

Comment on T.H. Irwin's "Aristotle's Conception of Morality"  
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Professor Irwin begins by identifying two features of the modern conception of morality which one might at first glance think are missing from Aristotle's ethics: namely, an essential concern for the welfare of others and an emphasis on the voluntary character of moral actions and qualities. Aristotle's ethics is a theory of the excellences of character which are required to lead a good life, and so the question whether it is recognizably a *moral* theory will be a question about whether these excellences of character are recognizably *moral* virtues. Professor Irwin's view is that the excellences of character discussed by Aristotle will also be moral virtues, in the modern sense, if they involve a concern for the welfare of others and are exercised voluntarily, and he finds that they do have these features. For this reason, Aristotle's theory is recognizably a moral theory. However, it does lack something that modern moral theories tend to emphasize, namely, a concern of some sort for persons as such. Although Aristotle's virtuous person is concerned with others, the others are objects of concern as friends, family members, and fellow citizens, not as persons as such, or as fellow human beings. It is quite possible, on Aristotle's view, that another human being be relegated to the status of slave or barbarian, and therefore be outside of the realm of moral concern. In his closing paragraphs, Professor Irwin reminds us that this is a reason for dismissing Aristotle's view only if we are sure that our more extensive concerns for others cannot be explained Aristotle's way. That is to say, rather than drawing the conclusion that Aristotle had no conception of *morality* because he did not attend to the question of what is due to persons as such, we might instead come to believe that Aristotelian reasons for concern with others tie us to a much larger group than Aristotle himself supposed.

I want to comment on two of the issues that Professor Irwin has raised. One is the issue of concern for the welfare of others as opposed to self-concern and how central it is to modern conceptions of morality. The other is the issue of whether a modern conception of morality essentially involves some required attitude towards persons as such.

Let me start with the topic of self-concern. While I agree with Professor Irwin that someone who was completely inattentive to the interests of others would not be recognizable as a moral agent, I want to argue that a certain kind of self-concern is just as central to most modern conceptions of morality as it is

to Plato's or to Aristotle's. Courage, temperance, magnanimity, and proper pride are recognizable as *moral* virtues even if they are not related to the welfare of the community in the ways that Irwin suggests Aristotle takes them to be. To this extent I want to agree with Professor Irwin that Aristotle's is surely a moral theory, and even to suggest that it is not necessary to relate all of the virtues either to the welfare of others or to the common good in order to establish the point.

I am using the phrase "self-concern" rather than "self-interest" to talk about a certain shared feature of Greek and modern moral thought which has been misunderstood. For example, H. A. Prichard, in his two famous papers, "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" and "Duty and Interest", argues vigorously that the whole project of moral philosophy is misguided. Prichard puts Plato, Aristotle, Butler, Hutcheson, Paley, Kant, Mill, and Green all together into the category of mistaken moral philosophers who have tried to give answers to the question why one should do the right thing, or be a moral person. Prichard thought that this question could only be answered by appeal to moral reasons, which are trivial in the case, or by appeal to non-moral reasons, which are from a moral point of view irrelevant. The non-moral reasons in question, Prichard thought, would have to be reasons of self-interest, or advantage, where it is supposed to be understood that we know what "advantage" consists in.

Now, I do not think that Prichard's debunking analysis of our tradition is right: moral philosophers have not all been trying to show that morality is to our advantage in some familiar sense of "advantage". But it has been characteristic of the tradition of moral philosophy all along to try to show that morality is not just *for* others but is something that is of concern to the agent. We might use a very old-fashioned phrase, and say that moral philosophy has always invited us to be concerned with the state of our souls - or anyway of our characters, and tried to show us that the point of being a moral agent is not just that it is a good thing for others but that it is in some way a good thing for oneself.

It is true that in Greek philosophy the emphasis is to a surprising extent on the self-concerned side of morality rather than the other-directed side. But we can find passages in which the Greek philosophers show that they realize that this will make it sound as if they are talking about something other than morality, and yet that they nevertheless do take themselves to be talking about morality. The moral philosopher, in attempting to discover the point of being a morally good person, will emphasize the self-concerned side of morality, and then will have to reconnect his or her theory to the other-directed side. One such passage occurs in Book IV of the *Republic* when Plato, having carefully

described what it is to have a perfectly organized soul, suddenly returns to the more everyday notion of justice, or, as he puts it, decides to test his theory "by applying commonplace and vulgar tests to it." (Shorey). At this moment Plato shows himself first, to have in mind an everyday notion that looks a lot like our own everyday notion of morality; second, to be aware that something needs to be said about how his own philosophical theory connects to that notion; and finally, third, to be stunningly confident that the connection can be made. Would a man with the sort of soul I have described, Plato asks, embezzle, commit sacrilege or theft or adultery, betray his comrades or the state, or neglect his parents? "Oh, no," replies Glaucon, and that is the end of the matter. Just acts, according to Plato, can be *defined* as those acts which "preserve and help to produce this desirable condition of the soul" , unjust acts as those that destroy it.

One might take as a similar moment in Aristotle the following passage from Aristotle's discussion of proper self-love. Aristotle says:

[The good man ]is ready to sacrifice money as long as his friends profit, for the friends gain money, while he gains what is fine, and so he awards himself the greater good. . . it is also possible, however, to sacrifice actions to his friend, since it may be finer to be responsible for his friend's doing the action than to do it himself. In everything praiseworthy, then, the excellent person awards himself what is fine.

(1169a25ff. Irwin)

Like Plato, Aristotle understands that the connection between the moral self-concern emphasized by the philosopher and the concern with others emphasized in the everyday concept of morality must be made. Like Plato, Aristotle has no doubt that it can be. The right kind of self-concern - a desire for what is fine - finds a natural expression in decent and generous treatment of others. General justice is simply the outward manifestation of complete virtue.

My point here is that the emphasis on this kind of concern with the state of one's soul or character is not peculiar to Greek ethical philosophizing, but endures. In Kant's ethics it is the conception of oneself as autonomous and free that does the motivational work. Like Hume, Kant identifies a separate category of virtues and duties which are concerned with the self and not with others. Kant's *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue* opens with the claim that, if we had no duties to ourselves, we would

have no duties at all. One might say that it is self-respect that lies at the root of morality for Kant. The eighteenth century moral sense theorists, too, emphasized a sort of pride or need for self-approval: Hume, for instance, answers the free-rider problem by invoking the value of "inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, a satisfactory review of our own conduct". This is a long way from Plato's complex answer to Glaucon's ring-of-Gyges challenge or from the function argument by which Aristotle links virtue to *eudaimonia*, but it is in the same spirit. It invites us to believe that treating others justly and well is a consequence of having a kind of character which it is good from one's own point of view to have.

The project of showing that this is so, misidentified by Prichard as a project of showing that morality is in our "interest", is one that moral philosophy inherited from its Greek founders and has retained. But I don't think that this is characteristic only of *philosophizing* about morality - I think that it is also characteristic of the "ordinary" concept of morality. It shows up in the idea that morality is part of what will save your soul, in the idea that acting in morally decent way is an expression of self-respect, and in the idea of integrity. And these are ordinary moral ideas, not just philosophical ones.

The basic Greek idea, then, that a good character is something that, in some sense, is good for the agent to have, and that concern for others and decent treatment of others is an expression of that good character, is an essential part of both the tradition of moral philosophy and of our notion of what morality is. So neither the emphasis on self-concern nor the inclusion of a number of purely self-regarding virtues is a reason to think that the Greek notion of morality is different from ours.

The second point I want to take up is the question whether it is essential to a recognizable moral theory that it include some required attitude toward persons as such. Professor Irwin points out that on Aristotle's view "Duties are owed to other people as friends and fellow-citizens sharing goals and interests with the agent, not simply as other people." To those who immediately see that this approach could have some unattractive conclusions, Irwin points out that "We are entitled to reject Aristotle's approach only if we are convinced that the appeals to friendship, community, and cooperation really fail to justify moral principles with a wider scope than Aristotle recognizes. We should not assume that the length to which Aristotle goes is the length to which his principles will really take him." I suppose the suggestion here is that our ties of friendship, citizenship, and cooperative partnership may be sufficiently extensive to do the same sort of work in an Aristotelian theory that obligations to persons as such do in

other theories. I myself am skeptical about this possibility. I think that some required attitude towards persons as such is an essential feature of the modern conception of morality and especially of the modern conception of justice. I think in particular that the idea that all human beings are in some sense equal - as the bearers of rights, or as the objects of moral concern, or as claimants to the benefits of social cooperation, is essential to *our* notion of what justice is about.

It is a little hard to produce an argument on the subject, but let me try to support it by this consideration. Think again of the features Professor Irwin identified as central to the modern conception of morality - concern for others and voluntariness - and think about why they are essential. Take voluntariness. In modern moral thinking, an emphasis on the voluntary character of moral actions and qualities tends to be associated with an idea that it is *not fair* for people to be praised and blamed, or rewarded and punished, for things that they cannot help or are not responsible for. When Hume claims that the difference between moral virtues and involuntary natural abilities is merely verbal, he expects and gets resistance. When he says that someone with good natural abilities is "more intitled to our good will and services than one entirely void of them" (*Treatise*, p. 607) he probably means to shock us, and he does. Hume dismisses the emphasis on the voluntary because he thinks the motives for it are theological (*Enquiry*, Appendix IV). And certainly, if eternal salvation depends on good moral character then it looks as if good moral character had better be something that is in each person's power. But even if the idea that morality is voluntary took on the kind of importance it now has in a theological context, this idea has a hold even on people who do not explicitly endorse these theological views. When you teach Aristotle's ethics you often get a certain amount of resistance to the idea that someone who is badly brought up may just be out of luck as far as the achievement of practical wisdom is concerned: this strikes the modern student as being *unfair*. This feature of Aristotle's view stands in sharp contrast to Kant's view that our moral character depends on the one part of us that is immune to deterministic forces. Once the philosopher has convinced us that a good moral character is a good thing to have, a modern person wants it to be equally available to everyone, like every other good. And I think that this is related to the modern emphasis on concern for others, for people just as such: the sense is that the interests of other people are just as important as yours. Trite as it is to say, I think it is true that modern moral thinking has an egalitarian component that Greek theories lack almost completely. And I think that the two features Irwin identifies as characteristic of modern moral thought are two sides of this egalitarian

view. The emphasis on the voluntary reflects the thought that we are all at least potentially equal as moral agents. The emphasis on concern for others reflects the thought that we are all equal as objects of moral concern.

Both kinds of equality are captured in the idea that we are all equal as human beings, as persons. Theories will differ with regard to the question in what respect we are equal, and therefore what attitude is required. It may be love, or respect, or just being counted equally in whatever calculations are done. But there will be some thing about persons that makes us all equally in the moral realm. I think it has become *essential* to *our* conception of morality that some attitude towards persons as such is required. And I think that such an attitude is not found in the ethical theories of Plato and Aristotle. In this respect - and I think only in this respect - Aristotle's theory is no longer recognizable as a moral theory. This is a feature that a modern conception of what morality is simply cannot be without.

