

A Philosophical Discourse: Are a Good Citizen and a Good Human Being the Same?

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Abstract: *The concept of being a good citizen and being a good human being can overlap to some extent, but they are not necessarily the same. The distinction between these two concepts lies in the scope and context of their application. Being a good citizen typically refers to fulfilling one's responsibilities and duties as a member of a specific society or nation. This can involve obeying laws, paying taxes, participating in civic activities, and contributing positively to the community. On the other hand, being a good human refers to embodying ethical and moral virtues that are not confined to a specific society or nation. For instance, this may encompass traits such as compassion, empathy, honesty, and equality. This paper primarily sheds light on how Aristotle views the qualities of a good citizen vs. a good human being. Additionally, this paper will explore the perspectives of other notable philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to offer more nuance to this question.*

Keywords: *Aristotle, Civic Duty, Ethics, Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Morality, Philosophy.*

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Many philosophers have explored the ideas of morality, ethics, and the qualities of a good citizen versus a good human being. One of the most notable individuals who has deeply discoursed on this topic is the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle. Besides Aristotle, others have grappled with the idea of what it means to be a good citizen and a good human being. While this paper primarily focuses on Aristotle's perspective, it also leverages the perspectives of philosophers from different countries and time periods, namely Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Each philosopher's perspective slightly varies based on their cultural background, historical context, and personal beliefs. Ultimately, the relationship between being a good citizen and a good human being can be complex and nuanced, and it continues to be a subject of philosophical exploration and debate.

1.2 Overview of Philosophers

Aristotle: The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle explored the concept of virtue ethics. Aristotle primarily believed that being a good person meant developing virtuous traits and habits that lead to a flourishing and fulfilling life. Aristotle's work, "Politics" will primarily be leveraged to explore the fundamental difference between a good citizen and a good human being.

Immanuel Kant: German philosopher Kant developed a comprehensive ethical theory known as deontological ethics, which focuses on moral duty and universal principles. According to Kant, being good involves acting out of a sense of moral obligation, regardless of societal expectations. In his philosophical works like "Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals" and "Critique of Practical Reason," Kant explores what it means to be a good citizen and a good human being.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: An influential Enlightenment-era philosopher from France, Rousseau explored the concepts of good citizenship and being a good human being in his seminal works, particularly in "The Social Contract" and "Emile." Rousseau discussed the concept of the "general will" and the importance of citizens aligning their personal interests with the common good to be both good citizens and good human beings.

1.3 Core Question for Exploration

If a renowned politician had another discrete life outside of his city, would this still make him a good citizen? As presented in his work "Politics," Aristotle observes the distinction between a good human being and a good citizen, raising questions about ethics and politics. According to Aristotle, a good human being demonstrates virtues and qualities that in turn help them to excel and do great things as an individual. Conversely, a good citizen demonstrates virtues and qualities that support the thriving and flourishing of their communities. Whereas the goodness of a citizen is respective to their community, the goodness of a human being is universal and constant. While Aristotle does not directly answer this antinomy, he underscores the importance of considering situations through different contexts and perspectives, emphasizing the complexity of making decisions in a political community and interconnecting the difference between a good citizen and a good human being.

II. DEFINITION OF A GOOD CITIZEN

2.1 Aristotle: Virtues Through Political Participation

While Aristotle recognizes that the two concepts of a good citizen and human being can be interconnected, many differences separate the two. First, a good citizen must be active and engaged, showing political participation. This includes voting or holding a position in an office where there is a set goal to accomplish the well-being and thriving of the community. In addition to this, a good citizen should always obey the laws of the city and fulfill any legal obligations as it helps maintain order and stability. When observing the virtues of a good citizen, Aristotle says, "Since some are by nature rulers and others are by nature subjects, those with different natures must have different virtues, and so the virtue of a citizen must be suited to the constitution of which he is a member. For each constitution has a prescribed end, so the virtue of the citizen must necessarily have reference to the form of government under which he lives"(Aristotle, Politics, Book 3, 1277b). Hence, Aristotle emphasizes how the virtues of a good citizen may differ depending on the form of government that is set as they are aligned with their respective political system.

2.2 Kant: Deontological Ethics and Individual Moral Duty

Immanuel Kant, a prominent German philosopher of the Enlightenment era, developed a comprehensive ethical theory known as deontological ethics. Kant's moral philosophy primarily focuses on individual moral duty and the categorical imperative, a central concept in his ethical theory. The categorical imperative is a universal moral law that applies to all rational beings. According to Kant, being a good citizen involves fulfilling one's duties and obligations within the framework of a just and well-ordered society. These duties include respecting the rights and freedoms of others, obeying the laws, and contributing to the maintenance of a harmonious social order. For Kant, a good citizen adheres to the principles of justice and acts in accordance with the moral laws that apply to rational beings in a societal context. In other words, a good citizen respects the rights and autonomy of others and contributes to the common good through their actions.

2.3 Rousseau: The Social Contract

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's views on good citizenship are primarily discussed in his work "The Social Contract," in which he examines the idea of a social contract—a hypothetical agreement among individuals to form a society and abide by its laws and regulations. According to Rousseau, by entering the social contract, individuals relinquish certain individual freedoms in favor of the common good and the will of the collective. Being a good citizen, then, means adhering to the laws and principles of the society of which one has consented to be a part. For Rousseau, a good citizen is someone who acts in accordance with the "general will" of society. The general will represents what is best for the entire community, not just for specific individuals or groups. When citizens act in line with the general will, they contribute to the stability and harmony of society. Rousseau believed that this collective will be the foundation of a legitimate government, promoting the common good rather than serving the interests of a privileged few.

III. DEFINITION OF A GOOD HUMAN BEING

3.1 Aristotle: Development of Individual Virtues

Aristotle's concept of a good human being is centered on the notion of living a virtuous life in pursuit of eudaimonia, often translated as "happiness" or "flourishing." He believed that all human beings have a natural telos or purpose and that fulfilling this purpose leads to the highest good. This telos is achieved through the cultivation of virtues. According to Aristotle, virtues are the golden mean between extremes. For instance, courage is a virtue that lies between cowardice and recklessness. Moderation, courage, wisdom, justice, and other virtues are essential for achieving a well-balanced and virtuous life. The development of these virtues is a lifelong process, and they are cultivated through education, habituation, and practice.

While Aristotle believed that a good citizen must demonstrate virtues that support the flourishing of their communities, a good human being must demonstrate virtues that in turn help them to excel and do great things as an individual. Aristotle demonstrates a distinction between the two where in order to be a good citizen, one must be a good human being. However, Aristotle states that a good citizen does not have to be a good human being.

Hence, Aristotle believed that a good human being is not required to necessarily be involved in the political community as they might focus solely on their development and growth of virtues. According to Aristotle, this moral virtue enables one to develop one's character and demonstrate courage, honesty, wisdom, and more. However, this does not mean that a good citizen cannot develop their virtues or pursue personal growth. The only characteristic that a good citizens should possess is that they must contribute substantially to the flourishing of their respective communities.

3.2 Kant: A Foundation of Moral Duty

In Kant's ethical system, being a good human being is the foundation for being a good citizen. By acting by moral duty and the categorical imperative, an individual becomes a morally upright person and, in turn, a responsible and just member of society. Kant's concept of a good human being is closely related to his notion of moral duty. Hence, to be a good human being, Kant believed that one must act out of a sense of moral duty, regardless of personal inclinations or external consequences. This means acting in a way that respects the dignity of oneself and others, promoting the well-being of all rational beings, and striving for moral perfection.

According to Kant, the primary differentiator between being a good citizen and being a good human being lies in their scopes and contexts. Being a good citizen pertains to one's responsibilities and obligations within a specific societal structure while being a good human being is a broader and more fundamental concept that involves moral duty and ethical behavior based on rational principles.

3.3 Rousseau: Natural Education and Embracing the Genuine Self

Rousseau's ideas about being a good human being are deeply explored in "Emile," in which Rousseau outlines how to raise a virtuous and well-rounded individual. He emphasizes the importance of natural education, where children are allowed to develop freely and in harmony with their inherent goodness. Rousseau believed that humans are inherently good in their natural state but become corrupted by societal influences and institutions. To be a good human being, one must shed the artificial trappings of civilization and return to a simpler, more natural way of life. Rousseau's concept of the "noble savage" reflects this idea, suggesting that individuals in a state of nature possess a genuine goodness that becomes obscured in the complexities of society.

The main difference between being a good citizen and a good human being in Rousseau's philosophy lies in the tension between societal demands and individual authenticity. While being a good citizen involves abiding by the social contract and adhering to the general will, being a good human being requires rediscovering and living in harmony with one's natural inclinations and moral compass. One involves conforming to social norms for the sake of a well-ordered society, while the other necessitates embracing one's genuine self and living authentically, promoting the well-being of all rational beings and striving for moral perfection.

IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

4.1 Aristotle Prioritizes Being a Good Citizen

Although being a good citizen and being a good human being is both important, being a good citizen takes priority in Aristotle's view. While Aristotle does not explicitly state this preference, his writings suggest this precedence when he concludes, "The good man, we say, does express a single virtue: the complete one. Evidently, then, it is possible for someone to be a good citizen without having acquired the virtue expressed by a good man" (Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 3, 1276b). To achieve one's full potential, Aristotle deems it important to participate in political life and be involved in the community. The city-state or polis is the superlative form of association and is where virtues will be developed, and personal growth will occur. By being a good citizen, a path is paved toward opportunities to pursue personal excellence and bring prosperity to the community. Therefore, to thrive as human beings, Aristotle believes it is necessary to demonstrate the qualities of a good citizen. In contrast to this belief of Aristotle, a good man is superior to a good citizen as they aim to do what is right and beneficial for all. Because he has these qualities, any unacceptable desires or self-interests will not be committed or exerted.

On the other hand, both Kant and Rousseau did not explicitly prioritize being a good human being or a good citizen over the other. According to Kant, being a good citizen and a good human being are intertwined in his ethical framework. His emphasis on universal moral principles and the categorical imperative underscores the importance of aligning personal actions with moral duty, both as an individual and as a citizen. Similarly, Rousseau also viewed being a good citizen and a good person to be closely intertwined. However, Rousseau's emphasis on the general will in "The Social Contract" does insinuate that he views the well-being of the collective as a central concern for him in the context of good citizenship.

4.2 Minimal Overlap Between Being a Good Citizen and Good Human Being

Aristotle believed that the two concepts of being a good citizen and human being will rarely coincide due to the pursuit of virtue and personal development which will not always correspond to the interests of their respective communities. There may be personal needs, desires, or ambitions that conflict with the community as a whole. This hints that political life is complex, and it involves overcoming ethical situations where one must make decisions that may not align well between the pursuit of individual virtues and the demands of citizenship. Additionally, Aristotle recognized the pressure when it comes to ethical considerations individuals encounter, emphasizing the need for wisdom in certain situations. Individuals may have ambitions for happiness while they may also care about their responsibilities when it comes to citizenship and service.

When observing the difference between a good citizen and a good human being, valuable insights can be drawn out as it delves into the interconnectedness between the pursuit of virtues and civic responsibility. While the two rarely coincide with one another, Aristotle prioritized being a good citizen over being a good human being as individuals are challenged to balance their interests with the needs of their community. Although Aristotle does not explicitly address this antinomy, he does recognize the complexity of making certain ethical choices, especially through comprehensive consideration of different situations and circumstances.

V. CONCLUSION

5.1 Wrap-Up

In summary, the concept of being a good citizen and being a good human being can indeed overlap to some extent, but they are not necessarily the same. The distinction between these two concepts lies in the scope and context of their application. Being a good citizen primarily involves fulfilling one's responsibilities and duties within a specific society or nation, contributing positively to the community, and obeying the laws. On the other hand, being a good human being revolves around embodying ethical and moral virtues that transcend societal boundaries and are applicable universally.

The perspectives of renowned philosophers, such as Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, offer valuable insights into the qualities of a good citizen and a good human being. Aristotle emphasized the importance of virtues and personal growth in becoming a good human being, while also acknowledging the significance of civic virtues for being a good citizen. Kant emphasized that being a good human being serves as the foundation for being a good citizen, emphasizing individual moral duty and adherence to universal moral principles. Rousseau, on the other hand, explored the tension between societal demands and individual authenticity, underscoring the need to balance being a good citizen with embracing one's genuine self. While Aristotle's view prioritized being a good citizen to a certain extent, Kant and Rousseau did not explicitly prioritize one over the other. Instead, they emphasized the interconnectedness of being a good citizen and a good human being within their respective ethical frameworks.

5.2 Application

The philosophical question regarding the difference and similarities between being a good human being and a good citizen has significant practical applications in various aspects of life, including personal development, civic engagement, and ethical decision-making. More specifically, the distinction between being a good citizen and a good human being can further dictate ideology around politics and ethics. Through an understanding of this distinction and a recognition of qualities encompassing a good citizen, people may be motivated to actively participate in their communities and engage in civic activities. As such, being a good citizen involves not only obeying laws but also contributing positively to the community, voting in elections, and being informed about societal issues. Overall, this understanding can foster a sense of responsibility and commitment to the betterment of society.

In exploring the perspectives of these philosophers, this paper elucidates the multifaceted nature of being a good citizen and being a good human being. It encourages further contemplation and examination of the qualities that contribute to the flourishing of both the individual and the broader community, as well as the potential conflicts and synergies that may arise between these two ideals. Decision-making in a political community is therefore extremely complex, as individuals must navigate between pursuing personal virtues and fulfilling the demands of citizenship. Ultimately, this complexity calls for wisdom and discernment, recognizing that individual pursuits of excellence and community well-being may not always align. As society evolves and faces new challenges, understanding the interplay between these concepts remains crucial in fostering harmonious and thriving communities that uphold both individual virtues and the common good.

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