Virtue Ethics

Western Ethics (PHI 402)

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Virtue Theory - *What Is Virtue?*

- Virtues and vices are relatively stable dispositions to act in certain ways.

- People who are honest characteristically do things like tell the truth, give the correct change, pay their taxes, and so on, whereas dishonest people characteristically lie and cheat.

- Virtues are good character traits, and vices are bad character traits.

- We praise and admire people who are honest, kind, just, generous, courageous, and so on.

- We encourage our children to acquire the virtues, and many of us try to become more virtuous ourselves.

- At the same time, we blame or criticize people for being dishonest, unkind, selfish, or arrogant. These are character defects, and a common assumption is that people can and should try to correct these flaws.

- We tend to think of a person's character – the collection of virtues and/or vices they possess – as somehow more important, more central to their identity than other traits they might have, such as their personality traits, aspects of their physical appearance, or their talents.

- People sometimes disagree about which traits are virtues.

- The standard list includes traits such as honesty, courage, kindness, generosity, and justice.

- But what about traits such as modesty, tidiness, wittiness, competitiveness, and selflessness?

- Should we include any of these traits in the list of virtues? To answer this question we need to consider a more fundamental question: What makes a trait a virtue? That is, do all the virtues have something in common, something that allows us (a) to distinguish them from other character traits, and (b) to explain why they are virtues and not vices (or morally neutral traits)?

- An important question that arises when trying to determine what makes a trait a virtue concerns the relevance of inner states (thoughts and feelings). A virtue is a disposition to act in certain ways, and people clearly have thoughts and feelings when they act.

- But does it matter what these thoughts and feelings are? And does it matter which of these thoughts and feelings motivate them to act?

- Some argue that as long as people act in certain ways, it doesn't really matter what they think or how they feel (provided, of course, that they keep any negative thoughts and feelings to themselves).

- Others think that inner states do matter in some way. One view is that we admire virtuous people because "their heart is in the right place." Generous people care about other people's happiness, and honest people care about the truth, and so it might be that caring about certain things is essential for virtue.

- An alternative view is that virtuous people are admirable because they act for the right *reasons*, for example, because they recognize that the good of others is worth pursuing, or because they believe they have a duty to help others

- A third, more demanding view is that truly virtuous people are motivated to act by the right reasons *and* the right feelings. In this view, a truly benevolent person is someone who knows they should help others and also cares about their welfare.

- This leads us to a closely related question: Is a virtuous person wise or knowledgeable, and if so, what kind of knowledge do they possess?

- The claim that virtuous people do the right thing for the right reasons clearly suggests that they must know what the right reasons are. But how do they know this?

- One possibility is that they know a set of action-guiding rules or principles, which they apply to particular cases.

- Another possibility is that they have acquired certain intellectual skills that allow them to figure out what to do in a particular case, in much the same way that an experienced builder is able to find a creative solution to a new building problem.

- Finally, it is useful to note the distinction between moral (or character) virtues and intellectual (or epistemic) virtues.

- Roughly, intellectual virtues are traits that allow us to attain knowledge, and include traits such as open-mindedness, curiosity, perseverance, intellectual humility, and imaginativeness.

- Moral virtues, by contrast, are traits that allow us to live and act well, and include traits like courage, kindness, and honesty.

- Virtue epistemology – the philosophical study of the nature and role of intellectual virtue and vice – was inspired by the interest in virtue concepts among moral philosophers, and has since become a well-established branch of epistemology.

How Is Virtue Related to Other Moral Concepts?

- Apart from questions about the nature of virtue, philosophers are interested in the link between virtue and other moral concepts.

- One set of questions concerns the link between virtue and happiness.

- It seems obvious that virtues like kindness, generosity, honesty, and fairness generally con- tribute to the happiness of others.

- Part of the reason we value these traits and reward people who have them is that they contribute to the good of society as a whole – things tend to go better when people are kind and generous, and when they can rely on each other to be honest and fair.

- But do the virtues also contribute to the happiness of their possessor?

- Some philosophers claim that the virtues are necessary for happiness, that for someone to live a good or happy life, they have to possess the virtues.

- There is some intuitive support for this idea. It seems plausible that parents encourage their children to become kind, generous and just, not just for the sake of those around them but also for their own sakes. Being selfish, cruel, or dishonest can make one miserable.

- Further, many (per- haps most) virtuous people do appear to be happy.

- Another set of questions concerns the link between virtue and right action.

- It seems safe to say that virtuous people characteristically do what is right.

- But which of these concepts is primary: virtue or right action?

- That is, should we start with a theory of what makes an action right, and then go on to define virtue in terms of right action?

- (So, for example, if a right action is one that has good consequences, then a virtue might be a trait that typically has good consequences; or, if an action is right because it is in accordance with duty, then virtue might be a trait that involves respect for doing one's duty.)

- Or, alternatively, should we start with a theory of virtue, and then identify right action in terms of virtue ?

- (for example, as the kind of action that a virtuous person would perform, or   an action that manifests or is motivated by virtue)

Can People Become Virtuous? (or: Do the Virtues Exist?)

- Part of the appeal of thinking in terms of virtues and vices is that we don't have to appeal to obscure metaphysical entities such as "moral duty," but rather to the character traits – dispositions that people actually possess.

- However, many social psychologists – or "situationists" – doubt whether people do in fact possess character traits.

- Many argue that virtues, like moral duties, are fictional entities.

- The results of various experiments in social psychology show that people's behavior is influenced more by situational features, such as the number of people in the room, the presence of an authority figure, or even the smell of cookies, than by their personal beliefs, attitudes or feelings.

- What this suggests, according to situationists, is that people do not possess character traits.

Virtue Ethics

- Virtue theory, then, is a field of inquiry that concerns itself with questions about the nature and existence of virtue as well as the link between virtue and other moral concepts.

- Virtue theory should be distinguished from virtue *ethics*, which is a normative theory rather than a field of inquiry.

- Virtue ethicists are concerned with many of the same questions as virtue theorists, but they are committed to a particular view about the relationship between virtue and other moral concepts, namely that virtue is a central moral concept, and that conceptions of "the good life" and of right and wrong action are secondary in the sense that they should be understood in terms of virtue.

- The distinction between virtue theory and virtue ethics was first suggested by Julia Driver in 1996.

- Before this time, it was common to use the terms interchangeably.

- This didn't cause much confusion given that the majority of philosophers who were interested in questions about virtue were doing so in the course of developing or defending virtue ethics as an alternative to the two dominant normative theories: deontology and consequentialism.

- Indeed, one of the main objections to these two normative theories was that they ignored or neglected questions about virtue and character.

- While this criticism was certainly justified at the time, this is no longer the case.

- Kant's long-neglected doctrine of virtue, which is expounded in the second part of *The Metaphysics of Morals*, has since received a considerable amount of attention.

- philosophers like Julia Driver (2001) and Thomas Hurka (2001) have developed distinctively consequentialist theories of virtue.

- It is now widely accepted that any normative theory should include an account of good character or virtue.

- . For this reason, it became necessary to distinguish between the broader field of inquiry that concerns itself with questions about virtue (virtue theory) and the specific normative theory that takes virtue to be a central moral concept (virtue ethics).

- If all normative theories should include an account of virtue, the question that arises is: What distinguishes virtue ethics from these other theories?

- One way to answer the question is to compare the structures of these theories, focusing specifically on the account of right action provided by each.

- **Deontology**: As we've seen, *deontology* takes the notion of moral duty as primary. An action is right if it is in accordance with duty.

- It follows that a virtuous person is someone who acts from a sense of duty, and the moral knowledge they have is knowledge of a set of moral rules or principles that specify what is required by duty.

- **<u>Consequentialism</u>**: Standard forms of consequentialism, in turn, take good consequences to be primary, and define right action in terms of (actual or expected) consequences.

- They hold that virtues and specific inner states, such as motives, feelings, and knowledge, only have instrumental value.

- By contrast, the central concept in *virtue ethics* is virtue rather than duty or good consequences.

- Accordingly, it evaluates actions in terms of virtue, for example, by holding that an action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous person would characteristically do in the circumstances.

- While this is a fairly accurate sketch of the differences between these theories, it can also be somewhat misleading, for it suggests that the three theories are all focused on answering the question, What makes an action right? Many virtue ethicists think that the concepts of right or wrong action are relatively unimportant or uninteresting.

- Philosophers like Anscombe argue that we should altogether abandon these concepts and instead evaluate actions as virtuous (kind, honest, just, etc.) or vicious (unkind, dishonest, unjust, etc.).

- A significant difference between virtue ethics and its rivals concerns the role of normative theory.

- Deontologists and consequentialists tend to view a normative theory as useful for solving the moral quandaries or dilemmas that we encounter from time to time, such as: Should I have an abortion? Should I break a promise to help a friend? Should we separate a set of conjoined twins? and so on.

- And this is why their focus is on giving an account of right action.

- Although virtue ethics can certainly help us to find answers to these questions, it is concerned with the much broader question about living well or being a good person.

- As such, it is concerned with our attitudes and habits, our ways of living and perceiving things.

- To illustrate, consider the person who has focused all her energy on advancing her career, but one day, perhaps after reading a biography of a great philanthropist, wonders whether she should try to become more generous and less focused on advancing her own interests. She is not facing a moral quandary at all. But we can all recognize that she is facing an important ethical question, namely: How can I become a better person?

- And her answer might be something like: "I should make an effort to care more about others, and take time off work to do volunteer work in the com- munity. I should buy fewer luxury items, and focus on what is really important in life." .

- When it is claimed that virtue plays a central role in virtue ethics, then, what is meant is not merely that it evaluates particular actions in terms of virtue rather than duty or consequences. Rather, as Russell (2013a, 2) notes, "[w]hat sets virtue ethics apart is that it treats ethics as concerned with one's whole life – and not just those occasions when something with a distinctly 'moral' quality is at stake."

Varieties of Virtue Ethics

- The early figures in the revival of virtue ethics were all influenced by Aristotle, and so "virtue ethics" generally meant "Aristotelian virtue ethics."

- However, over the last two decades, a number of normative theorists have suggested alternative forms of virtue ethics, inspired by philo- sophers such as Plato, David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger.

- Our focus will be on three varieties of virtue ethics that have dominated current debates in the area.

Eudaimonistic Virtue Ethics

- Eudaimonism (from the Greek *eudaimonia*, a good human life) is a tradition in ethics that is focused on the question: What is a good life for human beings?

- Ancient eudaimonists include Aristotle, Plato, and the Stoics.

- Aristotelian virtue ethics is the most popular version of eudaimonism among contemporary virtue ethicists, and is supported by Julia Annas (1993, 2011), Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), and Daniel Russell (2009, 2012).

- Aristotelian virtue ethics is committed to a form of perfectionism, for it tries to answer the question, What is the *best* life for human beings?

- Accordingly, it conceives of virtues as *excellences*, and further, as *human* excellences – they are traits that make it possible for us to live well as the kind of beings we are, namely, human beings.

- Vices, in turn, are seen as *defects*, traits that make someone worse as a human being.

- To identify the virtues, we need to think about human nature, about what distinguishes us from plants and the other animals – what does it mean to function well as a human being (as opposed to a tree or a bear)?

- The answer given by Aristotelians is that the **capacity for reason** is the distinguishing feature of human beings.

- We are able to act from reason rather than mere instinct, feeling, or desire, and we are able to shape our emotions and desires so that they are aligned with reason.

- A virtuous person has practical wisdom (*phronesis*), which is an intellectual virtue that involves reasoning well about how to live and act virtuously.

- A good or happy life for human beings (*eudaimonia*) is a virtuous life, where the virtues are conceived as reliable dispositions to act and react well, that is, for the right reasons and with the right feelings and attitudes.

- Aristotelian virtue ethicists evaluate actions in terms of virtue and vice, claiming, for example, that an action is right if it is what a virtuous person would characteristically do in the situation

The central claims of Aristotelian virtue ethics

1. Virtue is a human excellence .

2. What makes a trait a virtue is that it allows its possessor to live a good (happy or flourishing) life.

3. A virtuous person is motivated by the right feelings and the right reasons.

4. Practical wisdom is required for virtue.

5. Actions are to be evaluated in terms of virtue and vice.

Agent-based Virtue Ethics

- Agent-based virtue ethics begins with the intuition that what makes a person good or admirable is the fact that they have good inner states.

- In this view, it doesn't really matter whether people actually accomplish the things they set out to accomplish, or whether their actions are in accordance with a set of moral rules.

- Rather, what matters is that they possess and are motivated by the right kind of beliefs, values, attitudes, and emotions.

- Hence virtue (or virtuous motivation) is not merely central but fundamental, in the sense that it is not defined with reference to any other moral concepts, such as good consequences, moral duty, right action, or *eudaimonia*.

- Virtuous inner states are seen as intuitively good or admirable, and no further explanation of what makes these states good is given.

- The most popular form of agent-based virtue ethics is the sentimentalist view developed by Michael Slote (2001, 2010).

- Slote argues that what makes someone admirable is that they are motivated by "warm" inner states, such as compassion, care, and benevolence.

- Accordingly, actions are evaluated as right or good depending on whether they manifest virtuous motives.

- Slote accepts that well-motivated people will try to bring about good consequences.

- But he claims that the actual consequences of an action are irrelevant to its rightness.

- Similarly, he argues that although well-motivated people will try to get the facts right, knowledge or practical wisdom is not required for virtue.

The central claims of Slote's agent-based virtue ethics

1. A virtue is an admirable trait .

2. Virtue is not defined in terms of human flourishing or *eudaimonia*

3. A virtuous person is someone who acts from good or virtuous motives such as benevolence, care, and compassion it.

4. Virtue does not require practical wisdom.

5. Right action is defined in terms of virtuous motivation.

Pluralistic Virtue Ethics

- Eudaimonists define virtue as a trait needed for happiness, whereas agent- based virtue ethicists define it in terms of inner states.

- In this sense, both these approaches are monistic.

- By contrast, pluralistic virtue ethicists reject the view that there is a single ground of virtue.

- Christine Swanton (2003), the leading advocate of this view, gives a broad definition of virtue as a disposition to respond well to the demands of the world (2003, 19).

- But argues that what makes a trait a virtue (that is, what is involved in responding well to the demands of the world) can be any of a number of things.

- The virtue of compassion involves responding well to a person's suffering, and this includes having certain feelings, such as care, concern, and a desire to alleviate their suffering.

- By contrast, the virtue of justice does not require responding with warm feelings or fine inner states, but simply honoring or adhering to rules of justice.

- Swanton also rejects the view that practical wisdom is required for each and every virtue.

- In the case of some virtues, responding well will require knowledge or intelligence, but other virtues require creativity rather than rationality.

- Finally, Swanton offers a pluralistic account of what makes an action right.

- She argues that actions are right if they are virtuous overall, and this involves hitting the targets of the relevant virtues.

- So, for example, when responding to the suffering of others, an action will be right if it succeeds in hitting the targets of compassion (that is, if involves an understanding of their suffering and a concern for their welfare) and benevolence (that is, if it succeeds in alleviating their suffering).

The central claims of a pluralistic virtue ethics

1. A virtue is a disposition to respond well to the demands of the world
2. Not all virtues characteristically contribute to the happiness of their possessor.
3. Some virtues require good motivation, but others do not.
4. Not all virtues require wisdom or intelligence.
5. Right action is defined in terms of hitting the targets of virtue.

Summary

- A normative theory is an attempt to provide a systematic and coherent account of the values, norms, ideals, and standards that we appeal to when making moral judgments of actions, states of affairs, motives and intentions, character, and lives.

- During the twentieth century, the focus of normative ethics was on right action. Deontologists give an account of right action in terms of moral duty, whereas consequentialists argue that rightness depends on consequences.

- All normative theorists share a commitment to some form of moral realism, which is the view that there are objective moral values and that at least some of our moral judgments can be true or false. This position is challenged by anti-realists, who argue that moral values are invented or constructed by human beings, which means that moral judgments cannot be objectively true or false.

- Virtue ethics is a normative theory that claims that the virtues, understood as dispositions to act and feel in certain ways, play a central role in morality. Virtue ethicists reject the claim that we have moral duties, and in this regard they agree with anti-realists. However, they presuppose a form of moral realism because they think we can make true moral judgments in terms of virtues and vices.

- Virtue theory is a field of inquiry that focuses on philosophical questions about virtue and vice, or character more generally. Virtue theorists are not necessarily committed to virtue ethics. Some virtue theorists embrace consequentialism or deontology, whereas others remain neutral.