

Nietzsche and Aristotle in contemporary virtue ethics

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Table of contents

1. Introduction and research question	3
Introduction	3
Contemporary virtue ethics: agent-based and agent-prior positions	3
Aim and research question.....	4
2. Alasdair MacIntyre: rediscovering Aristotle	5
Nietzsche’s critique on Enlightenment morality.....	5
Why Nietzsche is not an alternative	5
Rehabilitating Aristotle.....	6
3. Rosalind Hursthouse: virtues and human nature.....	7
Human flourishing and naturalism	7
Nietzsche: strong virtues.....	7
Different sets of virtues	8
Human nature as harmonious	8
4. Christine Swanton: strength and virtue	9
An agent-based approach.....	9
Strength conceptions of virtues: altruism as an excess of life	9
Expressing strength ‘well’	9
5. Conclusions	11
Objectivity	11
Strong virtues.....	11
Nietzsche and Aristotle in the contemporary virtue-ethical debate	11
6. References	12

Nietzsche and Aristotle in contemporary virtue ethics

1. Introduction and research question

Introduction

Kantian, utilitarian, and natural law- versions of modernistic ethics have flourished several decennia after the Second World War. Around 1980, ethical theory became concerned with critique on Enlightenment philosophy. This critique was a result of its technocratic tendencies and its focus on the subject as human being, apart from his particular bonds, and consisted of a double opposition. First, there is a neo-Nietzschean tendency, which regards rationalisation as a threat for vital subjectivity. It exposes moral truths as contingencies, determined by coincidental balances of power. Second, there is a neo-Aristotelian tendency, which regards reason as an expression of a particular culture. From this perspective, morals are concerned with fundamental ways of life, passed on by a group ethos¹.

Contemporary virtue ethics: agent-based and agent-prior positions

Virtue ethics is one of the three major approaches in present normative ethics. It differs from Enlightenment ethics, which emphasizes duties, rules or the consequences of actions², because of its emphasis on moral character. Therefore, virtue ethics is agent-focused: it concerns the virtuous individual and the inner traits, dispositions and motives, which qualify it as being virtuous. Some forms of virtue ethics do allow for moral rules or laws, but thread them typically as derivative or secondary factors³.

Within virtue ethical accounts, a distinction can be made between agent-based and agent-prior approaches⁴. An example of agent-based virtue ethics can be found with Nietzsche, who regards the agent himself as the foundation of virtue, instead of human flourishing. More recently, Christine Swanton has developed an approach, which allows for different sets of virtues⁵.

What counts as a virtue can also be judged by its relation to a specific conception of human flourishing ('eudaimonia'). Such an approach counts as agent-prior: character evaluations are grounded in a view of eudaimonia, and therefore are not regarded as fundamental themselves. This kind of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics is defended by Alasdair MacIntyre, but also by Rosalind Hursthouse⁶, who has developed a naturalistic approach.

¹ De Wachter, 2000; p. 87

² Hursthouse, 2003

³ Slote, 2001; p.4

⁴ Slote, 2001; p.4

⁵ Swanton, 2003

⁶ Slote, 2001: p.6

Aim and research question

In the contemporary virtue-ethical debate, an important discussion concerns the ways in which virtues can be grounded. Two important alternatives are already mentioned: the foundation of virtues either in the agent or in human flourishing. This paper aims to clarify the ways in which these two alternatives are handled by a selection of three distinctive philosophers in contemporary virtue ethics. Therefore, this paper examines the ways in which Nietzschean and Aristotelian strategies to ground virtues are being handled in the virtue ethical approaches of MacIntyre, Hursthouse, and Swanton. A perspective will be regarded Nietzschean, when the central viewpoint has originated from Nietzschean thought, in particular agent-based views. A perspective will be considered Aristotelian when ideas are explicitly and recognizably derived from Aristotelian thought, in particular agent-prior views.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre: rediscovering Aristotle

Nietzsche's critique on Enlightenment morality

For MacIntyre, modern moral utterance and practice can only be understood as a series of fragmented survivals from an older past. The problems that modern ethical theorists cope with are the result of these diverse fragments. They will remain insoluble until this fragmentation is well understood⁷.

In *After Virtue* (1981), MacIntyre states that the failure of Enlightenment morality has been perceived most clearly by Nietzsche. The primary question of Enlightenment philosophers concerned what rules to follow, and why one has to obey them. Nietzsche showed that the Enlightenment project failed to provide a true objective basis for morality, and was neither capable to answer the question what kind of person one ought to become. The latter is a consequence of the removal of Aristotelian teleology from the moral world⁸.

In Enlightenment morality, rules are the primary concept of the moral life, and therefore justification of virtues depends upon prior justification of rules and principles. Both Nietzsche and Aristotle agree on an alternative approach: they suppose that we need to attend to virtues in the first place, in order to understand the function and authority of rules.

Why Nietzsche is not an alternative

According to MacIntyre, Nietzsche's historic achievement lies in understanding more clearly that appeals to objectivity were in fact expressions of subjective will of 'those who are too weak and slavish to assert themselves with archaic and aristocratic grandeur'⁹. He despised the idea of basing morality on inner moral sentiments, on conscience, or the Kantian categorical imperative. There is no place for such fictions as natural rights, utility, or the greatest happiness of the greatest number. One's morality can only be what one's will creates.

For MacIntyre, this collapse of the Enlightenment moralities leaves two options: either there remains only the Nietzschean diagnosis and the Nietzschean complications after the Enlightenment, or one can hold that the Enlightenment project has failed, and should never have been commenced in the first place.

The first option is not coherent, since Nietzsche himself can be regarded as an exponent of Enlightenment critique. What Nietzsche describes is aristocratic self-assertion. This differs from the kind of assertion of the pre-modern period, which is required by a certain role. In this perspective, the self lacks the capacity to detach from any particular viewpoint; one can not withdraw oneself from his given position in society. The self becomes what it is due to this role, therefore being not an individual but a social creation. In contrast, Nietzsche replaced the fictions of the Enlightenment individualism by a set of individual fictions of his own. Therefore the

⁷ MacIntyre, 1981; p.104

⁸ MacIntyre, 1981; p.112

⁹ MacIntyre, 1981

Nietzschean stance seems to be a facet of that very moral culture, of which Nietzsche took himself to be an implacable critic.

Nietzsche's critique made it inevitable to reject the ethics of the Enlightenment as a true candidate for moral thought. His critique however, does not extend to pre-modern ethical thought¹⁰. According to MacIntyre, the most powerful pre-modern mode of moral thought is Aristotelianism. Therefore, if an alternative needs to be found in the pre-modern times, it has to be Aristotle.

Rehabilitating Aristotle

Nietzsche's Enlightenment critique raises the question whether it was right in the first place to reject Aristotle¹¹. For MacIntyre, the return to pre-modern thought seems to be the best option. Nietzsche has cancelled out Enlightenment philosophy, and being one of its exponents, did not offer an alternative. In the end, after three centuries of moral philosophy and one of sociology, there is still no coherent and rationally defensible statement from a liberal individualistic point of view. The Aristotelian tradition can be restated, in order to restore intelligibility and rationality to our moral and social attitudes and commitments¹².

¹⁰ MacIntyre, 1981: p.239

¹¹ MacIntyre, 1981: p.111

¹² MacIntyre, 1981

3. Rosalind Hursthouse: virtues and human nature

Human flourishing and naturalism

A particular Aristotelian form of virtue ethics has been developed by Rosalind Hursthouse. A central premise in her naturalistic account is the conception that human beings already possess all ethical virtues of character, without any vices. All relevant character traits are regarded 'natural' to the species¹³.

Common to neo-Aristotelian approaches is the presupposition, that a virtue is a character trait needed for eudaimonia, to flourish or to live well. This view contains two claims: the virtues are beneficent to their possessor, and they make their possessor a good human being.

Hursthouse defends this last claim in naturalistic terms: ethics are in some way based on considerations of human nature, but in a form that explicitly disavows any pretensions to being purely scientific. Yet it may be possible to find an objective basis for a single set of human virtues of character within such a generally Aristotelian approach. This objectivity of moral judgements is of the same kind as the judgments which biologists make, when describing various plants and animals.

In the flourishing conception, right action follows from the nature of the virtuous agent, which is sufficiently mature. The set of human virtues is the set of character traits that are natural to human beings in a way that, if everybody has this set, it contributes to the flourishing of the individual and others. When a virtue is not fully achieved, one's nature has not been fully realized; this can be experienced in (psychological) conflict.

Nietzsche: strong virtues

Nietzsche distinguishes two groups of human beings by nature: the weak and the strong. The strong free spirits do not accept any rules from others, and make exceptions of themselves. The weak are the members of a herd who take themselves fundamentally like anyone else. These two kinds of people need, according to Nietzsche, a different moral evaluation.

Where good weak individuals might have the virtues as we know them, good strong human beings are the exceptions on the standard of virtue. In their differences, they possess least some character traits that occur on the list of vices.. The enjoyments of the strong are forms of self-realization and self-fulfilment which are in some way solitary, and the character traits which benefit this self-realization are anti-social. Mostly, they are solitary and achieve self-realization only by denying the social group. This calls for injustice and callousness, and perhaps other standard vices as well¹⁴. Therefore, the strong spirits necessarily need to be evaluated in a different way.

¹³ Harman, 2001

¹⁴ Hursthouse 1999; p.254

Different sets of virtues

Nietzscheans challenge the notion that there could be a single set of virtues for all people, since they regard the individual as the base for all virtues¹⁵. Hursthouse welcomes serious consideration of Nietzsche's views, however only as long as they might lead to the improvement of our current ethical outlook.

As stated before, objectivity is to be found in human nature and in the way human beings live. Nevertheless, Hursthouse agrees with the Nietzschean stance: there is no fixed human nature. A framework for objective and universal virtues, which counts for all human beings, cannot be provided. There may be multiple natures that result in different sets of virtues. Although the Nietzschean view clearly causes trouble for the thesis that human nature is harmonious, there are still no grounds to abandon this thesis. For Hursthouse, the Nietzschean critique does not offer a better alternative, and therefore insufficient reason to discard the thesis of harmonious nature.

Human nature as harmonious

The fact that human nature is harmonious is considered to be contingent¹⁶. If things had been otherwise, ethics would not exist, or would have been evolved unimaginably different. However, the belief that human nature is harmonious is considered an element of the virtue of hope. The practice of ethical thought has to be based on the assumption that human beings as a species are capable of harmony within themselves and each other. If we suppose they are not, this practice will collapse. Hursthouse regards this practice as worth going in with, and therefore there is no practicable alternative: it is necessary to take the assumption on board¹⁷.

¹⁵ Harman, 2001

¹⁶ Hursthouse 1999; p.264

¹⁷ Hursthouse 1999; p.265

4. Christine Swanton: strength and virtue

An agent-based approach

In contrast to Hursthouse, Swanton does not make flourishing the centrepiece of her virtue ethical approach. For Hursthouse, justification is founded on the degree in which action is honouring the demands of the world¹⁸. Swanton discards such a naturalist approach. She states that Aristotle lacks a satisfying conception of the relation between the demands of the world and the flourishing of the possessor of the virtues. Therefore she does not regard it as a vice to be a strong person, who plays along different rules. Alternatively, she places character at the basis of her ethics, and develops a strength conception of virtues.

Swanton states that moral theory does not have to reveal a connection with human nature; it has to determine what virtue requires of a person, and is constrained by the facts of our nature: morality can only demand what our natures can supply¹⁹. This ‘constraint conception’ contrasts with the ‘flourishing conception’ of Hursthouse, and weakens the causal account of naturalism. Within this approach, altruism is regarded as a result of an excess of life.

Strength conceptions of virtues: altruism as an excess of life

Nietzsche, as mentioned, examines the motivational springs of altruistic behaviour, to assess motivated actions. He makes a distinction between the kind of the person who is ‘overfull’ of life, and the decadent kind of altruistic person who has an empty inner core.

Nietzsche attacked the kind of altruism that involved a deficiency of self-affirmation. The weak altruist has a spiritual hole that is filled by trying to live for others, while the altruism of the strong person “expresses the value of life, including the agent’s own”²⁰. According to Nietzsche, pity is not considered a virtue. It expresses a number of invaluable aspects of weakness, and a form of narcissism. Swanton interprets Nietzsche’s ‘become yourself’ as an appeal to be passionate and energetic in one’s own projects and creativity, rather than losing oneself in others in weak kinds of altruism and generosity.

However, for Nietzsche there is a kind of noble giving, which is ethically superior to giving based on pity or a sense of obligation. It results from a self-sufficient sense of having more than enough, which can cause a person being moved to give things to other people. In this way, Nietzsche illustrates altruism can be justified in terms of the ideal of inner strength²¹.

Expressing strength ‘well’

So the strong type of person does not give out of pity, but out of excess life. According to Swanton, this idea of strength should become normative. Exercising or manifesting will to power ‘well’ can then be regarded as virtuous: the expression of strength itself does not suffice.

¹⁸ Harris, 2004

¹⁹ Harris, 2004

²⁰ Swanton, 1997

²¹ Slote, 2001; p.22

Nussbaum states in her opposition between bourgeois and basic vulnerabilities, that compassion based on basic vulnerability is not recognized, since the other person is evaluated on the good expression of strength²². For expressing strength well, recognition of the value of gentle virtues to regard others is required.

These gentle virtues of pity, compassion and charity may ‘disqualify the altruistic response as virtuous’²³ if these expressions are motivated by fear or vanity, for example. Strength has to be expressed well, in recognition of the others’ needs. According to Swanton, gentleness must be suffused by strength, strength be tempered by gentleness²⁴. Therefore Aristotle’s view needs to be adapted by the importance of the vulnerability and receptivity aspect. For this, the Nietzschean view that the expression of strength constitutes – at least partly – the profiles of gentle virtues, is adopted.

As mentioned, the virtues of strength and gentleness are not properly virtues, unless understood in their thick accounts: suitably infused with aspects of ‘gentleness’ and ‘strength’ respectively. Therefore, strength and gentleness traditions of the virtues are not opposed; they are rather incomplete. An ethics of care or benevolence for example, does not recognize the importance of a variety of aspects of strength will be defective²⁵. A strength tradition has a lot to offer for illuminating this blind spot.

²² Nussbaum, 1994

²³ Swanton, 1997

²⁴ Swanton, 1997; p.498

²⁵ Swanton, 1997

5. Conclusions

Objectivity

The relation between Nietzschean and Aristotelian thought has been examined for three virtue ethical positions, to clarify the way in which both perspectives are handled in contemporary virtue ethics. Both MacIntyre and Hursthouse regard the Nietzschean viewpoint on the subjective will and his pluralist critique as serious accounts. However, it is not considered to be an alternative for an Aristotelian approach, in which virtues can be determined on a more or less objective basis. To Hursthouse, moral are contingent, yet some kind of objectivity in virtues can be reached. Also, as long as there is no useful alternative, human nature has to be regarded as harmonious. In contrast, Swanton states that the strong person gives because of excess of life: strength and gentleness conceptions are regarded complementary.

Strong virtues

The possibilities for strong virtues have been explored by Swanton and Hursthouse. Hursthouse regards strong persons as having vices that cause damage to the weak, and thus discards strong virtues. In the pluralistic virtue ethical approach of Swanton strength is a central virtue, from which gentleness can be derived.

MacIntyre questions whether the idea of the Nietzschean strong individual is an exponent of Enlightenment morality, and should be discarded for this reason. In contrast, the Aristotelian account recognizes the social roles and social shaping of the subject. Therefore, it can provide an answer to the question what person one ought to become. The Aristotelian tradition, being the most powerful pre-modern ethical approach, can restore intelligibility and rationality to our moral attitudes and commitments.

Nietzsche and Aristotle in the contemporary virtue-ethical debate

Both the Aristotelian and the Nietzschean viewpoint have been influential on the development of the virtue ethical approaches mentioned above. The key strategies to handle these viewpoints are have been examined for these three approaches. Other influential virtue ethical thinkers which are not mentioned in this paper, such as Philippa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe or Michael Slote, have also explicitly determined their positions in this debate.

The distinction between an agent-focused and a eudaimonistic approach still seems to be a fundamental problem in virtue ethical thought. Nevertheless, contemporary contributions try to handle the discrepancies of these two perspectives in new ways. The neo-Aristotelian thinkers Hursthouse and Foot mention there is still a lot of work to be done on Nietzsche²⁶, and according to Swanton, both strength and gentleness conceptions have a lot to offer to each other. This points out that virtue ethics is still vital and in development: challenged by the discrepancies it is faced with, new virtue ethical views are explored more and more. However, what we might conclude from contemporary virtue ethical accounts is, that the voices of Aristotle and Nietzsche will probably resound lively in these future virtue ethical accounts.

²⁶ Hursthouse, 1999; p.254

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