

ETHICS: ARISTOTLE AND KANT

Thomas J. Slakey

I want to begin with the word "ethics" itself. The traditional term used by Plato for this sort of inquiry was "politics", and this is the term Aristotle himself first uses to describe such questions as, "What is justice?" "What is virtue?" "What is a good human being?" However, Aristotle soon makes a distinction that is found nowhere in Plato, a distinction between two kinds of human excellences, or virtues, the first class called "intellectual", that is excellences of speculative reason, and a second class called "ethical", roughly speaking, excellences of behavior. The term "ethical" is new, coined by Aristotle to mark his distinction. He will then go on to describe his inquiry as "ethics", and this is the word used in the titles of his two books on the subject.

Words related to *ethos* in their root sense refer to what is typical or customary, for example in Homer and Herodotus to the usual dwelling places of horses or lions, or to the accustomed abodes of men. The words can also refer, as in Herodotus, to the manners or customs of a people, and this is especially the force of the Latin word *mores*, from which we get our own word "moral", and also of Kant's word, *Sitten*, usually translated "morals". It might seem then that the importance of these words for Aristotle would be to call attention to what is customary or traditional in human societies

Thomas J. Slakey, now retired, was a tutor at St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland, and for four years Dean of the College. He was also Academic Vice President of St. Mary's College, California.

and is in that sense "moral". However, this is not the direction of his interest at all.

Instead Aristotle focuses on a related meaning of the *ethos* words as referring to what is customary or characteristic in the life of an individual, as when Homer speaks of Athena's habit of quarreling with Ares (*Iliad*, V, 767). In the *Poetics* the related word is usually translated "character", as in the "characters" of a drama. There is a remarkable sentence in which Aristotle uses the word three times in praising Homer. Unlike inferior writers, Homer almost never speaks in his own voice, but instead immediately brings in a man or a woman, or some other character, never without character but having character (1460 10). This is what Aristotle particularly wants to examine in his ethical writings, the distinctive habits of individuals, the dispositions or states of soul which lead us to act in typical ways, and this is what he means by calling his inquiry "ethical".

What then is the distinction between intellectual and ethical excellence, that is, between intellectual and ethical virtue? Aristotle begins by distinguishing the soul into two parts, rational and nonrational.¹ The rational part investigates truth and falsity, and has such virtues as scientific knowledge, dealing with the truth about unchanging things, and art, dealing with the truth about making and building. Practice and habit would clearly seem to be relevant to these virtues, as with practice in proving geometrical theorems, or practice in handling hammers and saws, but Aristotle does not emphasize habits in connection with intellectual virtues because he is saving the notion of habit, in a particular sense, as the source and defining property of the ethical virtues. To speak of ethical virtues will mean first of all virtues based on habit.

Contrasted with the rational part of the soul, the locus of the

¹ From now on most of my quotations of Aristotle will be from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. I use the Terence Irwin translation (Indianapolis, 1985) and for the Greek text the Loeb edition, 1991).

intellectual virtues, there is the completely non-rational part, the source of the vegetative processes of nutrition and growth common not only to human beings and animals but to all living things, including plants. Next there is a third part of the soul intermediate between the rational and the non-rational, which Aristotle describes as the "appetitive" or "desiring" part. This part is proper to animals, including human beings, but in human beings the desires share in a rational principle to some extent, because they are capable of listening to and obeying reason, but they are also distinct from reason because they are capable of resisting and fighting against it. It is this intermediate part of the soul, partly rational and partly not, which is the particular source of difficulty in ethical action and in ethical inquiry (I, 13).

To understand it better, we have to deal with the notions of pleasure and pain, beginning from simple physical pleasures and pains. In developing the concept of ethical virtue, Aristotle always starts from temperance, which relates to food, drink, and sex, or courage, which relates to fear of bodily injury and death. However, he also extends the concept of pleasure to cover even the pleasure of thought and contemplation, and the concept of pain to cover humiliation, and failure, and even the pain of waiting for somebody. Thus he makes the extraordinarily sweeping remark: "For it is pleasure that causes us to do base actions, and pain that causes us to abstain from fine ones" (II, 3, 1104b 10). To the extent that the notions of pleasure and pain can be broadened to cover all of human action, so can Aristotle's analysis of ethical virtue, as we will see.

Next we will need the concept of "passion", or as it is more commonly expressed in modern English, "emotion", or in Irwin's translation "feeling". I find this an extremely difficult concept. Aristotle explains it first by examples: desire, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, affection, hatred, longing, jealousy, pity (II, 5, 1105b 21-2). What a list this is! Is it possible to find anything common to anger, fear, and pity, to

desire, affection, and joy? As a general description Aristotle hazards only the statement that the emotions are accompanied by pleasure and pain (1105b 23). I think that, as with pleasure and pain, the concept of emotion is most clear when it has a genuinely physical component. For example, in his work *On The Soul* Aristotle says that anger involves not merely an appetite for revenge, but also a boiling of blood around the heart, and he says that a similar account would apply to all the emotions (403a 3-33). The word "emotion" suggests that we are "moved", as in the expression used several times in the Gospels, "moved by compassion". (This phrase translates a remarkable word, that, so far as I know is coined in the New Testament, *splagchnizomai*.² Its root refers to the belly, the bowels. To be moved with compassion is to feel something in your belly.) Also the root of the word "passion", in English as in Greek, suggests that in experiencing a passion we are, so to speak, "passive". We undergo or endure a change that acts on us. Aristotle regards this change as complex, as occurring partly in our bodies but also partly in our souls, affecting the way we think and act.

Finally we will need the concept of "disposition", "state of character", "habit". The Greek word is *hexis*, which means simply having something, possessing something. Applied to the soul the word "habit" means having something in a relatively permanent way, as opposed to actions, experiences, pleasures, and pains, all of which are transitory. Aristotle defines the *hexeis* as "the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the emotions" (II, 5, 1105b 25). With reference to anger, for example, we stand badly if we feel it violently or too weakly, and well if we feel it moderately, and similarly with reference to the other passions.

Aristotle is now ready and bold enough to define "virtue",

² See, for example, Mt. 20:34, of Jesus when he cures two blind men; Mk. 1:41, of Jesus when he cures a leper; Lk. 10:33, of the good Samaritan; Lk. 15:20, of the father of the prodigal son.

the concept which Plato left undefined in the *Meno*. First of all, its genus. It is a kind of *hexis*, a state of character, a habit. We can say that it is the kind of habit which makes a person good, which makes a person function well (II, 6, 1106a 23), but this is to give a mere verbal definition. How does virtue make anyone good? Aristotle is aiming at what can be called a causal or explanatory definition. The answer has already been anticipated. It is a habit that helps someone feel emotions moderately. Thus Aristotle says it is a habit "lying in a mean", a *mesotes*, literally a midpoint (1107a 1).

Let us review. We began from the notions of pleasure and pain. We defined emotion in terms of pleasure and pain. We defined habit in terms of emotion. Now we have defined ethical virtue in terms of habit. The root notions throughout are pleasure and pain. Ethical virtue is the habit of being moderately affected by pleasures and pains, that is, the state of being in a midpoint or "mean" with respect to pleasure and pain.

But does Aristotle's account of virtue really explain anything? Before trying to answer this question, let us follow his argument one step farther. He goes on to say that the midpoint of virtue is not absolute but varies with individuals. His analogy is the amount of food proper for an athlete. What is too much for a runner may be just right for a wrestler (II, 6, 1106b 1-8). How then is the midpoint to be determined? Aristotle's reply is rather surprising. The midpoint is to be determined by reason, that is, as the person having practical wisdom would determine it (1107a 1). But then why mention the midpoint at all? Why not simply say that right human action is determined by reason, as the person having practical wisdom would determine it? Kant ridicules Aristotle's definition of virtue as a "mean" by saying, "if that is the wisdom in search of which we should go back to the ancients, as to those who were nearer the fountainhead . . . then we have made a bad choice in turning to its oracle".³ Kant is joined in his

³ The *Metaphysic of Morals*, Mary Gregor translation (Cambridge,

criticism by a number of modern scholars, for example R. A. Gauthier. Gauthier gives an elaborate historical account of the notion of moderation in Greek thought prior to Aristotle and concludes: "When Aristotle in his turn appeals to the notion of the mean, he is only conforming to usage. The old word awakened in his Greek soul too much resonance for him to reject it."⁴

1991), Ak. 404, hereafter cited as MM. I will also frequently refer to *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Lewis White Beck translation (Indianapolis, 1959), hereafter Foundations.

⁴ Rene A. Gauthier, O.P., *La morale d'Aristote* (Paris, 1958), p. 64, my translation. See also Sir David Ross, p. vi of his introduction to the *Magna Moralia* and the *Eudemian Ethics* in *The Works of Aristotle Translated Into English*, Vol. IX (Oxford, 1925) and his *Aristotle*, 5th Edition (London, 1949), p. 195. Even though Ross says he was "nurtured" on Aristotle's *Ethics* at Oxford and that it became "bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh," he writes that it is merely "a very frequent accident" that so many of the virtues Aristotle describes happen to relate to a mean. These are good examples of scholars thinking they understand their author better than he understood himself. Thomas Aquinas on the other hand, in his commentary on the *Ethics*, always assumes that Aristotle had some reason to say what he did and looks for a way to understand the text. In the *Summa Theologiae* he refines Aristotle's doctrine of virtue as a mean in what I think is an accurate interpretation. He raises the objection, how can virtue be a mean of the passions? This would have to mean that virtue is itself a passion. His reply: virtue, in its essence is *not* a mean of the passions but rather in its effect, since virtue *establishes* a mean in the passions (Prima Secundae Q. 59, a. 1, ad 1). In Q. 64, a.'s 1 and 2, he spells this out more fully. Through repeated determinations of reason, the virtues perfect the appetitive parts of the soul in virtues related to temperance and courage. The virtue of justice, however, is not directly related to the appetitive parts of the soul but to external things. As Aristotle had noted, its mean is different. Thomas extends "a sort of mean" (in quodam medio) to the intellectual virtues in that truth has to be conformed to the measure of things, neither exceeding by saying what is not nor falling short by failing to say what is (Q. 64, a. 3). He even extends the mean to the theological virtues but then only "accidentally" (a. 4). In the extremely detailed and elaborate study of the virtues in *Secunda Secundae*, many times longer than Aristotle's discussion, Thomas repeatedly exploits the concept of virtue as a mean between opposite vices.

These criticisms are indeed plausible. After all, besides the remarks about adjusting the mean in relation to each man, Aristotle himself emphasizes how complex and variable human life is. One who writes about human behavior can make only very rough statements which will admit of many exceptions (I, 3). One who is faced with acting in a particular situation must not expect that there are any rules that will tell him exactly what to do. He must instead make use of a kind of "perception"; he must, so to speak, "see" what he is to do when he cannot deduce the right course of action from any list of rules (II, 9; III, 3, 1113a 2). Furthermore, in describing what is meant by the mean of pleasure and pain, Aristotle says:

We can be afraid, for example, or be confident, or have appetites, or get angry, or feel pity, in general have pleasure or pain, both too much and too little, and in both ways not well; but at the right times, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the intermediate and best condition, and this is proper to virtue (II, 6, 1106b 18-23).

Is not what counts in this description "the right times", "the right way", etc.? This is what the notion of the mean really seems to come down to. We're inclined to say that it doesn't matter how much or how little fear the soldier *feels*. What matters is whether or not he throws down his shield and runs away. It doesn't matter how much or how little desire the adulterer *feels*. What matters is the fact that he's sleeping with someone else's wife.

Aristotle does on a few occasions say that in trying to decide what to do, we consciously look toward a mean (II, 1106b 9 and 14) and that we even "aim at it" as an archer aims at a target (1106b 16). He also says that actions, as well as emotions, admit of a mean (1106b 24). The virtue of justice, in particular, relates to the mean in a way different from the other virtues. For example, in dealing with money, we have to pay what is deserved, neither too much nor too little. However,

Aristotle most often emphasizes not that we point reason toward a mean, but that we make it possible for reason itself to function by controlling our desire and fear, our hatred and anger, our joy and pity. The mean in question is a mean of the emotions, not of actions. In a way the account of right action is that it is simply what right reason determines. Ethical virtue is that moderation of the emotions which leaves reason free to choose wisely.

And thus Aristotle says in Book VI that the role of temperance is to preserve practical wisdom, and that this role is reflected in the words themselves, *sophrosune*, temperance, as *sodsousa ten phronesin*, saving or preserving *phronesis*, practical wisdom 1140b 12. He goes on:

For the origin of what is done in action is the goal it aims at, and if pleasure or pain has corrupted someone, it follows that the origin will not appear to him. Hence it will not be apparent that this must be the goal and cause of all his choice and action; for vice corrupts the origin (1140b 17-20).

Thus the soldier who is in a state of terror fails to see that he must stay at his post and defend the city, much as he might know it otherwise. The habitual drunkard, his mouth watering at the smell or even the thought of whiskey, forgets everything else. Whereas when reason finds something to be good or necessary, our desires must move toward it and embrace it, not push the reason to devise other alternatives (1139a 25). For the person of ethical virtue, the emotions support and strengthen reason instead of getting in its way.

Let us now consider Aristotle's most extended example, that of courage or bravery (III, 6-9). The paradigm is facing death in battle in the defense of one's city. The brave person will feel fear but "he will remain unperturbed, as far as a human being can be." He will stand firm against dangers "in the right way, as prescribed by reason" (1115b 11-13). Aristotle considers several variations that fall short of true courage.

One is mere animal courage, acting mainly from anger or emotional excitement, as in making an impulsive rush against danger, whereas in the case of true courage, emotion "cooperates" with reason but does not dominate it (1116b 25-35). Another variation is the apparent courage of professional soldiers, based on their better weapons and their greater experience and skill. Aristotle says that this is not real courage because when the danger is too great and they realize that they are actually inferior in numbers and equipment, "they are the first to run, whereas the citizen troops stand firm" and die fighting (1116b 16-18). A third variation is when soldiers fight not so much for the good of the city as for their own honor (1116a 17ff). Aristotle cites Homer's Diomedes and Hektor, two of the greatest fighters in the Trojan War, as lacking the truest courage because both speak explicitly about fighting to avoid disgrace (*Iliad*, VIII, 148 and XXII, 100). Thus the truest courage is present only when one acts "for the sake of what is fine" (1115b 13). The word translated "fine" here, *kalos*, could also be translated as "good", or "noble", or even as "beautiful". Aristotle's sense of good human action is related to the notion of the beautiful, a beautiful human being.

There is an apparent inconsistency when Aristotle goes on a little later to discuss a related virtue, greatness of soul, or "magnanimity" in the root sense of that word. The great souled person is one who "thinks himself worthy of great things and is really worthy of them" (1123b 3). Here, surprisingly, Aristotle stresses the role of honor (IV, 3, 1123b 15-24, 1124a 5-18). He apparently thinks that for taking on large responsibilities striving for honor has to play more of a role than it should for a brave soldier. The passion for public recognition, for "being somebody", can help one undertake large tasks that place one in public view. One who is "small souled" underestimates his own abilities and does not undertake what he could, perhaps because he lacks that passion for honor. On the other hand, one can want honor too much and

attempt tasks beyond one's reach. One is then *chaunos*, a word that suggests gaping, having one's mouth wide open, usually translated "vain" (1123b 9). Aristotle makes the interesting remark that being small souled is more common than vanity, and worse than vanity (1125a 34). It is apparently better to err on the side of wanting honor too much than wanting it too little.

In the classic work on war by Carl von Clausewitz, there is a remarkable passage which makes clear the role of honor in war, at least for a general, and the desire for honor is clearly thought of in an Aristotelian way, as an emotion. Clausewitz provides good evidence because it is likely that he derived his opinion from his own direct experience, not from reading Aristotle. He begins by lamenting the way in which the German language casts a pejorative sense on words that come through in translation as "greed for honor" and "hankering after glory" (*Ehrgeiz* and *Ruhmsucht*). He then goes on:

Other emotions may be more common and more venerated —patriotism, idealism, vengeance, enthusiasm of every kind—but they are no substitute for a thirst for fame and honor. They may, indeed, rouse the mass to action and inspire it, but they cannot give the commander the ambition to strive higher than the rest, as he must if he is to distinguish himself. They cannot give him, as can ambition, a personal, almost proprietary interest in every aspect of fighting, so that he turns every opportunity to best advantage. . . . We may well ask whether history has ever known a great general who was not ambitious; whether, indeed, such a figure is conceivable.⁵

Aristotle considers many other virtues, but perhaps one more will suffice to show how the analysis of virtue in terms of the emotions, and of pleasure and pain, is extended from the most obvious cases, the pleasures of food, drink, and sex,

⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Everyman's Library, 1993), pp. 121–2.

on the one hand, and the pains of injury and death on the other, to less obvious senses of pleasure and pain. The virtue of generosity is concerned with the right use of wealth, particularly with regard to giving (IV, 1). Generosity can clearly be conceived of as a midpoint between wasting money by giving too freely and missing opportunities for good by being too stingy. But how is it a mean of the emotions? Aristotle says that the generous person will give "with pleasure or [at any rate] without pain" (1120a 27, also 1120b 30). The truly generous person enjoys giving to worthy causes. He does not suffer as he sees his money disappear. People do *care* about their money. Those who don't care enough can simply waste it. Those who care too much can hoard their money and lose opportunities for doing good. Aristotle says that people who have inherited their money are thought to be more generous than those who have earned the money themselves, because those who have worked hard for their money tend to "love" it too much. The word translated "love", is literally love, *agapao* (1120b 12). If the word "love" is not out of place, neither is the analysis of generosity as a midpoint of the passions involved in giving money.

Let us now turn to Kant. Kant's moral philosophy is based on the arguments of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which he claimed to produce a "Copernican revolution" in philosophy (B xv–xvii). In the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* he again promises to produce something "entirely new" (Preface, Ak. 390). His argument is that any proposition possessing universality and necessity, like the proposition that five plus seven equals twelve, has to be based on reason, not on mere experience. Since moral propositions impose obligation, they do possess necessity and therefore they have to be based on reason, not on mere experience. Obviously experience is needed to apply them and to help us obey them, but the principles themselves derive their power from reason itself (Ak. 389). Moral propositions also possess universality, as we will see in a moment.

Whatever one thinks of the general argument of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, it does enable Kant to give a brilliant articulation of what is implied by the ordinary sense of right and wrong, of what is involved in a moral judgment, a formulation Kant calls "the categorical imperative". It reads as follows: "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Second Section, Ak. 421). This is an imperative because it tells me what I must do. It is "categorical", or universal, because it applies to everyone without exception. As I read the rule of no exceptions, following many other commentators on Kant,⁶ it means that if I feel morally obliged to do something, I believe that anyone else in my exact situation would also be morally bound to do the same thing. If I feel morally bound not to do something, anyone else in my exact situation would also be morally bound not to do it. So interpreted, Kant's analysis is reflected in a phrase we have in English, "moral indignation". If I see a bigger boy beating up on a small child, I feel indignant. I think what he is doing is wrong. It would be wrong for me and it is wrong for him. On the other hand, if another person is merely ill mannered or foolish, I might be annoyed or even angry, but I don't feel indignation. The word "indignation" implies a sense of right and wrong.

Kant makes a very sharp distinction between the "moral" and the merely "prudential". What is moral is what I am strictly obliged to do whether I like it or not. It has nothing to do with my inclinations and desires, but is simply my duty (Ak. 417). The prudential, on the other hand, is based on my

⁶ See, for example, H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative*, 6th Ed. (London, 1967), p. 135, p. 173, Kant is giving only the "form" of moral obligation; Lewis White Beck in his Introduction to *Foundations of the Metaphysic of Morals*, p. xix, ". . . it is not the specific precepts which are universalized. . . . What is universalized is the requirement that a certain character be found in our rules". See also R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford, 1952), p. 70.

own inclinations and desires. For example, as a businessman I am morally obliged to treat my customers honestly. If I do so merely as a matter of good business, however, I am acting only prudentially, for the sake of my own welfare rather than as a matter of moral obligation (Ak. 397, 419).

However, Latin writers such as Thomas Aquinas use the word *prudentia* to translate Aristotle's *phronesis*, practical wisdom, and it comes through in many English translations of Aristotle as "prudence". By *phronesis* Aristotle means reason directing our actions well, that is, toward what is good for us as human beings (VI, 5, 1140a 24ff). The difficulty is not merely in the translations. Aristotle also speaks of the goal of our lives as *eudaimonia*, as our "welfare", our "flourishing", or our "happiness" (I, 4, 1095a 15ff.). Whereas Kant argues that trying to base morality on our welfare or our happiness is the worst possible starting point. First of all, it is false. Happiness is not always "proportional to good conduct" (Ak. 442). Presumably Kant means that one can be morally good and still unhappy, or morally bad and still happy. Secondly, to base morality on happiness is destructive of morality. It undermines the distinction between doing something because it is morally right and doing something simply for our own welfare (Ak. 442).⁷ And thus for many contemporary philosophers, Aristotle's *Ethics* is simply irrelevant from a moral point of view.⁸ Some of my fellow graduate students used to say that Aristotle was not writing about ethics at all and that he didn't even know what it was. They were probably unaware that it was Aristotle who had invented the term "ethics". Such are the vagaries of linguistic and philosophical change.

⁷ See also Ak. 393-399, 416-418, and in *The Metaphysic of Morals* Ak. 377-378).

⁸ See Arthur W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Value* (Oxford, 1969) and other authors cited in Roger J. Sullivan, "The Kantian Critique of Aristotle's Moral Philosophy: An Appraisal", *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. XXVIII, 1, September 1974, p. 25. I owe a great deal to this article.

In another way also, Kant cuts the ground out from underneath Aristotle's *Ethics*. Aristotle's whole inquiry is what Kant calls "empirical" and is therefore irrelevant to morality in the proper sense. Kant's argument is, I think, valid against much of the moral inquiry of the eighteenth century, that of the Scottish philosophers Hutcheson, Hume, and Adam Smith. As I understand them they were essentially doing moral psychology, that is, investigating what would motivate someone to act morally. Whatever might have as a fact of psychology motivated a person to do something, the question still remains, is the proposed action morally right? Whether Kant's argument is valid against Aristotle is a much more difficult question that I will return to later.

What then becomes of the virtues in Kant's moral philosophy, since the discussion of the virtues is clearly an empirical inquiry? If one reads only the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, which is what most college students do, and not the later and larger work, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, one gets the impression that Kant is not interested in the virtues at all. However, nearly half of *The Metaphysics of Morals* is devoted to a detailed discussion of the virtues, some of it similar in details to Aristotle's account. In fact Kant's general understanding of the role of the virtues is similar to Aristotle's, namely that virtuous habits help to prevent our desires and inclinations from interfering with the judgments of reason. To the extent one is virtuous, one's reason is relatively free to follow what is right.⁹ Nevertheless, three important differences remain.

First of all, Kant reduces the virtues to a secondary place. What is important for Kant is to focus the child's attention on the concept of duty. Duty should "sparkle like a jewel" so that it "has an influence on the human heart so much more powerful than all other incentives which may be derived from the empirical field that reason, in the consciousness of its dignity, despises them and gradually becomes master over them. . . .

⁹ See Ak. 380 on fortitude, Ak. 383-4, Ak. 388-9, Ak. 390, Ak. 394.

Even moderately young children can feel this power" (*Foundations*, Ak. 394, Ak. 410-411). The questioning of young people about their lives and their actions, which Kant actually describes as a "moral catechism" (MM, Ak. 477-484), is supposed to promote the awareness of duty. Moral education becomes largely a matter of talk.¹⁰

Aristotle's conception of moral education is very different. He says that just as we acquire skill in carpentry by building and skill in music by actually playing a musical instrument, so we acquire virtues by doing the things that virtuous people do, and over time developing habits. "We become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions" (II, I, 1103a 32-b 2). Hence it is very important that we acquire good habits "right from our youth"; indeed, it is "all important" (1103b 24-25). Aristotle also emphasizes the role of government and law in habituating the citizens from their childhood (1103b 3-7), and this is why, at the end of the *Ethics*, Aristotle turns to politics, to the role of the city in the moral formation of the citizens. He allows that arguments and teaching can reach some people, but alleges that they "seem unable to stimulate the many to what is fine and good". The reason is that "the soul of the student needs to have been prepared by habits for enjoying and hating finely, like ground that is to nourish seed. For someone whose life follows his feelings would not even listen to an argument turning him away. . . . In general feelings seem to yield to force, not to argument" (X, 9, 1179b 5-29).

The second difference in the conception of the virtues is as follows. Aristotle distinguishes virtue from strength of will, especially in relation to the virtue of temperance. Kant makes no such distinction. For Kant, virtue is always understood

¹⁰ Iris Murdoch, in her essay "The Sovereignty of Good", remarks that Kant takes a wrong turn in focusing the attention of the child upon himself. Reprinted in *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 99-117. The remark is on p. 103.

as self-constraint, as resisting the desires and inclinations that can lead us away from right action (MM, Ak. 381, 384, 394). Aristotle, on the other hand, thinks it is possible, through self-control and the formation of good habits, to reach a state in which the desires and inclinations no longer fight against the judgments of reason. This is Aristotle's paradigm of true virtue, a paradigm toward which his whole inquiry points. He considers the strong willed person as falling short of virtue because he has to continue to struggle against his inclinations (VII, 1-10, and for a short statement, 1151b 33-1152a 4).

Kant's moral paradigm is precisely that of Aristotle's strong willed person. Kant says, for example, that a person who enjoys life could be preserving his life only because he *wants* to. It is when "adversities and hopeless sorrow completely take away the relish for life" that someone's not committing suicide has any moral import. Only then does it appear that he acted out of duty and not out of inclination (*Foundations*, Ak. 397-398). Even then we cannot be sure. Kant adds that so powerful is our "dear self, which is always there" that "we cannot cite a single sure example of the disposition to act from pure duty" (Ak. 406-407).¹⁰ A scholar named Roger Sullivan argues that Kant's paradigm really derives not from his philosophy but from his upbringing in a pious Lutheran family. Kant himself acknowledges in his *Religion Within The Limits of Reason Alone* that there is a similarity to the Christian doctrine of the fall.¹¹ Sullivan quotes another scholar named W. F. R. Hardie, who argues that Kant's paradigm fits the modern moral sensibility. ". . . the merit of moral victory seems to be enhanced when there have been obstacles to overcome. Is the saint, or the moral hero, the man who is not tempted

¹⁰ In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak. 122, Kant writes: "But complete fitness of the will to the moral law is holiness, which is a perfection of which no rational being in the world of sense is at any time capable."

¹¹ *Religion Within The Limits of Reason Alone*, (Harper Torchbooks, 1960), pp. 36-37, cited by Sullivan, op. cit., pp. 41-42.

or the man who struggles successfully against temptations?"¹² Aristotle would probably put the question differently. Not, "who is the moral hero?" but "who is the more excellent human being?" It is his conception of human excellence that is so foreign to the modern sensibility.

One consequence of Kant's paradigm is that, as he says himself, "imitation has no place in moral matters, and examples serve only for encouragement" (*Foundations*, Ak. 409). In fact, examples seem to have a negative role. In *The Critique of Practical Reason* Kant suggests that children consider various historical figures, trying to find "good conduct in all its purity . . . noting even the least deviation from it with sorrow or contempt."¹³ He seems to mean that one might ask, for example, whether George Washington fought our Revolutionary War out of a pure sense of duty, or whether instead he was acting out of pride or to defend his own plantations. Could Kant's influence, along with that of Nietzsche and Freud, have something to do with the modern tradition of biographical writing, which seems deliberately to promote suspicion. The older tradition of biographical writing was quite different. In his life of Cato the Younger, Plutarch remarks that "the true love of virtue is in all men produced by the love and respect they bear to him that teaches it," but Plutarch adds that mere respect is not enough. "Those who praise good men, yet do not love them, may respect their reputation, but do not really admire, and will never imitate their virtue."¹⁴

My own opinion is that, as Plutarch says, example is an important and powerful source of moral education. I also think example is especially important when children are young. Those who have virtuous parents are extremely lucky. Chil-

¹² W. F. R. Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*, (Oxford, 1968), pp. 138-9, cited in Sullivan, op. cit., p. 37.

¹³ The Lewis White Beck translation (Liberal Arts Press, New York, 1956), Ak. 153-155.

¹⁴ *Plutarch's Lives*, the Dryden translation (A Modern Library Giant, New York, no date), p. 923.

dren shouldn't witness vice early in life. It is better to be too long naïve than to be too soon suspicious. Plutarch also remarks somewhere that lack of suspicion is the mark of a noble nature.

The third difference between Aristotle and Kant is a little less clear. Aristotle generally emphasizes how difficult it is to know what is good for a human being. The most we can hope for in ethics is to say what is usually good (I, 3, 1094b 13–1095a 12). Aristotle's virtue of prudence or practical wisdom is difficult to acquire, since it depends on the presence and support of all the other virtues (VI, 12, 1144a 12–1145a 1). Kant, on the other hand, asserts that "human reason, even in the commonest mind, can easily be brought to a high degree of correctness and completeness in moral matters" (*Foundations*, Ak. 391). It is "within the reach of everyone, even the most ordinary man." In fact the ordinary man is more likely than the philosopher to hit the mark in moral matters because he is less likely to be confused by irrelevant considerations (Ak. 404). However, the contrast between Aristotle and Kant on this point is unclear because their general conceptions of morality are so different. Kant does acknowledge that in the case of what he calls "wide duties", those concerned with many of the decisions of practical life, it is hard to specify exactly what should be done. For example it is hard to say in a particular case of need, whether one should help one's parents or help a neighbor. It is only in the case of what he calls "narrow duties", those which are properly moral in his sense of "moral", that the answers are clear (MM, Ak. 390). He even has a section in which he uses the term "casuistry", a term common in Catholic moral theology meaning the discussion of difficult cases. One example: a person bitten by a mad dog feels the symptoms of rabies coming on. Knowing that the disease is incurable, he takes his own life "lest he harm others." Kant asks, "Did he do wrong?" and seems to leave the answer open (Ak. 423–4).

This issue brings us back to the categorical imperative. As we saw, it possesses qualities of universality and necessity. I argued earlier that the universality in question is best understood as meaning only that all persons in the same exact situation would be obliged to act in the same way. However, Kant does give a number of examples in which he seems to think that his test of universality not only provides a criterion of what a moral judgment is, but provides guidance about particular moral judgments. Those that can be generalized are correct. Those that cannot be generalized, except at the price of self-contradiction, are incorrect. For example, may I, when in distress, make a promise with the intention not to keep it? I immediately see that if many such promises were made, the whole practice of promising would be destroyed. Therefore, making a false promise is self-contradictory (*Foundations*, Ak. 402, and Ak. 422–425). Most critics are agreed that, so understood, Kant's universality test does not work, and that even though some of his examples are misleading, it is not what he intended. One can propose universal propositions that have no moral content or are morally offensive, and one can argue for exceptions in extreme cases to many moral rules.¹⁵

Kant has a second formulation of the categorical imperative, however, which does provide some moral guidance. Working from the concept of a "person" as opposed to a "thing", Kant proposes the following: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only" (*Foundations*, Ak. 428–429). From this principle, he argues, for example, against slavery at a time when slavery still existed in our own country and in many other countries. Slavery is wrong because the master is treating the slave as a mere means, as a thing (MM,

¹⁵ See, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd Ed. (Notre Dame, Indiana) 1984, pp. 45–47, and Paton and Beck in the passages cited above in footnote 6.

Ak. 283). Similarly Kant argues that Europeans are treating the American Indians as mere things when they do not respect the Indians' rights of first possession. He dismisses with contempt the European argument that splendid lands devoted only to hunting and gathering were largely vacant and could and should support large populations (MM, 266). Kant has a fine discussion of marriage. He argues that the sexual act is degraded when one person treats another person only as a means to his immediate enjoyment. It is only the complete commitment of each person to the other that raises the sexual act above this level (MM, 278). Kant has an excellent remark on gossip, on taking delight in scandal. Such delight "is contrary to the respect owed to humanity as such; for every scandal . . . weakens that respect, on which the impulse to the morally good rests." Scandal helps "to dull one's moral feeling by repeatedly exposing one to the sight of such things and accustoming one to it" (MM, Ak. 466).

In any case Kant's turn to the categorical imperative and his reduction of the virtues to a secondary place undoubtedly contributed to a long term shift in modern moral philosophy away from an emphasis on moral character, on what we should *be*, and toward moral rules, on what we should *do*, including what we should do in particular cases. Alasdair MacIntyre, in his *After Virtue*, first published in 1981, explains the shift as part of a long effort, which began about 1630, that is, after the Reformation and the beginnings of modern science, extending through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and continuing among those contemporary philosophers who have not yet finally given up. It is an effort "to provide a rational justification for morality" (p. 39). MacIntyre calls this "the Enlightenment project" and argues that it is now finally clear that the project has failed, that it failed with Kant and continues to fail. Thus MacIntyre argues for a turn back to the virtues and in particular to Aristotle. In fact, there has been in the last forty years an explosion of books and articles on the virtues, starting with Elizabeth Anscombe's influential

critique entitled "Modern Moral Philosophy", published in 1958.¹⁶

One strength of Aristotle's writing on moral questions is that he believes that human beings have by nature a "function", a particular kind of activity or "work" (I, 7). Somewhat in the way that plants and animals and human bodies have it within them by nature to grow toward definite mature shapes, so human souls have it within them by nature to grow toward mature and appropriate shapes. To be sure those shapes are hard to define precisely, and they are accomplished by multi-faceted and complex human activities controlled by conscious choices. Nevertheless, by careful reflection on human experience, one can argue that some activities are appropriate to human beings and other activities are not. This is why Aristotle never accepts Kant's distinction between the purely rational and the empirical, between what is based on pure reason and what is based on experience. This is also why Aristotle's *Ethics* cuts across Kant's distinction between the prudential and the moral. For Aristotle what truly satisfies human desire and makes human beings happy is precisely what human beings ought to do. Finally this is also why Aristotle can envision a moral paradigm in which inclination and obligation are at peace. Moral life does not have to be conceived as an endless struggle.

However, the turn to Aristotle poses a major difficulty for MacIntyre. MacIntyre believes that Aristotle's *Ethics* presupposes and depends on a metaphysical biology that is no longer tenable in the modern world (pp. 148, 162, 196).¹⁷ This is too large an issue for me to confront in this lecture. I would

¹⁶ First published in *Philosophy* 33 (1958). Reprinted *Virtue Ethics*, pp. 26-44.

¹⁷ MacIntyre also claims (p. 56) that Kant himself acknowledges in *The Critique of Practical Reason* that "without a teleological framework the whole project of morality becomes unintelligible." MacIntyre is referring, I think, to the postulates of the immortality of the soul and the existence of God at Ak. 122-125. See also Ak. 61-62.

only suggest that the best route into Aristotle's thought passes through his *Ethics* and *Politics*. It seems to me that much of what Aristotle argues in those two books is persuasive on its own. This was true for me when I was a Freshman in college, and I have seen it to be true again and again teaching in many different contexts and at many levels. One does have to get over the historicist bias of the modern world, which wants to treat any ancient text as merely a description of what some ancient people thought. Surprisingly, one good way to overcome that bias is to begin with Homer. However strange Homer's world of gods and heroes is, the opening scene of the *Iliad* draws us into the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon, and the final scenes draw us into the shared grief of Priam and Achilles. These are people we can understand.

MacIntyre however, seems to me and to some other critics to embrace a kind of historicism and relativism. Although he defends himself against this charge in the second edition of *After Virtue*, both there and in his later works, there is a repeated claim that moral arguments can be persuasive only within particular traditions and communities.¹⁸ I have myself in this lecture tried to show how differences of language can entail differences of thought. In particular, Aristotle differs importantly from Plato because he makes a distinction Plato did not make between intellectual virtue and ethical virtue. Kant differs importantly from Aristotle because he makes a distinction Aristotle did not make between the moral and the prudential. But Aristotle argues with Plato. He does not merely confront one assertion with a different assertion. Kant also argues with Aristotle. I have tried to carry on that argument.

In any case, it is important not to confuse differences in

¹⁸ *After Virtue*, pp. 125-127, 146-7, 263; *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, 1988), pp. 7, 141; *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, 1990). For MacIntyre's defense, see the postscript to the 2nd Edition of *After Virtue*, pp. 272-278.

moral theory with differences in particular moral beliefs. Kant's effort to provide a better understanding of morality was not an effort to provide a new moral code. As Lewis White Beck says in the introduction to his translation of *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (pp. vii-ix), Kant "begins with the commonly held Christian-humanistic ideals of Western civilization." Kant describes what Beck regards as the "common moral consciousness". In fact there is a large measure of agreement among Kant, Aristotle, and the tradition of the Bible. For example, homosexual acts are condemned by all three.¹⁹

It is clear that in our country now, and in the contemporary world generally, we have more moral disagreement than when Aristotle and Kant were writing, particularly as concerns marriage and sexual morality generally. The most divisive moral and political problem we have, namely, the question of abortion, may not yield to a study of the virtues, however successful it might otherwise be. For all his wisdom and for all his own virtue, Aristotle accepts abortion as a means of preventing excess population. He does think it should be restricted to the time before perception and life arise, which I take it meant before what used to be called "quickening", before the infant could be felt in the womb. Aristotle even endorses the widespread ancient practice of infanticide, of exposing malformed babies (*Politics*, VII, 16, 1335b 20-26).²⁰ This is a very striking example of the power of custom and community in determining moral attitudes, and to that extent I have to admit that it supports MacIntyre's general argument.

¹⁹ *Ethics*, VII, 5, 1148b 29; MM, Ak. 277; St. Paul in *Romans*, I, 26-27.

²⁰ Plato even makes a light hearted and witty analogy to the practice in the *Theatetus*, 160E. For more evidence of the practice among the Romans, see John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception* (Harvard, 1986), pp. 85-87. For a thoughtful though inconclusive discussion of abortion, see Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 20 (1991), pp. 223-246. Reprinted in *Virtue Ethics*.

ETHICS: ARISTOTLE AND KANT

One response to our situation is to take refuge in small, somewhat independent moral communities within which particular moral beliefs can arise and grow strong, not only among children but among adults. Such an approach follows Aristotle's emphasis on the importance of proper habits of mind if one is even to make a beginning of moral discourse (I, 4, 1095b 4-12). Moral arguments require starting points. Not every starting point can be justified by argument. Nevertheless, from within those smaller moral communities, efforts must also always be made to enter the public square, however difficult it is to find places from which discussion can begin. To imagine that differences of opinion about moral questions are like different national customs, like Irish dancing and German *lederhosen* is to destroy the whole web of concepts surrounding morality, right and wrong, temptation, guilt, and shame.