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Aristotle's Ethics and Kant's Imperatives;

Objectivity and Subjectivity in Relation to Moral Law, Action, and Happiness

Morality concerns right and wrong, pertaining to the belief that there is a correct and incorrect way of behaving. Aristotle's ethics concern the pursuit of happiness through virtue and action-based deeds. Kant's morality is premised on the categorical imperative, the governance of goodwill, and the Supreme Moral Law. In this paper, I will evaluate how Aristotle's ethics of happiness coincide with Immanuel Kant's hypothetical imperative, as they are both more subjective. This paper will also discuss the categorical imperative and universal law, which Kant poses as something more moralistic in comparison. The contrast between the two philosophers can be seen as Kant introduces a more deontological approach, whereas Aristotle demonstrates virtue based ethics. Furthermore, I argue that the hypothetical imperative and Aristotle's approach to pursuing the 'good life' are more achievable than following the categorical imperative. The Common Good, introduced by Aristotle, is more attainable than the Supreme law and kingdom of ends, introduced by Kant. Using Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics Book* and Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, it is possible to understand the exact positions these two renowned philosophers hold on morality, goodness, and proper human action.

Before diving into Kant's imperatives, it is essential to understand the two philosophers' stances on what constitutes morally sound action. Aristotle says that the virtue of thought and character being actively demonstrated throughout one's lifetime is what will help drive individuals toward happiness. Virtue alone will not achieve happiness, but demonstrating virtue through action matters. Moreover, Aristotle notes in Book I that "happiness, then, is apparently

something complete and self-sufficient, since it is the end of what is doable in action” (Aristotle, 17). This demonstrates how Aristotle views happiness as something achievable through practical action and self-sufficiency. The worthiness or goodness of happiness comes from within and does not depend on anything outside to determine its worth.

On the other hand, Kant believes that the intention behind the action matters more than the action itself. The good deed will not be considered good if it is not done for the right reasons. Kant suggests that goodwill is what governs moral duty and is the only thing that is good in itself. He states, "Without goodwill, one can't even be worthy of being happy" (Kant, 5). This introduces the idea that Kant views happiness as something other than the ultimate end. He argues that our end instead is to be rational through moral law. Kant claims that we value goodwill so much that we think only good people should be worthy of achieving the end of happiness. This creates the idea that bad people should not be happy people. Furthermore, Kant believes that “goodwill consists precisely in action's being driven by something free from all influences” (Kant, 27). Although, understandably, something being done for the ‘right’ reason is more morally correct than that action being done for a different or more selfish purpose, I do think that a good action should not be fully disregarded simply for the fact that it was not an act purely demonstrated out of an absolute goodwill. The beginning of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics Book* notes, “every action and deliberate choice seems to seek some good. That is why they correctly declare that the good is “that which all seek””(Aristotle, 1). A good act is a good act and I believe that by demonstrating good deeds, even if they are not completely governed by one's own good will, they should still be regarded as good. Something that is good in part should still be accredited for.

In section two of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant's scrutiny of different types of imperatives is inherent to his conception of morality. Kant describes imperatives as a source of action, maxim statements of truth. Imperatives are in place to set a foundational standard as self-evident propositions. Kant discusses imperatives throughout his piece *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* by dividing the term into two different branches: categorical and hypothetical. These two types of imperatives are commands of reason expressed as an ought. The categorical imperative is the imperative of morality and expresses the foundation for moral law and the supreme principle of morality. The hypothetical imperative gives practical rules and general advice to achieve a desired end. These two types of imperatives are fundamental to Kants' expression of morality and achievement of happiness.

The first type of imperative that Kant introduces is the hypothetical. Immanuel Kant's hypothetical imperative tells us what is good to do in order to accomplish a specific end or goal. An example of this would be "Don't cheat if you want to pass your class." Hypothetical imperatives are commands that come in two different forms. One form of the hypothetical imperative is 'problematically' (technical), which contains practical rules and is good for a possible end or aim. It is commonly regarded as a discretionary end as it is not promised as an end for all rational human beings since everyone has the individual ability to choose different ends. Problematic hypotheticals are possible but may or may not be willed.

The other type of hypothetical imperative is called 'assertorically', which is more pragmatic and adheres to a particular aim that is definitely willed. It applies an 'if you do A then you will get B' mentality, stating if you want to achieve an end, then you should do a certain action. The assertoric hypothetical denotes 'this is what you want to do if you want to be happy' and revolves around counseling means to happiness. The assertoric imperative is the form of the

hypothetical imperative that “declares some action to be practically necessary for the promotion of happiness” (Kant, 20). This coincides with Aristotle's stance on proper doable action since they are both reiterating the concept of doing something out of the belief of it bringing you happiness.

Both the hypothetical imperative and Aristotle's ethics revolve around doable action as a means to happiness as opposed to adding emphasis to the intent and goodwill behind it. Kant disagrees by affirming the categorical imperative. Kant states that if an action is good only as a means to another, the imperative is hypothetical. Still, if an action is considered to be purely good in itself, the imperative is categorical (Kant, 19). The categorical imperative examines the morality of lying from a strongly rational perspective that doesn't depend on what humans personally desire or care about. Although I can see how this could be considered moral, I do not believe it is applicable. Taking human emotion out of action and depending solely on the idea of good will does not seem reasonable, as it does not account for feelings or personal preferences. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Kant does account for “what is” vs. “what ought” to happen. He makes the distinction by regarding “is” in relation to the laws of nature in which everything does happen. On the other hand, the laws of morality are laws according to which things ought to happen yet and allow for conditions under which what ought to happen does or does not happen (Kant, 1).

Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* makes the claim that through the categorical imperative, humans should “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (Kant, 24). The categorical offers the perspective of humans as an end instead of a means, following the philosophy of universal law. He believes that humans should never exploit or use one another no matter what the purpose

may be. Although I agree with this statement as a general claim, I do not believe that it is necessarily applicable to the masses. There is something significant about the connection between other human beings that is brought about by emotional dependency. This should not be disregarded when looking at the contrast between the two imperatives. I personally believe that, situationally, it is vital for people to prioritize themselves and the people they care about. If an individual or their loved ones are in danger and it is possible to escape the situation by using or exploiting the person who has put them in said danger, I believe that it would be reasonably appropriate to do so.

With that being said, the categorical form of the imperative states that when we, rational human beings, act from duty, we are doing the right thing for ourselves as sensible creatures. This is why the categorical is expressed as the moral law. For example, the concise statement “Do not cheat” would be categorical because it is rational and would fall under the idea of universal lawfulness. It is wholly good and reasonable, so therefore, it is the duty of the subject to act in accordance with this law. The Supreme universal law adheres to people as a whole with subjects under an overarching law of reason rather than solely looking at the individual's path to bettering oneself.

As stated earlier, the governance of the good-will is a foundational building block for Kant's categorical imperative. Immanuel Kant believes that goodwill is the only thing that is good in itself. Kant believes that “an absolutely good will is one whose maxim can always include itself regarded as a universal law” (Kant, 41). The good will, according to Kant, should be applicable on a universal scale. Considering that Kant believes that one cannot obtain happiness without good will, he is therefore stating that it is impossible to be happy without adhering to a universal set of laws. That being said, Kant believes that autonomy over the will is

what gives the individual back their personal power as they are not only subjects to the universal laws but the givers of them. Kant notes that “dignity of humanity consists just in its capacity to give universal laws to which it is also subject” (Kant, 36). Autonomy over our actions governs how we act, and Kant's idea of an autonomous free will is a will under moral law that is governed on pure reason.

With that in mind, although Kant's philosophy is much more duty based than Aristotles, Aristotle does still account for a degree of lawfulness. There can be general, practical rules that people should follow. The common ground between Kant's categorical and Aristotle can be seen through Aristotle's account of justice, which is one of his four core virtues. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics Book* notes that a “just action is a mean between doing injustice and suffering injustice, since the one involves having too much and the other having too little” (Aristotle, 87). Furthermore, doing a just action is not the same as being just, likewise for matters of injustice. Aristotle elaborates on just actions and unjust actions by relating them to the concept of virtue, as a whole and in part. On page 80, Aristotle claims that “what produces virtue as a whole are the actions that are ordained by the laws concerned with education that looks to the common good” (Aristotle). This adds emphasis to how the law plays a critical role in virtue as it is a guideline to help achieve and maintain the common good. The common good here refers to an attainable community in which all members are working together in order to implement and fulfill a state of general well-being and prosperity. This contrasts Kant's stance on law as Aristotle is not referring to a state of universality.

For something to be lawful there has to be a set idea of what is unlawful. An unlawful person is considered to be an unjust one and vice versa. With that in mind, it is important to note that what is just is not always what is politically just. Political justice is divided into the two

categories of natural justice and law. Aristotle's teachings state on page 88 of Book V that "for what is politically just is what is in accord with law and exists among those who are naturally subject to law" (Aristotle). A situation may be considered unjust in the eyes of a bystander but will still be just to a degree if it is lawful. Although decency is important, what is decent may not always be what is lawful. Although Aristotle also notes that unjust actions and just actions can be coincidental and that sympathy should be given situationally, he still supports the idea of duty and lawfulness, to a degree. Kant takes the concepts of duty and law and expands upon it by stating that we, rational human beings, should subject in a way that is legislative to ourselves. Kant says that we are subjective to the law and authorize the laws that we are subject to. Kant emphasized throughout *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* that duty is what governs the will. Kant says that the will is not solely subject to the law, as it is applied externally.

In conclusion, Aristotle argues that everybody is on their own individual paths, trying to achieve a good life by acting in accordance with their virtues. By doable action demonstrated throughout one's lifetime, a person can achieve happiness. Every person should individually work on their virtues and, by applying them, can actively contribute towards the common good. Considering that happiness and the pursuit of it are foundational to the human experience, the study of morality, human action, and the highest good are essential to the understanding of philosophy. Aristotle notes that while lawfulness is important, human activity should not be neglected. Moreover, Kant claims that a universal law will benefit society as a whole, hence benefiting the individual, helping to achieve personal morality. He uses duty and pure reason to support his categorical imperative, noting that good-will is what gives the individual autonomy over one's actions. He believes that the intent behind the action is more important than the action itself. Although I understand where Kant is coming from, I believe that his ideals are still much

more objective. He does not account for human emotion and care ethics. I believe that Aristotle's common good is more achievable than Kant's idea of a universal law because it is more subjective. Although I believe that all people have commonalities, and that there is something notable about human nature, universalities and the idea of one truth or way of thinking seems to be a very westernized way of thinking. I do believe there is a lot to gain by reading the works of Aristotle and Kant as well as other famous philosophers of their time, yet feminist philosophy, black philosophy, and other lenses are important to incorporate into moral and political claims around philosophy in general.

Work Cited

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