On virtue in the ethics of Aristotle and Mill

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In this essay, I present the views of Aristotle and Mill on virtue. I shall argue that even though Aristotle focused on a moral theory about virtues and Mill on utilitarianism their treatment of virtue shows similarities.

Aristotle (2011) considers virtues as fundamental conditions for a flourishing human life because acting virtuous is required for the self-realisation of human beings in his teleological doctrine. Accordingly, he defines virtue as what it is about a thing that makes it unique and such that it performs its function well. Thus, the relevant functions required for human flourishing are to be found in the human soul. Aristotle investigation of the soul leads him to distinguish between character-related and thinking-related virtues. Thinking-related virtues are connected to the part of the soul that has reason and is concerned with the activity of deliberating. Character-related virtues arise in activities of perceiving and feeling emotions which are connected to a part of the soul which, though without reason, listens and responds to reason like to a father (Pakaluk 2005, p. 39).

Aristotle thinks that the goodness of the character-related virtues are important because only if this part is working well and thus, is submissive to the part containing reason, human goodness can been reached. Only if this is achieved, a human being has no impulses conflicting with what she thinks is the right thing to do. Here, these virtues are naturally inherited in all human beings, but it requires a process of habituation because it is not just the action but the mindset of the actor which is decisive for fully attaining virtue. Aristotle considers this successive process of self-realisation to be dynamic: first, the actor should avoid both extremes of a virtue but act in accordance with a state in between. Here, a virtuous person holds as a role model. Over time, the actor develops momentum which helps to reach the right state of character more and more by intuition. This is guided by the non-rational but responsive part of the soul. Once the virtue is fully developed, the character is able to act virtuously even if it is temporally disturbed. Aristotle thinks that it is up to us to elaborate the details about how we succeed on this path because the best decision in a situation depends not only on our personal state of

character but also on the degree of our other virtues and natural prepositions.

In this process, thinking-related virtues are involved to develop a ratio for good ethical conduct. They help to deliberate about possible consequences and correct our natural prepositions. Thus, they guide the character-related virtues arising from the non-rational part of the soul. The ultimate guide is wisdom which contains all other virtues related to knowledge. One of these is "administrative ability" which functions as the link between character-related virtues and wisdom; it contains both, the goal of the character-related virtue as well as everything required to attain it. Like all thinking-related virtues, it cannot be acquired through practice but needs education.

In contrast, Mill defends a utilitarian approach to ethics. He thinks that any moral rule includes some property that lets it serve a further end (Darwall 2018, p. 113), and the only end which is sought for itself is happiness. Thus, the foundation of morality consists in maximizing the happiness of each individual. Mill sees human beings as naturally social, so maximising the happiness of each individual is best served by maximising the happiness of the whole society. This principle for greatest happiness or utility is to be seen as the guide for all human actions according to Mill. Here, it is not only the quantity of happiness but also its quality which counts. The quality is however not completely subjective but should rather be oriented at the choice of a well-educated person who has the experience of multiple forms of pleasures (Mill 2011, p. 1073). On one possible reading, Mill seems to suggest that higher satisfaction is connected to acts involving a feeling of being oneself because they can lead to growth in oneself and thus, self-realisation (Darwall 2018, p. 120).

Mill considers virtues to be also ends in themselves; not alongside happiness, which would be against his utility principle, but as part of it. He explains this dichotomy by considering happiness as a whole consisting of various forms of desires, like the desire for virtue or money (Mill 2011, p. 1088). The uneducated state of human consciousness consists of primitive desires only. However, our natural predispositions let things that are first not valuable in themselves but "conducive to, or otherwise associated with, the satisfaction of our primitive desires, become in themselves sources of pleasure more valuable than the primitive pleasures" (Mill 2011, p. 1088). Thus, the desire for virtue becomes desired through a mechanism of associating it with pleasure (West 2006, p. 178), so that the utility principle holds. In the developed state of mind, it becomes a disposition for us to consider virtues as good in themselves because the consciousness of virtue became an instantaneous pleasure to us. Virtue, as such, is then part of our personal happiness and thus, worth pursuing.

The role of virtues in the utilitarian system of Mill is thereby more prominent than external factors like the desire for money. He emphasises the exercise of virtues because it provides not just any but the best condition for increasing general happiness (Donner 2006, p. 133). In fact, the "cultivation of the disinterested love of virtue" provides only blessing to the society (Mill 2011, p. 1088). Thus, the cultivation of virtues is required "up to the greatest strength possible" (Mill 2011, p. 1088) following the utility principle. In contrast, the desire for money or fame provides only marginal increase of happiness to the individual and often causes conflict of interest in the society which is against the principle.

Aristotle's understanding of virtues seems to be in contrast to a general utilitarian approach to ethical conduct based on consequences. Especially a hedonistic approach, where each act is right if it pleases the actor, is rejected by Aristotle because pleasure can only be a sign of a virtuous action for him. The value of these acts consists in their inclusion in the final cause of human beings, and an action is only fully virtuous if undertaken from a virtuous character. In the presented reading of Mill's utilitarianism however, Mill cannot be classified as hedonist because he believes that our desires are naturally directed towards the society in general (Darwall 2018, p. 122). This allows for the possibility that virtuous desires and actions are part of happiness and not pure means to it. They constitute happiness because they are in line with the natural desire of well-educated human beings to act in the best public interest. Thus, I think that Mill comes close to Aristotle's idea of a final cause because of his naturalistic view on human pleasure in a social context. However, this is not to say that Mill has the same understanding of "happiness" as Aristotle. Acting like a virtuous person would act is not sufficient even though primary and necessary for Aristotle. The acquisition of a virtuous character is the end, reached secondary through a process of education and training. Mill does not agree on this. For him, the primary end is the utility principle, so maximum happiness for society, and only implicitly, one acquires virtues because they constitute happiness for human beings, at least if they are well-educated.

A second distinction arises by comparing the balance between the flourishing of oneself versus the society for both philosophers. The utility principle of Mill indicates that the general good is above the individual, or at least that all participants of an action are to be considered equally. Aristotle does not oppose Mill that human beings are generally social, and in fact, holds that friendship is a central element for a flourishing life. But, everybody should be concerned with the striving for the own happiness in accordance with a virtuous character and the final cause of human beings. This is not to say that

there should be no general respect for the value of human beings, but it is the teleological structure of the world which metaphysically guarantees that acting for one's own good is never fundamentally bad for others who act for their good (Darwall 2018, p. 196). As a consequence, Aristotle includes virtues like bravery and temperance because they lead to self-respect of oneself as rational being. Mill, on the other hand, would not consider bravery to be virtuous, at least as long as it is not directed towards acts involving others, e.g. by saving others lives.

In conclusion, I showed that Mill ascribe virtue an important role in his utilitarian theory compared to pure hedonistic versions. This enables the possibility to show certain similarities with Aristotle's theory of virtue. However, the discrepancy between their metaethical frameworks and goals of morality implies that different character traits are seen as virtuous and the practical conducts would not coincide.

References

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