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The Virtue of Reference

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Let us consider the question, what makes a good reference librarian? Can we best answer that question by developing an articulated standard of a good or bad reference librarian, perhaps a list of rules that are either followed or not, with the good reference librarian being the one who follows the most rules? Or perhaps we should evaluate reference librarians purely on results, on the consequences of their actions? Perhaps on the number of correctly answered ready reference questions? More importantly, when we think of what good reference librarians are like, and when we want to tell neophyte reference librarians what good reference is like, would we ever want to conceive of reference work by these standards? Following the rules will make you good. Answer all your questions correctly will make you good.

I think not. We best conceive of reference librarians if we follow an Aristotelian or “virtue ethics” model and think about what kind of person a reference librarian should be. What virtues do reference librarians require to be good reference librarians? Obviously there are many, and I could just list them, but I want to focus on the intellectual virtue I consider most valuable for reference librarians. Reference work is neither an art nor a science. Its motivating virtue is indeed an intellectual virtue, but the one most difficult to teach: what Aristotle called *phronesis*, which is usually translated as prudence or practical wisdom. Reference is a phronetic activity.

Aristotle on the Virtues

To develop my argument I must give some background on “virtue ethics” and in particular on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Ethical philosophers have paid an increasing amount of attention to Aristotle’s ethics over the past few decades as “virtue ethics” has become prominent along with deontological and consequentialist ethics. While deontological ethics judges ethical actions by a particular standard of rightness or wrongness it is our duty to obey (e.g., the Ten Commandments or Kant’s categorical imperative) and consequentialist ethics judges ethical actions by their consequences (e.g., utilitarianism’s “greatest happiness for the greatest number”), virtue ethics follows Aristotle in focusing not on rules of conduct but on the character of the moral actor. What sort of person acts ethically? How do we raise and educate such people? What virtues (or excellences) does a person require to be an ethical human being? Those are some of the sorts of questions virtue ethicists might ask (1).

Aristotle viewed the world from a teleological perspective. The *telos* is the end toward which things aim, and to evaluate an action teleologically is to evaluate it by considering its final goal. “Every art and every *inquiry*,” Aristotle says, “and similarly, every *action* and every intention is thought to aim at some good; hence men have expressed themselves well in declaring the good to be that at which all things aim” (1094a1) (2). Thus if we consider the

quality or worth of reference work we would consider the good toward which it aims. For the purpose of my argument here we do not have to consider the final goal of reference work in any detail. I will accept for the sake of argument that reference work has a final and worthwhile goal, and that this goal is possibly something like “helping patrons find the information they need” or “training people to do research” or related goals.

Regarding ethics, Aristotle argued that the end or *telos* of human being was *eudaimonia*, usually translated as “happiness,” but meaning more broadly well-being, or perhaps even the well-lived life. Humans reach this end by developing good characters and living virtuously, a virtue (*arête*) being an excellence of any kind. The same can be said of particular categories of human beings classified by activity. Any activity has its standard of excellence, and performing that activity well involves various virtues. Aristotle divides the virtues into ethical and intellectual. “An intellectual virtue originates and grows mostly by teaching, and in view of this requires experience and time, whereas an ethical virtue is acquired by habituation (*ethos*), as is indicated by the name “ethical,” which varies slightly from the name “ethos” (1103a14). Ethical virtues are acquired by habit, and we must act just or temperate before we can actually become just or temperate, and even before we know what constitutes justice or temperance. Only later, when we acquire knowledge, and more importantly prudence or *phronesis*, will we be able to use reason to decide just or temperate action.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes between intellectual and ethical virtues and specifies the intellectual ones. He posits five intellectual virtues: knowledge (*episteme*), art (*techne*), prudence (*phronesis*), intuition (*nous*), and wisdom (*sophos*). Knowledge is what we might consider science, an organized intellectual activity designed to discover the way things are. We *know* that which is necessary and does not change, such as the nature of the universe. “The object of knowledge exists of necessity. Further, it is thought that all *knowledge* can be taught and all objects of *knowledge* can be learned” (1139b23). Art is concerned with production, not action, and “practical dispositions with reason are distinct from productive dispositions with reason” (1140a5). Art brings things into existence rather than directing our actions, which is the job of *phronesis*. Intuition is the ability to grasp the first principles that guide thought and allow us to learn knowledge from demonstration. Wisdom is the combination of both knowledge and intuition, that is, of both the belief in necessary things and the understanding of the first principles of thought.

Since my argument focuses on *phronesis*, I would like to develop its definition more. (I will use prudence and *phronesis* interchangeably.) *Phronesis* is the virtue concerned with action. Unlike knowledge, its object is not necessary things. Like art, its object is contingent things, but it is concerned with action and not production. “For what is scientifically known is demonstrable, while art and prudence are about things which may or may not be” (1140b35). *Phronesis* is the virtue that allows us to deliberate about actions to decide practically what is the best action in a particular situation. It is the virtue that helps us work toward the good at which we aim. *Phronesis* is the virtue people have who can reason well about the means toward good ends. “A man's work is completed by prudence as well as by ethical virtue; for while virtue makes the end in view right, prudence makes the means towards it right” (1144a8). And it is not a virtue that follows a rule, but that is embodied in a person. As Aristotle puts it, “a prudent man is thought to be one who is able to deliberate well concerning what is good and expedient for himself, not with respect to a part, but the kinds of things which are good and expedient for living well [in general]” (1140a26). And this kind of reasoning is not about knowledge or science, but about the ordinary, messy, unclear world we usually inhabit. “Now no one deliberates about things which cannot vary, nor about those which he cannot himself do. Hence since scientific knowledge is acquired by means of demonstration, and since there can be no demonstration of things whose principles may vary”, prudence cannot be scientific knowledge or art” (1140a33). Thus, while *phronesis* is rational, it is not

scientific. Aristotle finally concludes that *phronesis* “is a disposition with true reason and ability for actions concerning what is good or bad for man” (1140b5).

Unlike knowledge, *phronesis* requires experience. A person cannot become a good deliberator by taking a class or reading a book. “A sign of what has been said is also the reason why young men become geometricians and mathematicians and wise in such [fields] but do not seem to become prudent. That reason is the fact that prudence is concerned with particulars, which become familiar from experience; but a young man is not experienced, for experience requires much time” (1142a12). *Phronesis*, though, is concerned with the “ultimate particular,” always with individual circumstances that may follow a pattern in general but always vary in the particulars.

How does this apply to reference librarianship? Why do I even bother with this explication of Aristotle? I bother because I believe it is important to have a proper theoretical understanding of what is involved in good reference work, and more importantly what makes a good reference librarian. I think this understanding is important for its own sake, but it has practical implications as well. In order to educate and train good reference librarians, we must understand what a good reference librarian is, and I argue that that we should consider what makes a good reference librarian under an ethical model, and that the Aristotelian or virtue ethics model makes more sense than either a deontological or consequentialist model.

Understanding Reference

Reference is not a science, since there is no one set way in which it can be done. Its principles cannot simply be demonstrated with a logical proof. It is more a rhetorical than a logical act and depends upon many contingencies. I argue that it is best understood as a phronetic activity, that is, an activity best done by librarians who have developed the intellectual virtue of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. Being a good reference librarian requires years of experience and is not the kind of skill that can be easily taught. Reference as a phronetic activity means that it requires practical experience and time to develop the skill needed to reach effectively the good end toward which reference work aims.

Reference is an ethical and rhetorical activity as well. It certainly requires ethical virtues to be a good reference librarian, and not just the intellectual virtue of *phronesis*. Generosity, magnanimity, good temper—these are all ethical virtues of a good reference librarian. And reference is a rhetorical activity as well. Rhetoric, according to Aristotle, is the ability to find the best available means of persuasion in any particular situation (*Rhetoric*, 1355b26). Rhetoric also depends upon long experience of people and knowledge of the particular. The good rhetorician adapts the presentation to the audience, just like good reference librarians modify their own presentations to various patrons.

But it is as a phronetic activity that I think reference work can be best understood. The good reference librarian must be able to deliberate about the best action in a given situation where the best action is not always clear or even demonstrable. This can be the case even when answering a specific ready reference question. Do I go to Google or the *Encyclopedia Britannica*? Should I go to the *World Almanac* or a specialized encyclopedia? What is the best tool for this reference question? For experienced reference librarians, these may seem like silly examples, but try to remember how you thought when you had not been doing reference for many years. I ask you to do that because most likely you have not actually stopped to think about how to answer a ready reference question in a long time. After years of reference work, for better or worse, librarians come to rely on certain tools more than others, or they have a feeling for the types of questions best handled by different kinds of sources. Only if they are stymied do experienced reference librarians have to actually *think* about what they are doing.

The same kind of approach applies to more difficult questions, and also to the type of reference I do most these days—individual research consultations. I work in a university library, and most of my substantive reference interaction is with students and takes place during a scheduled consultation. I know only some of what the students want and need prior to the meeting, and the ensuing consultation process is always something of a negotiation, sometimes on subjects with which I am not very familiar. But while I do some preparation, rarely do I have to spend much time thinking about what I am going to do or say, or how I am going to act. I just do it, because I have done it so many times before, and after so many years the consultations and research questions become variations on a theme. In fact, I am especially grateful when I work with someone doing something out of my usual area because I get to learn and think, and I cannot just rely upon my habits of reflection.

And what about working with patrons? When was the last time you had to consciously think about how to handle a particular patron? Oh, this is a troublemaker, what should I do? Here's that old professor who claims not to know how to use a computer? After a few years of work, these situations become routine for most reference librarians. Oh, another psycho, big deal. After a while, who thinks about how to handle the various categories of patrons? Probably very few of us, because we have learned through sometimes painful experience how to handle various types of patrons, how to ask the right questions, how to direct the patrons to the appropriate help, and how to do it efficiently and leave them happy. We might say it becomes second nature, but the second nature is the result of our development of *phronesis*.

Consider also the reference interview. While it seems commonsensical to most of us, the fact that people have trouble with it shows how difficult it can really be to bridge the gaps between what patrons asks for, what they really want, and what we can give them. How do we know which questions to ask and at what time? How do we know when to keep pursuing the question and when to stop because we think we have reached consensus with the patron? If reference is a phronetic activity, we do not necessarily know how we know. We just know, because of our development of *phronesis*.

Many reference librarians, especially in academia, also deliver a lot of library instruction, often to a range of audiences. I see groups from freshmen to graduate students, and knowing what they need becomes again a matter of unconscious deliberation. Part of the adaptation is rhetorical, meaning I adapt my presentation to my audience. I make different assumptions about the knowledge and skills of freshmen and graduate students, and this affects both my style of presentation and its substance. This changing substance is the result of *phronesis* to the extent it is not carefully planned. Even when it is carefully planned, or when I try to do something new or experimental, the planning and experimentation always takes place within the experience I have built up and is guided by my practical reason as to what will work in this particular instance. Even if I have never performed a particular activity before, I have performed similar ones or others in front of a very similar audience.

Reference Education

Understanding the nature of reference work is inherently worthwhile for reference librarians, but this understanding also has implications for reference education and training. If reference is a phronetic activity, then any pretension that it can be taught or demonstrated is misguided. Certainly library schools have classes in "reference." My library school offered classes in general, humanities, social science, and science reference, and though I suppose they were good as far as they went, had my understanding of reference work been limited to those classes it would have been a very poor understanding. Compare that to classes that have demonstrable topics, such as geometry. If you complete a geometry course, you should actually know something about geometry. But if you complete a reference course, or even four reference courses, you may still be a very poor reference librarian.

Reference is an activity that is learned best by doing. It combines theoretical knowledge (of the organization of information, the content of specific reference sources, the scope of particular indexes, etc.) with practical knowledge that can only be gained by experience. This practical knowledge might be rhetorical, for example. Reference librarians both have to meet a need and persuade the patron that the need is met, that this is the best way to go about things. But the virtue most needed and that takes the longest to develop is *phronesis*.

Certainly, good reference librarians have to *know* things, and depending on the level and context of reference have to be quite knowledgeable about various subject areas, but their skills as reference librarians seldom come from books. They develop the skills through practice and often through apprenticeship. Prudent people, Aristotle says, have the ability to deliberate properly about the good. If we want to know the best way to handle a particular reference situation, then we ask good reference librarians. New reference students and librarians, or at least *eager* new ones, often ask more experienced librarians for advice on particular questions or problems. They do this because the answers are not clear and easily demonstrable. They cannot be learned by reading a book or even taking an online tutorial. They cannot be put into a handy chart for memorization. The way to learn how to be a good reference librarian is to watch good reference librarians work, to ask questions, to accept guidance, to model behavior. Some people might think this would just create automaton reference librarians, all this copying of behavior instead of trying to be creative. But the creativity of reference work, such that it is, comes after the modeling and guidance. Much the way a child is taught good habits before understanding why they are good habits, new reference librarians model habits of reference without necessarily knowing why they are good habits. The difference is that because they are not in fact children new reference librarians can reflect upon their recent experience and immediately begin developing the virtue of *phronesis* necessary for their work.

Think about your own beginning reference work, or if you train new students or librarians, think about the questions they have. What do new reference librarians want? They want certainty. They want *knowledge*, clear, demonstrable, never changing knowledge. But that is exactly what they cannot have because it does not exist. Reference is not a science. The virtue of reference is *phronesis*, practical wisdom, and librarians only gain it by years of fruitful experience. The neophyte reference librarian can feel lost in a way the experienced librarian rarely does, but the experience librarian can do no more than model good reference work, answer questions, and guide the new librarians. Here perhaps is where some ethical virtues come into play, the virtues of generosity and commitment to helping others. Experienced librarians who do not act as mentors to new librarians are certainly not virtuous. But the burden is ultimately upon the new librarian to develop *phronesis*, to learn how to deliberate about the best way to achieve the goal of reference in less than clear particular situations.

Conclusion

I have argued that reference is best understood as a phronetic activity, that is, an activity requiring extensive practical judgment gained by years of experience that aims toward some good involving deliberation about the best means to achieve that end. I put forward this conception of reference work because it seems best to explain my own development as a reference librarian and the development of others I have talked with. I now feel like I have developed the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* regarding reference work, though of course more time and experience will develop it even more. To conclude, I will compare one difference between my attitude as a neophyte and as an experienced librarian. I remember as a reference graduate assistant and even sometimes as a new librarian the panic I sometimes felt when patrons would walk up to the reference desk. What if they ask me something I do not know? What if I cannot answer their question? Or worse, what if I give the wrong answer? What if I

look stupid? This is probably the moment when new librarians most want the handy chart to tell them what to do. But after a while this feeling goes away. More likely these days if a patron comes to the reference desk I think to myself, I hope this person has a challenging reference question, because I'm tired of just pointing the way to the restrooms.

Notes

1. For the curious, there are many good introductions to ethics in general and virtue ethics in particular, but a good quick introduction to virtue ethics can be found here: Hursthouse, Rosalind, "Virtue Ethics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2003 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2003/entries/ethics-virtue/>>. A good collection of standard essays on virtue ethics is: Crisp, Roger and Michael Slote. *Virtue Ethics*. New York : OUP, 1997. A clearly written recent book-length introduction to virtue ethics is: van Hoof, Stan. *Understanding Virtue Ethics*. UK : Acumen, 2006. An excellent book-length comparison of deontological, consequentialist, and virtue ethics is: Baron Marcia, Philip Pettit, and Michael Slote. *Three Methods of Ethics*. UK : Blackwell, 1997.

2. Note on citations: For Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, I quote the following edition: *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. with Commentaries and Glossary by Hippocrates G. Apostle. Grinnell, IA : Peripatetic Press, 1984. The standard citation format for Aristotle is the use of Bekker numbers, after the editor of a 19th century edition of Aristotle's complete works. Since translations and editions of Aristotle are numerous, Bekker numbers are used by contemporary scholars to cite Aristotle much like people use chapter and verse citations to cite the Bible. So, for example, "1103a14" refers to page 1103, column a, line 14 of the Bekker edition. Bekker numbers are usually found in the margins of any good edition of Aristotle to make finding references easy regardless of which edition you use.