

THE MORAL MAN AS *ENGKRATÊS*

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ABSTRACT: And if human beings are the only ones responsible for their actions, it must be because only we are given the ability to choose the means to our end. But if we are having this opportunity to choose, to move between good and bad, how exactly do we distinguish between the two kinds of means to our end and what is the criterion? Who is really the moral man? Aristotle gives a fairly complex answer to that question, which I will shortly present here and I will try to contrast it to a more simplistic view proposed by Jean-Paul Sartre. Finally I will seek a bridge between these two concepts of the moral man as an effort to propose a more fruitful definition.

KEY WORDS: Morality, *engkratês*, *prohairesis*, free choice, will, sensibility

“Everyone can do what he likes, and will be incapable, from such a point of view, of condemning either the point of view or the action of anyone else.” (Sartre)

The notions of good and bad are strictly tied up to human beings, meaning that there is no morality in nature itself, but only in human nature. There is something about us as human beings making us able to perceive a difference between two actions, even if they might appear physically exactly the same. Our actions introduce a new type of event, one which is controlled by intention, an action for which there is a responsible agent. We tend to think that nothing is responsible for the damage done by a tornado, but we do think differently about damage done by a human. Aristotle would add here that this is so because we have the rational capacity to grasp the world and make choices, more specifically we have the ability to act in accordance with our *prohairesis*. Doing so, involves all characteristics of being human. In order to be an “*engkratês*, the strong willed person, who abides by his *prohairesis* in resisting desire” (Chamberlain, p. 147) one should balance between his rational and irrational soul, while aiming at something. According to Aristotle’s teleology everything is a movement towards an

end. And if human beings are the only ones responsible for their actions, it must be because only we are given the ability to choose the means to our end.

But if we are having this opportunity to choose, to move between good and bad, how exactly do we distinguish between the two kinds of means to our end and what is the criterion? Who is really the moral man? Aristotle gives a fairly complex answer to that question, which I will shortly present here and I will try to contrast it to a more simplistic view proposed by Jean-Paul Sartre. Finally I will seek a bridge between these two concepts of the moral man as an effort to propose a more fruitful definition.

First of all I want to introduce an example – imagine a tornado kills a man. Whether this man was a murderer or a good citizen makes no difference to our belief that this is just an accidental event for which, there is no one to be praised or blamed. If we imagine now that the man was killed by another man every single detail of this event becomes important even crucial to understanding if the latter is to be praised or blamed – nevertheless we have the intuition that he is responsible. T. H. Irwin investigates Aristotle’s account of responsibility and concludes that in most cases human beings are responsible for their actions even when these actions are not the direct product of a decision. (Irwin, p. 465) Even though we do not always make deliberated rational free choices, we are usually responsible for them. This might be explained by the approach proposed by Chamberlain. He sets out to explain the term *prohairesis* and suggests that the translations of it are often wrong because they fail to recognize it as a process. He claims that *prohairesis* is the process of forming new desires, requiring both the rational and irrational part of the soul: “When both parts of Aristotle’s bipartite soul – *dianoia* and *orexis* – function in harmony, the result is *prohairesis*”. (Chamberlain, p. 152) If being virtuous is about acting in accordance with *prohairesis*, then the moral man is the one who is in the process of forming new desires, which “the logos affirms and the desire pursues”. (Chamberlain, p. 152) Thus the *engkratês* is a morally perfected person, balancing his divided nature and using the concord of his soul in his search of means to his end. Every new desire he forms through *prohairesis* is a not just any desire, product solely of the non-rational soul, but a product of the human existence as whole, balanced being. This view suggests that we bear the responsibility of using or not using our full capacity when making decisions, unless there are circumstances, which prevent us from doing so. This is why Aristotle claims

that few people are morally perfected, but most people can be praised or blamed for their actions. In his terms, being moral is not only about being human, but about actively seeking the balance between what you want and what you believe. Moreover even if you do seek this balance, you might still not be able to act according to it. We are morally responsible by nature, as we are rational and sensitive to the world around us. But this does not directly lead to being moral, to actually developing our sensitivity and using it when rationally grasping a situation. Being moral, thus, is a process of constantly selecting from deliberation, training the will, exercising habits; as Chamberlain puts it, it is about “being committed” to erasing the conflict between reason and desire.

According to Aristotle, most people will fail to become moral, to be *engkratês*. This requires too much of a human being – first to come to know, understand and see the situation, which requires both a rational sight and also a non-rational sensitivity both very trained, distinct and working in accord; second it requires the agent to actually choose, act on what he has already saw as right in the situation; third the morally perfected man would be committed to coming to desire and want that thing which he perceived as good. This seems like a rather complex explanation of how we form the right desires.

For this reason I would like to contrast this view to Sartre’s concept of the moral man. He derives his ethics from a different view of the human being. Sartre thinks our existence precedes our essence, and thus we are the only beings which are not predetermined – we are free to choose our existence: “What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards.” (Sartre, p. 3) From this standing point Sartre claims that we are all responsible for our actions or inactions as creators of our being. If any other thing in the world is controlled by its essence, and all events are thus mechanical and calculable, the human actions are something different. According to Sartre we can be responsible for every single one on our actions as they are either a product of a concrete free choice we have made, or an indirect result of a preceding free choice of ours. Actually it seems like Sartre thinks we are posed in front of only one single moral dilemma and it is whether to define ourselves and thus constantly choose in virtue of our own will, or let the world and others define our being

and thus, never to make our conscious choices. For him there is one moral criterion and it is acting as a free agent. As long as you are following your own future project for who you want to be, as long as you choose your existence, you are a moral man. Importantly Sartre believes that anyone is capable of doing so. This seems like a very appealing view, as it explains why everyone is responsible for their actions or inactions, and because it does not suggest that it is an impossibly hard task to be moral. But there also seem to be a major issue with it – if we are free to do whatever we choose to, and any choice we deliberately make is moral, then it turns out that the moral man can go out and kill another man if he decides to do so and that would still, according to Sartre be a moral act. However, our intuition fights against this proposition – we do consider some actions as immoral. It does not sound right to go out and kill someone, simply because you've chosen to do so. Something seems to be missing from Sartre's account as he invests too much trust in the human being. He does claim that anyone can be moral, and he does suggest that all conscious decisions we make are moral.

There is a strong side these two views share due to the fact that they both derive their criterion of morality from the inner state of the human. For Sartre the moral man is the one who chooses his existence and for Aristotle he is the man who balances his soul and is committed to wanting and doing what is right. They both agree that we are able to control our emotions, that there are desires we build, desires which are a result of a deliberated choice. Another interesting feature they share is the *telos* and the projection of the self, which are both showing that the human is an aware being aiming at a goal, a process of becoming and for both being moral means being able to control this process. Aristotle claims that if you abide to your *prohairesis*, if you choose your desires, then you are a moral man and this is a process, a day to day battle. For Sartre if you have created a projection of yourself and every choice is a conscious move towards this end, then you are moral. With this statement they make every human responsible for his actions, which is good.

Nevertheless, these two views also share a weakness precisely because they share this strength. In postulating the moral criterion, they appeal only to some aspect of the human nature and leave aside the fact that we are “social animals”. This becomes a major issue as morality is supposed to control our relationships with other, but instead of this, we are offered a view of a solitary, isolated human. Sartre has been

accused of this and the whole work *Existentialism is a Humanism* is aiming at responding to such criticisms. Both Aristotle and Sartre depict the moral man as an organic being, balanced, determined; a fragile unity supported by the aiming at an end. And this indeed is a crucial factor in being moral. We cannot be moral, if we believe one thing is right, but truly want something else, or if we allow some external moral code to determine our choices – we need to act as a whole in order to make a truly moral choice. But the moral man, I want to argue is not simply an organic, whole being, but a whole being amongst others. What is somehow underestimated by Sartre and Aristotle is how our sensibility is shaped by living amongst others. It is intuitive that in order to be moral, we need also to be empathic and sensitive to other beings. Sartre further develops his idea and says that when making a choice and claiming our existence, we set an example of what a human should be like. This gives some universality to the moral he proposes, which brings his view quite close to Kant's ethics, which are based on the moral criterion – anything that we can accept as a universal law, which could be done by everyone is moral. But this universal law lacks understanding and sensibility – it is an artificial way of creating a “moral agent”, as this person would carry out actions which are acceptable for the mass, but it does not involve the whole of the human nature. Going back to the example – I might think that it is not acceptable for everyone to commit a murder, and yet continue wanting to kill someone. Even if I never carry out this action, I remain an immoral person as I have lost the ability to act on my *prohairesis*, I have become unable to choose freely. What would truly prevent me from committing a murder, and allow me to make this decision as a whole, balanced human being is not my effort to set an example for everyone else, but my openness to all other examples I have been given. The true, unmediated, open contact with the other allows us to develop a sensibility for situations and thus allows us to recognize and want the moral reaction. If I happen to know a person who was killed or was involved in a murder or if I knew a murderer; if I was opened to the others and have felt connected to this experience through my empathy for them, there is a greater chance that I would be sensible to such situations in future and recognize what the right thing is.

Engkratês is part of the moral person. But to be moral is not only a question of strong will – it is also a question of sensibility. We need to see the moral human not as a solitary whole figure, but as an organic self, amongst others. Finally I want to agree

with Sartre that morality is not a tool for judging the past of others, but for building our future with them.

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