

Kevin L. Flannery. *Action and Character According to Aristotle: The Logic of the Moral Life.* Catholic University of America Press 2013. 314 pp. \$59.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780813221601).

The perennial challenge of ethics is to connect the particular to the general and the general to the particular. Such a task is less daunting in a field like chemistry, where, from repeated particular experiments, we may conclude with a high degree of certainty that water, in general, boils at one hundred degrees Celsius. Repeated observations of particular acts, however, do not lead with the same certainty to the conclusion that specific acts are attributable only to specific agents. The thug can put bread on the table for his wife and children, and the virtuous man can kill to protect his own.

Aristotle's ethical theory, as Flannery adroitly shows, primarily has to do with singulars, yet it also lays claim to being a legitimate science. That is, ethical theory is considered a general study of acts *qua* particular. But to carry out this study, we must have access to some intelligible structure to these acts. Action, like physical motion, involves change, but change is not always mere chaos. Intelligible change is directed movement from one state to another based on an inherent principle guiding the movement.

As for the movement of Flannery's book, it mirrors the movement of moral analysis. In the first four chapters, he examines the characteristics of human acts considered simply as acts. In the remaining four, he examines the ways in which human acts fit into the larger scheme of human lives, where, he affirms, the terms 'good' and 'bad' have their primary application.

The first order of business is to identify as precisely as possible the subject matter of ethics: namely, individual acts. To get at the intelligible structure of these acts, Aristotelian philosophers utilize what has become known as the 'practical syllogism'. Although the practical syllogism highlights the deliberative character of human acts, it also leads to confusion. Human acts are not 'syllogistic' in the same way that logic is. They do not function according to *ekthesis* ('taking out') as propositions do when arranged in the form of an argument. Yet ethics indeed has a universal character due to *phronesis*, the intellectual virtue by which an agent can distinguish between right and wrong in a general way. In other words, there is a structure to willed human acts that goes beyond the mere will of the agents who perform them.

A classic example of the intelligibility of this structure is contained in teaching and learning. On the one hand, teaching and learning can be considered a single act that results in knowledge acquired by a student. On the other, they each have their own intelligibility that includes, but is not limited to, the respective wills of the two distinct agents. Aristotle compares this to the road that runs from Athens and Thebes. The road is one, even though the 'way' to get from one city to the other differs. Each way has its own intelligibility. Just as there is a whence and a whither for every physical movement, so is there for every moral action.

What Flannery shows in lucid prose is Aristotle's elegant, albeit complex, analysis of the structure of human acts within the matrix of human freedom and the objective ethical dimension of good and evil. Aristotle, he explains, neither despairs of locating intelligibility in human acts nor is he tempted to boil things down to a bare act of the will directed toward its desired object. Rather, he 'wades into the sea of factors, never claiming to be able to give a fully scientific account of it all, but also recognizing that it is possible to distinguish one factor from another and so to articulate with

precision what a particular person is doing when he performs a particular human act' (xvii). Aristotle's framework of ethical analysis allows him to account for factors such as coercion and ignorance that limit responsibility significantly and consequently modify the character of a human act without eviscerating its intelligibility. By introducing these limiting factors, Aristotle is able not only to reveal the internal articulation of individual acts, but also to categorize character types to whom such individual acts can be attributed. Flannery points out that the prudent man (*phronimos*) plays a special role in this moral analysis because, insofar as there is no conflict between reason and appetite in him, the *phronimos* allows Aristotle to turn all his attention to the internal articulation of individual acts.

A unique inspiration for Flannery's book is the thorny issue of double effect, the *locus classicus* of which is found in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* (II-II, q. 64, a. 7). Indeed, Flannery has been preoccupied with this issue for some time. He carefully teases out the concepts '*per accidens*' and '*praeter intentionem*' to show that neither Aristotle nor Aquinas wishes to focus solely on the agent's intended outcome in evaluating any particular moral action. Indeed, the 'circumstances' surrounding an act, of which the agent is aware by definition, essentially contribute to the evaluation of the type of act performed.

In the final chapters of the book, Flannery shows that the moral evaluation of an act ultimately is based upon whether the act is in accord with right reason; that is, whether it aims at the true good of the human person. Flannery is careful to note that this in no way changes the fact that ethics remains the science of individual acts. The key to shedding light on the true meaning of such acts is to situate them within the good life and view them through the lens of human happiness. Despite its murkiness, ethics can make use of a special kind of 'practical' syllogism precisely because its particular and universal components relate both to the intelligibility of individual human acts and to the universality of how such acts either contribute to or detract from human happiness.

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