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ARISTOTLE AND NIETZSCHE ON RELATIVE VIRTUE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

The juxtaposition between Nietzsche and Aristotle can sometimes seem improbable at first glimpse. This paper attempts to scrutinize the notion of virtue from a relativist standpoint by making comparison between Aristotle and Nietzsche. It is worth comparing Nietzsche’s account of human virtue with Aristotle’s virtue ethics whether it is plausible to make use of relativism. The article concludes that both philosophers do a brilliant work in determining the highest quality of human life: one that is vibrant, enthusiastic, and exceptional; characterized by self-actualization and ingenuity; and one that is full of creative ideas, perspicacity, and escapades.

Keywords: Aristotle, Nietzsche, Passion, Courage, Virtue, Zarathustra.

Introduction

American philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1947) supported the Aristotelian model of appealing to human nature in her famous article “Non-Relative virtues: An Aristotelian approach.” The work began with a general comment that the renaissance of virtue ethics advocated by Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others had never been accurate to its professed Aristotelian motivation because it made too many conciliations to moral relativism, interpreted as the belief that the principles of ethics rely on a specific culture rather than on the human nature, we all possess. Nussbaum’s goal was to demonstrate that the correct Aristotelian approach to the problems raised by moral differences is that there is a truly objective account of the good life or human flourishing, which is founded on our shared values and can be used to condemn moral practices that diverge from it.

On the other hand, If Nietzsche relativizes virtues and denies the basis of universal virtues then it seems that his “will to power” cannot be rationally justified. However, if all virtue arises from “will to power,” which is the fundamental core of life and the actions of every human being, then Nietzsche cannot be called a relativist. How can we justify? Why is he obsessed with the growth of human character? According to Christine Swanton, Nietzsche does not reject central universal virtues as conceived by Aristotle and standard moral theories, notably justice. In this paper, I argue that the comparisons between Nietzsche and Aristotle are highly overstated. This work compares and contrasts two related philosophies to explore the parallels and distinctions between both philosophers’ accounts of human virtue.

On Relative Virtue

In Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle classifies some of the significant moral virtues such as courage, temperance, magnanimity, and phronesis (practical wisdom). According to Aristotle, virtue ethics is determined by the individual with practical wisdom only in a unique manner, and that person cannot fully achieve certain virtues without acquiring all the others. Virtue represents the ability to respond passions at the right time (danger, courage, desire, outrage, empathy, etc.) for the right reasons, to the right person, and in the correct way. For example, to have this virtue means being angry at the correct time, in the best possible way, etc.; it doesn’t need to be mild or enraged. Martha Nussbaum even argues that Aristotle’s virtue ethics is not a contemplation of universals or rules, but an understanding of situations, i.e., awareness of the excellent characteristics of complex, particular circumstances, that is what an individual with practical wisdom should determine. Aristotle said: “Virtue makes the goal right, and practical intelligence makes what leads to it correct.”¹

Virtues or the excellence of the soul, are an inner capacity to articulate passions and deeds in an intelligent way – not too much or too less. For instance, eating too much or too little of healthy food can be harmful to one’s health. Likewise, doing too much or too little of physical exercise can be harmful. Different persons eat nutritious foods that are not pertinent for the illness. Healthy diets are not only relative to persons in different groups but different for the sickness. However, it also indicates that different healthy foods may be suitable for different persons who are healthy. Such people have awful impacts; for instance, if they miss breakfast, some have negative reactions when they eat breakfast. Similarly, “Virtue, like health and strength, therefore, is a form of character

¹. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Trans., David Ross (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 115.



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associated with choice, lying in the mean, that is, the mean relative to us, that being decided by reason, and by the cause for which it should be decided by the person of practical intelligence.”² For this reason, Aristotle directly upholds the relativist stance: “what is good for human may be harmful for animals . . . That’s why we claim that only some of the lower animals have practical intelligence, especially those who are considered to have a strength of foresight in their own lives. It is also clear that philosophical intelligence and political art would not be the same . . . But different philosophical intelligence concerned the good of every species.”³ For example, the greatness of various groups differs in grades. Aristotle rejected the idea that each group follows the same kind of virtue and thus demanded a unique virtue toward practical wisdom.

But what exactly does Aristotle mean when he states virtue is “lying in a mean relative to us?” The expression “mean” comes from the Greek word “mesos,” which means “in-between” or “middle.” The nature of virtue is in the middle. In contrast to arithmetical point, virtue as a mean is not a midway point between two poles, which is the same for everyone. Aristotle provides a brief overview, and, in fact, it is his exemplary instance for his standard of the virtues as “means between the extremes.” Then, virtue is a disposition of character engaged with choice, lying in a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us, defined by a reasonable principle, and by that principle by which the person of practical intelligence would determine it. Virtue is a habit of choosing, the essence of which lies in moderation or observance of the mean relative to the aptitudes and situations of each person’s, as judged by rationality by which the judicious man would decide it.

Plato and Aristotle held a divergent interpretation on the subject not only did they think that it was inconceivable to exclude passions from human existence, but they also recognized and examined the function of emotions in living a good i.e. happy life. Plato argues that there are certain emotions that assist a man reach the Good and others that hinder him from doing so. For Aristotle, virtue is not about swapping of passions, nor regulate of intellect over passion, nor even the dismissal of passion, but rather a habitual character in which a passionate response appropriately responds to its circumstance. One must experience one’s passions in an appropriate manner, which has to do with their proper deployment and employment, instead of their extreme constriction and restriction. The passions, according to Aristotle, are appropriate, accurate, and intelligent responses to our circumstances. Moral virtue is an appropriate emotional response to external situations. A virtuous person has power over the irrational part of his soul—over his rage, terror, affection, sexual attraction, spitefulness, aspiration, greed, animosity, and sympathy, i.e. he experience emotions in the correct manner and for the correct reasons. It is not an unintentional regulation over them, nor is it constraint derived from the skill that Socrates referred to as *enkrateia*, but rather a habit of reasonable response endorsed by extensive training. Proper dispositions are virtues, whereas incorrect dispositions are vices. Virtue, as the complete antithesis of vice, denotes right emotional feelings and appropriate decisions escorted by pleasure. A virtue is defined by the correct measure: virtue is a disposition (*hexis*) to rightly refer to the emotions.

In contrast to Aristotle’s description of virtues, Friedrich Nietzsche presents a radically different interpretation, accentuating, as the scholar Robert Solomon describes it more solitary, creative, and warrior-like virtues, such as independence, innovation, and risk taking. Nietzsche’s theory of virtue is founded on the idea of an order of rank among individuals. The virtues of the powerful, according to Nietzsche, are regarded as vices by the slave and feeble, and so Nietzsche’s notion of virtue is built on his dissection between master morality and slave morality. Nietzsche extols the virtues of those he refers to as “higher men,” people such as Beethoven and Goethe. The virtues Nietzsche admires in them are their intellectual capabilities – “the men of great creativity”—“the really great men according to my understanding.” For Nietzsche, these higher types, are unique, and conduct a “unifying project,” venerate themselves, and are robust and life-affirming. The higher type also “instinctively craves hefty responsibilities” in the guise of an “organising idea” for their life, which propels them to inventive and creative activity while also providing them with psychological strength and fitness. The premise that the higher types are “healthy” refers to psychological endurance and tenacity rather than physical wellbeing. Furthermore, a higher type accepts life because he is willing to embrace eternal return of his life and affirm it eternally and unabashedly.

Nietzsche is particularly interested in how virtues can be classified based on such factors as strength, competency, and dynamic characteristics of individuals’ lives. According to Plato, the passions are like horses, and virtue is the soul of the charioteer. The Charioteer steers the entire chariot, helping to prevent the horses from going in different directions while driving toward wisdom. Plato believes that such desires should be suppressed and that many deserves drastic restrictions and constraints such as sexual insanity, indignation, sorrow, food, drinks, fears, etc. Plato defines virtue as the mastery of certain passions that must be thwarted and governed the passion. Nietzsche radicalized it by arguing that passions like hatred and lust can be turned into virtues. Passions can

². Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 31.

³. *Ibid.*, p. 108.



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transform into one’s strength and self-determination. Nietzsche prompts us to pursue a passionate life, stressing that one is often responsible for the acts of one’s passions. When a person’s passions are motivated toward his or her highest purpose, they can transmogrify into virtues. Robert C. Solomon notes that “Nietzsche is a passionate philosopher with his passionate writings and a passionate defender of the passionate life—that is, an exciting and adventurous life . . . For Nietzsche, passions were neither commotions nor turbulences in life. They established its very gist.”⁴

According to Lester H. Hunt, one’s virtues are entirely belongs to one uniqueness. Nietzsche argues the factors that determine one’s virtue are primarily courage, resilience, and innovative activity. More precisely, Nietzsche points out that the factors that constitute one’s own virtue often determine what one is capable of doing, and that not all will have equivalent virtue. A virtue is not a universal principle, as opposed to a divine or human statute which everyone should follow. Nietzsche explicitly affirms these expressions in Zarathustra: “One should not share one’s virtues in common. The creator will create new values, but he will not impose them on others: This is my good; this I love; it pleases me completely; so alone I want the good. I do not want it as divine law; I do not want it as a human statute and requirement.”⁵ Again in *The Antichrist* (1895), Nietzsche advocates a similar notion of human virtue to the affirmation of a better life “A virtue must be our own creation, our most necessary self-expression and self-defence: any other kind of virtue is merely a danger.”⁶

The preceding argument explicitly demonstrates that Nietzsche relativizes a virtue to various kinds of people and even individuals that are incompatible with universal moral virtue. Nietzsche denies universal moral virtue, which is not always pertinent and cannot be the same for all. It posits those certain values belong to individuals who can only assess their virtue depending on the unique characters; that such characters are applicable to one individual but not to everyone; and that not all values are equally universal to all. Nietzsche also conceived passions in a relativistic manner: “we need to learn to think differently – in order at last, perhaps very late, achieve even more: to feel differently.”⁷

Courage

Courage has been one of the four cardinal virtues in Western philosophy. For Nietzsche and Aristotle, courage is a central virtue and an archetype for all of the virtues. Aristotle clearly distinguishes the virtue of courage between two vices, cowardice and recklessness. According to Aristotle, the criterion that both vices and virtues have in common is the presence of fear. Cowardice is the expression of excessive fear. Recklessness, on the other hand, is the lack of (or at least very little) fear. Courage appears to be contrary to rashness on one hand and cowardice on the other. Unlike both of them, courage is the perfect amount of fear, not too much or too little. A courageous man knows not too much nor too little terror and risk-taking, but only the appropriate amount determines a virtue. The courageous man “does the right things.” Fear is felt by the courageous person but he or she acts correctly. To be courageous, one must make the right choices and actions, as well as have the right feelings of fear and confidence. Virtue is a centre of the spectrum propensity to act or function in just the right amount.

Courage, according to Aristotle, is the virtue that lies between reckless and cowardice. The virtue of courage is “golden mean” between recklessness and cowardliness. Courage entails moderation. Courage entails our most respect when it comes to danger without egotistic motivation. Courage is moral fortitude in the midst of adversity. Courage is a virtue how we make a choice to do good, particularly when it is most complicated. When courage is blended with wisdom, intellect, and discernment, it is most noble. Virtue does not rely in choosing the absolute mean, but rather the mean relative according to the person’s aptitude, temerity, and circumstances. The mean is located at a different position for different persons.

According to Aristotle, it is reasonable to dread certain things, it is even noble and proper to dread such things, but the courageous person does not dread everything. Some tribulations, such as dishonour, poverty, sickness, friendlessness, and death, are worthy of fear. Aristotle exemplifies the courageous as individuals who behave valiantly in the face of a noble death or valiantly in life-threatening situations. The motivation for courage is constantly noble. Cowardice or recklessness are the vices that oppose courage. Aristotle claims that if one is courageous, one will confront one’s fears as reason dictates for the sake of noble causes. Aristotle says, “The man, then, who faces and who fears the right things and from the right motive, in the right way and at the right

⁴. Robert C. Solomon, *Living with Nietzsche: What the Great “Immoralist” Has to Teach Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 63.

⁵. *Ibid*, p. 24.

⁶. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, Trans., R.J. Hollingdale. (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 133.

⁷. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, Trans., R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 60.



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time, and who feels confidence under the corresponding conditions, is brave; for the brave man feels and acts according to the merits of the case and in whatever way reason directs.”⁸ It is crucial to understand that bravery does not imply sprinting into peril every time one gets the chance. A courageous person “chooses or endures things because it is noble to do so, or because it is base not to do so.”⁹

In Zarathustra, courage is most diligently related to creation, intellect, ambiguity, instinct, despise, and virtue. Courage is described by intellectual battle rather than physical or martial combat. Courage is about confronting one’s dreads by analysing and dealing with epistemic procedures with profound intellect or self-confidence. Mark Alfano described “courage is to face at the reality, to grasp things as they really are, no matter how terrible, awful, or nauseating they may be.”¹⁰ When Nietzsche talks of courage, he does not usually refer to barbarians, the military, or ambushes. They are thinkers who are creative, artists, and engage in intellectual endeavours. Courage is something that we can transmogrify passions that would motivate us to rebuild from action, not only fear but also sympathy, hatred, and resentment. Courage comprises a firm determination to confront challenges and it was prevised in Zarathustra to confront such difficulties that are difficult to face, such as gruesome and dreadful. Courage is like “the wings of the eagle, and the cleverness of the serpent, and the bravest creatures with all those virtues.”¹¹

Nietzsche is perhaps more obsessed with spiritual or interior courage than with the prosaic virtue of physical bravery. Nietzsche is proposing that we cultivate and express the spiritual courage to achieve what we see is worthwhile, and even if our convictions are opposed by the masses. Courage is not primarily about physically overcoming others; however, it is about having the courage to think and do what you believe to be worthwhile even when it is outlawed or limited by those in authority, sometimes knowing that the repercussions would be personal. It is the courage to become truly self-determining person who is not terrified to challenge the prevalent attitudes of one’s social system, the courage to become and thus morph oneself, and the courage to overcome adversity no matter how distracting they may appear or be. The Overman is not diffident to drive, to confront difficulties, to conquer circumstances and people, or to bring about change. This requires strength and courage, which is demonstrated through the application of one’s will to power. Courageous people comprehend how to exert their will to power. They vanquish, accomplish, exceed, trounce, and triumph through the courageous use of their strength and the overwhelming application of their will. Nietzsche says, “Certainly he has also dared more, done more new things, braved more and challenged fate more than all the other animals put together.”¹²

Nietzsche, like past thinkers, saw the “warrior” (as opposed to the ordinary soldier) as an excellent exemplar of courage in Zarathustra: “what is good?” you ask to be brave is good,”¹³ not to be engage in a long and happy life, not to desire to be appeased, and all this simply because of the adoration of life. As Lester H. Hunt phrases it: “Courage is something which enables us to act in the face of emotions which would normally prompt us to recoil from action, including not only fear but pity, horror, and disgust. . . . Courage includes a positive desire to face danger, and in Zarathustra it apparently also includes a desire to face all things which are difficult to face, including the disgusting and the horrible.”¹⁴ According to Robert C. Solomon, “Nietzsche’s conception of courage appears to imply not quite the same combatting fear (as is commonly assumed) as having “just the correct amount” of fear (the overly quantitative Aristotelian account). . . . Nietzsche most admired the mundane courage of just going on in life and getting something of value done. Courage, in contrast to both of them, is exactly the right amount of fear, neither too much nor too little.”¹⁵ To put it another way, courage is not really about surmounting fear. It is an outpouring of determination, formed by an overpowering but adroitly directed cascade of emotion.

Comparative Analysis and Conclusion

Both Aristotle and Nietzsche are primarily concerned with self-actualization in order to grow one’s character, the formation of unique virtue, and cultivate a sense of nobility. Both philosophers reject the Platonic conception of passions and believe that passions can be converted into robust, productive, and positive responses to specific situations. Aristotle relativizes virtue of unique types of human beings by describing the ‘mean relative to us’: one should do and experience things in the right way, in the right

⁸. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 50.

⁹. *Ibid*, p. 51.

¹⁰. Mark Alfano, *Nietzsche’s Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp.168-169.

¹¹. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra, A Book for Everyone and No One*, Trans., by R.J. Hollingdale, (London: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 313.

¹². Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Trans., by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 121.

¹³. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Trans., by R.J. Hollingdale, (London: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 74.

¹⁴. Lester H. Hunt, *Nietzsche and the Origin of Virtue*, (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 69.

¹⁵. Solomon, *Living with Nietzsche*, pp. 148-149.



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DOI: <http://ijmer.in.doi./2021/10.07.196>

moment, and for the correct purposes. Nietzsche also relativizes to various types of human virtue or even to individuals and refuses any appeals to a moral universal virtue. Nietzsche, like Aristotle, believes that virtue cannot be taught and that each individual must seek their own path, for each individual virtue is unique for various kinds of people with distinct characteristics, experiences, strength, and ambitions. They both embrace courage as the key source of virtue, but courage has different implications for each of them.

It is therefore essential to note several significant gaps between the two philosophers. Aristotle thinks that the feature of human actions that lead to practical intelligence can be deciphered into substantive notions of the good life and magnanimity. For Nietzsche, the will to power is the ability to turn one's vitality, growth, or drive to think and to discover, can be transmogrified into concrete notions that avow a healthier life. Nietzsche's theory of virtue is therefore both relativistic and non-relativist in nature. It is relativist in the sense as it holds that different individuals have different unique virtues based on their ability, strength, and circumstances. However, it is therefore non-relative in the sense as it claims that certain virtues do not emerge haphazardly, but rather emerge by intelligible means from a specific source which is the same for all humans: the will to power.

Aristotle taught us that a courageous person should not experience too much or too little fear or confidence, but a virtue is measured only by the right proportion of reason. Courageous people do not attempt a dangerous occurrence to achieve their own goals, but rather weigh their own reasons in order to face the obstacle and achieve the goal of goodness. Unlike Aristotle, Nietzsche excludes reason from his virtue theory. Courage entails a strong and profound desire to confront a dangerous and challenging situation. Danger can also be part of one's goal, but it is most often understood as onerous; indeed, it may be one's goal to vindicate in reaching the goal.

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