Chapter 26
Non-Relative Virtues

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Introduction to Ethics 118
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An Aristotelian Approach I

• 259 “From many different sides one hears of a dissatisfaction with ethical theories that are remote from concrete human experience.”

• She speaks with reference to Utilitarianism and Duty based ethics we will study later, as well as emotivism.

• 260 She appeals to Aristotle’s writings as the archetype of a virtue-based ethic.

• Her complaint with modern virtue-based ethics is that the writers claim that it is impossible to escape the charge of relativism.
An Aristotelian Approach I

• 260 “For Aristotle’s work seems, appealingly, to combine rigor with concreteness, theoretical power with sensitivity to the actual circumstances of human life and choice in all their multiplicity, variety, and mutability”

• To contemporary defenders of virtue-based ethics, “the return of the virtues is connected with a turn toward relativism.”
An Aristotelian Approach I

• Aristotle believed his ethical program was universalizable. The moderns think that virtue can only be defined locally with reference to a single locale.

• 260 Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams, and Philippa Foot have abandoned “the project of rationally justifying a single norm of flourishing life for and to all human beings.”
• 260 None of these writers “unequivocally endorses a relativist view. But all connect virtue ethics with a relativist denial that ethics, correctly understood, offers any transcultural norms, justifiable with reference to reasons of universal human validity, with reference to which we may appropriately criticize different local conceptions of the good.”
• 260 Aristotle defends “a single objective account of the human good, or human flourishing.”

• He takes it that there is only one human nature and that his virtue-based ethic comprehends what that human nature is and how it operates.

• Aristotle’s account shouldn’t on this account be counted as true, but it should be admitted as a “plausible candidate for the truth, one deserving our most serious scrutiny.”
An Aristotelian Approach I

- 261 “The purpose of this paper is to establish that Aristotle does indeed have an interesting way of connecting the virtues with a search for ethical objectivity and with the criticism of existing local norms.”
An Aristotelian Approach II

• 261 The account of the relativist looks something like this: Looking at various cultures and noticing that their rules and virtues are unlike each other, decides “any list of virtues must be simply a reflection of local traditions…” that “there can in fact be no list of virtues that will serve as normative for all these varied societies.”

• At this point they criticize Aristotle for drawing up a picture of the great-souled person to look like “a certain sort of Greek gentleman, in order to show that Aristotle’s list is just as culture-bound as any other.”
An Aristotelian Approach II

• As we look at Aristotle’s list of virtues, we recognize that he has not given names to some of the virtues or vices as if he were merely describing his own local culture. He attempted to generalize, first from general ethical experiences in life then specifically with a robust explanation of the experience, scientifically open to revision.
• 261 The first, general explanation of the virtue the “thin account,” is what it means “to be stably disposed to act appropriately in that sphere.” There may be “various competing specifications of what acting well … in fact comes to.”

• “Aristotle goes on to defend in each case some concrete specifications, producing, at the end a full or ‘thick’ definition of the virtue.”
An Aristotelian Approach II

- Look at the list on 262 of the areas of life and their associated virtues.

- 262 Nussbaum wants us to look at “the care with which Aristotle articulates his general approach, beginning from a characterization of a sphere of universal experience and choice, and introducing the virtue name” as a name which may be rewritten in any culture to satisfy the name given to the virtue for that category.
An Aristotelian Approach II

• 263 “The reference of the virtue term in each case is fixed by the sphere of experience… the ‘grounding experiences.’”

• “The thin or ‘nominal definition’ of the virtue will be, in each case, that it is whatever it is that being disposed to choose and respond well consists in, in that sphere.”

• “The job of ethical theory will be to search for the best further specification corresponding to this nominal definition, and to produce a full definition.”
An Aristotelian Approach III

• 263 Nussbaum recounts the example given by Aristotle of thunder.

• “People hear a noise in the clouds, and they then refer to it, using the word ‘thunder.’”

• The nominal (thin) definition “of thunder is ‘That noise in the clouds, whatever it is.’”

• “The competing explanatory theories are rival candidates for correct full or thick definition.”
An Aristotelian Approach III

• Nussbaum offers the two competing theories in the instance of thunder to be Zeus’s activities in the clouds as a false account and the best scientific explanation as the true account.

• The criteria are testable.
An Aristotelian Approach III

• 263 Parallel to the thin and thick explanations of thunder are the thin and thick explanations of say, courage.

• “And we can understand progress in ethics, like progress in scientific understanding, to be progress in finding the correct fuller explanation of a virtue, isolated by its thin or “nominal” definition.”
264 “Aristotle defends the proposition that laws should be revisable and not fixed by pointing to evidence that there is progress toward greater correctness in our ethical conceptions, as also in the arts and sciences.”
An Aristotelian Approach III

• 265 Nussbaum points out that Aristotle’s “greatness of soul” successfully made the transition from his definition to the “Stoic emphasis on the supremacy of virtues and the worthlessness of externals, including the body, and, through this, with the Christian denial of the body and the worth of earthly life.”
An Aristotelian Approach IV

265 Nussbaum points out three objections to her position.

1. Just because there is a shared experience doesn’t mean there is a shared appropriate response.

2. Grounding experiences are not necessarily shared and so there would be no shared virtue.

3. There may be a form of life that does not share any grounding experiences with other cultures.
• 265 Just because there is a shared experience doesn’t mean there is a shared appropriate response.

• 269 She replies: It may turn out that the appropriate response may be a disjunction (either or.) But the process of deciding on a thick definition may eliminate unsophisticated candidates.

• A general account of say, friendship will encompass many culturally tied customs in different worlds.
An Aristotelian Approach IV

269 Where customs do differ the general rule must be balanced with a keen awareness of the particulars.

"Like rules in medicine and in navigation, ethical rules should be held open to modification in the light of new circumstances; and the good agent must therefore cultivate the ability to perceive and correctly describe his or her situation finely and truly, including in this perceptual grasp even those features of the situation that are not covered under the existing rule."
An Aristotelian Approach IV

• 269-270 “The fact that a good and virtuous decision is context-sensitive does not imply that it is right relative to, or inside, a limited context.”

• 270 “It is right absolutely, objectively, from anywhere in the human world.”

• 270 Aristotelian rules retain a flexibility in reference to local conditions. They “remain always open to revision in light of new circumstances and new evidence.”
An Aristotelian Approach IV

- Objection 2: Grounding experiences are not necessarily shared and so there would be no shared virtue.

- 270 The Aristotelian should admit that there is no theory-neutral observation.

- 271 There is no single neutral language in which this truth is correctly described.

- 270 That doesn’t mean that the search for truth is some kind of “old-fashioned error”
An Aristotelian Approach IV

• 271 Given that there is no theory neutral observation, the relativist doesn’t recognize the fact of a great deal of overlap between diverse cultures.

• “Hardly any cultural group today is as focused upon its own internal traditions and as isolated from other cultures as the relativist argument presupposes.”

• 273 “We do not have a bedrock of completely uninterpreted ‘given’ data, but we do have nuclei of experience around which the construction of different societies proceeds.”
An Aristotelian Approach IV

- There may be a form of life that does not share any grounding experiences with other cultures.

- 274 “What is it to inquire about the human good?”

- What circumstances of existence go to define what it is to live the life of a human being?”

- If man were immortal or something wholly other than what he is conceived to be in Western culture, say in a Marxian or Nietzschian sense, there is no commonality that would share any grounding experiences.
An Aristotelian Approach IV

• 274 Nussbaum argues that it is in the limits of human or the immortal’s life that value is found.

• “All structures… are closed to something.”

• It is the limits that generate a need for virtue.