The Ethical Character from Plato to James: Strict and Stable to Flexible

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In this paper I examine the historical direction taken in ethics in relation to one’s personality and character, from a stable and static view to one that incorporates movement and flexibility. I begin by examining Plato and Aristotle’s understandings of character, using such concepts as Virtue and the Good as abstract and static ideals towards which development should lead. I then briefly examine Augustine, Kant, and Mill’s theories of what defines an ethical character, showing that the strict view was applied to varied and even opposing views of the ethical. Finally, I examine three very different views, those of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and James, which view character development and ethics not as a process aiming towards a set goal, but defined and expressed moment to moment. The ethical character is flexibly determined, through choice and decision making, the expression of the will to power, and the focus on the concrete and existent.
The good person, according to Plato, is one that is virtuous and just. Similarly, the good life is one in which virtue and justice prevails. This virtue is the excellence of a person, their highest and finest quality, their final end. The use of reason is the highest excellence of humans, governing in the just soul over passions and appetites. With the governance of reason, then, there is harmony in the soul.

Aristotle, too, picks up on and emphasizes the question of a person’s excellence. Like Plato, he concludes that it is reason. Aristotle, however, adds an important aspect to it – that of action, and a dynamic interaction between potentiality and actuality. Further, for him the virtuous character comes into existence through habit. Like the emergence of the ethical character, Ethics itself, in effect, is the study and practice of habit. Lastly, he differs from Plato in his view of a person’s final end – that of happiness, or doing-well. Combining the ideas together, happiness comes about through action in accordance with reason.

According to these thinkers, whether it be the good, justice, reason or happiness, with the emphasis on action or without, the excellence of a person comes about through their meeting or inability to meet a set abstract concept of excellence. This concept is defined separately from them, and their success is in the degree of alignment with it. Perhaps the best expression of this comes about metaphorically in Plato’s myth of the cave, where the absolute forms, and most importantly the form of the good, are unveiled to the person coming out of the cave. Even though they exist within the person (as potential), initially they are viewed as external to it (the good as the sun).

The role of action is tricky here, as is the emphasis on habit. These might be interpreted in different ways, and seem to be critically necessary for the development of an ethical character, but for the relevancy of the current argument they too imply a direction towards a set ideal. That is, action directed towards a stable concept of justice, habit cultivated in the direction of becoming a virtuous character. The person is situated at one point, the ideal at another in the future or ahead of them, and action and habit function as means, or tools, to reach that set point.
Next, Augustine, Kant, and Mill are examined very briefly to represent other forms of stable and set concepts related to the ethical character. Augustine, and other philosophers that regard God as the highest good, are appealing to a concept external to the individual. The idea of an omnipresent, all-powerful God is, to some degree, a stable and strict view of that good. Other strict views can be found in Kant and Mill’s theories. For Kant, it is the categorical imperative and universal moral laws that define the ethical realm. The emphasis is on intention, and the ethical is that which is done out of a sense of duty, and against an initial inclination. For Mill, on the other end of the spectrum, the emphasis is on the consequences of action, and the ethical is that which produces the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest amount of people. In either case, by defining the ethical as subject solely to intention or consequences, these views hold a stable perspective on what is right/wrong or good/bad and disregard any other measure of these concepts (including those that previous philosophers regarded as absolute goods).

As interpretations of the ethical character continued to evolve, the emphasis, in some cases which I would like to examine, shifted from stable and external conceptions to dynamic and internal ones. Choice, Kierkegaard argues, lies at the center of the ethical realm and the development of the ethical character. The choice, as he presents it, is between two states, that of “either” and “or,” or between not choosing and choosing to choose. Kierkegaard approaches the either/or question from a personal perspective, giving it concrete relevancy. “It is always important to choose rightly,” he writes, “even as between things which one may innocently choose; it is important to test oneself, lest some day one might have to beat a painful retreat to the point from which one started” (314). He further stresses the importance of making the right choice, writing that “I hope that I may be successful in choosing the right course; at all events, I shall endeavor to make the choice with real earnestness, and with that I venture, at least, to hope that I shall the sooner get out of the wrong path” (315). Though what a person chooses is important, what Kierkegaard mostly emphasizes in his notion of “choice,” and which emerges
in this passage, is the process of deliberation itself. When confronted with life’s dilemmas, it is not the
decision itself that defines the ethical, but choosing the process of questionning, of pondering over the
question, examining it. Further, through choosing the process of “or,” and choosing to actively engage in
life, the ethical character, or the self, emerges. Through this process, he writes, “you can win what is the
chief thing in life, win yourself, acquire your own self” (316).

To further examine this last point, choice and personality, in Kierkegaard’s view, are clearly
intertwined. “The act of choosing,” he writes, “is essentially a proper and stringent expression of the
ethical” and “thereby the personality announces its inner infinity, and thereby, in turn, the personality is
consolidated” (318). In addition, there is one other important aspect to choosing “or” – that of despair.
Through choosing one despairs, and through despairing one finds oneself, one’s eternal validity.
“Choose despair,” Kierkegaard writes, “for despair itself is a choice; for one can doubt without choosing
to, but one cannot despair without choosing.” Further, it is not only despair that is chosen, but through
despair another choice is made, that of choosing the self (322).

Another view of what defines the ethical character is found in Nietzsche’s concept of the “will to
power.” This view, similar to Kierkegaard’s, emphasizes an internal and dynamic perspective. The “will
to power” lies within a person, the source of that which creates and values. The good, for Nietzsche, is
“everything that heightens our feeling of power, our will to power, the power in man itself.” The will to
power is also directly related to happiness, “the feeling that our power is growing – that resistance is
being overcome” (356). Viewing the source of value as subject to the will to power, similar to
Kierkegaard’s concept of choice, is defining the development of the ethical character as one that occurs
from one occurrence to the next, or from moment to moment, and focuses on the now. Perhaps
Nietzsche’s concept of the “superman,” if viewed metaphorically, stresses this point on the role of
choice and the will to power. It might serve as a trigger for reaching to the will to power, evaluating it,
and challenging its strength. The message is clear: choose now. Choose now, both as an active choice to
live your life, to live right this moment, but also for each now that exists, give it its fullest weight as if this moment was forever to return. “To ask yourself the question,” Nietzsche writes, “before each and every event, ‘do you wish this to happen again, and perhaps an untold number of times?’ would place the greatest weight upon your actions!” (360).

Value comes about through the will to power, Nietzsche argues, people being their own creators of values. Similar to Kierkegaard’s emphasis on choosing to choose as the ethical, not just the choice itself, so does Nietzsche make such a distinction in relation to value. “Valuing is creating,” he writes, and “valuing is itself the treasure and the jewel of all valued things” (354). It is the process of valuing, then, that is important, not just that which is given value. Through the will to power, valuing, and the focus on the now, emerges a depth of being, a sense of self. “If mankind,” he writes, “is still lacking a goal, is it not lacking – itself?” (355).

Comparing Kierkegaard’s concept of choice and Nietzsche’s will to power with previous conceptions of the good and ethical – such as virtue, happiness, and God – it is clear that the movement is from the external and stable view, of a set and abstract concept towards which a person should lead their lives, to an internal and dynamic view, in which the focus shifts inward and examines the now. Comparing them to Kant and Mill’s views, of considering solely intention or action and consequences, it could be argued that the two later philosophers argued for internal concepts as well. While this might be the case, it is the strictness and absoluteness of each of these views that separates them from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche’s.

Lastly, the third philosopher which I would like to examine as representing the movement towards an internal and dynamic view of the ethical character is William James. James emphasizes that the ethical realm is conceptualized and constructed by actually existing minds, and therefore has no absolute existence separate from them. “There is no such thing,” he argues, “as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance” (369). Both moral relations and the moral law, he further argues,
cannot exist in emptiness, since “their only habitat can be a mind which feels them.” Measures of “goodness, badness, and obligation,” then, “must be realized somewhere in order really to exist; and the first step in ethical philosophy,” he writes, “is to see that no merely inorganic ‘nature of things’ can realize them” (371). Clearly, James rejects the idea of an absolute good, such as virtue, God, or the measure of consequences of action, in as much as it exists independently of minds to perceive it. People are the creators of these measures, he argues instead, similar to Nietzsche’s argument of people as creators of values, and as long as they are there to perceive there would also exist a multitude of such measures.

Once there are existing minds to perceive the world, there are also claims and demands made upon it. Good, according to James, is that which satisfies demand, and the highest good is that which is most inclusive, or satisfies the greatest amount of demands. In addition, and also similar to Nietzsche, James’s view focuses on the here and now, the ethical and the development of the ethical character deriving from concrete situations and occurrences.

When synthesizing Kierkegaard and Nietzsche’s concepts of choice and the will to power, as well as James’s emphasis on existing minds and concrete situations, it is possible to make an opposite argument to the one suggested in this paper. That is, focusing on choice, the will to power, and existing minds as the ethical, is just as stable and strict as the concepts of earlier perspectives to which they are compared, such as reason, virtue, happiness, or God. The difference, however, can simply be made clear: it is not specified what these concepts consist of, and therefore they could be exclusive, as well as inclusive. Reason as the highest good, for example, specifically consists of reason. What does choice consist of? Habit? Habit combined with virtue? Similarly, what does the will to power consist of? Reason? Reason combined with virtue? Etc. In relation to James’s view, it is not as strict as earlier concepts, since through his rejection of absolutism it could be implied that his own perspective cannot be absolute.
In this paper, I examined the direction taken in ethics in relation to personality and the ethical character from an external, stable and strict view towards an internal, flexible and dynamic one. I began with Plato and Aristotle’s conceptions of absolute and abstract ideals, towards which development should lead. I then examined three additional stable and static conceptions of the ethical, those of Augustine, Kant and Mill. Lastly, I presented three very different perspectives and their view on the ethical character, which emphasize an internal and dynamic interaction, those of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and James.

**Works Cited**

