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Ambiguity within Aristotle and Abelard's Ethical Theories

Aristotle (384-322 BC) and Peter Abelard (1079-1142) present ethical theories that are similar at their roots, but have key differences, particularly in the role of virtue and in their individual discussions of pleasure. One particular similarity is the criticism that they are both vague in their ideas of how virtue is acquired. Aristotle admits to a certain ambiguity in his theory, but Abelard seems unaware of his own inherent contradictions. However, this vagueness makes it difficult for an audience to put Aristotle's theory into action and to judge other's actions objectively and with certainty if following Abelard's theory.

Aristotle defines virtue as a "state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate" (Aristotle 2.6). For example, the virtue of courage consists on a mean between cowardice, which is a vice of deficiency, and rashness, which is a vice of excess. A person acquires virtue through habit and actually acting virtuously rather than acquiring it through nature. In fact, one has to steer away from what is natural, or what brings them pleasure, because one has to exercise control over pain and pleasure in order to be virtuous. The main objective for a virtuous human is to increase pleasure to the largest degree,

but only virtuous pleasure. For example, sex and alcohol may bring pleasure, but it is not virtuous. It does not lead to eudaimonia, or ultimate fulfillment, which is what all humans strive for according to Aristotle. Reference to reason can lead someone there. Virtue acquired through reason is superior to "natural virtue," or virtue that is displayed by accident. If one uses reason to actively choose to act a certain way, the decision has more merit than if one displays virtue without thinking it through. Furthermore, virtuous acts are contextual, meaning one has to "to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way." (2.9) Given the slight vagueness in how to act virtuously, Aristotle admits that it is difficult to fall directly on the mean, so he claims one has to choose the lesser evil, which usually involves steering away from pleasure or the way humans naturally tend.

Abelard defines virtue in relation to sin, which he defines as the intent or the consent to do evil in direct contempt of God. He maintains that the intent behind the action is the deciding factor for sin, not the action itself. In contrast to Augustine, whose idea of sin is universally known, the moment of sin according to Abelard is a private moment that occurs in one's head. According to Abelard, "Nothing taints the soul but what belongs to it, namely the consent that we've said is alone the sin, not the will preceding it or the subsequent doing of the deed" (Abelard 208). For example, he claims that "it isn't the lusting after a woman but the consenting to the lust that is the sin. It isn't the will to have sex with her that is damnable but the will's consent" (205). Furthermore, if someone is struggling between their thoughts of lust, for example, and knowing that God does not wish him/her to give in, the resistance makes the person even more virtuous. If a person does a good action, it is irrelevant if the intent behind it was not good. An action is good if one is aiming to please God, and thus he cannot be "deceived in his evaluation" (214). An act that Abelard does consider a sin is the act of self-defense, for

example. He claims that if someone killed another person in self-defense, that person has sinned against God because of the *choice* that person made, even if that person did not want to kill. That person consented to the will to kill to save his/her own life, which God would not want anyone to do. And consenting to the desire for something one believes God would not want anyone to do is the definition of a sin, and merit comes from the resistance to this temptation.

Although Aristotle and Abelard differ in several crucial ways, Abelard seems to borrow quite a bit from Aristotelian ethics. For example, both Aristotle and Abelard believe that being a virtuous person takes effort rather than it coming naturally. If a virtuous act is committed without reference to reason, both believe it inferior to an action that is thought through. Aristotle believes that natural virtue is meaningless when judging the character of a person and Abelard states that deeds without reason "aren't such that they deserve merit, since they are lacking in reason" (213). Furthermore, both maintain that it is not the action itself that determines a virtuous person. However, for Aristotle, the role and root of virtue is about character building and "becom[ing] good" (Aristotle 2.2), whereas for Abelard, it is about doing everything with the intention to please God, which does not necessarily involve character. Aristotle believes that one should make every effort to steer clear of unvirtuous pleasure, such as alcohol and sex, because turning away from natural tendencies displays strength of character. On the other hand, Abelard believes that God created pleasure for a purpose and experiencing pleasure is not a sin. He claims that if one believes feeling pleasure itself is a sin, "then surely it is illicit for *anyone* to have this bodily pleasure. Hence not even married couples are exempt from sin when they are brought together by this bodily pleasure that is permitted to them, and neither is one who enjoys a delicious meal of his own fruit. […] Finally, even the Lord, the creator of foods as well as of our bodies, wouldn't be without fault if he inserted into those foods flavors such as would necessarily force those who

eat them into sin by their pleasure in them. For why would he make such foods for our eating, or permit us to eat them, if it were impossible for us to eat them without sin? And how can sin be said to be committed in doing what is permitted?" (Abelard 206-207).

Both Aristotle and Abelard's ethical theories have merit in the context of recent times, particularly when considering Aristotle's discussion of contextual evidence, and Abelard's insistence of the importance on the intention behind the acts. However, both are vague as to how moral virtue is acquired. Aristotle admitted this ambiguity, whether he thought it to be a fault of his theory or not. The ambiguity stems from his idea that one should follow reason as a practically wise person would define it. Perhaps in Aristotle's time, practically wise people were more easily identifiable. Oracles, for example, as Socrates consulted in order to determine his life's mission of finding a more intelligent human than himself. Although Aristotle claimed that "in order to become good […], we must examine the nature of actions, namely how we ought to do them" (Aristotle 2.2), he did not provide the *how*, he provided a model. This model of a practically wise person is vague, not easily acted upon, and may not be unanimously agreed upon. Aristotle admits that discerning the exact mean:

> is no doubt difficult, and especially in individual cases; for or is not easy to determine both how and with whom and on what provocation and how long one should be angry; for we too sometimes praise those who fall short and call them good-tempered, but sometimes we praise those who get angry and call them manly. The man, however, who deviates little from goodness is not blamed, whether he do so in the direction of the more or of the less, but only the man who deviates more widely; for he does not fail to be noticed. But up to what point and to what extent a man must deviate before he becomes blameworthy it is not easy to determine by reasoning, any more than anything else that is

> perceived by the senses; such things depend on particular facts, and the decision rests with perception. So much, then, is plain, that the intermediate state is in all things to be praised, but that we must incline sometimes towards the excess, sometimes towards the deficiency; for so shall we most easily hit the mean and what is right. (2.9)

Abelard places responsibility of virtuous action on the shoulders of humans and claims that they cannot be wrong in action if they *believe* they are acting according to God's will. He simultaneously claims that they cannot be wrong in their own assessment and intimates that a person may do a virtuous deed, but believe they are scorning God, and therefore sin. Abelard states, "if one believes that what he is aiming at is pleasing to God, he is in addition not deceived in his evaluation. Otherwise the infidels themselves would also have good deeds, just as we do, since they too believe no less than we do that through their deeds they are saved or are pleasing to God" (214). How can one be mistaken in one's evaluation of their own deeds if they believe they are scorning God, but not if they believe they are pleasing God? If sin is judged entirely based on our own evaluation of what God would like us to do, does that mean a dictator committing genocide because he believes God would be pleased is virtuous? According to Abelard, one's intention and one's action is completely separate and does not inform the other. However, it is possible that someone could delude themselves into thinking they are acting in God's will and commit horrible deeds that one would assume God would disapprove, but according to Abelard, that person is not sinning and cannot be mistaken in his evaluation of God's pleasure or will. How can one acquire virtue if their evaluation of their own will is faulty? Abelard's ethical theory can be considered to be more easily followed compared to Aristotle's, on the condition that one is a follower of Christ, and one knows with certainty that they are not delusional (which is not possible). Ultimately, followers of Aristotle may have difficulty

knowing who to trust as a practically wise person in order to act according to reason, and followers of Abelard may have difficulty knowing their own intentions with absolute certainty and judging other's actions as sinful or virtuous, which may be important when considering the influence over one's own actions.

Works Cited

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