

Topic 1

Reason and moral states – Why both of them are necessary for us to perform actions

1. Introduction

1.1 Asking ourselves about our actions

We often ask ourselves “What is it to act morally?”. Moreover, we reflect on our actions and on their role as causes of what we decide to do. By reflecting on their role, we may end up asking ourselves what motivates our choices and what is required in order for us to act correctly.

In this essay, I will start by exposing the topic and clarifying most of the key concepts to our understanding of his perspective and then I will use Philippa Foot’s account on practical rationality as a starting point to argue in favour of the importance of the intellect when it comes to performing different actions. After that, I will present a counterargument to which I will attempt to answer and. Then, I will present a deontic scheme and argue for the importance of our moral states as a necessary condition for our actions. To finish my essay, I will summarise its most important aspects and further clarify my thesis.

In his work *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that action (which can be defined as a conscious and voluntary act performed by a rational agent) is originated from choice (our decision to follow a certain course of action), which relies on desire and reasoning with a view to an end (seen as the *telos* or goal we have in mind when performing an action). According to him, choice cannot exist without reason (in this case he appears to be referring to practical reason, the type of reason that helps us determine what we should do and which actions we should perform) and intellect (that I would define as what enables us to reflect about different questions and issues and what ultimately distinguishes us from irrational beings) or without a moral state (how we are, morally speaking, and what we believe is morally the best or right course of action to follow), since good action (a concept related to doing what is morally correct) and its opposite (to be clarified in the deontic scheme) both depend on a combination of intellect and character (who we are as individuals, our personality traits, beliefs and others) – This means that, from his perspective, in order for us to decide, we need a combination of our intellect and our character. Should we find ourselves in agreement with his claim?

2. Practical reason and intellect

2.1 Why we need our intellect to act

According to the British philosopher Philippa Foot, we are capable of questioning different courses of action and of deciding what to do. Furthermore, she points out that, when people suggest us to act differently, we are capable of asking why we should do so and see grounds for acting in different ways.

Practical rationality (the term Foot uses) – she thinks – is effective at evaluating ends and at guiding us towards our actions.

If we follow Philippa Foot's approach, it can be argued that, as rational agents, we possess indeed practical reason (Foot argues that practical reason can evaluate ends). Practical reason, I would suggest, is capable of evaluating ends or, if it is not capable of doing so, it still makes it possible for us to assess which course of action favours the end we seek (we would know, for example, that, if someone is in desperate need of medical treatment, the course of action that would favour the end of saving that person, would be, if we are not doctors, to decide to call an ambulance). Thus, practical reason influences our actions and is required for them, since actions are conscious and voluntary acts. If practical reason is what makes it possible for us to reflect on different courses of action, then we require it to be aware and conscious of what we are doing (something essential for an act to be considered as an action) leading us to reach the conclusion that practical reason is necessary for an action to be performed.

When analysing practical reason and intellect, we find that the latter encompasses the mental faculties which distinguish us from irrational beings. Considering that practical reason is one of our mental faculties which distinguish us from irrational beings, then it is a part of our intellect and, since we need practical reason to reflect before we perform an action, it is possible to assert that our actions require our intellect.

2.2 The writing on the wall: Challenging Aristotle's perspective

There would be several different ways to present an argument against us needing our intellect to perform an action. For instance, we could consider the following gedankenexperiment:

Imagine you live in a city which has a writing on a wall with a multitude of moral rules that are followed by the people. Although they never chose those rules, they blindly follow them and seem them as the force that guides them to perform their actions: If they follow moral rules blindly, it would mean that intellect would not have much work to do. We could even claim that intellect would be insipid in such a society, proving that our actions are not reliant on intellect.

Even though I believe this to be a powerful objection against Aristotle's thesis, I would argue that the scenario I previously described would not be incompatible with the need for intellect for us to perform an action. This belief is motivated by the idea that acting blindly would mean that we would not question the rules we abide by and that, even when we do not question those rules, our intellect is still working and influencing our actions – In situations similar to this one, it can be highlighted that blindly following something can be described as having that so deeply ingrained in ourselves that our intellect ends up being biased. But there is nuance we should explore: A deeply biased intellect (to be more specific, one as the intellect I formerly described in this paragraph) is not the same as the lack of it as a force that helps in motivating our actions. Furthermore, in a scenario like the city I described, I would argue that neither did the intellect disappear nor did it stop working. Instead, it was deeply biased and that bias is what made it apparently absent.

3. Acting according to who we want to be

3.1 A deontic scheme for our actions

When morally describing our actions, I believe it is important for me to present a deontic scheme made up of four categories in which human actions can be fitted: Immoral, amoral, obligatory and supererogatory, although there are different interpretations on the moral value of our actions and some controversy regarding, for instance, supererogation (whether supererogation exists, for instance).

The scheme, aimed at introducing how we may fit different actions, goes as follows:

Immoral	Amoral	Obligatory	Supererogatory
Refers to morally condemnable actions	Refers to morally irrelevant actions (for example, the flavour of ice cream I will choose to have for dessert)	Actions we are morally obligated to perform (if we do not perform them, we are acting immorally)	Actions that go beyond our duty and are often connected to moral sanctity (it is debated up to this day whether it is possible to go beyond one's duty, although I will not write much about that controversy)

When agents are confronted with other rational individuals' actions or when they are reflecting about their own actions, they guide themselves by their conceptions of good and evil and of how different actions ought to be morally judged (the 'moral schemes', similar or different from the one in the board, that orient them as rational agents).

Then, they formulate moral judgements, which consist of normative propositions regarding different situations. Since their moral judgements are influenced by their own moral states and beliefs (which are a part of our character and our personality) and moral judgements guide our actions in the sense that we act according to them, then we can conclude that our moral states are necessary for us to perform an action.

3.2 Do we act against our moral states?

When faced with my argument, one could object that there are circumstances in which we act against our moral judgements, meaning that we would follow a course of action we do not find morally acceptable. If that happens, then my argument is unsound, as I claimed that we acted according to our moral judgements. This raises an intriguing question – When an agent performs an action that they deem morally wrong, are they acting against moral judgement?

If confronted with this question, many would answer that, if we perform a morally condemnable action, we are contradicting our moral judgements.

In spite of the fact that I acknowledge and respect this perspective, it is my belief that, when agents follow a course of action they perceive as morally wrong, they are still being guided by a moral judgement. To be more specific, they are being guided by moral judgements according to which their own interests as more valuable and desirable ends than the others' good and interests – These moral judgements, even if not explicitly expressed or fully embraced, are present and contribute for agents contradicting what they see as their moral judgements (which, from my point of view, does not encompass all the moral judgements that should be fitted there). To sum up, they will tell themselves they believe their actions are condemnable, but, in the end, beliefs and moral judgements they do not consider as such suggest otherwise. Therefore, I consider that Aristotle's perspective survived this objection.

4. Conclusion

During the essay, I introduced the topic (Aristotle's thesis on human actions) and clarified key concepts when I considered it to be useful. Using Philippa Foot's account on our ability to evaluate ends and see grounds for acting as a starting point, I argued that we should, even without accepting that practical reason evaluates ends, consider it necessary to the process of performing an action. Then, I confronted my argument with a powerful objection and argued that our beliefs help us formulate moral judgements, which guide our actions. After that, I presented an objection according to which we can contradict our moral judgements and tried to answer it as best and convincingly as I could.

Having present answers to my objections, I find myself in agreement with Aristotle's account on reason, intellect and moral states as being necessary for our actions and choices. I justify my thesis by arguing that practical reason and intellect (as in our mental faculties that make us rational beings) let us (at least) evaluate which are the most efficient means for us to achieve our ends. Moreover, we formulate moral judgements and act according to them, even if the moral judgement is not recognised by the subject as so, especially when it pertains to self-preservation and valuing one's interests in detriment of another instead of what they would supposedly believe to be the right thing to do (from my perspective, as I explained, they do not actually believe but think they believe something).