A Reckoning of Sorts on the Prospects of Moral Philosophy

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I

Broadly speaking, Western philosophy has tended to distinguish between the use of our cognitive and rational powers in theoretical and practical matters and has persuaded itself that, in both, though in different ways, whatever is valid in human judgment depends upon and implicates a grasp of certain necessary invariances. The thesis takes many forms and has been challenged, with a notable lack of success, from ancient times (as in Protagoras) to the turn into the twentieth century (for instance, in Nietzsche), if we may measure the success of such opposition by the strength of its immediate following. That is largely changed now, in the sense that a firm disjunction between theoretical and practical reason is hardly endorsed anywhere, except among those who are antecedently (and unalterably) committed to one or another version of the older outlook, and in the sense that there are now many philosophers who regard the denial of modal invariance in both world and thought as entirely congenial.

The history of the older canon divides, in these regards, more or less in terms of the themes favored in Aristotle and Kant. (I mean this, of course, as a heuristic simplification; but it does indeed offer an instructive economy.) Aristotle subordinates practical reason to theoretical reason, because, as he affirms, reality is necessarily invariant; because human reason (nous) is capable of grasping its structure directly; and because, although practical matters concern what is contingent and changeable, practical reason is rightly guided by whatever may be discerned of what is invariant in human nature. This is the master theme that binds the Nicomachean Ethics to the Metaphysics.

If, however, the customs of different societies and different ages were judged to be merely contingent but (somehow), because of their salience and social density (so to say), normatively binding nevertheless, then, as in the plausible but undefended Aristotelian extension of Martha Nussbaum's studies of Henry James and Joseph Conrad, the Ethics would soon be judged irrelevant to our own moral world, however attractive its analogies might be. In any case, in the Ethics, as (more explicitly) in the Rhetoric, the rational management of the “accidents,” the details, of practical life requires that they be judged, perceptually, in accord with what is known to be invariant or what may reasonably be so judged. Alasdair MacIntyre’s Aristotelianism (in After Virtue)—an Aristotelianism utterly unlike Nussbaum’s—pretends to accommodate the play of historically divergent cultures but loses its nerve at the last moment. For, although MacIntyre ingeniously treats (Aristotelian-like) virtue (or virtues) as (a) normative ingredient(s) operative among humans and informed by the telos of the central institutions of any viable society, it turns out that wherever the schema cannot be fitted to modern societies (as is nearly always true), the societies in question are summarily judged to be morally defective. In effect, for MacIntyre, the internal virtues of very different societies prove, miraculously, to be the functional parts of an integrating and encompassing virtue that ranges easily and invariably over every society.

The corresponding theme in Kant, which binds the Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals to the first Critique, argues that, in moral matters, the required invariances of (practical) reason are autonomously promulgated by way of the same cognizing powers...
that originally make possible our grasp of an objective science—but now in a self-legislating way. The difference between Aristotle and Kant in this regard (the difference that seems at first to be in place) is that, unlike Aristotle, Kant supposes that the ruling invariances of practical reason cannot depend in any way on actually discerning the normative structure of human nature (as if they were the discoveries of some kind of theoretical science); and that, in the context of science itself, the invariant ordering of nature is discernible as such, precisely because it is tacitly imposed, originally and constructively, by the "thinking subject," on whatever (as we conjecture) comes to us through our senses from an utterly alien independent world.

I take Aristotle's and Kant's conceptual models as the two principal paradigms of Western philosophy committed to modal invariance. They are the most ramified, the most radical, the most uncompromising, and in a way the strongest models of moral theory we have, in spite of local weaknesses. They are also the most influential philosophies in the West. I believe they are profoundly mistaken, nonetheless, not only in their original voices but in those of the armies that have followed them.

Let me add, for the sake of a certain balance, that John Rawls's A Theory of Justice and Jürgen Habermas's "Discourse Ethics" try, by novel and eccentric means, to recover (in different ways) the universality and necessity of Kant's moral vision, without Kant's "transcendental" resources. Rawls supposes that there is some rational disposition in human nature, no matter how it is encultured, ultimately to favor the liberal conception of rights and goods that Rawls draws from certain early modern sources he happens to favor. The oddity about Rawls's theory is that he neglects to provide an account of human nature in accord with which, dialectically, we may test the range of findings he sets before us. For instance, he never considers the possibility -- which the entire post-Kantian world concedes -- that "human nature" and human "reason" (or "rationality") may be no more than constructions or artifacts of the historical process. Also, he offers no account of the role of history in judging matters of justice and injustice, which are his central concerns. On the contrary, the fundamental principles of justice, Rawls thinks, are universally favored within the terms of reference of a postulated "original position" in which rational agents have no sense of social history at all, no sense of the actual history of any theories of justice and injustice keyed to the events of practical life. Justice, it seems, is some sort of autonomous intuition.

But for the great candor and scrupulosity of Rawls's argument, one might, as in scanning the views of a lesser and less responsible thinker, easily judge what Rawls has to say to be preposterous and arbitrary. I confess I am drawn to such a verdict. In any case, the same fault, with minor accommodations, appears in the sequel to A Theory of Justice, in Political Liberalism, which plainly admits its own ideological bent, its inherent tendentiousness, though Rawls remains persuaded that the general lines of the theory are basically correct.4

The theory is Kantian au fond, in the plain sense that it depends on the autonomy of reason (without a developed account of human nature) and in the sense that its deliverances are supposed to be universal and necessary (in some less than apodictic or transcendental regard), which it never quite defends.

For his part, Habermas, who obviously comes under the philosophical influence of the stricter Kantian, Karl-Otto Apel,5 pretends he can recover, progressively, asymptotically, "dialogically," through the relatively "disinterested consensual processes of "rational" debate (regarding the import of our, or any, historical situation), whatever corresponds to the universal dicta of Kantian-like practical maxims that pass the test of the Categorical Imperative. In fact, according to Habermas, we are led "pragmatically"
(not apodictically, or a priori, or transcendentally) to rules of reason that are less opportunistic, less egoistic and idiosyncratic, than maxims might otherwise be and certainly less vacuous than the Categorical Imperative itself (if taken in the purely formal sense Kant recommends). Habermas supposes that there is something in the structure of societal life that remains invariant at the limit of inquiry, whatever history may produce. In both Rawls and Habermas, therefore, there is an incipient confession that the formal universality and necessity of moral rules are somehow grounded in the invariance of human nature; just as, in Nussbaum and MacIntyre, the appeal to the contingent virtues of historical life somehow lead to invariant norms (if not to rules) by which the deviance of actual life may be described and corrected.

I say that these Aristotelian and Kantian strains are standard in Western philosophy, both in ethics and in metaphysics and epistemology in general; and that, in different (but oddly converging) ways, the two traditions -- down to our own time, where pretensions about invariance and competence in discerning invariance are no longer readily conceded -- still dominate philosophy's history. Today, theorists avoid the flat-out admission that they have invoked some overriding invariance to save their theory from what would otherwise be conceptual disaster. They attempt, as I have been suggesting, to find conceptually indirect strategies for recovering the invariances they require but know full well they can no longer defend by anything like Aristotle's or Kant's devices. Hence the ingenuities of Nussbaum, MacIntyre, Rawls, and Habermas -- at least in the sphere of ethics. For, if they were discovered to have invoked a particularly powerful form of invariance in what might be tactfully called the "executive" way, they might also stand accused of replacing philosophy by lazy ideology (which I believe is the case) or accused of having proceeded in a question begging way (which I think is also the case).

Occasionally, even in such a virile field as the philosophy of science or the philosophy of mind, a strong thinker hesitates in the face of the difficulties I am hinting at and, rather than attempt an improbable recovery like the recoveries I have mentioned, simply falls back (wearily, I imagine) to the reassuring pillow of modal invariance. Thus, for instance, Wesley Salmon, worried (it seems) by the Kantian-like restriction Hans Reichenbach imposed (with whatever qualification, against Kant) on the supposed resources of inductive reason involved in discerning the invariant laws of nature, hurries to shore up the general inductive strategy he shares with Reichenbach, by simply invoking a convenient version of Aristotle's realist reading of invariance borrowed (without ceremony) from the Posterior Analytics. In Salmon's view, induction cannot discover nomological invariances unless they "are there" in nature. Quite right! But anyone disposed to challenge the moral philosophers mentioned would be bound to challenge Salmon as well. We are led thereby to see a surprising linkage between the fortunes of moral philosophy and the fortunes of the philosophy of science—and metaphysics and epistemology to boot. I shall make more of that later.

For the moment, let me simply mention, as a second specimen, the recent versions of the supervenience theory favored by Donald Davidson and Jaegwon Kim (in rather different ways) -- the first, in specifically non-nomological terms; the second, in nomological terms -- to the effect that, relative to the mind/body problem, the mental "supervenes" on the physical: that is, every change of a mental sort (not otherwise specified) must be (cannot possibly fail to be) linked to a corresponding change of a physical sort. In Kim, the mental proves to be no more than epiphenomenal; in Davidson, the matter is treated agnostically. In neither is the modal necessity of the supervenience even explicitly defended; it is invoked, rather, as a deus ex machina, in
much the same way Salmon invokes Aristotle. (I freely admit there is a greater show of reasonableness in Kim than in Davidson, but I think the case can be fairly made that the argument is ultimately circular nonetheless.)

II

I have hinted that the fortunes of moral philosophy and the philosophy of science (and epistemology and metaphysics) are more closely linked than philosophers usually admit. But the point of saying so is not entirely obvious. Part of what’s at stake is that the fortunes of epistemology and metaphysics are inseparable from the contingencies of practical life --are affected by those contingencies; and part lies with our presuming in too sanguine a way on modal invariances like those Aristotle and Kant have claimed to discern.

There is a short argument that may be mentioned that anticipates -- but does not quite deliver -- everything that may be said against the partisans of modal invariance. Think only of this: if Kant is right in construing the “phenomenal world” (the only world we know) as a construction jointly constituted by the conceptual powers of human understanding and “brute” data generated in some unknown way from a noumenal world, then Aristotle must be flatly wrong; there is no discerning an invariant structure known to inhere in an independent world. But if Kant is right as well in thinking we are experientially confined to the “phenomenal world” holistically, then Kant is wrong in supposing we could ever discern (within the indissolubly phenomenal) the modal necessary structures of our own understanding; we should be obliged to study ourselves as contingent artifacts within that very construction.

The important point is this. On such an argument: (i) there would be no principled difference between theoretical and practical reason; and (ii) there would be no modal invariances to discern, either in science or morality. For my own part, I find the clearest anticipation of items (i) and (ii) in Marx’s Theses on Feuerbach, but I shall not press the case here. What is more important is that the general trajectory of the history of philosophy has passed through two critical stages that we ought not ignore: in the first, it has challenged the tenability of every effort to construe objectivity (equally in science and morality) in terms of some initial correspondence between how things merely appear to us and how they really are “in themselves,” independently of our interest and inquiry; in the second, it has challenged the tenability of every effort that accepts the constraint of the first but reserves to itself some further privilege regarding the self-presenting competence of human understanding in its jointly cognitive and constituting role.

The career of philosophy in all its inquiries has, I suggest, passed through three dialectically linked phases: first, favoring correspondence, the assured fit of word and world (or thought and reality, or the “subjective” and the “objective”) -- a thesis that would not be reasonable unless (as in accord with Aristotle’s or Descartes’s model) reality possessed a necessarily invariant structure and our cognizing powers were natively apt for discerning same; second, favoring construction, the insistence that any cognitive fit between word and world implicates the tacit role of human understanding in first structuring the phenomenal world we are apparently empowered to understand -- a thesis that would not be reasonable unless (as in accord with Kant’s model) human agents could never convincingly claim objective knowledge of a world whose structures were entirely independent of the constituting powers of human understanding; and third, favoring symbiosis, the admission that any supposed fit between word and world was itself
an artifact of reflexive conjectures upon its own apparent constituting powers, so that (as in accord with post-Kantian thought: notably, in accord with Hegel and Marx) there could be no prior principled disjunction between cognizing “subjects” and cognized “objects” apt for correcting our objective claims.

The upshot of this remarkable history, which I have summarized in too brief a way but which is all but irresistible, is simply this: **objectivity and rationality** are themselves critically postulated artifacts evolving under the evolving forms of reflexive rigor afforded by earlier stages of the same artifactual powers. To admit that is to admit that all invariance and privilege are gone -- both in science and morality, and for the same reasons. That, I say, is precisely what motivates the cleverness of the late “Aristotelians” and “Kantians” I’ve mentioned: they are unwilling to go the extra (post-Kantian) mile; they are unwilling to concede symbiosis. But they provide no reasonable basis for retreating to Aristotle or Kant. You have only to review the doctrines advanced by Rawls and MacIntyre to see that, in Rawls, no grounds are offered, apart from a pretended consensus (that is never tested), for his very bold claim that rationality (somehow deprived of pertinent memory and biography and somehow analyzed in some impossible thought-experiment), reliably confirms the lexicographical norms of liberal justice; and, in MacIntyre, no evidence is offered, apart from a brave wave of the hand in the direction of Aristotelian and Thomist convictions, to show that individual virtue (somehow internally linked -- normatively, invariantly, discernibly -- to collective institutions) yields objectively grounded criteria for judging departures from natural morality.

It is hardly necessary to subscribe to my penny history. Think of it as a dialectical challenge -- along several lines: first, with regard to presumed modal invariances; second, with regard to the supposed hierarchy of cognitive powers relating theoretical and practical matters; and third, with regard to criterially operative notions of “objectivity” and “rationality” applied under the conditions of changing history. I put it to you that you cannot show that the attack on the “canon” favored by Aristotle or Kant is incoherent in any way; hence, that the denial of the supposed modal invariances Aristotle or Kant prefer is self-contradictory or paradoxical; hence, that any return, now, to Aristotle or Kant can count on approximating to their legitimative resources.

III

These are still preambulary remarks. What’s needed are the essential arguments against Aristotle and Kant. If we had such arguments in hand, the entire direction of philosophy would be affected at a stroke -- a fortiorem, the fate of moral philosophy and whatever the inseparability of theory and practice entails (the prospects of the philosophy of science, for instance). I don’t mean to say that there are no other options in moral philosophy or the philosophy of science besides the Aristotelian and Kantian ones. Of course not. Many theorists find the Humean model, for example, quite promising for moral philosophy -- and even for the philosophy of science (though, frankly, the latter prospect strikes me as hopeless, given Hume’s view of causality, induction, the laws of nature, and even physical objects and numerical identity). I still maintain that if Aristotle’s and Kant’s views fail, then the import for both moral philosophy and the philosophy of science (as well as epistemology and metaphysics) would be immensely more consequential than the defeat of the Humean option. For one thing, there is no advocacy, in Hume, of modal necessity in anything like the commanding form the doctrine takes in Aristotle and Kant. For another -- which may explain why I cannot imagine anyone’s seriously invoking Hume in the formation of a systematic account of
the work of the sciences -- Hume's official philosophy is not viable at all; and what is genuinely interesting in Hume is hardly compatible with his official philosophy. I know, of course, that many have invoked Hume to good advantage. I can only suppose they mean to invoke Hume empiricism in name only -- that is, in favor of a certain limiting view of perceptual constraint on theory and law and explanation and evidentiary adequacy and metaphysics and the like -- for instance, as in van Fraassen's recent espousal of a spare positivism (opposed, let it be said, to Salmon's view, just in the way of manifesting how thinly Hume may be used against what is doubtful in the more robust "Aristotelian" idiom).

In any case, Hume is a lesser theorist than Aristotle or Kant, though not a lesser intelligence, in the plain sense that Hume attempts a remarkable economy ranging over all the central concerns of philosophy without ever demonstrating that his official position is viable in even the most relaxed conceptual respect; and that what he means to save by means other than what his strict empiricism could accommodate he saves by a blunderbuss appeal to "associative" habits that are themselves not reconcilable with that empiricism.

I happen to admire Hume very much. Some say he is philosophy's ironist -- meaning by that, I suppose, something close to what I have just said or, alternatively, meaning by that that claims like Aristotle's and Kant's (avant la lettre) may not be philosophically defensible. But Hume's own "philosophy" is utterly unworkable -- if for no other reason than that his official view of identity (both numerical and qualitative) makes discourse impossible. Grant that, and there is nothing to be said for invoking Hume's "philosophy" as such. Still, that has very little to do with invoking Hume's splendid observations as a civilized commentator on the human scene. On the contrary, Hume is never fatuous (as far as I know) in the way Kant often is; but there is (and can be) no sustained comparison of their "moral philosophies" or their "philosophies of science," in spite of what a tolerant profession has permitted itself to say for a very long time.

The verdict is nowhere clearer than in the space of moral philosophy. For there cannot be any point to a moral philosophy that lacks a viable theory of the human self or agent who acts, judges, and takes up responsibilities. Hume's empiricism is completely baffled by the need to admit a persisting, relatively unified self apt for forensic confrontation (or evidentiary challenge) through time and change. There is no theory of the self in Hume that makes any sense at all. That is precisely why Thomas Reid found it so easy to expose Hume to ridicule; although it is plain that, in speaking of moral matters, Hume simply abandoned (as he did, at the very start of his philosophy, in speaking of perceptual ideas) any thought of recovering the "self" in strictly empiricist terms. (Reid surely knew that.)

My point in mentioning Hume is primarily to confirm the reasonableness of confining my principal line of argument to countering Aristotle's and Kant's more strenuous influence. Nevertheless, in adding Hume so easily to my targets, the promissory note intended may be thought to have appreciated in value. It would be very difficult -- certainly in Anglo-American philosophy -- to imagine any triad of figures more influential in moral philosophy than those I have now mentioned. The beauty of falling back to Aristotle and Kant, apart from challenging their unmatched importance, is that what undermines their moral philosophies undermines (for cognate reasons) their epistemologies and metaphysics as well. The would-be benefits are too large to be ignored.

Furthermore, once you concede Hume's weakness, it is very hard to suppose that any other English-language philosopher could possibly vie for our allegiance in a new way -
equal in importance to Aristotle's or Kant's. That was part of the reason for mentioning Rawls and Habermas and Nussbaum and MacIntyre: one needs to appreciate just how dependent contemporary moral philosophy is on Aristotle's and Kant's failed strategies -- or, alternatively, on the lesser visions of Hume and Hobbes and Locke and Mill and Moore and Dewey that might be added, without requiring very much in the way of adjustment. The same is true, I believe, of continental European thought, with the single great exception of Hegel (and perhaps Nietzsche), though it is notoriously difficult to say what Hegel's theory was or whether Nietzsche had a theory in anything like the sense in which Aristotle and Kant did. I daresay, nevertheless, that no interesting moral philosophy (or epistemology or metaphysics, for that matter) can be seriously mounted today that fails to come to terms with Hegel and Nietzsche. (Yet they are neglected.) More than that, stalemateing Aristotle and Kant (along the lines I favor) leads directly through the stages of my penny history to a point at which we may reclaim the conceptual nerve of both Hegel and Nietzsche. If that is true, there is no need to sketch their contributions before a proper ground is laid. Here, I mean only to prepare the way. The perception of the serious weakness of Aristotle's and Kant's philosophies is interminably deflected by the lengthening labors of academic scholarship; so that now it often comes as a surprise to remind ourselves of their actual doctrines. The point of making the effort is simply that one gains an immense advantage over current philosophy; for, on inspection, it turns out that most leading views in moral theory particularly are little more than pale efforts to recover Aristotle and Kant "by other means."

IV

The principal intuition against Aristotle and Kant is a natural one: not decisive in its mere mention but not negligible either: viz., that if morality (or ethics) concerns the normative direction of one's life and one's society's, then the differences between Aristotle's and Kant's worlds and our own (and the differences between our own society's and another's contemporaneous with ours) must adversely affect our invoking the same norms across the immensities of time and place.

One hesitates to draw that conclusion simply because, elsewhere in our inquiries -- for instance, in theorizing about objective truth in the sciences -- one supposes the vagaries of history can be offset. If that is true, one wonders, why should it not also be true in the moral sphere? There you have the clue to the importance of testing the doctrine of invariance. For if it were finally defeated, one might conjecture, not only moral philosophy but the philosophy of science (and epistemology and metaphysics) would have to be reworked as well.

It is possible to attack Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics on many fronts: for instance, by insisting that there is no reason to believe the virtues must in principle form a harmonious whole -- whether with one another or with other interests bearing on personal development or ranging uniformly over all societies, or that the good life is teleologically fitted to human nature on realist grounds. The best short summary of such objections that I know appears in Bernard Williams's Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy. But it neglects more strenuous objections, for instance the inevitable weakness of the work of all those ingenious interpreters of Aristotle who would recover the preeminence of essentialism. I favor an alternative strategy, therefore: one that shows that Aristotle's model is suited only locally to the vestige of the Greek world he knew Alexander had permanently altered even as he formed his doctrine. On that strategy, we may dismiss Aristotle's modal claim, on which his most fundamental work depends: the Ethics, the
Metaphysics, the Posterior Analytics, the De Anima — and then redeem (if we insist) whatever piecemeal insight may be usefully incorporated in an independent doctrine, much as we now do with Hume. In a sense, that is what Nussbaum and MacIntyre — and Salmon — do, in their respective ways, except that they believe they are retrieving what is valid in Aristotle's account of invariant nature or human nature.

Aristotle's master stroke — I mean the argument on which nearly everything of importance in his œuvre depends — lies with the idea that if we deny that things have invariant natures or essences, we must contradict ourselves somewhere in discourse. By that denial, we violate (Aristotle thinks) either the principle of noncontradiction or the principle of excluded middle or both. Well, of course, if Aristotle were right, then we had better not tamper with the realist reading of invariance. That would offset Williams's objections and vindicate to some extent the presumption of a modern "Aristotelian" like MacIntyre. Also, it needs to be said, there is no stronger defense (of its kind) than Aristotle's: though you may well wonder whether there might be stronger versions of his thesis than the one he actually offers. But there cannot be a firmer defense of modal invariance than Aristotle's, since (as he says) denial straightway leads to contradiction.

There are many places where Aristotle advances this thesis. For economy's sake, I select the following as being as close to the heart of his claim as any brief passage is likely to be:

But if not all things are relative [says Aristotle], but some exist in their own right, not everything that appears will be true; for that which appears appears to some one; so that he who says all things that appear are true, makes all things relative... makes everything relative... to thought and perception, so that nothing either has come to be or will be without some one's first thinking so. But if things have come to be or will be, evidently not all things will be relative to opinion.12

The argument is a complex one. I cannot do full justice to it here. But we need only the main thread. It is obviously directed against Protagoras, because Protagoras is said to have held: (a) that we may give up invariance and fall back to changeable appearances; and (b) that what appears (to someone) is true (relative to his perception). Aristotle says that means that everything will be both true and false (1007b). But the charge is misleading as it stands. What Aristotle means is that the argument does "away with substance and essence": accidents (he says) must be the accidents of something (some substance) other than another accident; to construe all predication as holding only of appearances leads to contradiction (1007a-b).

Aristotle's right, of course, if one assumes (in his sense) "substance and essence." But why should we? If individual things (ou siai), now denied invariant natures, were to be viewed as artifacts constructed in accord with "the phenomenal world," then there would no longer be grounds for the charge of inescapable contradiction. Aristotle's argument requires that the principles of noncontradiction and excluded middle be first reconciled, as a condition of right application, with his metaphysics of invariance. But there is no modal necessity for doing that.

By parity of reasoning, the law of excluded middle is easily opposed. It is plainly weaker in a formal sense than the law of noncontradiction, since its denial is not inherently contradictory. It is certainly not modally necessary to adhere to excluded middle. When Aristotle says that "a contrary is a privation of substance, that contradictories, cannot belong to the same thing in the same respect (1011b), that (speaking of substances) "the
understanding either affirms or denies every object of understanding or reason” (1012a), he clearly links excluded middle to the same metaphysics he affirms in supporting noncontradiction. But if his metaphysical principle is not necessarily true, then the entire argument collapses -- as a modal claim -- though we are at liberty to recycle any nonmodal part of Aristotle's we may find useful. I should add for the sake of closure that the principle of noncontradiction is utterly vacuous unless interpreted, in the sense that no interpreted application of noncontradiction is modally necessary -- for instance, Aristotle's own dictum.

Once we accept the falsity of the modal claim, Aristotle's entire system ceases to be conceptually binding: in moral philosophy, in metaphysics, in epistemology, in the philosophy of science, in logic itself. As a consequence, the Nicomachean Ethics cannot be the necessary model of all valid moral philosophies, and cannot even be shown to be valid. It comes as a surprise to see how straightforward the refutation is, and how it can be effected without citing a single word from the Ethics itself.

Let me remind you, however, of the opening line of the Nicomachean Ethics:

Every art and every inquiry, [says Aristotle], and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. 13

If this means (as indeed it does) that we must construe the eudamonism of the Ethics as being in accord with norms internal to the human essence, then, no matter how much we suppose practical ethics to be occupied with particular contingencies and accidents, the entire undertaking will be tethered in a strong way to invariances said to be discovered by some science that knows the nature of man. But if that is no longer possible, for reasons drawn from our review of Aristotle's larger conception of reality (within whose terms practical matters obtain), then no modern Aristotelian can be said to be doing more than drawing weak analogies between the structure of our own historical world and the classical world Aristotle limns. On that reading, we have (as yet) no demonstrable sense in which the Ethics is rationally or morally compelling. It is impressive, I don't deny. But it is only an ideology of sorts -- in precisely the same sense in which Rawls is an attractive ideology.

No one will be satisfied with saying only that. But if we find the vision of the Ethics morally compelling, then the short truth is that we simply find Aristotle's moral taste compelling. There's nothing more to say, unless stronger philosophical resources are at hand. I say there are none of the modal gauge Aristotle presupposes.

V

The argument against Kant is both easier and more difficult. It is certainly easier to begin with Kant's Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals than with the first Critique; it is also obvious that the objective of the Foundations is as opposed to the project of Aristotle's Ethics as any such undertaking could possibly be. But Kant's thought is notoriously intricate, and we must search for the right clue if we are to challenge his doctrine in a way that compares favorably with the argument against Aristotle. But I begin autobiographically: I confess I don't recognize in myself a “will” to act in accord with duty for duty's sake alone -- in anything like the sense Kant advances. Am I mistaken in supposing that such a (pure) “will” is not “present” in me insofar as I am rational? Or am I corrupt or irrational in not recognizing that I am still morally bound by its
commands? If the implied objection holds, then (I say) Kant’s doctrine falls. The puzzle is how to show that such an autobiographical intuition cannot be rationally dislodged by Kant’s arguments in the Foundations. (It is hardly enough to voice a personal disclaimer.)

In the First Section of the Foundations, Kant makes the offhand observation: “It should not be thought that what is here required [a metaphysics of morals] is already present in the celebrated Wolff’s propaedeutic to his moral philosophy, i.e., in what he calls universal practical philosophy, and that it is not an entirely new field that is to be opened.” So it is clear that if the modal claim Kant imposes on us depends “entirely” on the validity of his new argument (in the Foundations), I may perhaps be vindicated if that argument does not succeed. The incredible thing is that, singlehandedly, Kant seems to have invented (by the Foundations) a sense of duty -- of acting solely from a sense of moral obligation, of acting on a priori grounds that bind practical reason categorically, “absolutely” -- that “everyone” supposes must have been “there” in ordinary moral experience before he proposed the thesis. (Kant implicitly endorses the trick.) The question remains: Does the argument succeed, and how can it be shown to do so?

I must cite Williams’s excellent objections once again -- this time to Kant’s proposal. Williams draws attention to the fact that what Kant calls “moral laws” are “notional laws,” that is, that their force depends on what Kant conceives to be “the business of making [moral] rules.” He goes on to object that the test Kant prepares for us (comformity with the Categorical Imperative) “is not a persuasive test for what you should reasonably do if you are not already concerned [say] with justice [or perhaps with other projects of Kant’s divining]. Unless you are already disposed to take an impartial or moral point of view, you will see as highly unreasonable the proposal that the way to decide what to do is to ask what rules you would make if you had none of your actual advantages, or did not know what they were.”

It seems plain that Williams is addressing Rawls here (or perhaps Alan Gewirth) more than Kant, though he claims to be speaking of Kant; for Kant would certainly not admit that the force of his argument depended on whether “you were already disposed” to take a favorable view of acting from a sense of duty. (This explains the provisional irrelevance of my own autobiographical remark.) Nevertheless, it leaves us with the puzzle of just how Kant intends to prove his case.

Williams’s objections are very reasonable -- even telling, in the way in which his arguments against Aristotle are telling -- except that they do not quite engage the principal claim. Williams sees what is required, and doubts that what is required can be supplied. But he does not go far enough.

In the First Section, Kant offers, by way of the following tally, a first pass at his own thesis:

thus the first proposition of morality is that to have moral worth an action must be done from duty. The second proposition is: An action performed from duty does not have its moral worth in the purpose which is to be achieved through it but in the maxims by which it is determined.... The third principle is a consequence of the two preceding, I would express as follows: Duty is the necessity of an action executed from respect for law.

Here, my complaint about the alien quality of Kant’s claim may seem at least pertinent. For, now, one may ask: What is the sense of “necessity” that Kant invokes?
I don't mean the necessity that follows analytically from embracing Kant's conception of moral worth; I mean the necessity that obliges us to adopt that conception.

My charge, I can now say, is that I cannot see that Kant successfully establishes that we are (unconditionally) bound by the necessity he alleges. The failure of his proposal is adumbrated in Williams's objections and in my own autobiographical complaint. It's clear that Kant's necessity is very different from Aristotle's. Frankly, Aristotle had confused the conceptual relationship between logical and metaphysical necessity; whereas Kant means to draw our attention to the necessity of admitting the import, for moral matters, of "the entirely new field" he introduces. He states this in a frontal way:

Is it not of the utmost necessity to construct a pure moral philosophy, which is completely freed from everything which may be only empirical and thus belong to anthropology? That there must be such a philosophy is self-evident from the common idea of duty and moral laws. Everyone must admit that a law, if it is to hold morally, i.e., as a ground of obligation, must imply absolute necessity.¹⁹

(This catches up the trick of appearing to analyze a prior intuition among the general public, whereas it actually plants its own congenial anticipation among the philosophically impressionable.)

The counter argument is deceptively simple: first, it affirms that, considering only ordinary views of "duty" (I am not sure in what sense "moral laws" are part of the common idea of morality), the denial of duty's implying absolute necessity is not itself self-contradictory or paradoxical; second, it asks Kant to supply the precise sense in which, in whatever substantive respect he intends, he can demonstrate that the necessity he's introduced is implicated (somehow: not analytically) by the ordinary view of duty or the common idea of morality. I see no demonstration looming, but we are of course still at the First Section. It's at the Second that Kant means to spring his argument.

We must go a little further.

The nerve of Kant's claim seems to lie in the following:

From what has been said it is clear that all moral concepts have their seat and origin entirely a priori in reason.

But since moral laws should hold for every rational being as such, the principles must be derived from the universal concept of a rational being generally. In this manner all morals, which need anthropology for their application to men, must be completely developed first as pure philosophy, i.e., metaphysics, independently of anthropology (a thing which is easily done in such distinct fields of knowledge).

Everything in nature works according to laws. Only a rational being has the capacity of acting according to the conception of laws, i.e., according to principles. This capacity is will. Since reason is required for the derivation of actions from laws, will is nothing else than practical reason.²⁰

I have deliberately left the capstone of Kant's theory unspecified. The reason is this: the argument implied in what I have just cited is supposed to convey the necessity by
which we infer the categorical force of (that is, the necessity binding on us by) the "moral imperative" that satisfies the condition stipulated. But the initial "metaphysical" constraint is supposed to be independently necessary: that is, it necessarily or rationally obliges us to admit the (further) necessity of the condition moral obligation imposes on us. There are two forms of necessity here: one is the philosophical necessity to accept the categorical necessity of the "moral imperative"; the other is the entailed necessity of the "moral imperative" itself. As Kant puts it: "the imperative of morality" is a "categorical imperative," "one which present[s] an action as itself objectively necessary, without regard to any other end." So we do not need to consider the details of Kant's famous doctrine of the Categorical Imperative: its validity is a consequence of the necessity of the argument just cited. It's the prior argument that fails.

Consider, for one thing, that it is not demonstrably necessary that "everything in nature works according to laws." Causality and nomologicality do not entail one another. Van Fraasen, whom I've cited earlier, offers a perfectly coherent account of a natural world like our own, but one that lacks laws in the realist sense. Secondly, if the objection just supplied were honored, then, with respect to the second citation (regarding "moral laws"), Kant could hardly advance his own claim except by analytically defining "a rational being" as one who acts "according to the conception of laws"; hence, he could never claim to have made a metaphysical discovery about moral agents; he could never claim to have done that a priori. Thirdly, whatever Kant (thereupon) says about the Categorical Imperative -- which is meant to bridge our acknowledging ourselves being rational beings and our recognizing the necessity the Imperative imposes on us as rational beings -- is nothing but an analytic consequence of his original definition. (It's in this sense that Williams's objection gains a deeper import.) Finally, on the first objection, it now proves to be a fatal mistake to suppose that any invariant, a priori, apodictic necessity can be compellingly drawn from non-analytic linkages between rationality (or freedom) and the universality inherent in the concept of a law. Kant would require a more robust metaphysics than he cares to admit. The strategy is a failure.

Of course, as everyone knows, Kant's account of the Categorical Imperative draws on a strong "analogy" to the laws of nature -- hence, to the supposed transcendental findings of the first Critique. The laws of nature are said to be universal; hence, the maxims by which we act "rationally" must be of the same formal sort (Kant says) as are the laws of nature. In fact, Kant explicitly affirms:

By analogy, then [with the universal laws of nature], the categorical imperative of duty can be expressed as follows: Act as though the maxim of your action were by your will to become a universal law of nature.22

My verdict is that the modal argument utterly fails, although (as with Aristotle) we are entirely within our rights to salvage the Kantian formula (if we wish), though now without the presumption (or any ground for same) of the invariance or unconditional force of moral reason. The Categorical Imperative (that is, its application in particular cases, under maxims) cannot "in the strict sense, command, i.e., present actions as practically necessary." The rest of Kant's account cannot recover what is needed: it is not more than an explication of what Kant supposes is a successful argument.

Allow me an additional leap, therefore. In the penny history of philosophy I offered earlier, I suggested that Kant's constructivism should have led him to accept the doctrine of symbiosis -- which of course he implicitly avoids. The reason is clear from the preface

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to the second edition of the first Critique and from Kant’s famous letter to Markus Herz (February 21, 1772), even though the formulation given in the Herz letter was to be superseded in the mature form of the Critique itself. The point is that, in the revised preface, Kant acknowledges that, “though we cannot know [any] objects as things in themselves, we must yet be in a position at least to think them as things in themselves; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears”; and, relative to this already complex matter, Kant adds the double thesis that “nothing in a priori knowledge can be ascribed to objects save what the thinking subject derives from itself [and] pure reason, as far as the principles of its knowledge are concerned, is a quite separate self-subsistent unity, in which, as in an organized body, every member exists for every other, and all for the sake of each.”

The trouble with this reasoning is this. Kant is very clear that the concepts we employ to give form to what appears as our phenomenal world are not abstracted from “objects” experienced; they are innate or prior in “the thinking subject.” That is the novelty of Kant’s “Copernican revolution”: “objects” are to be compared with our native concepts. Nevertheless, if we cannot know the “noumena” of which appearances are thought to be appearances, then we cannot know what (in the way of intelligible structure) is constructed by the “thinking subject”; and then, we cannot fill in with assurance what, precisely, is a priori and what is not in that construction. That is the essential challenge of the post-Kantian theme of symbiosis -- and of its historicized nature.

My shorthand summary of what is illicit in Kant’s account is that Kant has no secure source of information about the possible (unsuspected) further forms of phenomenal experience, if (as he admits) he is confined to the phenomenal world itself. Thus, for example, he fails to grasp that there is no necessary connection (analytic or synthetic) between causality and nomologicality. What he ventures to assign to the (prior) constructive powers of the “thinking subject” rather than to the (indissoluble) construction that is the phenomenal world leads him to think he has discerned the invariant structure of that “thinking subject,” whereas what he has really done is discern the contingent regularities (thus far) of what (constructively) he assigns the “thinking subject.” According to my penny history, Kant confuses the process of “construction” with the product. (That is the point to moving to symbiosis.) To segregate in the “constructed” phenomenal world the (prior) work of the “subject” who constitutes that world is already to deny that we are confined to the phenomenal world. I have no doubt that it catches up the general themes of early modern philosophy, but it also fails to protect itself from the valid criticism it draws from a later vantage.

Read this way, the problematic argument in the Foundations regarding the a priori necessity of rationally endorsing the Categorical Imperative shows the way to exposing the more general failure of Kant’s strong claims about the a priori conditions under which human knowledge is made “possible” at all. The best Kant may suppose is that we may conjecture, empirically, about what might be (for all we know) the a priori condition of our sciences and other inquiries. But to think that way is to drop the pretense of ever discerning the invariant structure of “the thinking subject,” and to opt instead for the contingencies of symbiosis. Kant implicitly declines the option: it would defeat his purpose, to treat the a priori as an artifact of contingent experience itself. Kant is never tempted in that direction: “this system [of a priori conditions] will, as I hope [he says], maintain, throughout the future, this unchangeableness [its apriority].” The argument, however, that is not a viable option.

I have now, by somewhat opposing strategies, challenged the claims of modal necessity or invariance in Aristotle and Kant, both with respect to the normative
questions of morality and (more briefly) with respect to knowledge and world in general. Since I have also shown -- or, perhaps better, sketched a general argument by which to show -- that contemporary Aristotelians and Kantians are not likely to recover the invariances Aristotle and Kant have favored, the question remains: What are the prospects of an objective morality and how are they related to the conditions of objective knowledge in general? There is the puzzle for our time. The specimen views of the would-be Aristotelians and Kantians (I've mentioned) betray the extraordinary fact that we are still marking time with irrecoverable strategies. For it is plain enough that those (and similar) specimens are among the most admired exemplars of our day. I have brought us only to a stalemate. There is perhaps some virtue in having done so, since it forces us to admit in a frontal way that we cannot have advanced very far philosophically if we continue to favor expended models. One often hears it said nevertheless that we have advanced. I fail to see the evidence. We require a distinctly new beginning. If my penny history is close to the truth, then it will have to be a very new beginning indeed.

Notes


2 See Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1994), particularly the Postscript.


See Bernard Williams. Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), Ch. 3.


Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, pp. 62-63. See the rest of ch. 4.

Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, p. 64.

See Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, pp. 66-67. Nevertheless, I don't think Williams's objections get to the heart of the matter, because (contrary to what Williams says) there is reason to think Kant would never treat moral or practical reasoning as "first-personal"; and because, in spite of that, assuming reason to be "pure," it must be shared by "all rational beings" (not merely human agents). See Kant, Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, p. 24 (p.408: Akademie edition).

Kant, Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, p. 16 (p. 400: Akademie editions).


Kant, Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals p. 36 (p. 418: Akademie edition). This formulation Kant offers against the possible pretensions of the "imperatives of prudence." I am applying it, against Kant's own intention, against moral imperatives.

Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, p. 33.