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PH201 Philosophical Ethics  
Paper 4: Virtue Ethics

There are many who realize the insufficiency of most of the ethical systems proposed in the modern world. One of the systems that they propose as an alternative is virtue based ethics as originally defined by Aristotle. The views of abortion that are often considered moderate views, as opposed to the “radical” view from Natural Law, could be seen to be applications of Aristotle’s system. In these views, abortion is not desirable, but there are circumstances in which it would be a better or at least acceptable. Most often, the instances of rape and incest are used as examples, and this argument will consider the same. This argument will examine how this conclusion is drawn and how it leans on Aristotle’s methodology to accept a clear evil as morally possible.

Aristotle began by defining The Good as that which all things desire. He went on to identify the supreme good, in the case of humans, as happiness. It is notable that, on this point, his view seems compatible with the natural law position. Using what is called the “function argument,” Aristotle went on to identify that the highest faculty possessed by humans, and, therefore, the faculty that humans are most called to perfect is reason. From there, Aristotle identifies man’s supreme good as “a rational activity of the soul in accord with virtue.” At this point, Aristotle looks at the soul and identifies that there are two parts of the soul in which virtue and ethics can be applied: the sensitive and rational soul; the lowest part of the soul, the vegetative, is incapable of answering to reason, so it is excluded from discussions of ethics.

Moral virtue is found in the sensitive soul at the point at which it obeys reason, and it is defined as “a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e., the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason, and by that reason by which a man of practical reason would determine it.”<sup>1</sup> Intellectual virtue is that which is found in the rational soul, and here Aristotle makes a distinction between the calculative faculty, which know variable truths, and the scientific faculty, which knows universal truths. He places the realm of ethics in the calculative faculty. This fact is one of the insurmountable errors in Aristotle’s premises. Because he places ethics in this area, he does not allow for the idea of any universal truths or intrinsic evils; Aristotle’s ethics is here doomed to reflect a certain relativistic risk.

In the example of this discussion, a woman who has become pregnant through rape or incest avoids the first truth of the discussion that abortion is, of itself, an evil act. Instead, it is measured using Aristotle’s rules that require the law or moral application to be tested between excess and defect and applied relative to the person in question. This would seem to be the logic that is being used when, instead of starting from the point that abortion is an inherent moral evil, it is applied as something that is just generally bad, but has to be taken and judged on a case-by-case basis. Applying the basic tenets of Aristotle’s tests for moral virtue, it becomes apparently virtuous to attain an abortion in this circumstance. The key to this is the fact that all actions must be the mean between defect and excess. In the example here, the defect would be to disallow the act of abortion under any and all circumstances; excess would be to allow common and easy abortion for any and all

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2009), 31.

reasons. It would seem that the mean is to discourage the act, but to allow it in exceptional cases. This is the approach deemed moderate and reasonable by many contemporary politicians who are attempting to avoid being labeled as too radical in either direction.

In the end, while there is significant public debate on the issue of abortion, similar arguments could be made using Aristotle's system for a plethora of other acts that are, to most people, understood to be morally repugnant under any circumstances. This relativistic underpinning of Aristotle's system prevents it from being applied as a universal and effective ethical system even though it comes closer than many of the systems that are more frequently offered in the modern world.

## Bibliography

Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2009.