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Moral tragedy

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ABSTRACT

In this paper it is argued, contrary to certain moralists, that resolutely good people can be assured of a contentment of the soul.

KEYWORDS

Aristotle; Raimond Gaita; Alasdair MacIntyre; moral conflict

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INTRODUCTION

In *Nichomachean Ethics* Aristotle maintains that: "to fear some things is right and noble, and it is base not to fear them — *e.g.*, disgrace; he who fears this is good and modest, and he who does not is shameless"; and that "poverty and disease we perhaps ought not to fear, nor in general the things that do not proceed from vice and are not due to a man himself" (Aristotle, 1952a: I, 6; emphasis added). His point is that what is fearful — or, at least, what we should be most afraid of — is wickedness. Yet, this is avoidable. So, if we are resolved to be good, we do not have to live in fear of this. Hence, although "the happiness and well-being which all men manifestly desire, some have the power of attaining, but to others, from some accident or defect of nature, the attainment of them is not granted", he claims in *Politics* (Aristotle, 1952b: VII, 13); even then "nobility shines through, when a man bears with resignation many great misfortunes, not through insensibility to pain but through nobility and greatness of soul" (Aristotle, 1952a: I, 10). Therefore, despite the fact that "those who say that the victim on the rack or the man who falls into great misfortunes is happy if he is good are, whether they mean it or not, talking nonsense" (Aristotle, 1952a: VII, 13) for Aristotle such a person is not unhappy either, unless their soul is rent by faction (Aristotle, 1952a: IX, 4). Yet, it is sometimes argued that there are tragic situations where even good people cannot but suffer morally. They are, then, doomed to be morally fearful, and can only hope to be morally lucky enough not to become involved in such events. The aim of this paper is show that this depressing thesis is unwarranted.

CONFLICTS OF DUTY?

In reference to the hanging of Billy Budd, Peter Winch says that although Captain Vere considered it right for him to do so, he considers it to be wrong; and they both could be right: "I am holding that if A says «X is the right thing for me to do» and if B, in a situation not relevantly different, says «X is the wrong thing for me to do», it can be that both are correct" (Winch, 1972: 164–165). Raimond Gaita agrees: "there is no difference in their descriptions of the character of that innocence and of its importance to their judgements, no difference, that is, which explains why Vere acted one way and Winch thought it impossible for him to act that way" (Gaita, 1991: 110). He contends that moral deliberation is "irreducibly personal [...] [so] this should no longer be surprising or puzzling, or a sign of irrationalism" (Gaita, 1991: 110). Yet, reasonable agent A who cannot agree with reasonable agent B, will necessarily be morally fraught if he must actively oppose him; as he knows that he is in conflict with somebody whose cause is — for his adversary — actually right. But, this is absurd. Moral

deliberation involves the weighing up harms and benefits attached to cases, and these are publically accessible. What needs to be decided, then, is whether or not upholding the rules of the sea requires the hanging. Vere is quite convinced that they do; so, he can be consoled in the fact that Billy is in the wrong, despite his moral innocence. If he is correct, Winch's finding it impossible for him to give the execution order, is simply a matter of weakness.

CONFLICTS OF VALUE?

Nevertheless, Alasdair MacIntyre maintains that there can be

> rival allegiances to incompatible goods [...]. It seems that there can be rival conceptions of the virtues, rival accounts of what a virtue is [...]. Could one virtue be temporarily at least at war with another? [...]. Can the exercise of the virtue of doing what is required of a sister (Antigone) [...] be at odds with [...] justice (Creon)? [O]ur situation is tragic in that we have to recognize the authority of both claims (MacIntyre, 1990: 142–143).

His contention is that it is wrong to think "the tragic form of narrative is enacted when and only when we have a hero with a flaw, a flaw in practical intelligence which springs from inadequate possession or exercise of some virtue" (MacIntyre, 1990: 163). This is because there is a multiplicity of human practices — such as raising a family and forging a career — which can create for us irresolvable moral conflicts. Hence, "there may be tensions between the claims of family life and those of the arts — the problem that Gauguin solved or failed to solve by fleeing to Polynesia" (MacIntyre, 1990: 210). The point is that even if he is not a bad man, whatever Gauguin does he is in a fix, because for the tragic protagonist, "ought" does not imply "can" (MacIntyre, 1990: 224). Yet, this does not make sense. That someone should do something can only mean that he should do it if he can. But, as noted by Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*, when discussing people wanting to enter the religious life, "husbands could not desert their wives without injustice. Therefore when he [Jesus] met Peter, who was married, he did not separate him from his wife, although he kept John from marriage when he wished to wed" (Aquinas, 2006: 2a, 2ae., 186, 4; emphasis added). So, since "doing injustice is the greatest of evils", states the author of *Gorgias* (Plato, 1960, 469b; emphasis added), if Gauguin should go to Polynesia, this can only be on the basis of first taking care of his family. Consequently, either Polyneices body belongs to Antigone to bury; or it belongs to Creon to let rot; or it belongs equally to both of them, so either course of action is valid.

BLAMELESS WRONGDOING?

However, some moralists think that there can be "acts of dirty hands — acts that are justified, even obligatory, but none the less wrong and shameful" (Stocker, 1992: 9; emphasis added). Hence, Gaita:

> in what follows, one of the ten who might be saved by the shooting of an innocent person calls that shooting evil. I do not think it follows that he must say [...] that therefore it must not or ought not be done. Do I intend his speech as an argument that the killing would be evil? Only in this manner and to this degree: it is meant to foreclose one way of talking about the killing and its relation to the ten, to the effect that though, of course, it is terrible it is "the right thing to do", and so not evil. If he kills one to save ten, even because he believes that "he must", that "he must" does not mean that he should not plead for the forgiveness, not only of the one he kills and those related to him, but of those he "saves" as well (Gaita, 1991: 69).

Gaita believes that "people can do evil yet not be blameable for it [...]. [But:] It would be wrong to infer that they are not morally responsible for what they did, meaning, that they should not feel remorse for what they did" (Gaita, 1991: 43–44). If this is correct, then of course the culpability factor is unnecessary for a moral tragedy; but is it? Remorse is defined as "bitter repentance for [a] wrong committed" (Fowler & Fowler, 1974: 1050), and people are blameable for committing wrongs. He says that:

> there are many who would say that if he [Oedipus] acted in non-culpable ignorance, then remorse is rationally inappropriate. But if we ask why that should be so, I know of no answer which does not, in the end, beg the question about the connection between responsibility and blame (Gaita, 1991: 345).

Yet, there is no question-begging here: remorse comes from wrong-doing, and doing wrong accrues blame. Therefore wrong-doers are right to feel bad about the harm they have done, and they are right to apologise and ask for forgiveness, since what happened was their own fault. The point is that either what is proposed is evil and should not be done; or circumstantially it is not, and so it can be done. For, to think that there could be a duty to do the wrong thing is a contradiction in terms.

Stocker makes the extraordinary claim that Aristotle himself accepts the morality of "dirty-hands"; because he says that "if a tyrant were to order one to do something base, having one's parents and children in his power, and if one did the action they were to be saved, but otherwise would be put to death" (Aristotle, 1952a: III, 1), a wrong can rightfully be committed. Yet, Aristotle repudiates baseness. Using matricide as an example, he says that there are "some acts, perhaps, we cannot be forced to do, but ought rather to face death after

the most fearful sufferings [...] for what we are forced to do is base" (Aristotle, 1952a: III, 1). Moreover, he also says that

> not every action nor passion admits a mean; for some have names that already imply badness, *e.g.*, spite, shamelessness, envy, and in the case of actions adultery, theft, murder [...]. It is not possible, then, ever to be right with regard to them: one must always be wrong (Aristotle, 1952a: II, 6).

The only time, then, that doing something apparently wrong — such as throwing goods overboard (Aristotle, 1952a: III, 1) — is justified, is when the baseness of the action is annulled by the weight of the circumstances. For, "on condition of securing the safety of himself and his crew any sensible man does so" (Aristotle, 1952a: III, 1).

CONCLUSION

Aristotle maintains that despite the vicissitudes of life, resolutely good people can at least be assured of peace of soul, and to this extent they are not unhappy. Hence, in reference to some very brave men who opposed the Nazis, Philippa Foot remarks:

> one may think that there was a sense in which [...] [they] did, but also a sense in which they did not, sacrifice their happiness in refusing to go along with the Nazis. In the abstract what they so longed for — to get back to their families — was of course wholly good. But as they were placed it was impossible to pursue this end by just and honourable means. And this, I suggest, explains the sense in which they did not see as their happiness what they could have got by giving in. Happiness in life, they might have said, was not something possible for them" (Foot, 2001: 95).

That this idea — that in a vital sense a good person cannot be harmed — is wrong would be tragic. This paper has sought to reassure us that it is not.

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