The Ethics of Reading

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THE ETHICS OF READING

Mark Moes

Aristotle’s treatise the Nichomachean Ethics is a companion volume to another treatise, the Politics. In its opening pages, Aristotle claims that there is an ultimate goal for the sake of which people do what they do (1094a17-22), and that this goal is the same for a community as for an individual (1094b7-8). These claims have often been rejected in the context of a liberal modernity, which on the one hand prides itself on pluralism about what is good and, on the other hand, separates what it takes to be the public realm of politics from what it takes to be the private realm of morality. Nevertheless, the claims derive some support from the common observation that most people, at least at certain crucial junctures in their lives, ask themselves questions such as, “what is to be the shape or pattern of my life as a whole?” or “what do I want to do with my life as a whole before I die?” or “given what I have done so far, what ought I do to prepare for what is to come next, and how can I complete what I have done so far?” They find such questions difficult or impossible to answer without taking into account the goals of the communities (families, countries, churches) to which they belong.

But Aristotle does not suppose that either individuals or communities can ever perfectly understand or articulate their ultimate goals, let alone perfectly understand them from the first moment when they begin to deliberate. Rather, he says that one of the most important things agents aim at when they deliberate is the improvement of their grasp of what their ultimate goals are. Agents can only improve that grasp, he suggests, by inquiring into the lives of other individuals and other communities, so as to learn by induction from the experience of other members of the race. He says that, in order to live well, individuals ought to live lives which embody an ongoing inquiry into the good for communities and for individuals (1094a23-26). This is is a very interesting claim and one startling to some modern ears. How can one learn about one’s own good and one’s own happiness by studying the lives of others? Note that the claim does not presuppose what much contemporary liberal writing on ethics and politics presupposes; namely, that the human good is irreducibly plural and relative to the culture or community in which it is sought. It presupposes, rather, that persons in a given context can learn about what really is good for themselves by studying other persons and communities. That is to say, the view relies on an assumption that there is a common human nature, no matter how many and various (and beautiful and non-interchangeable) the individual and social exemplifications of that common nature may be. Note secondly that, if Aristotle’s advice is sound, then each particular human life is in one of its key aspects a quest for a deeper understanding of the human good, as well as a quest for a better embodiment of that good as it can be embodied in that life. If Aristotle is correct, then among the most important deliberations we make as humans are deliberations about how to get ourselves into position to get.

Supposing that Aristotle’s embodied inquiry into the good for individuals transforms itself in accordance with that inquiry, and supplies us with an objective universal human good, the exemplifications, what is the degree to which what we claim of our lives has the form of the good for individuals? What is our true good (this is discussed by liberal theorists who realize that modern chaotic materials in and out of communities)? (2) Consider some narrative patterns, particular storylines or contexts, in the context of the degree to which a narrative pattern, pattern in human life, is on a par with the accomplishments of others or incomparable. (3) All this presupposes, of course, which is always the same, that the human good is to be enacted in a life story, the shape of the shape or pattern of our true good in living it. (4) All this presupposes, however, the continued and carried on (5) For the purpose of the literature of the human good, masterworks from the past, works acclaimed as embodying an ongoing inquiry into the good for communities and for individuals (1094a23-26). This is is a very interesting claim and one startling to some modern ears. How can one learn about one’s own good and one’s own happiness by studying the lives of others? Note that the claim does not presuppose what much contemporary liberal writing on ethics and politics presupposes; namely, that the human good is irreducibly plural and relative to the culture or community in which it is sought. It presupposes, rather, that persons in a given context can learn about what really is good for themselves by studying other persons and communities. That is to say, the view relies on an assumption that there is a common human nature, no matter how many and various (and beautiful and non-interchangeable) the individual and social exemplifications of that common nature may be. Note secondly that, if Aristotle’s advice is sound, then each particular human life is in one of its key aspects a quest for a deeper understanding of the human good, as well as a quest for a better embodiment of that good as it can be embodied in that life. If Aristotle is correct, then among the most important deliberations we make as humans are deliberations about how to get

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There is an ultimate good and that this goal is achieved by improving our lives. These claims have often been made in a way that is consistent with the idea that there is an ultimate good and that this goal is achieved by improving our lives. Such views are not inconsistent with the idea that there is an ultimate good and that this goal is achieved by improving our lives. However, they are often inconsistent with the idea that there is an ultimate good and that this goal is achieved by improving our lives. The distinction between these two views is important because it is often the case that the former view is more consistent with the idea that there is an ultimate good and that this goal is achieved by improving our lives than the latter view.

In countless dialogues, the unhappy endings are often the result of an ongoing interaction with the happy endings of such stories share a type of happy ending. All lives are exemplified as embodying truth about human character. This is a striking fact that many of the Western literary theorists who maintain that narrative form is something imposed on totally chaotic materials in an act of sheer originate creativity by the literary artist or the lifestyle artist. (2) Concrete human lives can embody repeatable and universal narrative patterns, patterns really exemplified in lives which, nevertheless, are, in respect to the constellation of all the patterns exemplified in them, unique and incomparable.

(3) All the happy endings of such stories share a type of happy ending which is always the same, while the unhappy endings are infinitely various. (4) In enacting a life story, persons must come to discover and to embody (or not) the shape of goodness in their lives for themselves (nobody else can do this for them). (5) For the purpose of learning universal lessons about recurrent and general patterns in human life, everyone would do well to read two kinds of classic text: (a) masterworks from the history of ethics, and (b) stories that have been universally acclaimed as embodying truth about human character. In what follows I shall focus on (4) and (5).

How is it that in reading the best books in the history of ethics readers can and must come to understand and to discover for themselves what human goodness is? It is a striking fact that many of the Western classic texts concerning ethics and good living are intentionally unfinished works which are constructed in such a way as to draw students into active inquiry and into self-involving interaction with them. Consider some works of Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas. At the end of many of his dialogues Plato leaves hints that the conversations so far depicted are to be continued and carried on by the reader. For example, the last line of the Philebus is "I need not remind you of what still remains to be done." What is laid out in the second half of many of the dialogues is a sort of spiritual or psychological regimen, a set of guidelines for living well and, what comes to the same thing, for coming to apprehend and to embody ever more the good life. At the beginning of many dialogues there are indications that the depicted conversations are going on in the presence of auditors who are supposed to be learning some deep lessons by following the flow of the conversations. In countless other ways, too, the dialogues are carefully constructed so as to draw readers into an active participation in the conversations depicted, and into imaginative and/or active identification with both the good and bad characters depicted in them.

Consider, too, the work of Aristotle. Aristotle has a bad reputation today, but one that is in many ways undeserved. Aristotle-bashing is a cultural relic of the reaction
against decadent forms of Aristotelianism in the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods. It might truly be said that Aristotle's Ethics is, as Alasdair MacIntyre has called it, "the greatest set of lecture notes ever written." We should note that it is a set of unfinished lecture notes, with the explicit aim only (1) to help auditors grasp in outline what the shape of the good life is, (2) to invite them into deeper inquiry into the outline and into the ways to embody in ever richer ways the pattern of goodness sketched in it, and (3) to lay out many of the qualities of soul and of life which provide the indispensable conditions for responsible inquiry into the good and for the embodiment in action of what comes to be apprehended in course of the inquiry.

Finally, consider the second part of Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologica (and the whole Summa). Thomas presents it not as a finished system but as the record of a vast work of dialectical construction. It records the process and the product of mining the enduring truths out of the best previous accounts of human goodness, a work of separating the true and enduring from the marginal, the distorted, the incomplete or misleading or flawed insights in those previous accounts. The ethical parts of the Summa summarize the best arguments about good living which up to the time of writing had been produced. When it criticizes these arguments, it grants what is true in them and explains why their proponents came to make what can in retrospect be seen to be at least partial errors. But it leaves open the possibility that new arguments may emerge which are more compelling or need answering. And it requires readers as they read the text to work through the arguments for themselves, make the distinctions for themselves, and so on.

Students soon find that reading either Plato or Aristotle or Aquinas can be an enormously difficult and time-absorbing task. It has never been easy to read these texts well, but the conditions of modern life and of the modern university perhaps especially discourage the kind of focussed study which the understanding of and engagement with these texts requires. Yet I am claiming that overcoming the obstacles to reading classic texts well is something every reader ought to work at, and that it is a task which every reader must achieve for him or herself. Not only are modern social conditions to some extent barriers to the deep reading of these texts, but it is also the case that, as these and many other texts from Gilgamesh and Genesis to the tragedies of Aeschylus attest, human beings do not learn except through difficulty and suffering. Even when readers have the guidance of a more or less magisterial lecturer or interpreter of a great text, it costs them a lot to read well a text which was itself produced at great cost, and produced by an artist of genius.

One way to emphasize the personal cost of the good reading of good books is to point out two levels of meaning of the title of my essay: 'The Ethics of Reading'. On the one hand, the title can mean that there is an ethics which concerns the qualities of character which are prerequisites for and indispensable conditions of good reading. On the other hand, it can mean that there are qualities of character which result from good reading. Depending on how one construes the force of the preposition of, the title either emphasizes the virtues which go into and make possible good reading or the virtues which come out of and result from good reading. What are the virtues that go into good reading? One might mention some of the traditional cardinal virtues: Practical wisdom, if one is a philosopher in order to have the leisure to consider the pleasures and gratifications (skipping TV or nights out) or the fear of failure, the fear of poverty, the fear of impoverishment, and not the fear of reasons, and humility. And the fear of being humiliated, and of the fear of recognition and unmasking. On the other hand, are the virtues that come out of good reading?

Is it not obvious that the good life? Simone Weil was not too quick of attention of the student of Aristotle.

The love of our neighbor is to say to him: 'Not only are you the sufferer excepted, but every wrong labelled 'unfortunate' that is done to any day stamped with the stamp of enough, but it is also in some certain way. The one who is able to empty itself of any self interest, it is as it may seem that they are done. They do not need to devote the right place, it is as it may seem that they can one of the worth of a genuine. They the help of just need. Studies of...
G. S. Gordon

The first three centuries of the Christian era witnessed the birth of the Church, the rise of the Empire, and the flowering of the Augustan Age. In these formative decades, the Church was born in the crucible of the Roman Empire, giving birth to Christianity and to the language of Christian thought.

The Church's growth was rapid, and its impact on the culture of the Roman Empire was profound. The early Christian apologists, such as Tertullian and Justin Martyr, defended the faith against the charge of adoring a mere human being. Their arguments were based on the evidence of the Spirit's presence and the miracles performed by Christ. These writers were also the first to distinguish between the Church and the state, arguing that the Church is a community of believers who follow Christ and is thus independent of the state.

The Church's growth was also marked by the development of a liturgical tradition, which included the celebration of Mass, the reading of Scripture, and the recitation of prayers. These practices were aimed at fostering a sense of community and a deeper understanding of the mysteries of the faith. The liturgical tradition was also an important means of evangelization, as it was through the liturgy that the Gospel was preached to the faithful.

The Church also played a significant role in education, providing instruction in the faith and in the skills needed for skilled work. The Church was also the first to establish a system of higher education, with the establishment of universities and the appointment of scholars to teach the faith and the liberal arts. The Church's educational system was also an important means of spreading the faith, as it was through the teaching of the Church that the Gospel was preached to the faithful.

The Church's growth was also marked by the development of a complex structure, with the establishment of dioceses, parishes, and monasteries. The Church was also the first to establish a system of governance, with the establishment of bishops and priests who were responsible for the spiritual and temporal affairs of the faithful. The Church's governance system was also an important means of spreading the faith, as it was through the Church's governance that the Gospel was preached to the faithful.

The Church's growth was also marked by the development of a rich and varied artistic tradition, including paintings, sculptures, mosaics, and stained glass. These works of art were intended to inspire and instruct the faithful, and they also served as a means of evangelization, as they were carried to new regions by bishops and missionaries.

The Church's growth was also marked by the development of a rich and varied literary tradition, including the writing of sermons, hymns, and prayers. These works of literature were intended to inspire and instruct the faithful, and they also served as a means of evangelization, as they were carried to new regions by bishops and missionaries.

The Church's growth was also marked by the development of a rich and varied musical tradition, including the writing of chants and hymns. These works of music were intended to inspire and instruct the faithful, and they also served as a means of evangelization, as they were carried to new regions by bishops and missionaries.

The Church's growth was also marked by the development of a rich and varied architectural tradition, including the building of churches, monasteries, and basilicas. These works of architecture were intended to inspire and instruct the faithful, and they also served as a means of evangelization, as they were carried to new regions by bishops and missionaries.

The Church's growth was also marked by the development of a rich and varied administrative tradition, including the establishment of a system of dioceses, parishes, and monasteries. The Church was also the first to establish a system of governance, with the establishment of bishops and priests who were responsible for the spiritual and temporal affairs of the faithful. The Church's governance system was also an important means of spreading the faith, as it was through the Church's governance that the Gospel was preached to the faithful.

The Church's growth was also marked by the development of a rich and varied social tradition, including the establishment of a system of charity and welfare. The Church was also the first to establish a system of social welfare, with the establishment of hospitals, orphanages, and charitable institutions. The Church's social welfare system was also an important means of spreading the faith, as it was through the Church's social welfare that the Gospel was preached to the faithful.
antidote to counteract what would otherwise be a distorting influence. To make his point, Socrates considers the relations among the following four items: (1) the works of craft, the artifacts produced in the act of imitation; (2) the craftspersons who make such works and understand the form exemplified and embodied in them and who understand the principles of operation made possible by that form; (3) those persons who use the artifacts or works of craft; and (4) "mere painters," those persons who merely produce imitations of the surface features of the works of craft, who produce mere sketches of the works, without understanding the full forms embodied in the works or the principles of operation made possible by those forms. Socrates suggests the need to think about the relations among (1) to (4) when the works of craft in question are (A) literary imitations of human life, works of imitative poetry, works of literature, and (B) human actions and/or the character traits expressed by and produced by human actions. Plato wants us to notice that when literary imitations (A1) are in question, the craftspersons (A2) correspond to the authors who understand the forms embodied in the works and the principles of their operation, the users of the works (A3) correspond to the readers who use the works as they are meant to be used, i.e. intelligent and careful scholarly readers, and the mere painters (A4) are shoddy readers who take note only of the surface features of the work. Plato also wants us to notice that when human actions are in question, the craftworks produced (B1) correspond to concrete actions, qualities of character, or lives (an action or a life is a poetic work of art), the craftspersons (B2) correspond to intelligent agents who embody human goodness of action and character in the concrete material or media provided by their life context, the users (B3) of the works are the same intelligent agents who benefit from the well-crafted nature of their actions, characters, and lives, and the mere painters (B4) are agents who merely imitate superficially the good actions of others without understanding the deep principles of character and motivation behind them and without doing these actions with the right motives, in the right way, and so on. Persistent reflection upon the relations among (1) to (4) in connection with writing, reading, and acting generally, Socrates suggests in Book 10 of the Republic, can take one a long way toward ethical and intellectual virtue.

In closing, I shall make a few bold summary claims. The deep reading of good books and the possession and exercise of good morals require each other. The deep reading of good books, whether these books are explicitly about morals or not, is required for the development of good character. But good character is also in some degree a prerequisite for good reading. (This circle is not vicious, since we all have a capacity in us to bootstrap ourselves up toward better character and the better reading ability which goes with it.) It follows that shoddy reading of even good books will prevent the development of good character, and that 'general education' conceived as the cursory and shoddy reading of even good books (from anybody's canon) ought to be eschewed in favor of careful and accurate reading with some degree of scholarly precision. And as Aristotle tellingly emphasizes in his Nichomachean Ethics, the worst result of bad character is the agent's increasing blindness to the true condition of his or her character, which can often involve
To make his point he identifies four items: (1) the works of imitative poetry, which are works of craft, who produce forms; (3) those persons who produce those forms, Socrates calls "makers," those persons who make the works of craft, who produce those forms embodied in the works as they are, and the mere painters and sellers of those forms. Socrates adds (4) when the works of imitative poetry, which are works of craft, who produce forms, are in question, the qualities of character, or vows, to be had (B2) correspond to the authors who imitate them, and character in the users (B3) of the works is reflected in the crafted nature of their actions. Thus are agents who merely understand the deep meaning of the works, doing these actions without knowing and acting generally, have done a long way toward understanding the deep reading of good books (from anybody's own culture) which can often involve Blindness to the poor quality of his or her reading and understanding of classic texts. That some people are blind to the poor quality of their understanding of classic texts is evident to anyone who actually has had a profound encounter with (for example) western ancient and medieval philosophy and who then observes how quickly it is dismissed with a wave of the hand by people who read nothing but textbooks stuffed full of secondhand opinions about it. The inundation of the modern academy with more and more textbook surveys of classical thought, often written by people who do not understand that thought, and the cursory quality of the readings given to classic texts by many professors and students today, is both a symptom and a cause of moral decline in our culture, and can only prevent us from taking real pluralism seriously by learning from those of our predecessor cultures which are radically different from our own.