notes written up by one of his students — none of Aristotle's original work survives. What I do hope to do is treat Aristotle as a philosopher comparable to Kant or Mill who has views on ethics that are still relevant today.

which does roughly translate to ‘happiness’, although a closer match would be human flourishing, or the set of conditions under which a human being will flourish. In simpler terms, the good life. However importantly this is not a matter of mood. Whether one is happy in the moment, or even generally feels happy, but more of a matter of life going well as a whole. Eudaimonia was lasting and objective. In this sense, the good life is complete and self sufficient, a godlike condition similar to enlightenment in other cultures. As such, it is the ultimate end, and we all aim to live what we take to be the good life. However, “The many do not give the same account as the wise.”¹² The good life may differ from person to person, but Aristotle holds that as a result of the fact that we are all human means there will be some basic aspects of the good life which will be the same for all. He makes one thing very clear — the good life requires that one lives in accordance with virtue, and as such, Aristotle claims that the virtuous life is the happiest life. In this sense morality and happiness are aligned, strange in comparison to the positions of utilitarianism or deontology which take human self interest to be something separate from morality.

To figure out what this ‘good life’ is, Aristotle makes an argument from human functioning. He claims that the human function is something that exists, like a flute player has the function of playing the flute, or a carpenter to make things out of wood. Aristotle takes human functioning to be “rational activity of the soul in accordance with virtue”.¹³ Aristotle holds that the human soul is composed of three parts. The most instinctive are the basic functions of the vegetative part of the soul, the part concerned with bodily functions such as eating and sleeping. This aspect of the soul is not relevant to the discussion of virtue. In the middle is the

¹² Aristotle, and John Lloyd Ackrill. *A New Aristotle Reader*. Princeton University Press, 1987. 1095a20

¹³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a5

appetitive part of the soul, consisting of our desires, passions and inclinations for certain behavior, the part that needs to be controlled for us to stay in line with virtue. The highest level of functioning is the rational part of the soul, that which is unique to humans among all living things. The rational part of the soul is where our will resides and is that which we use to control the appetitive part of the soul in building virtue. Virtue, in this case, is seen as a capacity within each of us to realize our potential through the various powers available to us as human beings, most importantly (at least in the pursuit of virtue) habituation and self reflection.

Habituation is what it sounds like — building habits, and this specifically ties into the parts of the soul just mentioned. Aristotle recognizes humans as creatures of habit who set routines to structure our lives, and as such, we can use the rational part of our soul to take control of the appetitive part, and through repetition and training (habituation) make it so that our automatic processes and reactions are in line with the actual carrying out of virtue. Through self reflection, we can choose what habits we want to keep and what habits we want to discard, which should, through rationally recognizing the correct habits, guide us to virtue.¹⁴

This is probably a good time to discuss what Aristotle means by virtue. Though I do believe that his works are widely applicable to the modern day (especially his discussions on ethics), this is one area where his theories show their age. Virtue in ancient Greek is the word *arete*, which could also be translated as excellence. To us, virtue is a moralized concept. To do something virtuously is to do something in accordance with moral principles, perhaps in an excellent manner but not necessarily so. However, to an ancient Greek such as Aristotle, one could hold a discussion about a virtuous horse or a virtuous chariot without inviting any sort of

¹⁴ Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book II Ch 1

absurdity.¹⁵ However, a large part of this was the fact that to the ancient Greeks, morality was just one of the many ways one could be excellent — the virtuous life was a life lived in accordance with excellence, in all its myriad ways. However, I would argue that there is necessarily a dose of moral thinking in there as well. In order to live the *completely* virtuous or excellent life one would have to engage with morality in some capacity as one of the many ways that one can be excellent/virtuous is through morality. Although I think that Aristotle’s moral thinking isn’t so limited, this concept of morality as part of the excellent life can give us sufficient proof of Aristotle as a moral thinker for us to deal with him as such without entertaining the idea that he is not talking about morality when he speaks of virtue.

An essential part of this being guided to virtue is what Aristotle considers virtue to be, namely a mean between extremes. More specifically, the virtues (such as courage, temperance, liberality (generosity), and “proper pride”) are an intermediary between two related vices that are described by excess and deficiency. “With regard to feelings of fear and confidence courage is the mean... the man who exceeds in confidence is rash, and he who exceeds in fear and falls short in confidence is a coward.”¹⁶ As such, through self reflection one can determine where one is on the spectrum of any of these virtues. And through habituation and conscious choice, one can guide oneself closer and closer to the virtuous mean. This is something I’ve been working to do in my own life recently. Through careful self reflection I have determined that I am perhaps too rash but more importantly too trusting of a person, quick to sprint from one activity to the next or commit to something without double checking the relevant information. Recently this has caused me to have a surfboard stolen and buy a pair of skis that are not worth what I paid for

¹⁵ Examples supplied by Alex Rajczi

¹⁶ Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1107b

them. Perhaps these experiences will help me make better choices in the future and eventually habituate myself towards more prudent actions.

To Aristotle, we all start at different points on the path to virtue, as a result of our individual human nature or upbringing, and so might have shorter or longer paths to reach true virtue. However, paradoxically, actually reaching true virtue isn't necessarily the goal as Aristotle doesn't see it as something that can be attained in our lifetimes. Somewhat like the Buddhist concept of enlightenment, virtue is asymptotic, but the pursuit of virtue in life is what brings meaning.¹⁷

¹⁷ The above paragraphs on Aristotle adapted from my essay on Aristotle and Susan Wolf: *Susan Wolf's Meaning in Aristotle's Flourishing Life*.

Chapter One: The Problem of Convergence

As I have said already, I find virtue ethics to be the most compelling account and the most useful ethical theory in my own life. I find myself really resonating with the ideas of habituation as a means of guiding myself towards a more moral and virtuous life and see the idea of virtue as a mean between extremes as a highly accurate description of human functioning. However this part of the paper is a deeper dive into the question of why I feel this to be so, and as such I will evaluate these theories based on how well they respond to who we are as human beings and their ability to lead us to the good life.

First, I will look at the respective moral psychologies of Aristotle, Kant, and Mill. Ethics is about guiding us *as human beings* to morality, and as such any ethical theory should take into account some essence of human functioning or understanding of what it means to be human as a means of informing the account. An essential aspect of what it means to be human, especially in the realm of ethics and morality is our motivation for action, what it is that compels us to do the things we do. Many ethical theories consider the larger categories of motivation for action as morality and self interest, with all human actions being motivated by one or the other. I find that as individual human beings we are most strongly inclined to do what is best for ourselves, as has been proven in many psychological studies and philosophical reasoning. In short, all of us have a reason not to follow morality in many day to day circumstances. I could donate a portion of my income to charity, or I could use the money to buy myself nice things, but we often tend to choose the latter. And so, there is a tension between what is best for us, and what is best overall, what is moral. I find Aristotle's rejection of this tension through his assertion that the virtuous life is the happiest life to be a compelling treatment of the problem. His claim gives us a self

interested reason to reject what I will term ‘narrow self interest’, the sort of self interest that would decline giving to charity in favor of furthering one’s personal well being. As such, we can separate this narrow self interest from what I will call ‘larger self interest’, the self interest that is furthered by living in a society where people act morally, and generally don’t lie, steal and cheat each other whenever possible. The difference is a difference in scope. For example, in deciding whether or not one should raid their neighbors vegetable garden or fruit tree, one can think of the ways that one might benefit from the act of stealing, but at the same time one might also think of the ways that one might benefit from existing in a society where one’s personal property is not under constant threat of being stolen. Each of these moral theories, in suggesting that we choose moral actions, asks us to engage in the shared belief of a world in which this is possible.

However, I want to analyze how well these theories demonstrate that it is in our larger self interest to take moral actions, which I will refer to as ‘the convergence’ problem. I will consider a theory to have successfully dealt with the convergence problem if it is able to demonstrate to us how morality and self interest actually do converge, or more simply that acting morally is in our own self interest. As I’ve already hinted at, my initial intuition here is that I will find Aristotle’s complete rejection of this tension to be the most compelling treatment of the convergence problem, however we will see if this idea holds up under closer scrutiny.

As a second point of analysis, and mixed in with my discussion of this fundamental tension, I will discuss how these theories deal with the idea of a sensible knave, the person who, as David Hume puts it “...observes the general rule, and takes advantage of all the exceptions.”¹⁸ which factors into the discussion mentioned above through the idea of self interested reasons to act morally instead of giving into narrow self interest.

¹⁸ Hume, Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, section 9 part 2

Mill's utilitarianism is a very good example of the convergence problem, and so I will begin my analysis with his theory. As stated above, Mill claims that self interest and morality are two different ways of motivating human beings to action, with one's own happiness being the ultimate end that we pursue in life. In light of this Mill looks to the government and to our own 'internal sanctions' (one's conscience) to convince us to act in moral ways, 'moral' to Mill being that which serves the good of everyone, holding to his utilitarian standpoint. I strongly feel that there is something about the separation of these two motivations that simply doesn't benefit the common good. If the aim of such an ethical theory is the utilitarian maximization of the happiness of all, highlighting this apparent difference between morality and self interest gives us more of a license to act from our own narrow self interest rather than curbing this basic human impulse. However, Mill claims that it is the duty of the government to keep people in line and structure society such that we can serve the good of the many while still following our narrow self interest by giving us incentives to act morally and disincentives to act immorally, the penalties which back up the law in day to day life.¹⁹

I find this insufficient as a solution. I don't think the goal of having laws that perfectly guide us to a moral life is an attainable goal. One cannot simply cover all the bases when the 'bases' are the individual decision points that we are all presented with in the course of daily life, and a much better solution is one in which people regulate their own narrow self interest seeking tendencies for the greater good, preferably a greater good that they believe they will benefit from. That being said, Mill doesn't just rely on external sanctions of the law and acknowledges the power of internal sanctions. In chapter three of *Utilitarianism*, Mill claims that the internal sanction of duty and one's conscience is what keeps one from straying into immorality, and is

¹⁹ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ch 3

the true binding force of his theory. “It's binding force, however consists in the existence of a mass of feeling which must be broken through in order to do what violates our standard of right, and which, if we do nevertheless violate that standard, will probably have to be encountered afterwards in the form of remorse.”²⁰ Later on in the chapter Mill furthers this point by appealing to mankind’s innate feelings of unity with one another, suggesting that, from a utilitarian standpoint, “there is this basis of powerful natural sentiment; and that it is which, when once the general happiness is recognized as the ethical standard, will constitute the strength of the utilitarian morality.”²¹ He claims that this ‘powerful natural sentiment’, our “desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures”²² is something natural to our position as creatures within a society, which he claims must consult the interests of all to be possible. This seems like a much stronger solution to the convergence problem.

With the power of these internal sanctions, Mill does sufficiently deal with the convergence problem as he is able to, through the recognition of his utilitarian standard, give principled reasons as to why we should want to follow morality. He demonstrates that morality stems from this powerful natural sentiment within us, disproving my initial concern with the insufficiency of his theory in addressing this tension between self interest and morality. I still feel that there is something better about Aristotle’s complete rejection of the tension, but it seems that Mill reaches the same conclusion, albeit through a more circuitous route, which I would see as a downside and a weaker position to construct a moral theory from.

²⁰ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p29

²¹ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p31-32

²² *Ibid*

Kant's moral psychology claims that we should follow the categorical imperative because of the logical and reasoned arguments he gives for recognizing it as exactly that, an imperative. However, similar to my initial thoughts on utilitarianism, I again see the problem of a lack of demonstration of convergence. As I've discussed in the exegesis of Kant's point of view, he sees all humans as rational agents such that each and every one of us is an end in themselves and as such is deserving of respect, which amounts to not being treated as a means to someone else's ends. Growing out of this recognition of human rationality is the recognition of human autonomy and the moral law as the law that one gives to oneself.²³ As such we are all supposed to, in recognizing our own rationality (which we must do because we as humans take ourselves to be free) recognize this same aspect in all other human beings and treat them accordingly.

The kingdom of ends that Kant discusses sums up my point nicely. He describes this kingdom of ends as "only possible on the analogy of a kingdom of nature, the former however only by maxims, that is self-imposed rules, the latter only by the laws of efficient causes acting under necessitation from without."²⁴ Just as the kingdom of nature is completely and solely governed by the necessitation of natural processes, so the kingdom of ends is solely and completely governed by the categorical imperative and the maxims it generates. This analogy implies a complete adherence to the categorical imperative — similar to how one cannot violate laws of nature, Kant claims that we cannot violate these maxims of morality if we are to actualize the categorical imperative in our lives. However, this 'cannot' is not 'cannot violate these maxims of morality because doing so will affect one's happiness or self interest', but rather a more logical cannot as Kant claims that if we are to accept the basic first principles that his

²³ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, p44

²⁴ *Ibid*

argument stems from we will have no choice but to logically accept his conclusion of following the categorical imperative. However, this doesn't give us what we need to fix the problem of convergence, a proof that morality and happiness converge.

Furthermore, Kant himself makes the point that the categorical imperative “has nothing to support it in heaven or earth.”²⁵ This idea (at least in his mind) completes his theory by raising it up to a pure standard as he does with logic, which he names a ‘pure philosophy’ due to the fact that logic gets its truth and validity from nothing more than abstract rules, without any empirical evidence. He finds it to be a strength of his theory to be built solely on logic and first principles that can be determined from basic reasoning as he sees empirical evidence from the real world as less pure, with truth less guaranteed. In appealing to this side of human rationality, he gives us purely logical reasons for why we should act morally. However, I find that this aspect of his theory completely distances it from human life and presents the problem of giving us rational beings no larger self interested reason to follow the categorical imperative, despite it’s being classified as an imperative. In short, Kant gives an account of how we should act but not why we should act in that way and I simply don't see this as providing any suggestion that larger self interest and morality converge. Even if one is to in theory accept Kant’s reasoning for why we must make moral choices in our lives such that we abide by his categorical imperative, the human capacity for rationalization about why *their* situation should grant them an exception is phenomenal. Oh, it’s ok if I walk off the trail, pick the flowers, or even cheat the system, if everyone else follows the rules it will all be fine! We as humans are very prone to backsliding and slippery slopes, especially when self interest is the motivating factor. We may be rational creatures, but we are susceptible to irrationality and irrational choices. As such, without any

²⁵ Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals, p34

motivating reasons to follow morality from the perspective of larger self interest, Kant doesn't give us any self interested reason to act morally.

As I've said earlier, part of what I like so much about Aristotle's virtue ethics is the idea of self interest and morality as aligned, completely rejecting the tension that the other two moral theories bring up. I agree that perhaps morality and self interest are in fact disconnected as the other theories state, but to present it as such, at least for a moral theory, seems to severely undermine the position.

I feel that the way Aristotle deals with this convergence problem is much more effective than the other two — he simply denies that this tension between morality and self interest exists at all, with his claim that the moral life is the happiest life. While on first glance this idea may just seem outright wrong — we can think of all the ways that one might be confronted by a moral dilemma where one must not give in to self interest — I believe there is more to it than meets the eye. We must recognize how Aristotle's view is much wider in scope than a single instance of a moral or self interested action. In arguing that the moral life is the happiest life he is making a claim about the entirety of one's lived experience. Alasdair MacIntyre, a modern virtue ethicist argues that this position is justified because not acting morally will always have you looking over your shoulder for your immoral actions to catch up with you, an idea reflected outside of virtue ethics by philosophers such as David Hume. Acting immorally may lead to short term or material benefits, but these will never add up to the peace of mind afforded by a life well lived in accordance with virtue.²⁶

However, there are two things that must be noted here. First of all, Aristotle gives us a very thin conception of what it is for this moral and happy life to take place. He simply states it

²⁶ MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue a Study in Moral Theory*. Bloomsbury, 2014.

as fact, not accepting the possibility for anything else, and not giving arguments to back up this position either. I find the most plausible explanation for this fact to be the differences in concept between what we consider to be ‘virtue’ or morality today and what the word meant in ancient Greek which is laid out earlier. To Aristotle it was obvious that a life lived in accordance with virtue would be the happiest life — after all, it was an excellent life that one would be living. That being said, this is definitely a weak point of Aristotle’s argument.

Second, we must recognize that the idea that the virtuous life is the happiest life in effect is quite similar to other moral theories which claim that not acting morally will catch up to you. Hume supports this idea as well in his discussion of morality, and the problem of a ‘binding force of morality’ is explicitly referred to in Mill’s utilitarianism. In short, this is not something truly special about virtue ethics. However, I do believe that it does show a major flaw in Kant’s deontology.

But why are we even asking this question? This brings me to my second but closely related point of analysis — the idea of the Sensible Knave. This comes from David Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, where he describes this character as:

“a sensible knave, in particular incidents, may think that an act of iniquity or infidelity will make a considerable addition to his fortune, without causing any considerable breach in the social union and confederacy. That *honesty is the best policy*, may be a good general rule, but is liable to many exceptions; and he, it may perhaps be thought, conducts himself with most wisdom, who observes the general rule, and takes advantage of all the exceptions.”²⁷

²⁷ Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, section 9 part 2

Hume argues against this position, saying that it is irrational and one should recognize that in fact the material goods gained through such immoral actions will not outweigh the negatives of always looking over one's shoulder for the law to catch up with you. However, this is at best a weak solution, at worst no solution at all, and this idea seems to be a problem that all three moral theories grapple with. No matter what, one cannot convince this person to do the right thing. However, I believe that Aristotle's gets us the closest. Going back to the idea of happiness and morality as aligned, this seems to me to explain things as such. If morality and happiness are aligned, then at least in principle we can not only say that what the sensible knave does is morally bad, but we can further assert that what he does is misguided and will not lead to happiness for himself, even if he gets away with the immoral action at hand.

That being said, Kant's theory being grounded in sort of a priori reasoning for why one should be moral will also be able to give similar in principle condemnations of the actions of the sensible knave, as will Mill's utilitarian morality. Furthermore, this 'in principle' condemnation does seem like a consolation prize if the goal of an ethical theory is to stop such actions, but perhaps it is too high of a standard to ask a moral theory to convince the most egoistic and self-centered people around to abide by such internal sanctions. In these cases it seems that no amount of reasoned argument will suffice and the best we can hope for is that the external sanctions of the law will provide enough of a deterrent with the possibility of negative consequences for immoral actions that such actions will not occur. Rather than needing to convince the sensible knave to act morally, what our standard for moral theories is how well they do in presenting a reasonable argument such that your everyday human being would be convinced. I feel that there is a certain apathy or tendency to act self interestedly that lives within all of us, and in the case of the sensible knave this is perhaps the only motivating factor — a

sensible knave only cares about morality insofar as appearing to act moral will support their self interest. However, the rest of us are going to exist somewhere in between this extreme and the extreme of a Mother Teresa, someone who acts solely based on what is moral. As such, I think what we need is a self interested reason to be moral, a solution to the convergence problem, which I find most strongly stated in Aristotle's theory.

Overall, on this assessment of the three moral theories I believe I can conclude that what I find so special about virtue ethics on first glance, it's rejection of the tension between morality and self interest, is in fact also accounted for/a part of Mill's moral psychology that grounds his utilitarian theory, as visible in his discussion of internal sanctions and the role of society to habituate people towards virtue/moral action. In answering the question of what's so special about Aristotle's virtue ethics, I want to conclude that this rejection of the tension isn't it as it's also something prevalent in Mill's theory. However, I do think that this can be seen as a distinguishing factor between Aristotle and Kant's deontology, as we see none of the same sanctions present in his theory, relying only on the will of the rational agent themselves to provide such motivation to be moral. Perhaps Aristotle's rejection of the tension between self interest and morality isn't unique to virtue ethics, being reflected in the works of other philosophers, but it is one of the stronger points of the theory, allowing Aristotle to prove to the everyday human being why one should be act from morality and not pure self interest. In the next chapter I will take a look at another way of considering virtue ethics to be special, the idea of philosophy as a way of life as discussed by the philosopher Pierre Hadot.

Chapter Two: Pierre Hadot's Philosophy as a Way of Life

Recently, there has been a push in philosophy for a sort of return to how philosophy was pursued in ancient times — Pierre Hadot has been at the forefront of this movement, pushing for philosophy as a way of life, focusing more on integrating philosophical principles into one's life and the pursuit of knowledge as a spiritual journey as opposed to the analytic philosophical tradition of today which (he claims) is more focused on arguments and the pursuit of knowledge in a scientific fashion. At first glance this might seem like further evidence for my support of Aristotle's Virtue Ethics, however Hadot also claims that there is no one way of doing this properly — any philosophical school will do for guiding one to the philosophical way of life, and someone might find great assistance in their lives from the works of philosophers like Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius (or even Kant and Mill) as easily as I gain assistance from Aristotle. In the second part of this paper I will discuss how Hadot views ancient philosophy, and present his view as a counter to my support of Aristotle's Virtue Ethics over Kant's or Mill's ethical theories, focusing on the character of Socrates as the pinnacle of ancient Hellenistic philosophical life, and the concept of spiritual exercises.

Hadot

In *What Is Ancient Philosophy*, Pierre Hadot sets out to give us a new perspective on the philosophical schools of the ancient Greeks, what he calls the Hellenistic Philosophers through a historical account that starts with Socrates as the first true philosopher. Socrates is explicitly compared to Jesus Christ, taking up the role of a spiritual as well as intellectual teacher. Hadot

claims that Socrates represents the philosopher in the purest form through his mode of Socratic questioning:

“Plato tells how Chaerephon, one of Socrates’ friends, had asked the Delphic Oracle if there was anyone wiser (sophos) than Socrates. The Oracle had replied that no one was wiser than Socrates. Socrates... began a long search... in order to find someone wiser than he. He notices that all these people thought they knew everything, whereas in fact they knew nothing. Socrates then concluded that if in fact he was the wisest person, it was because he did *not* think he knew that which he did not know... this is precisely the platonic definition of the philosopher... the philosopher knows nothing, but he is conscious of his ignorance.”²⁸

This mode of thinking and being is what Hadot considers to be the pinnacle of philosophy as a way of life, with Socrates as the ultimate example of such a life. “The unexamined life is not worth living”²⁹, Socrates says during his trial before the Athenian Pantheon. In this way, Socrates is in between ignorance and knowledge, which I take to be the position all philosophers should strive to take up. The position of awareness of one’s lack of knowledge, almost paradoxical, is the idea not to see or know more, but to see or know *more clearly*.

Michael Chase, a student of Hadot and a philosopher in his own right, argues that this is something that analytic western philosophy has left behind in its scientific search for truth.³⁰ He quotes Reiter as saying “Analytic philosophers... often identify, professionally and intellectually,

²⁸ Hadot, Pierre. *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* Translated by Michael Chase, Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2002. p25

²⁹ Plato. *Five Dialogues*. Translated by G.M.A Grube, Hackett, 2002. Apology 38a5-6

³⁰ Chase, Michael. “Observations on Pierre Hadot's Conception of Philosophy as a Way of Life.” *Practical Philosophy Special Edition*, 2007. p2-4

more closely with the sciences and mathematics, than with the humanities”, and himself observes that analytic philosophers are “Slightly embarrassed about being philosophers at all, to the point that their goal, sometimes implicitly and sometimes avowedly, was the elimination of philosophy itself.”³¹ Hadot himself claims that the way of practicing philosophy as a way of life that was integral to the ancient philosophical schools has been lost to time, and that more modern philosophies have focused too much on the actual arguments for or against these schools as ‘doing philosophy’, and this is what has been carried to the present day as philosophical discourse.

In this way, Hadot begins his argument for a return to how philosophy used to be practiced by the ancient Greeks, as a way of life. Hadot sees each philosophical school (for example Stoicism, Cynicism, Plato’s Academy or Aristotle’s Lyceum) as representing a choice about how one wants to live one’s life, the sort of fundamental aspects of that choice being represented in the goals or aims of the school. Plato’s Academy in democratic Athens was specifically aimed at politics, training students in philosophy with the goal of entering public service and bettering the lives of others, as reflected in *The Republic*, where he discusses the idea of the ideal city as being ruled by philosopher-kings. Aristotle’s school was aimed more at knowledge and learning, trying to uncover truths about the world. The Stoic school taught taking up the perspective of an impassive observer in all matters, even one’s own. The school of the Cynics was a rejection of all societal norms and values.³²

However, although the different schools might differ in content or method, they were all aimed at the same goal, the goal of viewing the world differently, to transform oneself and one’s

³¹ Chase, *Observations*, p 4-5

³² Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy*, chapter 7

way of life and live better lives as a result, a large contrast to (what Hadot at least classifies as) the current state of analytic philosophy. “Philosophy was a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual’s way of being.”³³ A large part of this ‘radical conversion and transformation’ was the use of what Hadot calls spiritual exercises, which were:

“...designed to ensure spiritual progress towards the ideal state of wisdom, exercises of reason that will be, for the soul, analogous to the athlete’s training or to the application of a medical cure. Generally, they consist, above all, of self control and meditation. Self control is fundamentally being attentive to oneself: an unrelaxing vigilance for the Stoics, the renunciation of unnecessary desires for the Epicureans. It always involves an effort of will, this faith in moral freedom and the possibility of self-improvement; an acute moral consciousness honed by spiritual direction and the practice of examining one’s conscience; and lastly, the kind of practical exercises described with such remarkable precision particularly by Plutarch: controlling one’s anger, curiosity, speech, or love of riches, beginning by working on what was easiest in order gradually to acquire a firm and stable character.”³⁴

A further spiritual exercise was what Hadot calls “the reading and exegesis of the authoritative texts of each school.”³⁵ This is dialogue and discourse on various theses and ideas of the students and teachers alike. These discussions would be structured around the ideas of the prominent texts or works of the school. To me this seems to be one form of ancient philosophical exercises that has survived to modern philosophy, as far as college classes go, philosophy classes

³³ Hadot, Pierre. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Edited by Arnold I. Davidson. Translated by Michael Chase, Blackwell Publishing, 2007. p265

³⁴ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p59

³⁵ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p63

are just about the pinnacle of the discussion based class — before class read and review primary texts written by the philosophers under discussion, and then come into class and discuss the work, often digging into the various issues that we might see within the work itself.

Analysis

I think that this perspective of Hadot's can be applied in a couple interesting ways to the question of what it is that makes Aristotle's virtue ethics special that I am exploring in this paper. In this chapter I will examine if Aristotle's virtue ethics could stand out from the other two ethical theories through Hadot's concept of philosophy as a way of life. Right off the bat we can see Aristotle's virtue ethics as more in line with this idea than the other two as it is one of the six or so schools of ancient Hellenistic philosophy that were practiced as a way of life that Hadot praises and uses as an example in his works. And this seems to be congruent with the more nitty-gritty facts of Aristotle's virtue ethics. Just as Hadot describes the ancient practice of philosophy as a way of life as focusing on transforming the way that one views and interacts with the world with the goal of the good life. Aristotle's virtue ethics is focused on such a transformation of the individual and one's way of life to lead a more complete existence, especially in Aristotle's claim that the virtuous life is the happiest life.

However, this does nothing to distinguish Aristotle's view from the other two ethical theories. As outlined in my exposition of Hadot above, there are a few essential aspects of philosophy as a way of life that distinguish these ancient philosophical schools that he is discussing from more modern philosophical theories. I will look at two core aspects of philosophy as a way of life to analyze the three schools of ethics and determine whether this can be a distinguishing feature of Aristotle's virtue ethics, that it can be a philosophical way of life in

ways that Kant or Mill's ethical theories cannot. The first aspect of Hadot's theory that I will look at is the idea of the transformation of the individual. This is a core aspect of his theory as he holds that what was so special about ancient philosophy is that it was more human-centered, focusing on changing how we see the world in order to help the individual lead a more complete existence and moving closer to the Socratic ideal of living between ignorance and knowledge, being aware of one's own lack of knowledge about the world. I will then move to look at the three theories through Hadot's idea of spiritual exercises. This is one of the main distinguishing features for a philosophical way of life that Hadot describes as he claims that the ancient philosophical schools would provide their students or followers with concrete exercises aimed at guiding them to such a transformation as described above.

On the idea of transformation, I think there will be little dispute as to whether this is a part of Aristotle's virtue ethics. As stated above, Aristotle's idea of the virtuous life as the happiest life asks us to change the way that we see our own actions. Instead of thinking in terms of narrow self interest as described in Chapter One, Aristotle asks us to view our actions in terms of the perspective of larger self interest to see moral actions as self interested actions. Further, there is Aristotle's depiction of true virtue as asymptotic, something that one can get increasingly closer to but will never truly reach. As such, we are given a new focus for the virtuous life, the journey in pursuit of virtue rather than the destination of true virtue itself. Going back to Hadot, this fits perfectly with the ideas presented through the character of Socrates as the pinnacle of philosophy, especially how he took this 'journey' of philosophy quite literally, travelling from place to place and asking people on the street questions about their lives and the principles that they live them by as a means of guiding them to challenge their core beliefs, giving up perceived knowledge for knowledge of their own ignorance.

In the case of Mill, the ideas behind the sort of government-house utilitarianism that he puts forward fits very well with the concept of the role of society in transforming its citizens towards virtue that is found in Plato's political philosophy as it takes into account the role of the state or government in guiding its citizens towards virtue through enforcing laws and reinforcing moral practices. Mill asks us to focus on the results of actions and how they affect the larger society as a whole, changing the way that we see the actions that we take in everyday life and expanding the circle of impacts of these actions that we consider — instead of just considering their impact on ourselves and those around us Mill suggests we consider the impact that they would have on society as a whole and those within it.

Similarly, Kant gives us such a transformative suggestion, asking us to change the way that we see other people to view them not as a means to our own ends, but as ends in themselves who would be degraded as human beings were we to treat them as less. Kant claims that the categorical imperative will help guide people to virtue by showing them which actions to take and which to reject. In taking up the point of view of the universe one can view one's actions through a different lens, testing to see if one's action is one that could be universalized as a law that everyone should follow.

At least as far as this transformation of the individual is considered to be about helping one see the world differently, as Hadot claims it is, all three ethical theories seems to provide a perfectly acceptable invitation to see one's actions in the world through a different lens, be it the virtue ethical, utilitarian, or deontological lens, and as such transform one's way of living, goals in life, and interactions with the world and other human beings. Under these criteria, these three ethical theories function as perfectly acceptable philosophical ways of life.

However, this may not be the most discerning point of analysis as far as my attempts to distinguish these three ethical theories goes. If we are to see any philosophical school, set of teachings or even just a philosophical viewpoint as a way of life merely based on the fact that they give us different ways to see the world, then basically any philosophical view will do as a way of life. A philosophical paper that does not attempt to convince one to take up the point of view presented in the paper or adopt beliefs held by the philosopher who wrote the paper would hardly be considered philosophy. Philosophy is the study of ideas and how we reach these conclusions, and as such any philosophical work that so much as gives us an argument will be meet this standard of providing transformation of the individual through changing the way they view the world.

Perhaps the concept of spiritual exercises will be more discerning. To Hadot, spiritual exercises are a large part of what leads to such a transformation of the individual. As quoted above on page 27 Hadot sees the classic examples of spiritual exercises as self control and meditation, repeatable actions similar to the exercises one might go through in athletic training. Furthermore, Hadot claims that these exercises involve an effort of the will with the possibility of self improvement, a striving towards some better state of existence. The plainest example of spiritual exercise that I see in Aristotle's works is his concept of habituation, which I believe perfectly fits the description of spiritual exercise that Hadot outlines. Aristotle claims that habituation is the primary method for us to work on ourselves in pursuit of virtue, and that in fact

“... none of the moral excellences arise in us by nature; for nothing that exists in nature can form a habit contrary to its nature... nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature

do excellences arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.”³⁶

To Aristotle, habituation is quite literally the building of habits, which he considers to be the only way that we become moral as he claims that morality is not something innate to us. Putting aside the nature vs nurture debate over morality, Aristotle’s habituation perfectly fits Hadot’s conception of a spiritual exercise, hardly surprising seeing as Aristotle’s philosophy is one of the philosophical schools that Hadot leans on in constructing his case for philosophy as a way of life.

In the case of both Mill and Kant, I do not think that we are given any such spiritual exercises to help us on the path to virtue. The parts of their theories that are the closest to the idea of a spiritual exercise would be the utilitarian and categorical imperative tests for one’s actions. Mill suggests that we analyze actions and the laws that guide them on the basis of their promotion of the general good; when considering an action, one should reflect and determine if it is in fact in the benefit of all or not. Similarly, Kant claims that his categorical imperative test will help guide people to virtue by showing us all which laws to adopt and which to reject through adopting the point of view of the universe. However, I see these ‘morality tests’ as insufficient because they are not in fact exercises similar to the exercise of habituation. Similar to an athlete’s training, habituation is a repeatable action, the conscious choice of moral actions over immoral one’s such that eventually the moral action will become one’s natural response. Kant and Mill’s morality tests are more similar to the idea of transformation described earlier, attempting to give us a different perspective to view the world from. And if this transformation of the way one sees the world is to be a defining feature which tells us which philosophies are a

³⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a19

way of life and which are not, the net will be cast far too wide as to include any and all philosophies that ask us to view the world differently.

However, there is a counterargument to be made here. As stated by Michael Chase, the close student of Hadot and oftentimes translator of Hadot's works, points out:

“Moreover, the wide variety of ancient philosophical schools, which correspond to various personality types or attitudes, increases our chances of finding the elements of a philosophical life that is congenial to us. If we tend to give importance to vigilance, duty and the tension of spiritual striving, we may find Stoicism suitable as a guide for our modern lives; if we emphasize the importance of relaxation, friendship and relishing the pure pleasures of existence, then Epicureanism may be our cup of tea.”³⁷

Chase's claim that we do have a choice between what philosophical school is “our cup of tea”, points to an integral part of Hadot's argument for the revival of ancient philosophy. A large part of this idea is the concept that there are many different paths to this place between knowledge and ignorance that all philosophers should strive for. Furthermore, Chase says:

“Finally, since ancient philosophy in its most fundamental aspect is not a systematic theoretical construct, but consists in a series of practical exercises destined to transform our perception and our being, we are justified in picking and choosing elements of doctrines and techniques from the entire gamut of philosophical schools.”³⁸

In a way, Hadot's concept of philosophy as a way of life invites us all to emulate Socrates and his meandering journey away from ignorance and towards knowledge, to take these philosophical schools (perhaps with a grain of salt, especially with respect to their respective

³⁷ Chase, Observations, p1

³⁸ Ibid

metaphysics which don't have the power of modern science behind them) and pick and choose what helps us as individuals to lead moral and fulfilling lives.

However, this begins to lead us to a dangerous and strange relativism about what counts as a philosophical way of life, or what counts as a moral theory at all. On the first point, about choosing which philosophical school is our 'cup of tea', I agree with what Chase is saying, but will point out that he is talking about picking and choosing between philosophical schools which are already to be considered ways of life. On my analysis above, Aristotle's virtue ethics is the only one that fits Hadot's description of a philosophical way of life. However, if we are to entertain Chase's idea of picking and choosing what works and what doesn't from the different philosophical schools, it is perfectly plausible to suggest that someone might take the elements of Aristotle's philosophy that they resonate with, such as the spiritual exercise of habituation, and apply them to a different ethical theory or moral code, perhaps even to Kant or Mill, building their own philosophical way of life tailored to themselves. However, I believe that this idea of choosing what resonates and what doesn't is highly problematic. Each of these three philosophers have given us reasoned arguments for why their ethical theory is correct, Mill appeals to societal practices, Kant appeals to reason and logic, and Aristotle appeals to human functioning, each believing themselves to have given us a complete theory on how and why to be moral. Chase claims that ancient philosophy does not consist of "systematic theoretical construct[s]"³⁹, which I find to be completely untrue when it comes to Aristotle — much of his ethical work is backed up by his metaphysics and ideas of human functioning, and this idea certainly cannot be applied to theories such as Kant or Mill's, which are all about the ethical theory or system that they have constructed. This sort of cherry picking what works from different ethical theories leads us into a

³⁹ Chase, Observations, p1

confusing relativism which has the potentiality to produce an account that contradicts itself or that is not backed up by philosophical reasoning. To cherry pick Aristotle's idea of habituation and add it to Kant or Mill's ethical theories would completely disregard Aristotle's discussion of why habituation is so important, which traces back to his ideas of nature and human function, which are in fact entirely incompatible with Kant's idea of the categorical imperative or Mill's discussion of the binding force of morality. To Kant, the categorical imperative is available to anyone through his set of logical reasons for why we must recognize the moral worth of each other human being, having nothing to do with habituation or Aristotle's idea of virtue as something that is gained through repetition/experience. Similarly, as explored in Chapter 1, Mill makes the claim that the ultimate binding force of his morality is the "strong natural sentiment" of "the social feelings of mankind — the desire to be in unity with one's fellow creatures, which is already a powerful principle in human nature."⁴⁰ This completely goes against Aristotle's idea of morality as a purely acquired faculty, and as such would be difficult if not impossible to reconcile with the concept of habituation.

As such, I do find reason to see Aristotle's virtue ethics as special compared to Kant or Mill's ethical theories through this idea of philosophy as a way of life. Unlike the latter two theories, Aristotle's virtue ethics gives us the spiritual exercise of habituation as a means of leading us to virtue, distinguishing it as a philosophical way of life worthy of being followed.

⁴⁰ Mill, Utilitarianism, p32

Chapter Three: Gilbert Ryle's Morality as Caring

In the third part of this paper I will further explore what makes virtue ethics special by discussing the views of the 20th century philosopher Gilbert Ryle, who claims that knowledge of morality is a type of caring about the right things that can be learned by example but not taught. I believe that this is perhaps the strongest evidence for something that is intrinsically special to Aristotle's virtue ethics. Aristotle's conception of morality fits with Ryle's conception of morality as a type of caring, distinguishing it from theories which would see morality as a type of knowledge. Interestingly, this appears to be a part of Mill's ethics as well. I will argue that if we are to see Ryle's assessment of the moral psychology and human nature of morality as correct, then this can be used as a means of assessing the three ethical theories I am examining, looking to see if their conceptions of morality fit Ryle's idea of morality as caring. Throughout this section I will use the words 'morality' and 'virtue' interchangeably. Ryle, writing from the 20th century predominantly talks about virtue, but seems to use this interchangeably with the terms morals and morality.

Ryle

Gilbert Ryle, although primarily a philosopher of the mind, has a couple of interesting essays that delve into ethics as well, "On Forgetting the Difference Between Right and Wrong", and "Can Virtue Be Taught?", which outline his views on what type of knowledge (if any) makes up one's moral constitution, and the idea that virtue is (or is not) something that can be taught. In "Forgetting the Difference Between Right and Wrong", Ryle posits that the idea of someone knowing the difference between right and wrong (which I will subsequently refer to as

one's morals), and subsequently forgetting it, is a ridiculous notion. This assumption is in fact one that I completely resonate with. I agree that literally forgetting one's morals — for example, that stealing is morally wrong and giving to the poor is morally good — is an absurd idea. Perhaps there could be some far out cases of amnesia in which someone forgets their entire lived experience, along with their accumulated societal norms, but without such extenuating circumstances, it doesn't seem to make sense for someone to forget their morals as I might forget the combo of my bike lock, a friend's address, or the capital of Hungary (Budapest).

Importantly, this 'forgetting' which Ryle claims doesn't exist is not meant to cover cases of moral ambiguity or cases of someone learning new information (perhaps through a philosophy class they come to hold the belief that morals are subjective) which might cause them to disregard their morals, becoming callous or uncaring to the suffering of others, something that I believe fits well with Aristotle's idea of virtue as a journey.

Ryle begins by pointing out that this idea of what virtue actually is, is a relatively unexamined part of philosophy (at least when he was writing about it in the 1950's) and goes on to use Aristotle's writings on the subject as a starting point, as quoted below from the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

“None of man's functions possess the quality of permanence so fully as the activities in conformity with virtue: they appear to be more lasting even than our knowledge of particular sciences. And among these activities themselves those which are highest in the scale of values are the more lasting, because they most fully and continuously occupy the lives of the supremely happy: for this appears to be the reason why we do not forget them.”⁴¹

⁴¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1100b

“Moreover, we can speak of excellence in Art, but not of excellence in Prudence. Also in Art voluntary error is not so bad as involuntary, whereas in the sphere of Prudence it is worse, as it is in the sphere of the virtues. It is therefore clear that Prudence is an excellence or virtue, and not an Art.”⁴²

Ryle goes on to consider some possible reasons for why the absurdity of forgetting one’s morals might ring true for so many of us. He considers the possibility that it is absurd for us to forget our morals because of the constant reminders that we are presented with through engaging with everyday life. “Somewhat as, throughout December, Christmas carols, Christmas cards, and butchers’ shops constantly remind us of the immanence of Christmas Day, so the daily procession of duties to be done and derelictions to be apologized for keeps us constantly in mind of the difference between right and wrong.”⁴³ However, Ryle dismisses this idea as insufficient, saying that if this were the explanation for why we can’t forget our morals, then it wouldn’t cover cases of extremely forgetful people, or someone living far removed from society, making it such that forgetting one’s morals would be a rare occurrence rather than a completely absurd one as his (and my own) intuition points to.

Ryle further considers the explanation that perhaps forgetting one’s morals is absurd because it is not knowledge in the sense of dates, addresses, etc., but more of knowledge in terms of a skill, such as skill at a sport or in a language, as Aristotle seems to be hinting at in the second quote above. In this way, Ryle posits, one would be unable to forget the difference between right and wrong in that one cannot instantly forget a skill in the way that one can instantly forget factual knowledge. However, Ryle argues that one still can forget such skills,

⁴² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140b

⁴³ Ryle, Gilbert. “On Forgetting the Difference between Right and Wrong.” *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, edited by Abraham Irving Melden, University of Washington Press, 1958, pp. 147–159. p148

such as forgetting one's Spanish through a long period of disuse, which cannot be applied to one's morals.

A third option that Ryle considers is the idea that perhaps virtues are more in line with tastes or preferences, perhaps similar to an educated taste such as how someone needs to be taught to appreciate good music or good wine, etc. Furthermore, this would fit well with the way that we think about morals, some people take to music immediately, as some are just more empathetic people, and to be moral on principle requires education and training, as knowing good from bad wine does. Ryle gives further descriptions of the connection between tastes and knowledge of virtues, pointing out that “to be honest or charitable on principle, even against the impulses of the moment, involves knowing the difference between right and wrong — much as, unlike the mere relishing of one piece of music more than another appreciating the superiority of the one piece of the other involves knowing their relative merits and demerits.”⁴⁴ He goes further to say that when considering examples of *educated* tastes and preferences, there is an essential component of caring that reflects his description of knowledge of virtue “There seems to be a sort of incongruity in the idea of a person's knowing the difference between good and bad wine or poetry, while not caring a whit more for the one than for the other...”⁴⁵ Now, Ryle says,

“we can begin to see why it is ridiculous to say that one has forgotten the difference between right and wrong. To have been taught the difference is to have been brought to appreciate the difference, and this appreciation is not just a competence to label correctly or just a capacity to do things efficiently. It includes an inculcated caring, a habit of taking certain sorts of things seriously. A person who used to care may, indeed cease to

⁴⁴ Ryle, *On Forgetting*, p151

⁴⁵ Ryle, *On Forgetting*, p152

care or to care so much. But ceasing to care is not forgetting any more than ceasing to believe something or to mistrust someone is forgetting.”⁴⁶

Ryle takes this to be, at the very least sufficient as a working definition of the type of knowledge that virtue is, and proceeds to explore the concept further, pivoting to consider the question from another angle which he brings up in his second essay, “Can Virtue Be Taught?” As a starting point to answering this question, Ryle takes up the Platonic dialogue, *Protagoras*, where Protagoras and Socrates are discussing this very question, that if indeed virtue or morality is a type of knowledge, then it must be able to be taught, but if it can be taught, then where are the teachers to teach it, and why do we find the idea of such instructors ridiculous? Protagoras suggests that we think about the idea as similar to learning one’s mother tongue or language. It’s something that we do learn, often from a very young age, but it is something that we get from our environment — parents, relatives and through interacting with society in general. Ryle returns to the distinction that he made in the previous essay — virtue can definitely be learned as it’s not something that we are born with, but the idea that it can be taught, at least intentionally, is perhaps a little ridiculous. In this way, the solution presented by Protagoras is almost enough, but can’t be the whole of the problem.

Ryle then turns to Aristotle’s reply to Socrates to see if there might be something to be learned there. Aristotle suggests that what makes us hard working, kind, or self controlled is learning, but learning by example, being shown by those in society around us how to act, and then going out into the world and trying to emulate such actions, and failing, and getting closer when one tries again, and so on. In short, habituation is the answer.

⁴⁶ Ryle, *On Forgetting*, p156

However, once again Ryle asserts that this is not the whole of the problem. If we are to view virtue as some sort of ability or skill that we can train and habituate ourselves into, similar to playing piano or riding a bike, Socrates' original question still remains — where are the instructors and trainers of virtue? Ryle claims that this discrepancy is because although it may resemble a skill, it still isn't quite that. Going back to the idea of virtue as a type of caring, he imagines a skilled surgeon, suggesting that he might have gained his skill at surgery from instruction and classes, but this leaves out the question of his scruples, what it is that would prevent him from botching an operation for money. A skill, Ryle argues, is something that could be used for good or for evil — a skilled surgeon could have a complete lack of morals such that they would do something like botch an operation for money, or they could be completely unwilling to do such a thing, but in either case this would have no bearing whatsoever on their skill as a surgeon. Similarly, Ryle argues that there is something different between teaching a child to play a card game and “teach[ing] the child to prefer losing the game to winning it by cheating.”⁴⁷ This further distances his concept of morality from the concept of a skill. Furthermore, Ryle claims that there is no reward for skill at being good or even the best at morality like there might be rewards for being the best or most skilled surgeon or tennis player, further distancing morality from the concept of a skill.

Ryle says that the odd thing about this question of how virtue/morality is taught is that we all know the answer to it — we learn our morals from our parents, heroes in the stories that we read, and societal interactions in general. It's something that we learn by example. Ryle asserts that those who we learn from are more like models rather than mentors — they act virtuously

⁴⁷ Ryle, Gilbert. “Can Virtue Be Taught?” *Education and the Development of Reason*, by R.F Dearden et al., Routledge and K. Paul, 1972, pp. 434–447. p440

because they care about acting as such themselves, and in modeling or as Ryle says ‘aping’ our role models, we learn to care about being virtuous. And so, Ryle concludes having given his argument for morality or virtue as a type of caring, something that we learn from those around us and similar to a skill in that we can train ourselves into it, but not quite the same.

Analysis

I find Ryle’s portrayal of morality as caring to be highly compelling as it appears to be much truer to what morality is than any other explanation. I see the other two possibilities for what morality is to be the ideas of morality as knowledge and morality as a skill, and Ryle presents compelling arguments against both of these concepts. In the case of morality as knowledge, Ryle shows us how this cannot be the case with his comparison of the plausibility of one forgetting a piece of knowledge as opposed to the absurdity of forgetting one’s morals, an idea which I think anyone would and should agree with. Furthermore, this is not some offhand or random comparison, but a comparison that cuts at what really matters when asking the question of what morality is. Ryle, as a philosopher of the mind, is specifically looking at the functional role of knowledge, what part it plays in the overall system of the mind, through this example of forgetting, and testing morality to see if it fits the concept well enough to be a type of knowledge — which he argues it does not, and I agree.

As for morality as a skill, I find Ryle’s argument to be powerful but not quite as convincing as his argument against morality as knowledge. Again, Ryle appeals to the functional role of a skill to build his argument, claiming that possessing a skill has no bearing on what one will do with that skill, skills being able to be used for either good or evil, whereas morality does in fact entail some amount of commitment to the morally correct action. Skills are about doing

an action well; morality is about doing the right action over less moral actions. I do not disagree with this distinction, but I do have some trouble with Ryle's second point, that there are no rewards for being moral or even being an expert in morality, like there are for being skilled or even an expert at something like surgery or tennis. There are plenty of rewards for being moral — socially we often find ourselves drawn to people that are upstanding moral individuals. We ask them for advice, trust them with our material possessions, praise them behind their backs rather than disparage them, and generally want to be around and surround ourselves with such individuals. Furthermore, to return to Aristotle's idea of the moral life as the happiest life we can see a further benefit to being moral as the assurance and comfortability with oneself afforded from not only knowing that one's actions are morally correct, but also that one won't be looking over one's shoulder for the law to catch up to one's immoral actions. So, I think there is perhaps a bit more of a similarity between morality and skillfulness than Ryle suggests, but not enough to go against his concept of morality as a type of caring.

Ryle gives very compelling evidence for morality/virtue to be linked to caring. I think his most compelling comparison is when he compares it to the idea of acquired tastes or preferences such as his example of the difference between teaching a child to play a card game versus teaching a child to care more about playing without cheating than losing or winning. In this way Ryle distances his concept of morality from the concept of a skill, such as skill at playing a card game, to show that caring about how the game is played is something different than being taught to play the game skillfully. This sets Ryle up for the discussion of how we are taught this type of caring, which he answers by saying that it is something we are taught by example through role models and the people that we surround ourselves with, aligning this concept with other types of caring which he argues we acquire in the same way, and I find myself agreeing.

All well and good, but the question still remains, how does this come to bear on the question of what makes Aristotle's virtue ethics special in comparison to Kant's deontology or Mill's utilitarianism? If there is some way that virtue ethics is special, then it might be so through Ryle's concept of morality as a type of caring. I will argue that if we are to take morality to be a kind of caring, as Ryle suggest we do, then we will find that Aristotle's virtue ethics sees morality as something very similar to this concept, and much closer than the conceptions of morality given by Kant or Mill. As such, in this chapter I will argue that Aristotle's conception of what morality is, morality as a skill, is closer to Ryle's conception of morality as caring than the accounts of morality given by Kant or Mill of morality as knowledge. I see Aristotle's conception of morality as a skill and Ryle's conception of morality as a type of caring bleed into each other in many important respects. Ryle argues that Aristotle's concept of morality as a skill goes wrong in the way that a skill might be used for good or evil, which I agree with, but I believe has less of a bearing on Aristotle's conception of morality than the concept of morality as a skill in general.

Going back to the idea of habituation that Aristotle expresses in his ethics I can see the parallels between this idea and Ryle's take on morality. Aristotle, as seen in the quote that Ryle employs, says that we learn virtues by example, not by being taught, which is a claim that Ryle supports and is a large part of his argument for morality as a type of caring. Similar to Ryle, Aristotle does not hold virtue to be merely a skill at doing something, which I think can be seen in his distinction between cleverness and prudence.⁴⁸ Aristotle makes the distinction that cleverness is knowing how to get what one wants, whereas prudence is knowing what the right things to want are. While both might be desirable, Aristotle says that prudence is more desirable

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144a20

than cleverness as cleverness can be led astray, to ends that one shouldn't be pursuing, whereas prudence always knows what the right things to aim at are. To me, this sounds a lot like the distinction that Ryle makes when he is arguing that morality is similar to but not quite the same as a skill — he argues that there is a difference between a skilled surgeon, and a surgeon who wouldn't botch an operation for money that is not covered by the concept of a skill, which he then argues is in fact this morality as a type of caring which he is discussing. As such, I think we can see past Ryle's insistence that morality to Aristotle is a skill — Aristotle may have indeed thought morality to be a skill, but through the details of his argument for what morality is we can see it is actually closely aligned to Ryle's reasoning for holding morality to be a type of caring.

So much for the similarities between Ryle and Aristotle, but as we saw in the last two chapters, there is plenty that is similar between virtue ethics, deontology, and consequentialism — as I am looking for something special about virtue ethics, the real question for this chapter is less of “how does Ryle support Aristotle” and more of “how does Ryle go against the pictures of morality put forward by Kant and Mill?”

In the case of Kant, there is plenty of evidence that Kant sees morality as a type of knowledge. Kant takes his categorical imperative to be the sort of thing that one can gain from a book or other piece of literature. The indisputable goal of his work on ethics is to provide such an argument that anyone could read what he has written and gain an understanding of morality through the categorical imperative. If one is to accept his argument, then one will have the sort of knowledge that can help one be moral through the categorical imperative test.

Furthermore, Kant holds his categorical imperative to be universalizable — which I see as further evidence for Kant seeing morality as knowledge — everyone would get to this place of morality themselves, perhaps through reading Kant's works, but at the same time everyone

(should) get to the same destination, the same set of rules of morality. This is very different from the idea of morality as caring as I see morality as caring as allowing for far more subjectivity of what counts as ‘moral’. To Kant, what is moral is clean cut and testable — moral rules are ones that pass the categorical imperative test, being universalizable, among his other criteria. Morality as caring is a concept that follows the societal values of the time, adapting, basically, to what one’s role models (where one gains their morality from) hold as moral or not. Furthermore, as I have pointed out earlier in this essay, Kant’s morality does not allow for striving in the same way that Ryle’s and Aristotle’s do. In the way that Ryle sees morality as a type of caring and the way that Aristotle sees us each on our own path towards virtue there is an element of striving, of working towards something better that is built into the process of becoming virtuous which is not there in Kant’s categorical imperative.

In the case of Mill, there is plenty to suggest a morality that is similar to caring. First of all there is Mill’s description of the binding force of his morality as internal sanctions “the social feelings of mankind — the desire to be in unity with one’s fellow creatures, which is already a powerful principle in human nature.”⁴⁹ He further goes on to align this idea of internal sanctions with that of human conscience, which he claims is “a subjective feeling in our own minds.”⁵⁰ This and other parts of his discussion on why we should be moral provide a strong suggestion that Mill also took morality to be a type of caring, though he may not call it as such explicitly, I think his discussion of it as a ‘feeling’ comes close enough. Interestingly enough, just as Mill’s reliance on internal sanctions gave us a very powerful self interested reason to be moral, once again it proves to bring his theory up to snuff on this assessment of morality as caring. In fact,

⁴⁹ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p32

⁵⁰ *Ibid*

proponents of utilitarianism see themselves as strongly aligned with the concept of caring in the way that they hold an equal amount of care for each and every person all over the world with the idea of moral actions being those that promote the general happiness/good of everyone.

I think it is hard to deny that this is something which Aristotle's virtue ethics and Ryle's concept of morality share, giving us something that is indeed special about Aristotle's virtue ethics. However as in Chapter One we again can see how Mill's internal sanctions give his theory not only a binding force as to provide us all with self interested reasons to be moral, but further the ability to see his morality as a type of caring, elevating it to Ryle's standard. Kant's deontology again seems to completely miss the mark with the strong evidence present for morality as a type of knowledge through his categorical imperative and use of a priori principles to reason his way into morality. Going back to the idea of the respective moral psychologies of these three theories, I find this concept of caring to be strong support for the idea that the moral psychologies of Aristotle's virtue ethics and Mill's utilitarianism better match who we are as human beings and give us a morality that is achievable within our own lives.

Conclusion

These three chapters each looked at a potential way for Aristotle's virtue ethics to be special or distinguished from Kant and Mill's ethical theories. In Chapter One we looked at the convergence problem, the challenge for a moral theory to provide self interested reasons to be moral. In Chapter Two we looked at Pierre Hadot's concept of philosophy as a way of life, assessing each theory's potential to be considered as such. In Chapter Three we took up Gilbert Ryle's view of morality as caring, examining the three theories treatment of morality to see if they fit more with this idea of morality as caring or the idea of morality as a type of knowledge, which Ryle is arguing against.

I have already made my bias for Aristotle's virtue ethics quite clear, though I did my best to remain impartial when assessing these theories, I will admit that the criteria for assessment was quite skewed from the onset — I chose the three categories feeling that they would support my initial intuition that there is something special about Aristotle's virtue ethics, which is why I find myself quite surprised to be concluding that, upon closer examination, there is less to that initial intuition than I first thought. However, I did notice a pattern emerging. In Chapter One I concluded that while Aristotle gives us the strongest solution to the convergence problem with his claim that the virtuous life is the happiest life, Mill's concept of the internal sanctions of morality do give us the tools to deal with the problem. Similarly, in Chapter Three, I believe that I have shown Aristotle's concept of morality as a skill (although argued against by Ryle) similar to the concept of morality as caring through his discussion of Prudence as opposed to Cleverness. However once again Mill's internal sanctions come to the rescue for his theory, demonstrating morality as caring through the subjective feeling of the human conscience.

The questions in both of these chapters were centered around ideas of moral motivation, what it is that pushes us to be moral, tied up with what morality is as an overall concept and how we view it or deal with it in our daily lives, demonstrating a much deeper similarity between Mill and Aristotle's theories. It is also worth noting that in both of these chapters we saw Kant's deontology come woefully short, struggling to provide us with self interested reasons to be moral and in sticking to the concept of morality as a type of knowledge straying far from what morality is — if we are to take Ryle's concept of morality as caring to be a true assessment. This is a meaningful criticism of Kant, especially Ryle's concept of morality as caring — this distinction comes to bear on the question of how we actually learn morality, and if we as human beings respond to morality as a type of caring, any moral theory that treats it as a type of knowledge will have plenty of difficulty in gaining traction with everyday people, and furthermore will have difficulty in providing relatable moral motivation, as we see with Kant in Chapter One.

Chapter Two gives us the most concrete example of something special about Aristotle's virtue ethics — unlike the other two it is capable of being followed as a philosophical way of life, most notably through the spiritual exercise of habituation. This conclusion I found to be hardly surprising as Hadot is describing ancient philosophical practices as the truest representation of philosophy as a way of life, and Aristotle's virtue ethics is such an ancient philosophical practice. It is interesting to compare this result to the similarities between Aristotle and Mill in the other two chapters — what it is about Mill's moral theory that isn't up to snuff for it to be a philosophical way of life is its lack of spiritual exercises. He may ground his morality in internal sanctions, but he doesn't give us concrete applicable ways to work towards his conception of morality, instead relying on society to build moral habits in its citizens. However, I think it is fair to question how big of a failing this actually is for his theory. Compared to the

questions surrounding what morality is and its moral motivation in the other two chapters, this seems like a relatively small failing.

However, I found myself strongly agreeing with Pierre Hadot's criticism of modern analytic philosophy which he describes as far too focused on argumentation and defeating others' arguments as opposed to the more 'life philosophy' theories given by ancient philosophers. If we are to accept this assessment, I think that what is special about Aristotle's virtue ethics, its ability to be followed as a way of life, is an important distinction. A large part of the questions in Chapters One and Three has to do with the applicability of the moral theories to life, how well they can convince the everyday person to be moral and whether how they see morality is true to human life. This third criteria of how well the theories in question would fare as a philosophical way of life is absolutely tied into these other two questions and provides a meaningful assessment that bears upon them. A moral theory that is able to be followed as this sort of philosophical way of life should incorporate an accurate view of human morality and the strength of its moral motivation can only be increased by being able to be incorporated into one's life as a life philosophy. As such, I think that Aristotle's virtue ethics can be seen as unique from Kant and Mill's moral theories through Hadot's concept of philosophy as a way of life. This I find to be fully compatible with my initial intuition about Aristotle's virtue ethics – that there is something about it that makes it more applicable to daily life and who we are as human beings. I will be treating it as such a way of life as I use it to inform my own life going forward, using habituation to guide myself to the virtuous mean between extremes.

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