

Aristotle, Appropriateness and Appropriation: Getting the Foundations of Virtue Ethics Right

Keywords: Ethics, virtue, egoism, *megalopsychos*, textual interpretation, Aristotle, Thomas Hurka

The last century has seen a revival of interest in virtue ethics, with it becoming a third major approach to contemporary ethics alongside consequentialism and deontology. While it is possible to construct a theory of virtue ethics without relying on historical texts, most virtue ethicists ground their work historically, and make particular use of Aristotle's account of virtue from the *Nichomachean Ethics*.

A very common charge against Aristotle's virtue ethics is that it is selfish or egoistic, and much work is done in contemporary philosophy to ameliorate Aristotle's theory on this basis. While, *prima facie*, the charge of egoism does not seem wholly untrue, upon closer examination these accusations are misplaced for two reasons. Firstly, because they are based on an interpretation of his claims which is isolated from the rest of his thought, and, secondly, because they are based on a modern notion of the self. Here I specifically challenge Thomas Hurka's well-known and oft-accepted criticisms of Aristotle and his framing of Aristotle's ethical theory as egoistic.

I.

There are at least three hallmark objections that are often cited against Aristotle's ethics, those of Immanuel Kant, Thomas Nagel and H.A. Prichard. Kant protested that "the principle of one's happiness is most objectionable," for making a man happy is much

different than making him good and prudent.¹ Prichard claimed that Aristotle's system gave the impression that "our only business in life was self-improvement."² Nagel objected on the grounds that others in their own right (and not only as other selves) were not given enough importance in Aristotle's theory.³

Three of Aristotle's passages in particular seem to excite the most frequent criticism of the kind above. The first is the question Aristotle raises in Book VIII of whether "friends really wish for their friends the greatest goods" (*NE* 1159a5-6). Aristotle answers that we can wish for friends what is good for them only so long as they stay themselves, for example, it makes no sense to wish them to be gods. He concludes, however, by stating that although we wish goods for our friends we wish "perhaps not *all* the greatest goods; for it is for himself most of all that each man wishes what is good" (*NE* 1159a12).

The second is his claim that "a man should be a lover of self" (*NE* 1169b1) in the best way, and, in being such, "awards himself what is finest and best of all, and gratifies the most controlling part of himself, obeying it in everything" (*NE* 1168b29-31).

The third is the claim that it is also possible for one "to sacrifice actions to his friend, since it may be finer to be responsible for his friend's doing the action than to do it

1 Kant, Immanuel. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, third edition, translated by James Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 4:442, as cited in Christopher Toner's "The Self-Centredness Objection to Virtue Ethics".

2 Prichard, H.A. "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" in *Twentieth Century Ethical Theory*, Steven Cahn and Joram Haber (eds.), (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1995), 37-47, at 45-46, as cited in Toner's "The Self-Centredness Objection to Virtue Ethics".

3 Nagel, Thomas. *The View From Nowhere*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), as cited in Toner's "The Self-Centredness Objection to Virtue Ethics".

himself. In everything praise-worthy, then, the excellent person awards himself what is fine” (*NE* 1169a33-35).

It is the third that seems to provoke the most, and it is with it, and its development by Hurka, that I shall be primarily concerned. However, all three passages are important and, by conclusion, I hope the light in which they are commonly viewed will be readjusted.

In his book *Virtue, Vice, and Value*, Hurka suggests that Aristotle's virtuous person is primarily, or even wholly, concerned with his own virtuous activity (Hurka 2001, p. 139). He supports this by citing several examples in Aristotle concerning the pleasure a virtuous person gets from doing virtuous activity, and conversely finding no mention of the virtuous person being pleased by the consequences of their virtuous activity (Hurka 2001, p. 139). This tendency, that of a person being concerned only with whether he himself is acting virtuously, Hurka equates with self-indulgence (Hurka 2001, p. 139).

Developing this view, Hurka recounts for us Aristotle's *megalopsychos* or proud person. This *megalopsychos* holds all the virtues and is completely good, and so it is appropriate that he should feel the pleasure that comes with these states (Hurka 2001, p. 139). Hurka feels, however, that the type of pleasure the *megalopsychos* enjoys is objectionable. Hurka claims that the *megalopsychos* is competitive, and cares a great deal about being more virtuous than other people (Hurka 2001, p. 140). When done a favour, he does a greater favour in return, and likes to have people in his debt (Hurka 2001, p. 140). A sort of inverse Scrooge, he likes to confer benefits, but sees receiving them as a mark of inferiority (Hurka 2001, p. 140). The *megalopsychos* is extremely competitive -- competitive to the point of possibly being jealous of others' virtue (Hurka

2001, p. 14). This excess of concern about one's moral virtue is in turn a vice (Hurka 2001, p. 140).

Hurka objects that this competitiveness and non-consequentialism leads to the agent caring more about the status of his own virtue than its effects (Hurka 2001, p. 140). He reasons that the *megalopsychos* will not do small virtuous acts, like "opening a door or helping start a car" even when there is need for them, because he is concerned only with great virtuous acts (Hurka 2001, p. 140). The *megalopsychos*'s principal concern is how his actions contribute to and reflect on his "standing" in moral virtue (Hurka 2001, p. 140). At closer examination we see Aristotle's *megalopsychos* is really a self-indulgent megalomaniac in disguise.

II.

Criticisms of Aristotelian ethics may thus be stated as follows: i) the goal of happiness is different than the goal of the good, ii) the virtuous person is highly competitive, iii) the virtuous person is not concerned with the consequences of his actions, iv) the virtuous person is primarily concerned with his own moral "standing," and v) the virtuous person becomes obsessed with his own virtue to the point of it becoming a vice.

Some of these objections are simpler to answer to than others, but I think it is possible to show that all the material necessary for a defence is already within Aristotle's system. I will try to sketch a more comprehensive picture of some of the essential features in Aristotle's theory that make it fundamentally incompatible with the type of

picture Hurka draws. First, however, I shall begin by attempting to answer each objection individually with the support of textual evidence.

i)

The first point, that happiness is different from the good, is one that Kant takes seriously. Aristotle, however, does not make the distinction in the same way, and I think this is important to remember. In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explicitly states that "happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue" (*NE* 1102a5). As such, happiness is identified with virtue and the good (Tessitore 1996, p. 102) -- it does not compete with them. Indeed, Aristotle claims that it is impossible for even an *akratic* (as opposed to a really wicked) soul to be truly happy exactly because it is not virtuous (*EE* 1240b23-24).

Secondly, the objection that the virtuous person is highly competitive is not entirely without warrant, for Aristotle does have several passages which refer to what seems like more than healthy sportsmanship, e.g. "if someone is always eager to excel everyone in doing just or temperate actions or any others expressing the virtues, and in general always gains for himself what is fine, no one will call him a self-lover or blame him for it" (*NE* 1168b25-28). However, Aristotle also feels that competition is an important way to inspire agents to greater virtue, and thus sees it as instrumental and good only so long as it is in the service of virtue. It is also worth remembering that this competition is virtuous. Even if we grant that virtuous competition entails one man seeking to be more virtuous than the next, the consequences of virtuous competition will necessarily be good, e.g. two good men competing to help the most will face the

competition of one another, but regardless of who excels, their actions will both be helpful actions.

The third objection, that the virtuous person is not concerned with the consequences of his actions, could perhaps justifiably be taken to be a token of egoism. I think this particular objection of Hurka's must be seen in the light of his own ethical framework. Throughout his book, Hurka is concerned with describing and comparing the "mathematical structure" of virtue and other good things. One notion he frequently refers to and uses for equations is that of "units of pleasure"⁴ or "units of value" (Hurka 2001, p. 126). It is with this in mind that Hurka criticises Aristotelian ethics for being concerned with x units of their own pleasure whilst disregarding how many units of pleasure might be created for someone else by the choice of a different action (Hurka 2008, University of Manitoba lecture).

Moreover, Aristotle claims that the unduly humble stand back from undertaking action precisely because they deem themselves less worthy than they really are (*NE* 1125a26-28). Vain people are unhelpful as well. They attempt to do what they are not worthy of and publicise their strokes of good fortune as if they were meritorious (*NE* 1125a29-32). Rather it is those who have accurate knowledge of their abilities who can pursue the right undertakings in an effective way, such as proud people. Indeed, proud people, being honourable on a "grand scale," are in fact the most effective when something practical needs to be accomplished. Perhaps they do not think in utilitarian

⁴ "Units of pleasure" was the alternate term Hurka used in his talk at the University of Manitoba. 2008.

terms before acting, but it seems that they are in fact the ones who would effect the best consequences.

The fourth objection of the agent being primarily concerned with his moral "standing" is also, I think, an imported one. The closest Aristotle himself comes to speaking about morality in terms of a "standing" is when he discusses the formation of good and bad men. Aristotle believes that we can become the type of people we are going to be by checking ourselves with our reason, trying to reach a mean in our actions, and consistently doing so (*NE* 1103b14-17). Once we have done this over a period of time, however, our characters become, so to speak, solidified. Then, we can no longer mould ourselves as was once possible. At this point, we have formed a moral character from whence forth it will be easier or more difficult for us to continue being virtuous (*NE* 1104a33-35).

In this sense, we could perhaps be said to have a moral "standing", though it seems undesirable and awkward to put it so. Yet this is not the sense with which Hurka seems to employ it. Rather, his "standing" seems to imply something akin to a quantifiable level or rank in an objective measuring system, which is entirely in line with his notion of "units of value."

However, the notion of there being an objective "standing" quantifiable in terms of "units" is an absurd one in Aristotle. To begin with, there are virtues which not all agents even have access to attaining, such as magnificence, viz. well-transacted (giving and taking) money for those with large sums (*NE* 1107b17). If one cannot achieve magnificence only because they do not have large sums, perhaps they may not be able to fulfill this requirement of virtuosity, but, then again, the potentially magnificent man will

not be able to accomplish the mean of liberality, viz. well-transacted money for those with small sums (*NE* 1107b17-18). Although by circumstance some might be barred from achieving certain virtues and thus be able to accumulate less overall gross virtue, neither the tools nor the spirit to calculate virtue in this way are present in Aristotle.

Rather, as I am about to discuss, the proud become proud by doing right action and judging it well, and, as I have already discussed, one effect of their being aware of their virtuosity is their appropriately and effectively undertaking good action.

The fifth objection, that the *megalopsychos* might become obsessed with his own virtue to the point of it becoming a vice, seems to imply that great virtue, Aristotelian style, is only a small step away from general vice.

Again, this makes little sense if we follow Aristotle closely. The process to becoming either virtuous or vicious is one of constant active habit. As previously discussed, it is only after repetition of a certain type of activity that a person's character will begin to take shape in an effective way, be it good or base. Therefore, it might be easier to do virtuous acts if you have already become generally virtuous, but this does not mean you are automatically virtuous. Just as events bringing good and bad fortune may occur at any stage, so is it possible for us to act virtuously or viciously at any stage. However, Aristotle also thinks that if one has had a relatively virtuous and good life, and is struck with bad fortune, it will not ruin their life, for they will know how to act in the face of misfortune, and they will have the sum of their virtuous life supportively behind them.

Similarly, a person who has practised virtuous activity to the extent that they have become a virtuous person in character, and is also a *megalopsychos* (in the sense that they

practice all the virtues (Hurka 2001, p. 139) and seek excellence in their own behaviour) is a poor candidate for great vice. Virtuous actions, if truly virtuous, do not have the "flip side" of vice that Hurka seems to think they do. To me this seems like a more complex psychological account of motivation than Aristotle would endorse (for him, if the virtuous man was shown to really be vicious, he would not have been truly virtuous in the first place).

Lastly, Aristotle specifically defines the self-indulgent man as one who "craves for all pleasant things or those that are most pleasant, and is led by his appetite to choose these at the cost of everything else; hence he is pained both when he fails to get them, and when he is merely craving for them" (*NE* 119a1-4). If we recall two of his other claims, that pleasure is an effect of happiness which itself is "an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue" (*NE* 1102a5), and that a divided soul, e.g. one led by its appetite to pursue something at the cost of all else, will necessarily suffer (*EE* 1240b23-24), it seems a very strange thing to say that a truly virtuous man is self-indulgent. In fact, I think it is contradictory.

For all of these reasons, I think it is now clear why the *megalopsychos* is not conflatable with the self-indulgent man.

ii)

I think an even stronger case may be made, however, against the egoist objection by examining essential features of Aristotle's thought. I say stronger because I think that this defence not only applies to Hurka, but also responds more broadly to many if not most of the egoist objections Aristotle faces.

Christopher Toner, in his article "The Self-Centredness Objection to Virtue Ethics," attempts to defend Aristotle in light of John Hare's criticism. I believe his defence to Hare is also a good starting point for a more comprehensive defence.

Toner believes that *eudaimonia* consists in "standing in the right relation to... objects according to their degrees and kinds of goodness" (Toner 2008, p. 609). This claim seems to cohere both with Aristotle's definition of happiness as an activity of the soul (*NE* 1102a5) – an activity that involves relations, and the right relations, between its parts – and his notion of the virtuous mean. Aristotle believes that for all qualities, there exists a mean between two extremes that is ideal to attain (*NE* 1106a28-30). Generally our nature inclines us to one more than the other, and so we struggle to find a balance in the middle (*NE* 1106a32). For example, if we are inclined to be vain, we must try to be less so, but not so much so that we end up unduly humble: after all, what we are aiming at is pride (*NE* 1125a16-17). Concepts like virtue and notions about what is best do not mean most or greatest in the qualitative sense that we often use them (e.g. think of contemporary colloquial phrases like "One can never have too much of a good thing!"). Rather what Aristotle intends when he employs the notions of virtue and the best is a mean which is appropriate relative to who we are and our situation (*NE* 1106b8).

Continuing to speak about relations, Toner states that not only the virtues and their vices, and the order of our soul, are based on relations, but that human beings are also essentially relational to each other (Toner 2008, p. 610). As he reminds us, Aristotle himself says that although the final good is self-sufficient, when we speak of a self-sufficiency "we do not mean that which is sufficient for man by himself, for one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and in general for his friends and

fellow citizens, since man is born for citizenship” (*NE* 1097b8-12). It would seem to follow that virtue would not mean different things for different types of relations (though it would, of course, have different instantiations). Therefore if the mean and appropriateness are what it means to be virtuous, it would follow that to be virtuous in relation to others would be to exist in appropriate relation to them.

Toner applies the concept of virtue as a mean to the example of one friend giving up something to another friend because the giving up of *x* is actually more virtuous than doing *x* (*NE* 1169a33-34). The excellent person awards himself what is “finest” (*NE* 1169a35), viz. what is best. Again, doing what is finest is not getting the quantitative most out of something, but rather doing what is appropriate. Thus the passage could be interpreted thus: as relational beings, acting finely means “standing in the right relation” to an object or to the good; thus in certain circumstances, “standing in the right relation to the good means standing aside”, not in a conniving, greedy way, but because it is the best, the most appropriate, thing to do given the situation (Toner 2008, p. 610).

I think it is notable that Aristotle does not say that we should always do this, but rather that it “*may* be finer” (*NE* 1169a33 [emphasis mine]). He thinks we should act virtuously, and acting virtuously includes a strong recognition of what is appropriate. As Toner says, “I sacrifice to you a noble action, and at the same time perform the finest action that I could in the circumstances” (Toner 2008, p. 611); here the agent rewards himself what was finest given his situation, whilst his friend performs the action which is finest given *his* situation. In this way, they both act as virtuously as they could have given their own peculiar situations, and without one diminishing the virtuous act of the other.

Toner does not believe Aristotle's ethics is self-centred in an egoistic way, by which he means "a view counseling taking one's own welfare as one's primary and overriding goal in life" (Toner 2008, p. 596). However, he still thinks that formally the theory is self-centred, and that this could be improved. Responding to Hare's comment that "attachment to others is not secondary... but is of the essence of flourishing" (Toner 2008, p. 613), Toner looks to a model from Aquinas to rectify what he sees as structural self-centredness. For Aquinas, the self does not hold centre place but is rather "a node in a web of relationships" centred on God (Toner 2008, p. 613). Toner believes a similar system at which good is in the centre, and agents are the nodes around it, is superior (Toner 2008, p. 613). Therefore, Toner tries to shift the perspective from an agent having a web of persons about him, to a web in which the agent is one of many nodes.

None of this, in my opinion, sounds overtly objectionable. However, one main premise it relies on is that Aristotle did indeed have a conception of the self which was central in the way previously described, and I am not sure this is so.

Of course, as Bernard Williams said, each person must necessarily be "fundamentally concerned with his own activity, for whose else might he directly influence?"⁵ I agree with this, and in this sense agents are necessarily self-centred. (That said, for the purpose of this paper, I will follow Toner's lead and call this "self-focus" to contrast it with self-centredness as Toner uses it.) However, even if this is so, and agents are necessarily *self-focused*, it is not as clear that Aristotle assumed a self-centred (in Toner's sense) schema in the first place.

⁵ Williams, Bernard. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp.68-69, as cited in Toner's "The Self-Centredness Objection to Virtue Ethics".

As Suzanne Stern-Gillet aptly points out, post-Cartesians bring a “host of un-Aristotelian assumptions and notions” to exegesis which threatens to make the process of ascertaining the meaning impossible (Stern-Gillet 1995, p. 24). Aristotle did not face the same problems about selfhood as we do (Stern-Gillet 1995, p. 18). There is no evidence of the Greeks thinking of themselves in the same sharply differentiated ways as we do, either in the form of “other minds”, dualistically fragmented, or as existentially separate from our fellow humans.⁶

The body of Aristotle’s work, in fact, gives the opposite impression. In *De Anima*, he speaks of us not as separate or antagonistic to nature, but rather as part of it, as the highest tier of animal creatures, as it is the soul that “is in some sense the principle of animal life” (*De an.* 402a6-9). Some of our “affections” are born of reason, but others are from the animal part of us (*De an.* 402a6-9).

In *Politics*, Aristotle compares the family and the *individual’s* relation to the state to a body part’s relation to the whole body (*Pol.* 1253a19-21). He states that the whole is a necessity prior to the part (*Pol.* 1253a20); the whole can survive (albeit injured) without the part, but the part cannot survive without the whole (*Pol.* 1253a23-24).

As we have already discussed, Aristotle also sees the good life as consisting of good relations amongst family, friends and community. In short, Aristotle sees us as an organic part of nature, a part which will flourish according to its cycle, and a part which is an inseparable combination of matter and form.

⁶ In fact, there is evidence to the contrary, and Stern-Gillet speaks about Homeric, albeit pre-Aristotelian, notions of “privacy, uniqueness, and reflexivity” (Stern-Gillet, 16).

The system Toner offers us, with the agent as one node amongst many, seems reasonable. However, it also seems Aristotelian. Given what we know about notions of selfhood (as we define it) in antiquity, it seems rather more likely that Aristotle did not think it necessary to unpack and make explicit the notion of self which is already implicitly figured throughout his body of work.

I said this would be a stronger defence. Really, however, it is just a closer look at Aristotle *qua* Aristotle. Any of the objections stated at the fore of this paper, including but not limited to Hurka's, can be seen differently by looking more comprehensively at Aristotle's work.

III.

Extrapolating a work from its time and place and isolating it from the web of things it was written between is a common cause of myopia. Under such vision, it is not always surprising that Aristotle receives the criticisms he does. However, when we consider his ethics in light of the notion of appropriateness and with a more organic view of the self – notions central to Aristotelian thought -- most of the objections drop off.

What *is* clear is that Aristotle's ethics may be self-focused. This is not utilitarian, but nor is it unreasonable. Aristotle may put great importance on *eudaimonia*, contentment and happiness. He may tie pleasure and good action together. This is not Kantian, but nor is it bad. He may value friends unequally. This is not Christian, nor is it Kierkegaardian; but then, again, Aristotle is neither of these.

Aristotle's ethics is based on people as they really are and his experience of things as they really happen. He acknowledges the tensions that can arise between oneself and others, but I do not think he gives into them. Indeed, by using a realistic account of our nature as the material for his theory -- including the inevitable selfish questions -- Aristotle offers us a theory which we can take seriously, one which is more practical and better suited to our real ethical queries.

Works Cited

- Aristotle. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Ed. Richard KcKeon. (New York: The Modern Library, 2001)
- Hurka, Thomas. *Virtue, Vice and Value*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001)
- Stern-Gillet, Suzanne. *Aristotle's Philosophy of Friendship*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995)
- Tessitore, Aristide. *Reading Aristotle's Ethics: Virtue, Rhetoric, and Political Philosophy*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996)
- Toner, Christopher. "The Self-Centredness Objection to Virtue Ethics". *The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*, vol. 81, no. 318, October 2008. pp. 595-617.

Lecture:

Thomas Hurka. "Underivative Duty" (then in progress). Talk sponsored by the University of Manitoba. Held at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba. Friday, 7 November 2008.