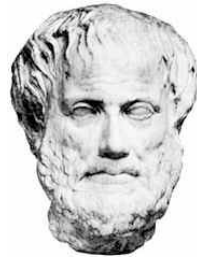


Aristotle

Virtue Ethics



Suppose

- Suppose you are in hospital recovering from an illness. You've been there quite a while and boredom defines your days. You are thrilled and relieved that Smith has come to visit once again. You thank Smith for his visit, but he declines your thanks. He says he always tries to do his duty. At first, you think he is being modest. But, as the conversation continues, you realize that Smith did not come to see you because it was you but he came because he knows of no one who is in greater need of cheering up than you.

Whaz Up with Smith?

- From a Utilitarian perspective, Smith was acting morally because he maximized happiness by cheering you up.
- From a Kantian perspective, Smith was acting morally because he did his duty.
- So, why do we think there is something wrong with Smith's action?
- What's the difference between acting to maximize happiness, acting in accordance with duty, and acting out of a personal sense of friendship?

What Is the Right Thing To Do?

- Each of the theories we have looked at provides answers to this question
 - Ethical Egoism: one ought to pursue one's own self interest
 - Utilitarianism: one ought to do whatever brings about the greatest amount of happiness
 - Deontology: one ought to do one's duty and do that which one can will to be a universal law

Outside the Ethical Theory Boundaries

- One of the problems with Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics is that each addresses how one ought to act in certain cases, but leaves open questions about how one ought to act in many other cases
- The question in ethics is, “How ought one to live one’s life?”
- Utilitarianism, Kant, and other ethical theories can be understood to be **Theories of Right**, where it is the principles of obligation (and prohibition) that determine one’s actions
- A **Theory of the Good** is concerned with describing the good life

Living The Good Life

- Theory of the Good is concerned with living the good life
- Living the good life is not concerned only with one’s obligations and duties
- “Be good” is not the same thing as “Do the right thing” or “Follow this rule”
- Imagine one who did the right thing but lived a secluded life, monotonously pursuing the same task every day, and spends all one’s time playing video games.
 - Might one convincingly say of this person that s/he leads a good life?

General Principle of the Good Life

- What makes for the Good Life?
 - Aristotle appeals to humanity’s common biological heritage to specify what constitutes the good life
 - The good life is understood in terms of the idea of human nature
- What is a good human being?
 - To answer this question one needs to understand what is meant by saying something is good

What is Good?

- What is a good hammer?
 - A good hammer is one that best performs the function specific to hammers
- What is a good father?
 - To answer this question, one has to ask what the function of a father is.
 - What is the function of a father?
 - A good father is one who best performs that function of being a father, namely to caringly and responsibly raise virtuous individuals
- What is a good _____?

Concept of Goodness

- Understanding what the function of a thing is leads to an understanding of what is meant by good
- For Aristotle, the concept of goodness is inseparably tied to the concepts of goal, function, and purpose
- What traits make a thing good will vary depending on the thing one is talking about
 - e.g., what makes for a good father will differ from what makes for a good rock climber
- Aristotle thinks that saying what the function of human beings is will illuminate what it means to be a good human being

Goal-directed Systems

- Aristotle thinks that animate and inanimate objects are goal-directed systems
 - Humans are goal-directed systems
 - What is the goal or end human's seek?
- Aristotle thinks humans seek happiness--a life in which the goal of human life is achieved
- A good life is a life of happiness
 - What is important is how we pursue the good life

How Does One Pursue the Good Life?

- How does a tree pursue its goals? How does a human pursue its goals?
 - What is the difference in how humans and other objects fulfill their goal-directed behavior?
 - Trees, and other inanimate objects, pursue their goals through some innate processes--there is no teaching involved
- How a human pursues his or her goals reflects how s/he was raised and brought up
- For Aristotle, a good upbringing helps us develop character traits that are conducive to the good life

What Is Human Nature?

- Aristotle thinks human nature is what all humans have in common and what all humans have in common is the desire to seek happiness
- What feature of humans is distinctly human and aids them in seeking their happiness?
 - Aristotle thinks this distinctly human capacity is rationality and the capacity for abstract thinking
 - Thus, the good life for humans is one in which rational capacities are developed and exercised to their fullest and in so doing humans achieve the best sort of happiness possible for them
 - Theoretical reasoning is superior to practical reasoning

What Makes a Virtuous Human Being?

- Aristotle thinks a good human being is rational and that rationality is good for humans
- Aristotle also thinks that good people will display certain traits in dealings with other human beings
- One can see these virtues as necessary conditions for human flourishing and well-being
- To understand moral rules and ethics, we must understand what makes someone a virtuous person

Components of Virtue Theory

1. An explanation of the nature of a virtue
2. A list of virtuous character traits
3. An explanation of what these virtues consist in
4. An explanation of why these character traits are good ones to have
5. An explanation of whether the virtues are the same for all people or whether they vary between individuals and cultures

What is a Virtue?

- A virtue is a character trait manifested in habitual action
 - If one only occasionally tells the truth, that person does not have the virtue of honesty
- Possessing a virtue requires that it be a habitual action, that it is ingrained in the individual's behavior
 - What makes a habitual character trait a virtue is that it is good for the individual
 - Vices are also habitual but are not good for the individual

Virtues Are More Fundamental

- Virtues are thought to be more fundamental than moral rules
- Virtue ethics does not attempt to supplement moral rules but to maintain that virtue, a virtuous character, is a fundamental moral category
- Considerations of virtue will often lead to the same conclusions as utilitarianism and Kantian ethics
- But, considerations of virtue can trump duty or utility

What Are the Virtues?

Compassion	Dependability	Benevolence
Cooperativeness	Honesty	Reasonableness
Courage	Generosity	Tolerance
Fairness	Friendliness	Thoughtfulness
Self-discipline	Patience	Loyalty
Civility	Moderation	Self-reliance

Doctrine of the Mean

- Aristotle thinks that one can understand these virtues within a single theoretical framework
- The Doctrine of the Mean says that the virtues can be found along a continuum between the extremes of excess and deficiency
- Virtuous traits are not to be understood as a mathematical average between the two extremes
 - Rather, the “correct” amount is somewhere in between what is too little and too much
- What is the mean for each virtue will vary for each person and for each virtue

Virtues a Balance Between Extremes

Activity	Vice (excess)	Virtue (mean)	Vice (deficit)
Confidence in Facing Danger	Rashness	Courage	Cowardice
Enjoying Pleasure	Self-indulgence	Temperance	Being puritanical
Giving of Money	Vulgarity	Generosity	Stinginess
Truth Telling about Oneself	Boastfulness	Self-honesty	Self-deprecation

What do The Virtues Consist In?

- What do the virtues consist in?
- Two examples:
 1. Generosity
 2. Honesty

Generosity

- Generosity is the ability to use one's capacities to help others
- Generosity is a mean between extremes
 - Stands between stinginess and extravagance
 - Stingy person gives too little, the extravagant gives too much
- How much is too much?
 - What might the utilitarian say? How much should one give?

Problem with Generosity

- It seems one should be generous but it is difficult to determine what counts for generosity
- If one says that one should be as generous as one can be while still conducting one's ordinary life in some minimally satisfying way, then what would constitute a "minimally satisfying way"?
- Paris Hilton's "ordinary life" is not ordinary and not like most people's
- Could Paris be generous even living a relatively extravagant life?
- How we address the issue of generosity will depend on an understanding of an "ordinary life"

Honesty

- The honest person does not lie
- What should the honest person do in cases when one should protect the innocent
 - Suppose in the case of the Inquiring Murderer from Kant, you said about your friend's location, "He's headed home." But, your friend is not headed to his home, but your home.
 - You did not lie, but you did deceive. Is this deception dishonest? Is the deception virtuous?
- For one to be honest, must one accept Kant's absolute rule?
- Could one be honest except in certain rare circumstances?

Problems with Honesty

- Being told a lie violates one's trust in another
- Doesn't being deceived also violate one's trust in another? If so, then being deceived is morally the same as telling a lie.
- But, why think that all situations demand one to be honest?
- If the murderer were to threaten your life or someone else's, then hasn't the murderer forfeited the right to the truth? If so, could one make the case that the murderer forfeits the right to being told the truth in pursuing his objective?

Why Are the Virtues Important?

- Why are the virtues desirable in the first place? Why is it a good thing for a person to be generous or honest?
 - Being generous is a good thing because _____.
 - Being honest is a good thing because _____.
- Each virtue may be valuable for different reasons. But, each reason seems to point to a common reason
- According to Aristotle, the virtues are important because **the virtuous person will live a better life, will fare better in life, will live well**

Are the Virtues the Same for All?

- We all live different lives and have different interests. So in one sense, virtues appear to differ from individual to individual.
- But, it appears there are virtues which are essential to all people in all times
 - Everyone needs courage to face life's challenges
 - Honesty in speech and deed is essential to trust and relationships
 - Everyone needs friends and having friends requires being a friend--so, loyalty appears essential to friendship
- Aristotle thought that there are some virtues that all people need at all times

Advantages of Virtue Ethics

- Moral Motivation: moral behavior is motivated by a characteristic of the individual
 - Moral motivation in Virtue Ethics is concerned with the whole person
 - Moral motivation in Kant is concerned with the person only to the extent that person performs an action for certain reasons
 - Kant's theory is only concerned with moral action in cases where there is moral decision making
 - Leads to "moral minimalism": How can one avoid being blameworthy for the way one acted?
- Virtue ethics does not divide life into moral situations and nonmoral situations--all of one's life should reflect virtuous character traits

Advantages of Virtue Ethics

- Moral Impartiality: Most moral theories treat all individuals as moral equals. But, are they? Should we treat everyone's interests as equal?
 - Should we treat the stranger's interests as the same as a family member's interests?
 - Utilitarianism makes this demand for impartiality in moral decision making
- While virtue ethics does not provide definitive rules for moral action, it does give one guidance in developing or being the kind of person who can effectively make moral decisions

Have You Ever . . .

- Have you ever made an ethical decision by imagining you were in the shoes of a wise, virtuous person and tried to figure out how that person would act in a given situation?
- Even if you haven't, do you think that this exercise would be helpful in making a decision?
- Might one benefit by asking, "Does this action and the effect of this action reflect the type of person I want to be? What kind of person will I be if I act in this way?"

Suppose. . . .

- Suppose you were the parent of a small child. While it is easy to teach a list of dos and don'ts with corresponding rewards and punishments, how does one teach a good character? Can virtue be taught? If so, how?
- Besides direct teaching, how does one facilitate the development of a virtuous character?

Troubling Issues about the Good Life Principle

- Aristotle assumes that being a good human is being rational and that rationality is good for humans
- Aristotle's principle is: If a good X is F, then F is good for Xs.
 - What does it mean to say you are a "good X"?
 - It means you are good at X-ing
- So, a good teacher is good at teaching; a good climber is good at climbing; a good torturer is good at torturing

Is F Good for Xs?

- Aristotle's principle says not just what makes for a good thing, but that doing that thing is good for one
- Is torturing good for torturers? Is it a good thing for one to be a torturer? Couldn't one be a good torturer and torturing be bad for you?
- The problem is that Aristotle's principle seems to suggest that what makes for a good thing is good for that thing
 - This may be true for a hammer, but why think it is true for humans?
- The problem is defining the concept of good in terms of the function of that thing

Natural and Normal

(a la Sober)

- Natural and normal are used in both evaluative and descriptive ways
 - “Natural” descriptively used means “found in nature” and evaluatively used means “natural” and “unnatural” as in “good” and “bad”
 - “Normal” descriptively used means “commonly found” and evaluatively used means “normal” and “abnormal,” with the latter indicating something is “wrong”
- Examples of leukemia and weight
- There is no simple connection between what is common and what is good. Thus, one should be skeptical about arguments that claim that some rare characteristic is wrong or bad. Likewise, that something is “normal” or “natural” does not provide automatic justification for that thing.