How Pondering About Good Boys Leads to the Acceptance of Virtue Theory and Consequent

Rejection of Individualism

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I have uttered "Who is a good boy?" countless times but never pondered its real meaning. The saying is societal, seemingly universal among pet owners and animal enthusiasts alike. However, no official consensus has been reached as to what a "good boy" is, or whether or not the normative term "good" can be attributed to an animal; yet the universal use of the phrase seems to suggest that that it is acceptable. But why? Good is usually reserved as a functional term, connoting whether the recipient of the attribute is performing its function correctly. However, in a society that places emphasis on reason and logic, the Aristotelian tradition of applying telos to the natural world has largely been rejected. If this rejection of virtue theory is the case, and the Enlightenment Project conception of "good" is true, then the question becomes: What does it mean, using reason and logic, for an animal to be considered "good?"

To start, if we accept Kant's deontological ethical theory, then a conception of the animal's duty, governed by logic, would have to be developed. If Mill's utilitarianism is accepted, then the animal's actions would then have to be judged based on their utility, or happiness, they bring into the world. But neither of these moral philosophies, nor any other moral philosophy based in reason, makes much sense when attempting to determine normative terms like "good" when in reference to animals and the natural world that seemingly do not use reason.

Some may argue that yes, of course attributing normative and ethical terms to natural things seemingly not ruled by reason is counterintuitive. However, if we cannot attribute these normative terms to animals, then why do humans seem to universally do so? This conundrum highlights an error in attributing reason to normative and ethical thinking. However, this does not mean that attributing normative terms to natural things like animals, and further extrapolating to

humans, is wrong. In fact, I would argue that it is actually natural, and exposes a hidden truth about morality: virtue theory is the prevailing moral philosophy.

By rejecting the efforts of the Enlightenment Project and accepting an Aristotelian-inspired virtue theory, the possibility for "good boys" is left open, and only their function is left to be determined. This acceptance of virtue theory, which for the essence of this reflection is primarily MacIntyrean, brings about legitimate concerns for me and radically shifts my perspective on ethics. The aspects of MacIntyrean virtue theory that have affected me the most are its critiques of individualism and importance on community. These features have issued a paradigm shift in regard to my understanding of politics, leaving me searching for an answer within a society centrally focused on the individual.

As someone who identifies as a traditional Rawlsian welfare liberal, the concept of individualism is central to Thomas Rawls' political theory. Rawls argues that "the principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance," where laws should be created based off of an ignorance of the *individual's* placement in society (Rawls 11). These laws are then those that should be universally adopted, given their objective nature, which is reminiscent of Kant's categorical imperative. Without diving incredibly deep into Rawls' political philosophy, the crux of Rawls' argument revolves around establishing a social order that provides the best outcome for the worst-off *individual*, no matter the discrepancy of wealth.

Before reading MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, Rawls' political philosophy seemed the most attractive to me given my conceived nature of fairness, especially when contrasted with Robert Nozick's libertarian political theory; Rawls' conception of liberty appealed to me more than Nozick's. However, MacIntyre challneges both theories' reliance on individualism and their irreconcilable moral disagreement over the conceptions of liberty and justice. MacIntyre argues

that this moral disagreement, which is the result of the Enlightenment Project's fragmentation of morality, leads to a lost "shared conception of the community's good" (MacIntyre 232). This discrepancy conflicts directly with "what education in the virtues teaches," which is that "[one's] good as a [person] is one and the same as the good of those others with whom [one is] bound up in human community" (MacIntyre 229). The fragmentation leads to a wrongful prioritization of the individual over the community.

The Enlightenment Project's fragmentation of morality has led to the "moral resources of the culture allow[ing] for no way of settling the issue[s]…rationally" (MacIntyre 252). Without the ability to rationally justify moral arguments, an emotivist culture was born, leading to a consistent talking past each other seen in these two rivaling philosophies. Both Rawls' and Nozick's political philosophies base their laws on what they consider is just, but it is impossible to have two radically different conceptions of justice. MacIntyre claims that this is evidence of morality's fragmentation.

These critiques have led me to reject both ideologies as unacceptable. The prioritization of what is good for the individual, instead of what is good for the community, has led to political and moral stalemate. Previously when in political discussion with someone arguing from a Nozickian approach, I oftentimes found myself ending the discussion with "We both want the same thing, the betterment of our country, but differ on how to get there." However, it has become abundantly clear as to why this stalemate occurred: our conceptions of justice and morality were incongruent. that this statement was false. However, an even more radical realization occurred to me: what I originally thought was an argument over what was good for our community was actually an argument over what was good for the individual. A false sense of

care, and thus conception of the morality, of community has masked our true focus on the

individual.

In order to remedy these moral discrepancies, an acceptance of the virtues and a moral

consensus prioritizing the community is needed. It is saddening to say that our country is

seemingly in more agreement over who is and who is not a good boy than what is best for our

communities. But why is that? It is clear that the issue we agree on is rooted in the adoption of

the virtues, while our disagreement is rooted in an adoption of Enlightenment Project moral

philosophies. Without this same adoption, how can we progress forward using policy that

focuses on radically different conceptions of morality?

Works Cited

MacIntyre, Alasdair C. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Bloomsbury, 2014.

Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard University Press, 1999.