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SOMMARIO

STUDI

- FRANCISCO FERNÁNDEZ LABASTIDA, *Il fondamento teo-logico della verità. Il rapporto fra essere, verità e logos alla luce del Perì Hermeneías di Aristotele e del commento di San Tommaso d'Aquino* 11
- DANIELE GUASTINI, *Il concetto di philia: Aristotele e la posterità* 27
- JÓZEF M. ŻYCIŃSKI, *The Rationality of Logos instead of the Dictatorship of Relativism* 43

NOTE E COMMENTI

- GENNARO AULETTA, *What About the Three Forms of Inference?* 59
- DANIEL GAMARRA, *Emmanuel Lévinas: etapas de vida y pensamiento* 75
- ANA MARTA GONZÁLEZ, *Aristotle and Kant on practical reason: an Annotation to Korsgaard* 99
- LEONARDO POLO, *La sofistica como filosofía de las épocas de crisis* 113
- GREGORY B. SADLER, *Rethinking Christian Philosophy: Adriaan Peperzak's Contributions* 123

CRONACHE DI FILOSOFIA

- Società filosofiche* 143
- Convegni e seminari* 145
- Vita accademica* 147

FORUM

- MIGUEL PÉREZ DE LABORDA, KATE ROGERS, ITALO SCIUTO, *Libertà, etica, filosofia di Dio in Anselmo d'Aosta. Nel nono centenario della morte* 153

BIBLIOGRAFIA TEMATICA

- Il processo moderno di secolarizzazione* (MARIA APARECIDA FERRARI) 163

RECENSIONI

- FRANCIS S. COLLINS, *Il linguaggio di Dio. Alla ricerca dell'armonia fra scienza e fede* (M. A. Vitoria) 175
- JOSÉ LUIS FERNÁNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ, *El Dios de los filósofos modernos* (M. Santos Camacho) 180
- VIRGILIO MELCHIORRE, *Essere persona. Natura e struttura* (A. Rigobello) 183
- NATALIA LÓPEZ MORATALLA, *Cerebro de mujer y cerebro de varón* (J. Alviar) 186

ADRIANO PESSINA, <i>Eutanasia. Della morte e di altre cose</i> (P. Requena Meana)	189
MARIALUISA-LUCIA SERGIO, <i>Confronto con la fede. Religione civile e identità cristiana nella cultura laica della Costituzione</i> (M. A. Ferrari)	193

SCHEDE BIBLIOGRAFICHE

HENRI BERGSON, <i>Félix Ravaisson</i> (A. Acerbi)	199
EUGENIO CANONE (a cura di), <i>Per una storia del concetto di mente</i> (J. A. Mercado)	200
JIRÍ FUCHS, <i>The Critical Problem of the Truth</i> (J. F. Sellés)	201
DAVID HUME, <i>A Treatise of Human Nature</i> (J. A. Mercado)	202
GIOVANNI STELLI, <i>Il filo di Arianna. Relativismi postmoderni e verità della ragione</i> (A. Acerbi)	203
FRANCESCO S. TRINCIA, STEFANO BANCALARI (a cura di), <i>Perspectives sur le sujet. Prospettive filosofiche sul soggetto</i> (A. Acerbi)	204
<i>Pubblicazioni ricevute</i>	205

ARISTOTLE AND KANT ON PRACTICAL REASON: AN ANNOTATION TO KORSGAARD*

ANA MARTA GONZÁLEZ**

AFTER many years drawing attention to the differences between Aristotelian and Kantian Ethics, recent scholarship tends to stress their commonalities instead. Among the authors representing this trend of contemporary moral philosophy, Christine Korsgaard has undoubtedly a leading role. Without denying the differences existing between them, Korsgaard has been particularly keen on calling our attention to their shared views.¹

Yet Korsgaard herself has acknowledged an obvious difference between Aristotle and Kant, regarding their approach to emotions: unlike Kant, Aristotle does not think of inclinations and emotions as mere feelings, but rather as valuable sources of information about morally salient aspects of our situation. In other words: they provide us with (germinal) reasons for action.²

Korsgaard, however, keeps this difference at the level of moral psychology, arguing that it does not make a great difference at the level of ethical theory.³ Now, this is precisely what I find controversial. My point is that this sort of difference

* This paper was first delivered at the III Inter-University Workshop on Mind, Art and Morality, held in March 4th-6th 2004 at the University Carlos III in Madrid, on the moral philosophy of Christine M. Korsgaard. I want to thank the comments of the audience. I am also grateful to Talbot Brewer for his careful reading of the text.

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¹ Thus, after having pointed out several aspects they have in common, she concludes: «I believe that these claims about the practical employment of reason are deeper, both in fact and in Aristotle and Kant's theories, than philosophers have generally recognized. To say that human beings are rational is not just to say that we are rule-following or logical, but rather to say that we are capable of authentic mental activity, of an engagement with the world that goes beyond mere reaction» (C. M. KORSGAARD, *From Duty and for the sake of the Noble*, in S. ENGSTROM, J. WHITING (eds), *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics. Rethinking happiness and duty*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 204).

² «Kant shares Aristotle's view that inclination involves pleasure... but since Kant thinks that pleasure and pain are mere feeling, that they are, to put the point a little bluntly, stupid, he also thinks that inclination is stupid... The fact that you have an inclination for something does not tell you anything about that thing or even about your own condition. It only signals the thing's relationship to you». (C. M. KORSGAARD, *From Duty and the for the sake of the Noble*, cit., pp. 225-226).

³ C. M. KORSGAARD, *From Duty and for the sake of the Noble*, cit., p. 227.

imports a more fundamental one about practical reason in its entirety, a difference which used to be preserved in Kant's own reference to a "pure practical reason" – against which Aristotle's might be called "impure practical reason".

In order to show this I will first offer a plausible account of how emotions enter into Kant's theory of motivation. Arguing that Kant's conception of practical reason allows a clear distinction between "the determining ground of morality" – which can never be empirical – and any comprehensive "theory of motivation" – which ultimately involves some reference to empirical incentives –, I try to clarify the role of the empirical – and therefore of emotions – in Kant's theory of motivation.

Yet, important as they may be, for a complete understanding of Kant's theory of motivation, emotions do not play in his system the same role as in Aristotle's ethics. The difference between them in this regard has rightly been pointed out by Korsgaard, and it has basically to do with the cognitive role which the former, but not the latter, reserves to the emotions. Now, from then on, I try to stress how, in the Aristotelian account, the cognitive role of emotions is ethically reinforced by the resort to moral virtue, and thereby to his particular conception of practical reason. This will be the issue discussed in the final part of my exposition.

1. KANT ON MOTIVATION AND THE DETERMINING GROUND OF MORALITY

Kant is known for having distinguished sharply between the pure and the empirical part of ethics. As recent scholarship has shown⁴ such a distinction is not meant to reject any possible role of empirical nature in practice, but rather to make clear that, being man a rational creature, the determining ground of morality could only be rational.

Now, there are different conceptions of reason. Thus, if we assume Kant's formal conception of reason, we will have to distinguish neatly between the problem regarding the *determining ground of morality* and the problem of *motivation*, for while a formal conception of reason can explain Kant's insistence on autonomous determination as an essential note of morality, motivation necessarily involves a reference to the external world.

⁴ M. BARON, *Kantian Ethics almost without Apology*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1995; B. HERMAN, *Making Room for Character*, en S. ENGSTROM and J. WHITING (eds.), *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics. Rethinking Happiness and Duty*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, pp. 36-60; T. HILL, *Human Welfare and Moral Worth. Kantian Perspectives*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2002; R. B. LOUDEN, *Kant's Impure Ethics. From Rational Beings to Human Beings*, Oxford University Press, New York 2000; A. WOOD, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999. N. SHERMAN, *Making a Necessity of Virtue. Aristotle and Kant on Virtue*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997.

More precisely: unlike autonomy, which goes hand in hand with being purely active, motivation always involves some kind of passivity: being motivated certainly means having a *reason* to act (Kant would say a *maxim*), but this in turn can only occur if we have first been somehow affected by the world. Accordingly, every motive points at something beyond the agent, which first suggests the possibility of an action. This is what Kant is thinking of when he first introduces the notion of “incentive” (*Triebfeder*), which should be distinguished from “motive” (*Bewegungsgrund*).

In the *Groundwork*, Kant certainly distinguishes between motive and incentive.⁵ As Korsgaard has pointed out, Kant is not always consistent with this distinction thereafter. The distinction, however, is crucial if we are to make sense of his theory of motivation in a way compatible with his claim for an autonomous determining ground of morality. In *Self-Constitution*,⁶ Korsgaard has conveyed this idea by saying that a motive is “an incentive plus a principle”. Accordingly, the incentive alone is not to be regarded a motive, but rather *the incentive embedded in a maxim*.

Indeed, apart from many other considerations, it is clear that almost every time Kant speaks of incentive he seems to be thinking of “sensible incentives”. The most notable exception is his reference to the “incentive of pure practical reason” – which is none other than the fact of the reason, or the moral law.⁷ Yet, it is perhaps worth noting that such an incentive only comes into play once we have deliberated about the *morality* of a certain action, and let our reason be affected by the thought of the law. According to Kant, we have to assume that such a thing is possible, even if we are not able to explain how.⁸

Now, even if we accept that our reason can “be affected” by the thought of the law, so that we can act in a morally good way, this does not yet explain how we came to think of an action in the first place. This is why the issue of motivation should be distinguished from the issue of the determining ground of morality. At least, Kant’s moral philosophy allows room for this sort of distinction – which, in turn, allows room for a quite detached view of moral judgment. Thus, one thing is being prompted to act, and a different thing is deliberating

⁵ «The subjective ground of desire is an incentive; the objective ground of volition is a motive; hence the distinction between subjective ends, which rest on incentives, and objective ends, which depend on motives, which hold for every rational being. Practical principles are formal if they abstract from all subjective ends, whereas they are material if they have put these, and consequently certain incentives at their basis». (I. KANT, *Groundwork*, 4: 427).

⁶ C. M. KORSGAARD, *Self-Constitution: Action, Identity, and Integrity*. Forthcoming in Oxford University Press.

⁷ I. KANT, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5: 72 ss.

⁸ «How a law can be of itself and immediately a determining ground of the will (though this is what is essential in all morality) is for human reason an insoluble problem and identical with that of how a free will is possible» (I. KANT, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5: 72).

about the morality of that action – which in the final account certainly includes acting from the motive of duty, that is, determined by the thought of the law.

For sure, according to Kant, in order to act morally well, one has to act from the motive of duty. Kant cannot be clearer about this. But the “motive of duty” is not an empty claim: it is the incentive plus a principle (namely, the categorical imperative). In order to see this well, it is important to distinguish, with Korsgaard, between “acting from duty” and “acting for a purpose”. Indeed, as Korsgaard has repeatedly pointed out, acting from duty does not exclude acting for a purpose.⁹ In choosing an action, we choose an act with its purpose. In realizing that action from the motive of duty, we just act, as Aristotle says, for the sake of the noble, but this includes a content.

In this way, Korsgaard brings Kant closer to Aristotle. Yet a difference persists: according to Kant, acting from duty means acting on the thought of the law, that is, acting on the possible universalization of one’s maxim.¹⁰ This is what Kant understands for “right reason”. Now, as we will see later, this point is foreign to Aristotle.

Before going on with Aristotle, however, it may be useful to offer a reconstruction of Kant’s position regarding motivation, as sketched so far:

First, we need an incentive to act. I am thinking now merely of a sensible incentive. This incentive is external to us, but affects us through our empirical nature. This is not to say that we act only from our “animal” side. For, as Kant himself suggests in several texts, we come to moralize our empirical nature over time;¹¹ accordingly we can assume that the perceptions moving us to act could finally be called “moral perceptions”. Stressing this aspect is important in order to soften the problem of “moral salience”.¹²

⁹ «Kant believes that all human action is purposive, and so that every maxim of action contains an end (see GG. 427, MPV, 381; 384-85; R 4). A maxim of action will therefore usually have the form ‘I will do Action A in order to achieve Purpose P’» (C. M. KORSGAARD, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 57).

¹⁰ Kyla Ebbels Duggan asks me whether this means that universalization is just a negative condition “so that so long as I wouldn’t do it if it weren’t universalizable, I count as acting on the thought of the law”. I think this is the case. In order to think of “universalization” in a more positive way, I do think it necessary to introduce the notion of “required ends” – as Kyla herself suggests. I think Barbara Herman has explored this path in her paper on “Obligatory Ends”. Korsgaard’s preference for the Formula of Humanity over the Formula of Universal Law could also be seen as a way to make the thought of the law a more plausible origin of positive actions.

¹¹ This is suggested, for instance, in his several references to a “second nature” or “return to nature”, in *Conjectural Beginnings*, 8: 116; *Pädagogik*, 9: 492 (*Education*, University of Michigan Press, 1960, n. 9).

¹² See on this topic: B. HERMAN, *Making room for character*, in S. ENGSTROM, J. WHITING (eds), *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics. Rethinking Happiness and Duty*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, pp. 36-60.

Once the incentive has done its work on us, we feel prompted to act. This action involves a maxim: “in order to achieve purpose X, perform act Y”. Since the maxim is a (subjective) principle, at this stage of the process we already have a *motive*. Now, we still have to check our maxim against the Categorical Imperative, in order to judge its permissibility. As Korsgaard observes, we can do this in a more or less reflective way. Kant himself thinks this is something we do in every moral judgment; something we convey in the familiar question «what would happen if everybody acted this way?». ¹³ This is precisely the idea Kant tries to make explicit in the categorical imperative test. If the maxim of a proposed action is universalizable, it will be permitted. If not, it will be forbidden. Whether we obey it or not, we cannot avoid acting under the influence of this law, which is the law of reason.

In all this, it is important to note that the Categorical Imperative works as a key factor in determining the morality of any action, but it is far from being the only element. ¹⁴ Kant’s own examples in the *Groundwork* suggest that the maxims we check against the categorical imperative are morally loaded in advance. Were it not so, we could not even be able to identify the action. This is why moral education becomes so important for Kant, who writes: «The first endeavour in moral education is the formation of character. Character consists in readiness to act according to maxims». ¹⁵

Although insistence on education is also a mark of Aristotle’s practical philosophy, the way both authors have of approaching moral education is very different, ultimately because they live in two different worlds. As Korsgaard has remarked, Aristotle’s world was a rational one, meaning that rationality was an essential feature of both the natural and the human world; Kant’s world, on the other hand, consists of pure facts: no rationality can be found in

¹³ «The rule of judgment under laws of pure practical reason is this: ask yourself whether, if the action you propose were to take place by a law of the nature of which you were yourself a part, you could indeed regard it as possible through your will. Everyone does, in fact, appraise actions as morally good or evil by this rule. Thus one says: if everyone permitted himself to deceive when he believed it to be to his advantage, or considered himself authorized to shorten his life as soon as he was thoroughly weary of it, or looked with complete indifference on the need of others, and if you belonged to such an order of things, would you be in it with the assent of your will?» (I. KANT, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5: 69).

¹⁴ See on this B. HERMAN, *The practice of moral judgment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, p. ix.

¹⁵ I. KANT, *Education*, 78 (University of Michigan Press, 1960). Later in the same book, he says: «The first step towards the formation of character is to put our passions on one side. One must take care that our desires and inclinations do not become passions, by learning to go without those things that are denied to us» (*ibidem*, p. 93). «Character consists in the firm purpose to accomplish something, and then also in the actual accomplishing it» (*ibidem*, p. 94).

the world itself, except that, which we put into it.¹⁶ That is the meaning of the Copernican revolution, whose relevance in the practical realm is not smaller than in the theoretical one. Thus, while in the latter this revolution means that truth follows the laws of our understanding, in the former it means that the good follows the *law* of our reason. Accordingly, the good is seen as a result of applying the (purely formal) law of reason.

Indeed: that the good follows (practical) reason, and not the other way around, goes hand in hand with the nature of practical reason. The *practical* good is, in both Aristotle and Kant, something to be realized by our reason. Yet, the difference between Aristotle and Kant, in this regard, has to do with Kant's identification of "right reason" and "universal reason". This is precisely the step Aristotle is not ready to take. So, when Korsgaard argues that "to ask whether a consideration is a reason is to ask whether it may be taken as normative", Aristotle would agree with her. But when she goes on saying «and that, in turn, is to ask whether the maxim of acting on that consideration can be regarded as a kind of law»,¹⁷ he would no longer agree with her – unless one qualifies this "kind of law" so much that it is no longer a (universal) law but merely a (particular) precept.¹⁸

Now, it seems to me that the reason for this difference has much to do with the different way both philosophers have of integrating emotions in their moral theories.

2. ARISTOTLE ON EMOTIONS AND PRACTICAL REASON

It is generally accepted that Aristotle has a much richer account of the role of emotions in moral life. As Nancy Sherman has recently observed, pointing at Aristotle's argumentation in the *Rhetoric*,¹⁹ emotions provide us with germinal insights about the morally salient aspects of our circumstances.

This statement should not obscure the fact that emotions by themselves do not provide us with any moral guide. In fact, they can also become a source of confusion: and this is, perhaps, the aspect the *Nicomachean Ethics* highlights. Moral behavior is the behavior according to the right reason.

¹⁶ «... it was Kant who completed the revolution, when he said that reason – which is form – isn't on the world, but is something that we impose upon it» (C. M. KORSGAARD, *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 5).

¹⁷ C. M. KORSGAARD, *From Duty and for the sake of the Noble*, cit., p. 212.

¹⁸ K. E. Duggan wonders whether this distinction might be conveyed as a distinction between reason setting its own end, on the one hand, and reason making substantive judgments about what is worth doing, on the other. I think that is a very clear way to put it. However, this does not mean that Aristotle's practical reason does not set its own end (at least, that is a controversial issue). All it means is that it sets its own end taking into account certain objects (See ARISTOTLE, *On the soul*, III, 10).

¹⁹ N. SHERMAN, *Making a Necessity of Virtue. Aristotle and Kant on Virtue*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, pp. 53 ss.

Yet, unlike Kant, Aristotle does not think that reason is right *by itself*, or that its rightness is a result of universalizing a given maxim. This is why reason itself needs to be perfected, which is, in Aristotle's view, the role of *phronesis*. At the same time, human beings need to interpret and moderate their emotions: that is the role of (moral) education according to Aristotle: «to make us find enjoyment or pain in the right things». ²⁰ Now, according to Aristotle, both aspects come together in the acquisition of moral virtue. Thus, he says, the human being needs moral virtue in order to be intelligent (*phronimos*), and s/he needs intelligence (*phronesis*) in order to acquire moral virtue.

Such a feedback relationship between practical reason and moral virtue is characteristic of Aristotle: there is no moral virtue without intelligence (*phronesis*), or intelligence without moral virtue. ²¹ Intelligence (*phronesis*) and moral virtue reinforce each other. From that perspective, we could say that *phronesis* is not merely an intellectual virtue, but also a moral one. Conversely we could also say that moral virtue is indirectly given a cognitive role. Unless we have moral virtue, we are likely to fail in the appreciation of the morally salient aspects of a particular situation. Now, this cognitive relevance of virtue is not separated from its role in correcting our desire. Indeed: according to Aristotle, moral virtue corrects our desires, preventing us from being attracted to morally bad ends. We could add as well: it enables us to perceive morally salient aspects of a given situation, even in the absence of any emotion whatsoever. In addition, all this is essential to a correct deliberation about our particular circumstances.

Now, such an account of the relationship among emotions, virtue and practical reason suggests a rather complex picture of the good action, whose form cannot be adequately captured through the universalization procedure. Instead, Aristotle speaks of "practical truth". This is, of course, the element of realism in Aristotle's account. Yet, we may argue: does truth – be it practical or theoretical – not necessarily involve some kind of universality? So why does Aristotle not resort to anything like a universalization procedure? It is in the answer to this question that we can best grasp the difference between Aristotle and Kant.

3. TWO CONCEPTIONS OF PRACTICAL REASON

I argue that the reason why Aristotle does not resort to a procedure like Kant's is not simply of historical nature – say that he was more skeptical about universal principles. It is more likely that he was not interested in those principles because he understood that morality is realized in the particular action, and

²⁰ ARISTOTLE, NE, II, 3, 1104 b 13-14.

²¹ ARISTOTLE, NE, VI, 6. 12.

at this level universal principles are of little use. Thus, asked about the moral standard Aristotle points at the excellent person.²²

Now, in this indication there is something we should not overlook: the reason why Aristotle points at the excellent person is because what makes an action good cannot be completely grasped through an abstract norm: good is what the excellent person does *in the way he or she does it*. In other words: morality, for Aristotle, is to be found *more in the way you act than in the things you do*. The point is that a “way of acting” involves attending simultaneously to many ends: for instance, not only doing what is fair, but doing it fairly, kindly, peacefully, and so on. The point of focusing on the agent rather than on the action – which is Aristotle’s focus – is that the agent is supposed to keep an eye on many different ends at the same time. This is perhaps why he says, quoting an anonymous author, «men are good in but one way, but bad in many».²³ Accordingly, one’s actions cannot be fully conveyed through a single approach: “I am going to do act X for purpose Y”. In any particular action many different virtues are involved, even if the action itself is ultimately defined as a “courageous action”. For Aristotle, it won’t be such unless it is also wise; and one cannot be wise unless he or she possesses moral virtue in general.²⁴

To a certain extent this is also the case with Kant: hence his insistence on interior dispositions.²⁵ However, Kant does not stress the idea of morality as a way of acting: his accent is on morality as the realization of the moral law. For Kant the different *ways of acting* do not belong to the intrinsic nature of morality as such.²⁶ Actually, in spite of her interest on virtue, the Kantian moral agent regards virtue (and pragmatic reason) merely as supportive of

²² ARISTOTLE, NE, III, 4.

²³ ARISTOTLE, NE, II, 6, 1106 b 34.

²⁴ Talbot Brewer has pointed out to me that the Kantian analogue of the *phronimos* has a large collection of local or specific maxims, and also higher-order maxims (subjective versions of the categorical imperative) that govern the more local ones. Taken as a whole, this scheme would help determine what will be done in name of which purposes. He argues that such a system of internalized maxims would do the work of the virtues in Aristotle. The point should be further explored, but my first impression is that an Aristotelian virtue can never be equated with an internalized norm.

²⁵ «A human being has a duty to carry the cultivation of his will up to the purest virtuous disposition, in which the law becomes also the incentive to his actions that conform with duty and he obeys the law from duty. This disposition is inner morally practical perfection. Since it is a feeling of the effect that the lawgiving will within the human being exercises on his capacity to act in accordance with his will, it is called moral feeling, a special sense (*sensus moralis*) as it were» (I. KANT, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6: 387).

²⁶ At most, we could say it belongs to *human* morality, insofar it must necessarily count on virtue and pragmatic reason. But even then, it is not clear how the different ways of acting can be counted as important dimensions of *morality* – more than of pragmatic anthropology: See GG, 4: 389; KU, 5: 173-174.

a morally good choice,²⁷ not as a constitutive part of it – which is the case with the Aristotelian *phronimos*. Conversely, for Aristotle practical truth does not exist unless we deliberate according to the right desire, which, in turn, depends on having moral virtue. Consequently, hitting the mean, making the right choice or decision, is not simply a matter of abstract knowledge, but a matter of moral virtue.

Obviously, moral virtue requires knowledge. Yet the kind of knowledge Aristotle deems necessary for acquiring moral virtue is not that of principles, but that of the particular circumstances of the action. This is not to deny the importance of principles – indeed: in the Aristotelian account, every virtue could be regarded as a sort of principle. The point is, rather, that theoretical knowledge of those principles is of no use unless we recognize them in practice: and we recognize them because of our acquaintance with the ends of virtue. This is why – to take the classic example of Plato – courage cannot be defined as “attacking always”, but rather attacking when it is appropriate. Yet, in order to appreciate when it is fit, that is, in order to judge accurately on the circumstances entering in the definition of courage, we need intelligence (*phronesis*).

Now: does not Kant also include a reference to particular circumstances of the action? Yes, he does: but he deals with those particular circumstances through pragmatic, not moral reason. Thus he says that Anthropology – which is a kind of pragmatic knowledge – is important in order to *apply* the moral law.²⁸ We could even assume that this knowledge influences the formulation of the maxim on which the agent proposes to act. And yet, it is not clear

²⁷ «Virtue is the strength of a human being's maxims in fulfilling his duty.- Strength of any kind can be recognized only by the obstacles it can overcome, and in the case of virtue these obstacles are natural inclinations, which can come into conflict with the human being's moral resolution; and since it is man himself who puts these obstacles in the way of his maxims, virtue is not merely a self-constraint (for then one natural inclination could strive to overcome another), but also a self-constraint in accordance with a principle of inner freedom, and so through the mere representation of one's duty in accordance with its formal law» (I. KANT, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6: 394). And also: «Virtue is, therefore, the moral strength of a human being's will in fulfilling his duty, a moral constraint through his own lawgiving reason, insofar as this constitutes itself an authority executing the law» (MM, 6: 405).

²⁸ «All moral philosophy is based entirely on its pure part; and when it is applied to the human being it does not borrow the least thing from acquaintance with him (from anthropology) but gives to him, as a rational being, laws a priori, which no doubt still require a judgment sharpened by experience, partly to distinguish in what cases they are applicable and partly to provide them with access to the will of the human being and efficacy for his fulfillment of them; for the human being is affected by so many inclinations that, though capable of the idea of practical pure reason, he is not easily able to make it effective in concreto in the conduct of his life» (GG, 4: 389).

how this influence could work: can we really introduce in a single maxim all the aspects the *phronimos* has in mind when he acts *in a certain way*, not only doing the right thing but also doing it in the right way? It seems to me that all we can capture in a maxim is a general type of action – the right thing –, but not the precise *way of acting*, which distinguishes the good man's action. This way of acting is what Aristotle tries to capture speaking of a plurality of virtues, which, nevertheless, form a unity.

Moreover: even if we were able to capture in a maxim the variety of circumstances which need to be taken into account in any virtuous act, we would have to particularize the action so much that the resort to the universalization procedure would become meaningless. This is why Kant's universalization procedure does not convey exactly the same conception of morality that Aristotle's *phronimos* does.

In order to further clarify Aristotle's position, as opposed to Kant's, we should perhaps revise Korsgaard's identification of "normative reason" and "a kind of law", for what Aristotle is suggesting is that practical reason has prescriptive force apart from any possible universalization of its precepts. For Aristotle does think that the most important aspect of *phronesis* – more important even than discovering the right mean – has to do with the prescription of the right action. Yet, in his view, this is merely a prescription for this particular agent, in these particular circumstances.

This is not to say there is absolutely nothing universal about the right action; in fact, the different types of action described in the different virtues represent a certain attempt to convey some general principles – those embodied in the *phronimos*. Aristotle's attempt to analyze every virtue seems thus to be directed to help his listeners reflect on those principles, because he assumes that in this way they will be in a better position to embody them in their own behavior. A number of remarks throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*, however, make clear that each agent should embody those principles in his/her own circumstances and ultimately in his or her own way. For, as Aristotle himself puts it, in dealing with actions what we say in general has more extension, but what we say in particular is closer to truth.²⁹ In fact, given the plurality of circumstances, he seems to assume that we cannot go beyond a generic typification of good actions; a proper universalization of morally good actions would be impossible.³⁰

²⁹ ARISTOTLE, NE, II, 7, 1107 a 29-30.

³⁰ If we were able to determine all the circumstances of that action we could perhaps overcome this obstacle. But we are not, because many of the circumstances involved in the goodness of a particular action have to do with who we are, with our particular biography. In this context it would be interesting to examine Korsgaard's concept of practical identity.

Now, Aristotle's insistence on the particular need not be seen as completely opposed to Kant's insistence on the universal. I agree with Korsgaard that their views are to a great extent complementary. Kant's emphasis on universal law conveys something important, namely: the idea that, as an active rational being, I am object of respect, and subject to the same laws that govern the life of other rational beings. At the same time, since according to Kant, humans are rational beings of a particular kind, we should keep in mind that there is a specific human way of being rational and acting rationally.

Yet, while Kant seems to think that the practically rational can be defined to a certain extent apart from experience – by resort to the categorical imperative –, Aristotle thinks otherwise. Although both philosophers characterize the good action as the result of a right reason, Aristotle has little to say about this right reason apart from the knowledge of the particular circumstances of the action. The more he can say in this regard is that there are types of action, the names of which «automatically include baseness»;³¹ here we have perhaps a hint of universal moral laws, but merely negative ones. Regarding positive behavior, as he puts it in a famous example, «it is not easy to define the way we should be angry, with whom, about what, for how long... for nothing perceptible is easily defined, and (since) these (circumstances of virtuous and vicious action) are particulars, the judgment about them depends on perception».³²

Now, as we have seen Aristotle thinks that right perception depends on virtue. Besides, in the text I have just quoted, he clearly suggests that in the particular precept governing this particular action, there is always more information than in any universal law. Hence we can infer that, in order to make a universal law out of a particular precept (or a particular maxim), we would have to leave out many details. Now, those are precisely the details, which make a difference when we speak of the goodness of this particular action.

The idea is very simple: by trying to universalize the maxim of my action I do not arrive at its goodness. The goodness of an action is not merely a function of its universal form. All I get to know by the universalization procedure is whether the type of action conveyed in the maxim I am planning to act upon, is permissible or forbidden. Yet, while doing what is forbidden is always bad, doing what is permitted is not always good: it depends also on many other factors inextricably linked to the individual agent and his/her circumstances: inextricably linked to the way he acts.

And conversely: saying that all we are obliged to do falls under a universal law is too strong, because in speaking of "universal law" we are suggesting that everybody else should act in the same way, were they in the same situation. This, however, would be the case only if human moral agents were pure rational beings, and circumstances were something extrinsic to their identity.

³¹ ARISTOTLE, NE, II, 6, 1107 a 10.

³² ARISTOTLE, NE, II, 9, 1109 b 13-16; 23-26.

But, at least for Aristotle, they are not. For Aristotle, human beings and human agency are certainly rational, but not purely formal. As a result, an agent may be obliged to act because of a particular precept of his or her practical reason, which, as such, cannot and need not be universalizable.

In other words: while the goodness of any action depends on its being prescribed by practical reason, this prescription need not be seen as a universal law. At least not in Aristotle. And this marks the crucial difference between Aristotle's and Kant's conception of practical reason. In Kant's moral philosophy, there is a strong connection between obligation and universality. As Korsgaard explains in *Sources of Normativity*, this is partly so because the idea of obligation parallels that of cause, and this, in turn, is linked by Kant to that of universality.³³ However, it is also that way because Kant's practical reason is pure, and, as such, it can only be determined by the universal form of the law.

Aristotle's practical reason, however, is not pure. It essentially involves an *orectic* dimension right from the start. This is best conveyed in Aristotle's definition of *prohairesis* as intelligent desire. Now, from this *orectic* dimension we see that the determination to act need not – and cannot – be merely formal, because desire never is: every desire has a content. Furthermore, it is the fusion of desire and content that makes a rational agent become *this* agent: particularization, indeed, comes not through reason but through desire.

From then on, Aristotle's insistence on the acquisition of moral virtue as a pre-condition for right deliberation can be explained because virtue corrects our desires and emotions “from within”, making them more universal. Virtue, indeed, introduces rationality in our desires. In this way it makes our desires more universal. Yet, in spite of that correction, they are still our particular desires. In order to act well we need not renounce our individuality; we just need to work on it, as Kant himself says. Only that the way to do that differs depending on our definition of practical reason. A good action, for Aristotle, would be merely the realization of what we have deliberated according to the right desire. This realization, and not merely the *logos* informing it, is what Aristotle calls practical truth.³⁴

Calling our actions “true” or “false” certainly involves admitting their rationality. But for Aristotle this rationality is not to be tested by means of any universal procedure – which may work for maxims, but not necessarily for the

³³ See C. M. KORSGAARD, *Sources of Normativity*, cit., pp. 225-227.

³⁴ «Virtue of character is a state that decides; and decision is a deliberative desire. If, then, the decision is excellent, the reason must be true and the desire correct, so that what reason asserts is what desires pursues. This, then, is thought and truth concerned with action... truth is the function of whatever thinks; but the function of what thinks about action is truth agreeing with correct desire» (ARISTOTLE, NE, VI, 2, 1139 a 21-27; 29-31).

even more particular *actions*. It would rather require a conscious search, to be carried out through dialogue with other human beings, already committed to a good life – as were those who attended Aristotle’s reflections on ethics –. In this way, Aristotle’s ethics calls for a dialectical continuation.

ABSTRACT: In recent years, scholarship has been calling our attention to the commonalities between Aristotelian and Kantian Ethics. In this general trend, Christine Korsgaard has a leading role. Yet, Korsgaard has also acknowledged an obvious difference between both authors: unlike Kant, Aristotle does not think of inclinations and emotions as mere feelings, but rather as valuable sources of information about morally salient aspects of our situation. In other words: they provide us with (germinal) reasons for action. Nevertheless, Korsgaard keeps this difference at the level of moral psychology, arguing that it does not make a great difference at the level of ethical theory. By contrast, in this paper, I try to argue that this sort of difference imports a more fundamental one about practical reason in its entirety.

KEYWORDS: Aristotle, Christine M. Korsgaard, Ethics, Kant, Practical reason.

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