

The Possibility of a Christian Appropriation of Aristotle's Ethical Philosophy

CHARLIE RITCH

Historically, the Christian tradition has heavily relied on Aristotle's ethical philosophy to provide a conceptual basis for the articulation of its own ethical doctrines, but Aristotle's concepts are coming up less and less frequently in contemporary ethical debates. The Roman Catholic Church, however, continues to be characterized by their reliance on Aristotelian formulations of theological doctrine. This, however, is not true of the Protestant church, which produced many of the Modern and nineteenth century attempts to find rational grounds for ethical philosophy without reference to Aristotle. According to Alasdair MacIntyre, these attempts have failed, and as a result there is no longer a "rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture."¹ It would seem, then, that the Protestant church would do well to reexamine Aristotle's ethical philosophy if they are to preserve the integrity of their ethical claims in the contemporary context.

Not all interpretations of Aristotle's ethical philosophy portray him as particularly helpful for articulating the ethics of the Christian tradition, though. A particularly problematic interpretation comes from Martha Nussbaum's work *The Fragility of Goodness*. She argues that Aristotle is a completely anthropocentric ethical philosopher, and he is thus able to

¹ MacIntyre 6.

Charlie Ritch is a senior at Wheaton College majoring in philosophy. He is pursuing graduate studies in biblical exegesis. This essay won third place in the 2003 R. E. Lee Contest at Wheaton College.

avoid the problems of his higher-minded predecessors. Nussbaum lauds the *NE* because it is authentic and unafraid to admit the messiness of the human ethical endeavor. Her interpretation of Aristotle's ethical philosophy is marked by three distinct arguments:

1. Ethical goodness is "species-relative," and thus the human good must be good for humans and humans alone.
2. There can be no hierarchy of ethical goods because there is no common standard by which to measure. Thus, the ordinary moral virtues are just as important for the good life as is the virtue of contemplation.
3. Ethical dictums are summaries of good decisions, not universally applicable laws. General principles are naturally susceptible to revision.

Since the Christian notion of ethical goodness is based on the eternity of God's character and man's having been made very much like God, it would seem that according to Nussbaum, Aristotle's ethical philosophy would not permit a Christian appropriation. Before it can be suggested that the Protestant church return to Aristotle for ethical insight, it must be determined whether or not Aristotle contradicts basic Christian presuppositions. I will argue that he does not and that in spite of the apparent contradictions posed by Nussbaum's interpretations, Aristotle may be read as anticipating the ethical philosophy of the New Testament.

Nussbaum's argument that the good life for human beings cannot be informed by the lives of gods or lower animals comes from her understanding of Aristotelian anthropology. Aristotle does indeed develop his concept of ethical goodness on the basis of his understanding of anthropology, and so it is not wholly improper for Nussbaum to call Aristotle's ethics "anthropocentric." Happiness has meaning only insofar as it describes the best possible state of human life. Aristotle concludes that this perfection can be nothing else but *eudaimonia* or happiness. But before

Aristotle can portray the perfection of human life, he must first explain what it is that must be perfected.²

Because humans are distinguished from animals by their superior use of reason, their proper function must involve their rational faculty. And since ethical philosophy is concerned not just with thought, but also with action, reason must be used for practical ends. This means that whatever else ethical goodness turns out to be, it must be practicable and attainable by rational human beings. Nussbaum concludes that this eliminates certain candidates for the good life. She writes:

There is no point in talking about the good life in an ethical inquiry insofar as this life is not practically attainable by beings with our capabilities. The life of a divine being might be ever so admirable; but the study of this life, insofar as it lies beyond our capabilities, is not pertinent to the practical aims of ethics.³

Nussbaum is here responding to the ethical philosophy of Plato, in which the ethical endeavor is portrayed as a pursuit of the transcendent idea of the good, a decidedly nonhuman concept. Aristotle explicitly rejects this conception of goodness, because even if the good were “something existing separately and absolute, it clearly [would] not be practicable or attainable by man; but the Good which we are now seeking is a good within human reach.”⁴

Nussbaum argues that the attainability of goodness provides parameters within which the good life must be defined. The life of a god, which is free from the fragility that characterizes human life, is essentially unattainable by human beings. And the life of a cow, which would not make adequate use of human reason, is not worth attaining. Thus, in

² *Nicomachean Ethics (NE)* 1097b 22–30.

³ Nussbaum 263.

⁴ *NE* 1096 30 ff.

Nussbaum's words, Aristotle's conception of ethical goodness is "species-relative"—that is, the ultimate good for each species is only relevant as a good within that species.

Nussbaum's argument that the good life must consist in a plurality of ethical goods, each of which is indispensable to the whole, comes from Aristotle's understanding of pleasure. She emphasizes the ways in which Aristotle's concept of pleasure differed from Plato's. Plato argues that whatever is pleasant participates in one universal and abstract idea of pleasure. This allowed for a kind of ethical precision akin to scientific measurement.⁵ If all ethical activities share the common characteristic of pleasure to one degree or another, then they can be measured against one another. The philosopher must determine which activity possesses the purest, most stable, and truest pleasure, and this activity will be the good life.⁶ Nussbaum argues that this perspective is repugnant to the basic realities of the human condition. Different pleasures are not all qualitatively similar, and to see them as such compromises the authentic complexity of human life.

In the first part of Book X Aristotle argues that pleasure attends the perfection of an activity. Thus, the character of a pleasure depends on the nature of the activity.⁷ Nussbaum reasons from this that ethical values are incommensurable with one another—that is, because there is no common standard against which to measure ethical values, each of them is unique and indispensable to the good life.

[Aristotle's] ethical works display a conception of the best human life as a life inclusive of a number of different constituents, each being defined apart from each of the others and valued for its own sake. Part of the very account of excellence of character is the stipulation that fine actions are chosen in each case for their own sake, not simply for the sake of some

⁵ See *Fragility of Goodness*, "The Protagoras: A Science of Practical Reasoning."

⁶ See *Ibid.*, "The Republic: True Value and the Standpoint of Perfection."

⁷ NE 1175a 23–25.

further reward or consequence (1105a 32). Each excellence is defined separately as something that has value in itself. To value each of these separate items, each of which has its separate account, for what it itself is, seems to entail recognition of its distinctiveness and separateness from each of the others.⁸

The ethical value of an activity depends on the degree to which it promotes the agent's happiness. Since the pleasure (and thus the ethical value) of each activity is unique, it follows that the good life will be characterized by a plurality of indispensable ethical activities—including many that are subject to external contingencies. There is no way to promote the contemplative life, or any other life dominated by only one ethical activity, as the best sort of human life. The very complexity of life requires that each of the virtues be enjoyed for its own sake.

This drastically affects the way we think about the good life. For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* does not describe any one part of life; rather it characterizes the whole of one's life. Thus, in the early chapters of the *NE*, Aristotle writes:

Happiness, as we said, requires both complete goodness and a complete lifetime. For many reverses and vicissitudes of all sorts occur in the course of life, and it is possible that the most prosperous man may encounter great disasters in his declining years, as the story of Priam in the epics; but no one calls a man happy who meets with misfortunes like Priam's, and comes to a miserable end.⁹

Because every ethically significant activity is really valuable in and of itself, and because no good can be foregone without significant loss, Nussbaum argues that the good life is profoundly susceptible to forces of luck. The

⁸ Nussbaum 296.

⁹ *NE* 1100a 5–9.

good life is characterized by a complex composition of ethical activities, many of which can be made impossible by fortune. And if the stability is compromised, then one's enjoyment of the good life is compromised.

One final aspect of Nussbaum's interpretation must be addressed. She argues that general principles in the Aristotelian framework are only summaries of good decisions, and as such they should not be portrayed as universal laws. In Book II Aristotle establishes a definition of virtue based on a certain understanding of an ethical principle:

Virtue . . . is a settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of actions and emotions consisting essentially in the observance of the mean *relative to us*, this being determined by *principle*, that is, as the prudent man would determine it.¹⁰

In Book VI, he more carefully examines the principle: "It is right to choose the mean and to avoid excess and deficiency, and . . . the mean is prescribed by the right principle."¹¹ Nussbaum argues that Aristotle's principle is often confused with contemporary ethical dictums. Instead of being the beginning of the reasoning process, as first principles are in the theoretical sciences, she maintains that the right principle is actually a collection of well-made decisions which form a sort of provisional rule when taken as a whole.

Principles are perspicuous descriptive summaries of good judgments, valid only to the extent to which they correctly describe such judgments. They are normative only insofar as they transmit in economical form the normative force of the good concrete decisions of the wise person and because we wish for various reasons to be guided by that person's choices. We note that their very simplicity of economy will be, on this conception, a double-edged attribute: for while it may help the princi-

¹⁰ Ibid. 1107a 1-5, emphasis added.

¹¹ Ibid. 1138b 17-19.

ple to perform certain pedagogical and steering functions, it will also be likely to make it less correct as a summary of numerous and complex choices.¹²

The important thing to note about Nussbaum's characterization is that it unequivocally precludes the possibility that ethical principles in any way reflect the unchanging character of God. The normative force of any ethical principle extends just so far as the principle is a formula for what a prudent person would do in a given situation. But since a general principle cannot account for the particularities of different situations, there exists the possibility that any and every principle will need to be corrected. Rather than reflecting the perfection of divine goodness, Nussbaum argues that ethical principles are only useful on certain occasions:

When there is no time to formulate a fully concrete decision, scrutinizing all the features of the case at hand, it is better to follow a good summary rule than to make a hasty and inadequate concrete choice. . . . Rules are necessities because we are not always good judges; if we really were operating ethically as well as we should, we would not have the same need of them.¹³

Ethical principles are thus a type of crutch on which we depend in imperfect cases where our deliberative capacities are limited by time. The principles are not essential to ethical goodness because they only summarize. And since it is the nature of ethical deliberation to be concerned with the particular situations, strategies that depend on general principles are fundamentally inadequate.

From what has been said about Nussbaum's interpretation, the prospects for a Christian appropriation of Aristotle's ethical philosophy are fairly grim. First, the Christian notion of goodness is not "species-rel-

¹² Nussbaum 299.

¹³ *Ibid.* 304.

ative,” insofar as the ultimate human good is in fact informed by the knowledge of God. Thus, the good for humans depends greatly on who God is and what He is like.¹⁴ It is not uncommon for the Christian to describe his ethical endeavor as the pursuit to be godly, or godlike. Such a pursuit is not an option in Nussbaum’s version of Aristotelian ethics. She maintains that the richness of human life is directly related to its fragility. The life of God should not even enter into the discussion of the human good.

Perhaps it will be objected that it is more appropriate to say that Christians strive to be Christ-like. Therefore, we might say that even theologically, our aim is within our species since our aim is most properly the man Jesus. But we must remember that this man was no ordinary man. He would not have been able to accomplish the purposes of the Messiah of Israel as a mere mortal. Rather, Jesus, as the Messiah was the god-man. He was and is the only man who can claim equal ontological status with God the Father. As such we may say that Jesus was for all practical purposes another species of being. This, too, has its problems, since Christians do not ultimately aim at Jesus’ ontological status, but at his ethical behavior. They do not, therefore, think that through their ethical striving they might attain divinity. Nevertheless, the Christian’s ethical model for human behavior is ontologically superior to humans.

It is also problematic that, according to Nussbaum, Aristotle seems to affirm the plurality of ethical values and prohibits the privileging of any one activity over another. Jesus teaches that we ought “not to be anxious for [our] life, as to what [we] shall eat, or what [we] shall drink; nor for [our] body, as to what [we] shall put on. [For] is not life more than food, and the body than clothing?”¹⁵ This suggests that there is something more worthy of our attention, something of higher value to us than our everyday concerns for food and shelter. Instead of occupying ourselves with these concerns,

¹⁴ This is especially evident in the context of God’s historical covenant with Israel. They ought never to break the terms of the covenant since God will never break them. But this might be expected of any human relationship. Where the theological element of ethics comes through most forcefully is in the concept of mercy. Humans are expected to “love their enemies” because even when they were the enemies of God, he loved them and showed them mercy, rather than the justice that was due them.

¹⁵ Matt. 6:34.

Jesus exhorts us to turn to the values of the kingdom of God, and the righteousness associated therewith. Here we must face the reality that not only are we to aim at the good of another species, but this good is higher, better, and more worthy of our attention than the ordinary practical goods associated with our species.

Finally, the notion that there are no ethical principles apart from mere summaries of good decisions is inconsistent with the notion of the divine law as a revelation of God's character. It could well be argued that the Old Testament law in fact provides a perfect example of the provisional nature of ethical principles. Were not some laws found to be, in some degree, unsuitable for the first century church? Even many of the Ten Commandments have acceptable exceptions. It would be a mistake to draw conclusions about the nature of law in general from particular manifestations through history. The changes in Israel's law code in the New Testament tell more about the context of certain laws and commandments and the ultimate revelation of God in Jesus than they do about the nature of ethical principles. Furthermore, even within the law there are certain dictums not subject to change. For example, while the prohibition against killing can be amended in certain situations, it seems that there are cases in which killing would be eternally forbidden. As G. E. M. Anscombe argues, anyone who even entertains the notion that judicial execution of the innocent might be ethically acceptable is morally unfit for ethical discussion, for "he shows a corrupt mind."¹⁶ Furthermore, the general principle that we are to "love our neighbors as ourselves" does not seem to admit of any exceptions.¹⁷

The obstacles to a Christian appropriation of Aristotle's ethical philosophy are partly the result of Nussbaum's overstating Aristotle's position. Nevertheless, she works from significant texts in the *NE*, which are not easily explained away. One problem stands out in her treatment of the *NE* though. On her interpretation, the arguments Aristotle makes in Books

¹⁶ Anscombe 42.

¹⁷ Matt. 22:39.

I-IX cannot be reconciled with his arguments in Book X. Nussbaum asserts, “We can say with confidence that [chapters 6-9 of Book X] do not fit into the argument of the *NE*.”¹⁸ She has so committed Aristotle to an anthropocentric ethical stance that she is quite unable to explain his transcendent turn in Book X. But it is at this point that the whole of the *NE* becomes available for Christian appropriation. If Aristotle had left his ethical inquiry with moral virtue without suggesting that humans were meant for something higher, then his ethical philosophy would be of little use to Christianity. Book X makes it clear that moral virtue begins the ethical endeavor, but it does not complete it. Nussbaum cannot assimilate Book X into her interpretive framework because Nussbaum takes as the pinnacle of the *NE* those books that Aristotle intended as stepping-stones.

While it might be true that among the moral virtues there can be no significant hierarchy, in Book X Aristotle clearly introduces a category of ethical activity that he takes to be higher and more worthy of pursuit than the moral virtues. Aristotle begins by reiterating his notion of pleasure, which, as we have seen, is indispensable to his ethical philosophy. Aristotle argues that pleasures are characterized by the activities with which they are associated, and, therefore, “as activities are diverse, so also are their pleasures.”¹⁹ Thus, Nussbaum argues that pleasures are so unique and so particular that they cannot be qualitatively compared, as Plato had proposed. This is how she justifies the claim that Aristotle promotes a plurality of ethical values. This is not, however, the direction taken by Aristotle. Instead, the diversity of pleasures provokes a discussion of which pleasures are most worthy of pursuit. Whereas the diversity of pleasure leads Nussbaum to draw out conclusions about the incommensurability of ethical goods, for Aristotle, it forms the basis of an ethical hierarchy.

Pleasures correspond to the activities to which they belong; it is therefore that pleasure, or those pleasures, by which the activ-

¹⁸ Nussbaum 377.

¹⁹ *NE* 1176a 1-2.

ity, or the activities, of the perfect and supremely happy man are perfected, that must be pronounced human in the fullest sense. The other pleasures are so only in a secondary degree.²⁰

Aristotle here argues that what is most appropriately called pleasure is associated with the most distinctively human activities. It is not denied that there are many other activities that seem pleasant to men with more animal-like sensibilities, but these are only pleasant in an analogical sense. True pleasure is that which the good man recognizes to be pleasant, for his perspective is decisive in ethical matters. And the good man will choose to pursue not all pleasures, but the highest and best of them.

Aristotle assumes that within the virtues some are more intrinsically valuable than others. These are the virtues associated with the “divinest” part of the human.²¹ From this, it is apparent that Aristotle’s anthropology is not as exclusive as Nussbaum would suggest. Human life shares many characteristics with both the animal and divine. This means that an “anthropocentric ethic” involves more than just figuring out what is specifically good for the human *qua* human; it is also concerned with what is good for the human *qua* animal and *qua* divine. Contrary to Nussbaum’s argument, Book X is not the first time we encounter this notion. In Book I, chapter 7 Aristotle argues that the Supreme Good is happiness, which is entirely self-sufficient and desirable for its own sake. When the idea of a proper human function is added to this, it naturally follows that perfect happiness will accompany the most self-sufficient activity that is most truly desired for its own sake.²² While there might be several different human excellences (i.e. generosity, friendship, and contemplation), true happiness must be associated with the highest of them.²³ It should thus come as no surprise that in Book X Aristotle reasons that the contemplative life is the highest good for humankind because it is the most self-sufficient and most

²⁰ Ibid. 1176a 26–28.

²¹ Ibid. 1177a 17.

²² Ibid. 1097a 1–15.

²³ Ibid. 1098a 15–17.

desirable in itself. Nevertheless, Aristotle seems to agree that this “divine life” is, to some degree, unattainable by humans. This, he says, is due to the fact that the good life he is proposing is actually better fit for gods than for men. It is a life based on the highest part of the human person, and this part in itself is superior to the whole.²⁴

Though some of the problems for a Christian appropriation of Aristotle’s ethical philosophy come from Nussbaum’s failure to account for all of Aristotle’s thought, some of them come from Aristotle’s failure to complete the picture of perfect human happiness. For Aristotle, the highest good is naturally beyond reach because it is the virtue better suited for the gods who need not attend to the lower virtues in order to pursue the higher. Humans are such that the contemplative life will always be interrupted by the demands of practical necessity. It is precisely because human life is characterized by vulnerability that any distinctively human ethic will fail to establish a complete picture of the good life. Nevertheless, the Christian appropriation of Aristotle’s ethical philosophy is possible, because Aristotle himself acknowledges that his portrayal of the good life is attainable only in theory. Aristotle writes:

[We ought not] obey those who enjoin that a man should have man’s thoughts and a mortal the thoughts of mortality, but we ought *so far as possible* to achieve immortality, and do all that man may to live in accordance with the highest thing in him; for though this be small in bulk, in power and value it far surpasses all the rest.²⁵

Apart from the Christian vantage point, which allows for an afterlife in which the immortality of the human being may be realized, Aristotle’s ethical philosophy might appear to be an exercise in futility. But if Aristotle is taken as anticipating the ethics of the New Testament, then what we have is an ethics that is incomplete, but not inconsistent. Book X marks the

²⁴ Ibid. 1077b 27–33.

²⁵ Ibid. 1177b 30–35, emphasis added.

beginning of Aristotle's clearest and most appropriate conception of the good life. But it was left to others (namely, the authors of the New Testament) to complete the picture. Because Nussbaum will not entertain the possibility that Aristotle's ethical philosophy is conceptually incomplete, she is forced to conclude that he is being inconsistent when he advocates the contemplative life in Book X. The idea that we cannot treasure some ethical goods over others, that we must always treat general principles as tentative approximations, or that we must aim low, hoping to achieve only those goods available to our species all result from reading the ethical philosophy in Books I-IX as the final word on the good life for humans. But Aristotle himself suggests that these earlier books function as a beginning, albeit a necessary beginning, but not the final word on the good life. The moral virtues are a dialectical foundation upon which to discover the highest and truest good life—for Aristotle this was the contemplative life, but for the Christian it is heaven. In both cases the point is the same: humans are free from worrying about their basic necessities, so that they can enjoy the free exercising of their highest and most noble faculties.

Nussbaum's problematic interpretations of Aristotle's ethics only account for part of Aristotle's ethical philosophy. And when taken as a whole, it can be portrayed as affirming the goodness of the common moral life while also advocating and promoting the contemplative life. On this interpretation, Aristotle can greatly facilitate Protestant and Catholic articulations of their ethical doctrines. Aristotle's careful assessment of the moral life provides a clear basis for understanding how God intended humans to live. It must, however, be acknowledged that the current world is not safe for ordinary life. This is, perhaps, why we saw earlier that Jesus does not encourage his followers to give their mundane needs too much attention. The human ethical endeavor involves pursuing the ultimately good life that combines the best aspects of the moral life and the contemplative life. For Aristotle, this was practically impossible, because it was inevitable that the entanglements of the moral life would prevent the full

enjoyment of the contemplative life. For Catholics and Protestants, the good life is not something to be enjoyed in the present world, but in heaven. Whereas Aristotle stops by saying that we ought to try as far as we are able to live like gods in uninterrupted enjoyment of our highest faculties, the New Testament urges us to anticipate a world where we will be able to enjoy such a life. Heaven provides the interpretive lens that completes Aristotle's picture of the good life. Because both the Catholic and Protestant Church have this lens in their conceptual framework, Aristotle's ethics can provide helpful assistance to the clear and complete articulation of their own ethical doctrines. And they would do well to place their articulations of heaven on a solid foundation of Aristotelian ethical philosophy.

References

- Anscombe, G. E. M. "Modern Moral Philosophy." *Virtue Ethics*. Ed. Roger Crips and Michael Slote. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. H. Rackham. Cambridge: Harvard Loeb Classical Library, 1934.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. 2nd ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *The Fragility of Goodness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.