

BOOK REVIEWS

Contrary to Thoughtlessness: Rethinking Practical Wisdom, Monica Mueller, PhD, Lexington Books, New York, pp. 118, 2013.

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As the subtitle of the book indicates, author Monica Mueller reopens an examination, evaluation and critique of contemporary American theorists writing on Aristotle's ethics. In our own times, it was Anscombe who had inaugurated the notion of practical syllogism in *Intention* and R.M. Hare retrieved it within the context of his prescriptive ethics in *The Language of Morals*, and later in *Freedom and Reason*. Hare, of course, was more inclined towards Kant's command view of moral language. Monica Mueller formulates her own view of Aristotle's ethical idea of deliberation by critiquing contemporary American scholars of Aristotle. In that respect, *Contrary to Thoughtlessness* acquaints the reader with the views and approaches to Aristotle's ethics made and undertaken by American scholars today.

Anscombe has been a pioneer of virtue ethics as against both utilitarianism and Rule-deontology. The idea of rule following was there in Wittgenstein's *Investigations* and later Stephen Toulmin's *Thought and Action* touched the issue of deliberation in deciding the course of moral action and choice of ends. The concept of reason giving in ethics occupied such thinkers as Kurt Baier in *The Moral Point of View*. A point may be made in passing, namely, that virtue ethics has remained a matter of concern with philosophers linked with Catholicism, which Protestantism encouraged deontology and the idea of one supreme and sovereign Moral Law. Kant is a monumental figure in that direction. This religious affiliation of the philosophers concerned remains somewhat obscure in this part of the world. We tend to forget that culture has always been one of the determinants of philosophical thinking. Further, it may be observed that philosophical thinkers in the West appear to be divided between the two camps, either one belongs to Descartes' camp (phenomenology and existentialism included) or to that of David Hume (the analytic school).

There has come up the notion of moral psychology, which

proposes to investigate the linkages between the concepts of moral thought. Mueller's persuasion has a large share of moral psychology. She does not go by bare analysis. Rather, she looks for factors of moral state of affairs, culture, upbringing, experience and perceptions prevalent in society. The point is that moral living, choosing, deciding, judging of moral issues, thinking of ends and means do not happen in a vacuum. There is a backdrop against which the moral drama is enacted.

Mueller's treatise, *Contrary to Thoughtlessness*, examines the elaboration of Aristotle's ethics, its constituents, concepts and notion in course of five chapters. She disposes of the views and adumbrations by a number of theorists, and puts in her own understanding and views to get and set the picture right. We shall follow her through her critical considerations.

Mueller opens her argument by pointing out that rule following is insufficient for full virtue. Humans are capable of acting otherwise, we have alternative perspectives to consider, and there are considerations that may be overriding. On occasions it may be necessary to call up courage and have integrity to challenge the moral status quo. The point is that practical wisdom is quite contrary to thoughtlessness. In looking for the possibility for Aristotelian virtue ethics, what is initially important is to give up the role of intuition. Practical wisdom is not intuition. A practically wise person by definition consistently acts well. A thoughtless person does not. For acting well, the moral agent has to be thoughtful. Moral thoughtfulness is different from theoretical contemplation. Its object is the real world, comprising the web of human relationships.

Mueller makes a distinction between diabolical evil and banal evil. The former evil is intentional and done for evil's sake, and the latter contributes to evil in one's ordinary living without the intent or realization of doing so. Banal evil is typified by thoughtlessness, which is contrary to practical wisdom.

Mueller has gone to quite a length in considering Aristotle's notion of practical syllogism. This is not syllogism simpliciter and the traditional idea of syllogism is of no avail in the moral context. The actions of the practically wise person are always the result of deliberated decisions and never merely the result of appetitive desire. Desire is correct if it accords with right reason. The Aristotelian moral agent never acts for the sake of an end without thinking and evaluating reasons. He has noetic knowledge of the correct ultimate end. Thoughtlessness compounds the potential

for wrongdoing. Virtue as for Aristotle cannot be an affair of mindlessness.

In practical syllogism, endorsement of an end constitutes the major premise, apprehension of the appropriate means to end constitutes the minor premise, and the conclusion is the command which issues in action. As Mueller shows, Aristotle's notion of practical syllogism stands apart from both Platonic analysis and Kantian deontological analysis. As in Plato's terms, the supreme principles of action are pre-established through contemplation of what invariably constitutes the Good, whereas the work of deliberation, as suggested by Aristotle, is strictly to determine the means to the pre-established end. As per Kantian analysis, whichever subjective maxims can be universalized is suitable as ultimate ends. It is worth mentioning that for Aristotle practical wisdom is distinct from scientific knowledge, because first principles in the practical realm are variable. Contingencies of each situation leave no room for an unchanging unqualified vision of the ultimate good. Matters concerned with conduct have no fixity. Mueller has argued against an overly intellectualized account of the formation of a practical syllogism. She contends that calculative deliberation is insufficient.

Deliberation of means to chosen ends is the work of practical wisdom. It remains a fact that human action takes place in a contingent reality which is often unpredictable and entails changing circumstances. Hence, Aristotle urges and encourages the learner of virtue to look at those with whom we credit practical wisdom. Looking to experience with an exemplar reveals the field of knowledge to which practical wisdom pertains, namely the spoken words and deeds of actors, people who live together in a shared common world. Becoming practically wise involves an analysis of the possibilities for human action and indicates the potential for human action at its best. In this context, Mueller takes up the case of *phronesis*, an important concept in Aristotle's ethics. *Phronesis* is to be understood in relation to *sophia*, which is an intellectual virtue. Contemplation of truth is what *sophia* denotes. On the other hand, *phronesis* is deciphering the right rule or ultimate end in a moment of action. Some theorists have identified *phronesis* with calculative deliberation. Mueller disagrees with such an interpretation, and holds that to view *phronesis* in this fashion is quite insufficient. She proposes to consider the overall course of one's development in becoming virtuous. She argues that to restrict *phronesis* to practical syllogism would be too reductive a conception. A calculative view of

practical wisdom does not tell the entire story of the life of a moral agent. Mueller surveys the stages of virtue development, beginning with desiring that which is pleasant and avoiding that which is perceived to be painful. Human being tends towards the pleasing and avoids the painful. This is our desiderative constitution.

Then comes the point about good upbringing, which includes learning to desire that which is noble and to avoid that which is base. Desiring the noble in good upbringing is to be a matter of habit, one comes to perceive that certain ways of acting are noble in certain circumstances. One further learns that acting nobly is pleasant and, therefore, one desires to do noble actions. At this stage, traits of character or moral virtues begin to develop, and correlative convictions of a certain kind are adopted. These convictions are not meant to be the sort of knowledge we have of rules or principles, but rather a kind of knowledge of that which is considered to be noble, which becomes a second nature with the practically wise. A practically wise person is one for whom virtues of character have been habituated in so far as it entails a full reflective understanding of why certain actions are conducive to the ends set by prior convictions and adopted during habituation. Judgment and choice in the fully virtuous person is reasoned from knowledge of the good in general.

The point that Mueller seeks to make is that habituation cannot be mindless, and the thinking involved grows to full virtue, and further that in reality the overall development of becoming virtuous is more fluid than a view of isolated stages. And that is why Aristotle insists on the prerequisite conditions of adequate time and experience.

The next important point is that Mueller takes up for discussion is that of a mean between extremes. How is rationality related to desires? *Phronesis* brings about an agreement of reason and desire that finds expression in good deliberation. Practical truth features this agreement between the intellectual faculty and the emotions. The point is subtle. If we do not have the right desires, reason cannot even start its analytical job. The major premise of a practical syllogism is composed of opinion and desire. A virtuous agent might desire to be generous, and this desire enhances his willingness to give. It may be noted that our virtuous agent has already been habituated in a social world that maintains norms which one learns in the process of becoming virtuous. The minor premise connects a particular situation to the major premise through induction. Now, in order to be sure about the required action to follow, one will have to search

for the middle term, and this is what is called deliberation in Aristotle's ethics.

It is a well-known fact that deliberate rational choice is required for responsible action in the realm of human affairs. For this state of affairs to take place, the moral agent needs to have experiences with a practically wise person in order to recognize what constitutes practical wisdom in the actual world. What is to be noted is that human action takes place in a contingent reality which is often unpredictable and entails changing circumstances. Looking at experience with an exemplar reveals the field of knowledge to which practical wisdom pertains. Becoming practically wise involves an analysis of the possibilities for human action and indicates the potential for human action at its best.

At this juncture Mueller makes three points: (a) It is important to explain that to know the realm of practical affairs is incapable of fixity. (b) Practical wisdom is a species of knowledge, is intellectual excellence. (c) The difference between potentiality and actuality are for the intellectual excellence. These points are relevant and related to the possibility of taking alternative perspectives regarding action. A point about the metaphysics of action should be in order. Now, given the binary of potentiality and actuality by Aristotle in *Metaphysics*, Mueller remarks that a person is actualized in action. Action is distinct in that there is the perpetual possibility of further actualization. Prior to the actualization the agent does not act, and the place of thinking is diminished in *praxis*. This paradox shows how thinking is related to action. The fully virtuous person acts well by her own initiative based on her understanding of the relevant features of the situation based on her desires as an acting agent. The problem then is: how does one know how to act well and what kind of thinking informs that knowledge?

Thinking and acting are two modes of being. Again, there is also the difference between the actor and the spectator. The actor in action discloses herself to the world, that is to others. Speech and action are the modes in which human beings appear to each other as men. When someone acts, the agent is disclosed to others along with the act itself. This disclosure requires the presence of others to witness the act. Further, a person is revealed by speech as well. In other words, without speaking, the distinctly human feature of action would be inconspicuous. As agents, we are capable of discussing our intentions, motivations, emotions, reasons, beliefs, and so forth. Aristotle invokes the distinction between animals and humans who use *logos*, that is speech. Now *logos* is the rational

element, the rational part of man and that differentiates man's practical activity from the animals.

Mueller draws our attention to the aspect of the spectator of acts. The actor and the spectator are interrelated in a shared public world. Aristotle instructs us to be spectators for the sake of witnessing the actor and, thus, form an image of the truth concerning practical wisdom. The practically wise person appears to others who witness and understand the meaning of the acts. The actor cannot exemplify virtue without the spectators who comprehend the meaning of the spectacle as it upholds. The spectators are those who witness the actions of the actors. They, like the actors, are also bound by the human condition of plurality, because their mode of being is dependent upon the presence of others and the in-between constituted by the web of human relationships. The spectator witnesses the appearance of the actors. They have a different perspective because of their role as witness.

Again, as the spectator is not acting, her being is marked by certain withdrawal from the appearing world. Theorists have interpreted the situation in the light of Plato's idea that the life of pure contemplation is the best conceivable life. Mueller disagrees with such an interpretation of Aristotle's position. Practical wisdom is different from philosophical wisdom. For Aristotle, the best life for human beings is a life that consists in both action and contemplation. The specific human reality is that we are at times actors and at other times spectators. This implies two things: first, the spectator may comprehend the meaning of the spectacle of the actor in action, but she abandons the potential implicit in participation in action. Thinking and acting are two modes of being, yet in the world, the two coincide.

In the fourth chapter, Mueller turns her attention to Kant's idea of judgment in the context of the role of thought in moral action. She quotes Kant's *Critique of Judgment* to the effect that understanding in general is the faculty of rules, while judgment is the faculty of subsuming under rules. The faculty of understanding is the faculty of principles of cognition because the understanding, consisting of categories and concepts of thought, orders a manifold of experience. This is how one comes to knowledge of the appearances of experience that are perceived. The faculty of judgment is an independent faculty of the mind which subsumes under rules. The power of judgment takes two forms. When the universal or the rule or principle, the law, is given the power of judgment subsumes the particular under it, and we get a

determinant judgment. But when only the particular is given for which the universal is to be found, the power of judging is merely reflecting. In this case what we get is a reflective judgment. Let us take two judgments, “this is a rose”, and “this is beautiful”. The former is a determinant judgment, while the latter is an aesthetic judgment of reflection. “Beautiful” is not a concept, there is no rule governing it. Something as beautiful is not judged to be so because the perception of it can be subsumed under a category of thought. Understanding demands of the imagination to offer a representation that can be subsumed, but the imagination can provide no such representation. Instead the imagination represents the object without a concept and offers the representation to reflection. In the relationship between understanding and imagination, Kant suggests that there is free play, a harmonious play of the faculties. As such, the aesthetic judgment refers to a feeling in the subject when judging, and not to anything conceptually indicative of the object being judged. And yet Kant argues that a judgment of the beautiful is universal, because the individual has no private interest in the object, and still judges. How does it happen? Kant’s answer is: through *sensus communis* or community sense. Judgments are communicable, and in judging one expects or thinks that others will agree with the assessment.

What about moral judgments? In that case Kant is concerned with the primacy of the categorical imperative as the universal rule from which all action must be deduced. At this point Mueller parts ways with Kant. She argues that there can be no general rules for conduct, since each encounter with experience is distinct in its very particularity. For Kant, when rules are established, rules for cognition as supplied by the understanding, or rules of morality as established by the moral law, one approves of the particular when it is consistent with the universal. But if there is no rule supplied for cognition or for practical reason, judgment requires a standard by which to judge. In judgments of beauty the standard is tested by its capacity for publicity and the delight in the beautiful on the part of the judging subject. This is what he calls community sense, guaranteeing inter-subjectivity. Kant believed the most representational position was the universal standpoint. Mueller implies that one depends on one’s community and interactions with others in order to be capable of forming examples which serve as the basis of judgments in moral matters. The judgments of morality are influenced by examples, fictional and real, that we choose to keep company within our thinking. And it may be noted that

communicability is established based on the thinking of the subject. Both communicability and community sense are conditions for reflective judgment. These two aspects of judging are the necessary conditions for the validity of a reflective judgment. Mueller doubts the Kantian requirement of impartiality as viable. She contends that actual impartiality is never possible precisely because a judging subject is always a particular subject. When judging, a subject can and should take the alternative standpoints of others into account and this entails representing the situation to the mind from particular perspectives, not an abstract impartial perspective. Further, communicability of reflective judgment involves the willingness to communicate one's thoughts to others and subjecting them to the test of publicity.

To sum up, Mueller's achievement lies in demonstrating her position in contrary to thoughtlessness in ethics. It is possible for one's thinking to influence one's actions on future occasions. One can judge one's own actions in retrospect by considering whether or not one's actions make sense from the variety of perspectives available in thought. Just as I can judge another to be exemplary by witnessing their compassion or courage, etc., in particular experiences, and internal to this judgment is the expectation of agreement of others regarding this judgment. I, likewise, can judge my own actions in retrospect by testing my actions in retrospect, one seeks agreement with oneself, with the internal interlocutor who is available when one is thinking.

Mueller's invoking of Kant's notion of reflective judgment is important as an insight. The model of reflective judgment works from the points of view of both the actor and the spectator. The judgment is informed by the variety of alternative perspectives available in one's mind. The same spectator would be an actor in the future. The reflective judgment of the actor reverses the order of the practical syllogism by beginning with particulars and judging an endorsable image of exemplarity which will serve as the appropriate end in this situation. A good ethical theory provides conscientious agents guidance as well as a way of assessing whether the action is worthy of praise.