Critical Thinking in Morality

When it comes to evaluating the virtue or lack of virtue of others, we are readily critical. Yet, what "critical" means is by no means so obvious. Our judgment of others can only be limited to how they appear to us. Nonetheless, each of us is all too aware of the difference between our external appearance and our inner selves. This difference is not only what ensures that each of us is a unique and unrepeatable individual in the cosmos but also what cautions us against all too readily judging the virtue or lack of virtue of others.

The term "critical" has multiple meanings. Acknowledgment of the difference between our external appearance and inner selves reminds us that the way things *appear to be* may not be the way things *really are*. In a discussion of the term "critical" in morality, it can mean, then, both the drawing of "dismissive" or "applauding" the virtues of others as well as the attempt to distinguish between the "obvious" and the "concealed" of appearances and the inner self. Given its ambiguities, then, a more thorough investigation of this metaphor would be valuable because an all too quick judgment based upon *obvious* appearances entirely misses the imperceptible conditions that make the appearances manifest and capable of being judged in the first place.

When we judge the moral character of another or are judged by ourselves, our judgment is unknowingly driven, for the most part, by an understanding of moral character that Aristotle called moral virtue and is known as virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is concerned with all of those *external* things in life of which one can have more or less. It is generally agreed that when one does such things in excess or deficiency, one is acting destructively (i.e., non-virtuously). The palette of such external things has a broad range that includes possessions, food, sex, work, physical training, etc. The general assumption is that too much or too little of such things has negative consequences both for the individual and her/his social context. As a consequence, moral virtue with respect to this palette of external things consists in the individual's developing habits (*ethos* in the Greek) with respect to them. A virtuous habit tries to establish for the individual what the "mean" of excellence is between excess and deficiency where "mean" is no simple mathematical calculation of a middle point that applies to everyone but a measure of

balanced excellence for the individual. We can take food as our example: Because of differences in metabolism, there is no universal standard of excellence with respect to food consumption. Each individual must learn for her-/himself what constitutes an excellent diet.

The Greek work *ethos* that is translated "habit" also means "character." The ethos or character of an individual or a social group is manifest by its habits. When we are critical of the moral character of someone, we are juding what we take to be their inadequacies (or success) at establishing a "mean" of excellence with respect to some kind of external consumption. The judgment, of course, is not grounded in one's actual perception of the moral effort of the individual but on the empirical evidence or wanting of evidence of moral effort. One's judgment of the other silently presumes not only the empirical situation of consumption but also the individual's capability to control her-/himself in that situation of excess and deficiency.

The assumption of capability is not trivial. At its core involves the acknowledgement that such moral virtues are *acquired* by habitual behavior and are not entirely determined in advance *by nature*. In other words, it is not the limitations of one's *natural environment* or of one's *natural instincts* that determine one's moral character. Virtue ethics is grounded in Aristotle's notion of *techné*, that is, humanity's ability to initiate a sequence of events that nature cannot accomplish on its own. Our *capability* to act habitually with respect to an excellent "mean" of excess or deficiency is possible in the first place, then, because of a *capacity* that in degree is found in no other species. *If the individual doesn't exercise the capacity to develop the habitual capability of acting according to excellence, then their intemperance is manifest in their character*.

Our critical judgment of the virtue or lack of virtue in the other is exposed to involve far more than an empirical judgment of moral character. As quickly as we are to judge the moral character of the other, we are quick to overlook the imperceptible capacities and capabilities that we take for granted in each individual. An appropriate judgment of the moral character of the other (or of ourselves) requires the critical assessment of these *non-natural* aspects of the self's capacities and capabilities that are beyond empirical assessment.

However, virtue is not limited to the moral virtues of Aristotelian virtue ethics. In fact, virtue can lead the individual to trump moral habits by means of a higher moral standard that merely discerning a "mean" of excellence between excess and deficiency. For example, if the individual's moral habit of material consumption involves the destruction in the long-run of the very material conditions of existence, then a higher moral principle of prudence can result in one's re-evaluating of one's moral virtue in favor of what Aristotle called "intellectual virtue."

"Intellectual virtues" are rules of "reason" that command us to do or refrain from doing things with our creative capacity to cause things to happen that nature cannot accomplish on its

own. Note carefully, though: These "commands" come from a human *capacity* that is imperceptible to the senses. They are not commands that come from the social world in the forms of normative rules of behavior, and they are not commands that come from the technical and pragmatic necessities of our situation. Intellectual virtues don't give us the necessary sequence for constructing a house, and they don't give us the professional qualifications that we must acquire to practice a particular profession. What makes these necessary rules *hypothetical* is that they are driven by an "if" that comes from one's situation or circumstance. "If" I want to build a house ..; "if" I want to practice a particular profession …, either the physical laws of nature or the external rules of the profession place commanding restrictions upon me. However, intellectual virtues rise far higher than all of these, what we can call, *hypothetical* rules that external authority or physical natures command us to obey. Intellectual virtues come exclusively from the individual, and they exist *only because an individual is capable of causing things to happen that nature (or one's situation) cannot accomplish otherwise on its own.* In other words, intellectual virtues are present only where there is an efficient causality that is not entirely governed by its situation and circumstance. This efficient causality is *categorical* because it can be exercised only by an individual and is not subject to *hypothetical* circumstances.

The *categorical*, efficient causality of autonomous freedom's ability to initiate events that nature cannot accomplish on its own has its own rules or else we would not be able to talk about a causality. The events happen in nocturnal dreams may be the result of physical or emotional states of the individual, but the events themselves have no coherent, causal order. There may be physical laws that make it possible for one to dream, but the causal incoherence of the dream eliminates any degree of personal responsibility for the events. There is no "intellectual" or "moral" virtue in dreams precisely because there is no causal order to the events of the dream.

The waking state is dramatically different from our nocturnal dreams. Here there are two forms of efficient causality that must be complementary or else our categorical causality would only result in disaster. Nonetheless, the laws that govern these two forms of efficient causality are not the same. Nature's physical laws are imposed upon all events whereas autonomous freedom's intellectual virtues must be self-imposed or else there would be no such thing as autonomous freedom – it would be determined by physical laws like any other natural event.

For us to experience in the world thee way that we do, we must conform to both *hypothetical* and *categorical* necessities with moral virtues (virtue ethics) occupying a medial, connecting position between *external*, hypothetical necessities and *internal* discernment of a moral standard of excellence with respect to those things of which we can have excess or deficiency in our natural circumstance. These moral virtues must be acquired by concrete experience of the physical circumstances that demand their discernment. *Categorical* or intellectual virtues are not derived from concrete experience, or else they would be determining of one's actions. They are not acquired by habits but learned by the power of "reason."

Once again, our notion of "critical" thinking has extended beyond the mere evaluation of empirical evidence. Causes are imperceptible. We only experience their effects in the senses. This is why we are able to give different causal explanations to phenomena. The assumption of the natural sciences is that there is a universal causal order of physical laws that apply to all times and to all places, but those laws do not come with the phenomena they govern. A human (or rational) being must be capable of discerning them without sight. Because they are imperceptible, they are incapable of absolute proof or disproof. Their validity is enhanced the more that the phenomena that they govern can be subject to the strict parameters of repeatability and comparison to a control group and the system of physical laws constitutes an internally coherent system. Nonetheless, there is no guarantee that the current grasp of physical laws is incapable of revision in the future, and, if the past is any indicator, those revisions can be revolutionary as Thomas Kuhn reminds us in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

Our "critical" thinking has taken us to a different level of reflection, though, than mere discernment of the lawful orders that govern *hypothetical* and *categorical* necessity. We have invoked the notion of "reason" to speak of how intellectual virtues that constitute the lawful order of autonomous freedom are able to be learned by the power of "reason," not acquired by habitual behavior. Because we are concerned with the imperceptible, causal order of *categorical necessity*, it is clear that we are not talking about *instrumental reason* that calculates, predicts, manipulates, and controls external phenomena. Instrumental reason is hypothetical. The reason of intellectual virtues is categorical.

We are all familiar with the products of instrumental reason, and too frequently we reduce rationality to instrumental reason because it is empirically measurable. The popular buzz word today is "outcomes based assessment." Yet "critical" thinking beyond the empirical that seeks to identify the imperceptible conditions of possibility for any and all experience of empirical phenomena exposes a different form of rationality. Succinctly, it is the rationality of *order*. Given the distinction between the hypothetical and the categorical, we can identify two rational orders: 1) of the physical law that governs physical events mechanically and 2) of the moral law that can (but does not have to) govern autonomous freedom's intentionality. Critical thinking requires us to assume both of these rational orders if we are to understand our experience of phenomena. Neither rational order is capable of absolute proof or disproof, but both are necessary if we are to be the individual and the species that we are.

We do not obtain understanding of either rational order naturally. We don't see the rational order of the physical world simply by opening our eyes, and we don't encounter the rational order of autonomous freedom simply by closing our eyes. No one can acquire a grasp of either order for someone else. *Every individual must grasp the rational orders of experience for her-/himself, and every individual does to the level of her/his capabilities.*

When it comes to virtues, then, there is much to be accomplished by the individual. S/he must acquire non-*natural* habits of moral virtue for her-/himself, and s/he must learn the non-*natural* laws of intellectual virtue. Moral virtues are malleable; intellectual virtues are absolute. Moral virtues require concrete experience; intellectual virtues can be taught by means of reason. In both cases, the validity of the moral or the intellectual virtue can only come from the individual who acts according to them. However, even more precariously, in both cases the reality of moral and intellectual virtues must be assumed because neither is capable of absolute proof or disproof any more than the physical laws of nature are capable of absolute proof or disproof.

Our engagement of "critical" thought about morality has brought us to a whole new dimension of experience than where we began with our readiness to judge the moral character of the other based on appearances. We have moved from un-critical certainty to critical precariousness. However, we are not left with relativity. Intellectual virtues are universal, and, whereas moral virtues are clearly relative to the individual, the expectation that the "mean" between excess and deficiency be "excellent" means that even here intellectual virtue lurks in the background of relative, moral virtues. It is this universal and absolute aspect of intellectual virtues that allows them to trump not only moral virtues but also the civic law and social rules.

Critical thought in morality leads us beyond censure and approbation of the moral character of others to focus on the imperceptible and precarious nature of humanity's (or any and all rational being's) capacity for virtue and moral capabilities. Given that we can neither understand nature, nor acquire moral virtues, nor grasp intellectual virtues for one another, our critical conclusions with respect to the status of the virtue of the other would be more effective were we to stop our finger wagging and/or applauding one another on the basis of mere appearances to quietly remind one another of the capacities and capabilities that make it possible for us to strive for virtue. This would be a form of critical thinking that encouraged moral effort rather than simplistically condemned or applauded moral appearances. Success in a precarious situation depends upon the efforts of all, and those efforts are best motivated not by sticks and stones or mere applause but by a reminder of the extra-*ordinary* status that humanity possesses in the order of things because of our autonomous freedom and categorical necessities. We are moral beings not because we must be but because we can be.