

24.01 Classics of Western Philosophy

Prof. Rae Langton

V. Kant

Lecture 20. Comparing Kant and Aristotle

(1) *Kant and Aristotle: actions versus character*

The Categorical Imperative (cast in the Formula of Universal Law) appears to be a test for the moral rightness of actions, which seems to indicate that actions are centre stage, for Kant, and that their rightness can be discovered by application of a principle. Aristotle offers no such test, and his interest is in character, including the virtues of good companionship, and aesthetic appreciation, as much as those of honesty and the rest. In so far as there is a any test for whether an action is right, it is given by asking whether a virtuous person would do it.

(2) *Kant and Aristotle: actions vs. emotions*

[Virtue] is concerned with feelings and actions, and these admit of excess, deficiency and an intermediate condition. We can be afraid, e.g., or be confident, or have appetites, or get angry, or feel pity....but [having these feelings] 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. Similarly, actions also admit of excess, deficiency and the intermediate condition. (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1106b)

The virtuous agent's emotions need to be appropriate, and need to be in harmony with their actions. For Kant, it is no part of virtue, or right action, that you have certain emotions or feelings: his main interest in emotions is in their capacity to get in the way of right action, and he tends to assume that emotions will tend to conflict with duty. One's action has moral worth even in the absence of e.g. sympathetic emotions, and in the presence of misanthropic ones.

(3) *Kant and Aristotle: duty-related ('deontic') language vs. virtue-related ('aretaic')*

Aristotelian virtue theorists typically want to use words like 'good', 'bad', 'virtuous', 'vicious', 'courageous', 'honest' (sometimes described as 'aretaic' terms) instead of 'ought', 'right', 'wrong', 'duty', 'obligation', 'permissible', 'forbidden' (sometimes described as 'deontic' terms). The latter terms, they say, give morality the wrong shape: you have a duty to perform an action — not, e.g. to improve your character, or your attitudes, or your capacity to perceive morally salient features of the world. They say that the morality of 'doing one's duty' is narrow, harsh and arid. The notion of duty suggests constraint. A Kantian may reply that this is also present in the notion of virtue: virtue makes a claim on the agent, just as duty does.

(4) *Kant and Aristotle: acting from motive of duty vs. acting from (virtuous) desire*

For Aristotle, the virtuous person does not act from a motive of duty: she does the virtuous thing because she wants to. Kant, on the other hand, praises the misanthrope who has no sympathy for others, but helps only out of duty (*Groundwork* 398):

suggesting that an action is morally worthy (or most morally worthy) when done from duty alone. A Kantian may defend this by saying that the talk of duty being the sole incentive really means that duty should be sufficient: even if you lack sympathetic desires, you would still do what's right. A counter-response is that the Kantian has 'one thought too many': that even in cases of right or virtuous action accompanied by sympathetic feelings, the motive of duty gets in the way of virtue.

(5) *Kant and Aristotle: Happiness and the meaning of life*

Aristotle has a conception of the good life, the fulfilling life for human beings. The virtuous life is also the happy life. The virtuous life is the life where one best fulfills one's function: it is a life with point and meaning. For Kant, the achievement of one's own happiness is no part of moral life, nor, on the face of it, is it part of moral life to find point or meaning in fulfilling one's function (though he does say you should develop your talents, and seek the happiness of others).

Some relevant questions on these points from the story of Kant and Maria Herbert:

- (i) Maria's actions are right, but is her character virtuous?
- (ii) Do her emotions, or lack of them, have moral significance?
- (iii) Can deontic language capture what is wrong with her?
- (iv) Do her desires, or lack of them, have moral significance?
- (v) Can her life be dutiful, yet lack meaning and point?