

Chapter 16

Virtue Ethics

16.1 Homework

Readings – EMP 12, RTD 4

Study Questions – Give a short answer to the following questions:

1. What is happiness according to Aristotle?
2. What is a virtue? How is it acquired?
3. Explain Aristotle's idea that virtuous action always consists in a mean.
4. Does the virtuous man take pleasure in being virtuous?
5. What are the advantages of virtue ethics? the disadvantages?

16.2 Introduction

We have studied three serious accounts of morality: utilitarianism, duty theory, and the social contract theories. There are radical differences between these views. According to utilitarianism, whether or not an action is morally right depends on whether consequences are beneficial. According to duty theory, it depends on whether or not the rule of your action can be turned into a universal law. According to social contract theories, it depends on whether or not the action complies with the rules which the contractors have agreed upon. These are very different and at least partially conflicting views on morality.

That said, there is one element which is common to all: the idea that morality consists in general, impersonal and objective rules. Any particular moral situation is supposed to find a solution by application of these general objective rules.

Where does this come from? A key word in all these systems of morality is: rationality. In all the views above, moral agents are taken primarily as being *rational agents*. A rational agent is an abstract entity, with no personal, even less intimate, relationships with others. The entire community is seen as a collection of independent agents solely characterized by

their rationality. What is moral is then to be understood *from the point of view of such a rational impersonal agent*. Because of the atomistic view of the community of rational agents, the moral point of view is equated with the *impartial* point of view.

At several occasions, we voiced our dissatisfaction with such a disembodied view of morality.

- When discussing utilitarianism, we could not accept the strict impartiality that the view was imposing on us. It did not seem right that a mother living in NYC should give up on her kid because she could save five kids in Central Africa with the same money.

- We also felt uncomfortable with Kant's idea that to be a unsympathetic, cold hearted person who does his duty without taking any pleasure in it is the best moral achievement we could dream of.

- As to the social contract theories, we were not happy with the idea that morality be restricted to rational beings, thereby leaving aside, among other things, infants, the mentally impaired and animals.

All these theories seem to *reduce the moral agent to a rational agent*, while it seems that to be moral also involves to possess some kinds of feelings and emotions, like being compassionate, careful, etc.

Virtue Ethics includes these considerations within their view of ethics: they do not ask only what is the right thing to do, but also: *what kind of person should we be?*

Greek philosophers were interested in the question of what kind of person we should be, rather than the question of which objective rules should guide our actions. Aristotle is one of the most important of these philosophers.

Aristotle – 384-322 B.C.E.

- One of the most important philosophers in the history of Western philosophy
 - Founded one of the major Schools or university if you wish: the Lyceum
 - Did research in pretty much every domain there was at the time: inventor of Logic, did a lot of Physics and Biology, major thinker in metaphysics, ethics and political theory. Also, economics, rhetorics and theory of literature.
 - He would enjoy studying the digestive systems of bugs just as much as the movement of planets.
 - Tutor of the soon to become Alexander the Great
- Major philosopher in Ethics
 - Major work is: *Nicomachean Ethics* – 350 B.C.E.– Nichomachus was his son
 - Was the first to offer a separated, systematic treatment of ethical matters. Ethical theory is for the first time considered as an independent discipline, in particular independent from political theory.

The good life :

For Aristotle, the study of ethics has an *immediate practical impact*. We study ethics as *adults*. We begin to study ethics armed with a bunch of feelings, habits, preferences

and opinions, all non-reflexive knowledge acquired by experience from childhood up to now. As adults, we would like *a sound plan to live well and to be happy*. So, the most important question of ethics for Aristotle is: How to lead the best life that makes me the happiest?

In this chapter, I will more follow Aristotle's text in RTD than Rachels' chapter in EMP, the latter being rather uninspired.

16.3 What is it to be happy? The function argument

The argument –

1. Happiness is the best good
2. The best good for any being resides in exercising its function well, i.e. with virtue
3. The function of humans is to lead a practical life of the rational part of the soul
4. The best good for a human being is to lead a practical life of the rational part of the soul well, i.e. with virtue
5. SO: Happiness for human beings resides in leading a practical life of the rational part of the soul well, i.e. with virtue.

Analysis of the argument –

- About (1): This is a big assumption that Aristotle makes: happiness for a being resides in doing its function well. He gives only two examples in supports of this assumption: the flautist and the sculptor.

This is an assumption that we might want to discuss. Does the best good for a being always have to do with its function? Do humans have a function?

- About (2): Aristotle gives an argument for this. He is looking for the specific function of human beings. To determine what it is, he looks into the various functions of human beings, and proceeds by elimination.

1. Life – this is a function of humans, but shared with all plants
2. Sentience – this is a function of humans but shared with all other animals
3. Rationality – this is *the* function of humans, because it is shared with no other beings.

→ *The point is that if you lead a life devoted to life, you live a life of a vegetable. If you live a life devoted to sensations, then you live the life of a cow (or a dog if you wish). Only if you exercise what makes you specifically human you are living a full life as a human. Finally, if you want to be a happy human, you have to exercise your rationality with virtue.*

How likely is this conclusion to be correct? – Consistency with popular beliefs

Aristotle is one of the earliest philosophers to pay attention to the others' beliefs, philosophers and non-philosophers. He always deem it important to check that his conclusions, which are primarily supported by logical arguments, be consistent with our natural intuitions.

Consistent with the philosophers' belief that happiness resides in virtue :

Important qualification: Being virtuous alone does not make you happy unless you are *active*: Sleeping Beauty is not happy!

“Just as at the Olympic Games it is not the best-looking or the strongest men present that are crowned with wreaths, but the competitors (because it is from them that the winners come), so it is those who *act* that rightly win the honours and rewards in life” (RTD p. 45)

This means that, according to Aristotle, the hermit in the mountain, meditating all day outside of the tumult of human society, is neither fully virtuous, nor fully happy.

Consistent with the popular idea that happiness resides in pleasures :

Aristotle maintains that the virtuous man takes pleasure in exercising his virtue.

“So their life does not need to have pleasure attached to it as a sort of a accessory, but contains it won pleasure in itself. Indeed, we may go further and assert that anyone who does not delight in fine actions is not even a good man; for nobody would say that a man is just unless he enjoys acting justly, nor liberal unless he enjoys liberal actions, and similarly in all the other cases. If this is so, then virtuous actions must be pleasurable in themselves.” (RTD p. 45)

This is important: this is a stark contrast with Kant's idea that the cold hearted man is a better man than the lover of mankind.

This contrasts with many religious traditions, according to which pain can be an important part of virtuous actions – think about sacrifice and martyrdom for example. For some, moral behavior is superior when not accompanied with pleasure but pain instead.

According to Aristotle, feelings and emotions *must* be taken in to account in any theory of ethics, simply *because there is no way of avoiding them: they are a necessary part of our life.*

Aristotle makes an interesting distinction between *four types of behaviour*:

- **vicious**: think in a wrong way, feels in a wrong way, acts in a wrong way
- **incontinent**: thinks in a right way, feels in a wrong way, acts in a wrong way
- **continent**: thinks in a right way, feels in a wrong way, acts in a right way – still fights against his emotions and feelings

- **truly virtuous** (practical wisdom): thinks, feels and acts in the right way.

→ *You are truly virtuous only if you perform virtuous actions without constantly fighting your feelings and emotions. You are truly virtuous only if your feelings, emotions, thought and actions are in a state of harmony. If you are reluctant to do the right thing, you are not virtuous.*

Consistent with the popular idea that happiness resides in external goods
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According to Aristotle, the external goods (wealth, power, beauty and friends) are in some sense necessary to actualize of happiness. They are not constitutive of happiness, but a poor, ugly and lonely man cannot reach full happiness. One of the reasons for this is that this man will have less opportunities to act according to reason and virtue, and hence to be happy.

“Nevertheless, it seems clear that happiness needs the addition of external goods, as we have said; for it is difficult if not impossible to do fine deeds without any resources. Many can only be done with the help of friends, or wealth, or political influence. There are also certain advantages, such as good ancestry or good children, or personal beauty, the lack of which mars our felicity; for a man is scarcely happy if he is very ugly to look at, or of low birth, or solitary and childless; and presumably even less so if he has children or friends who are quite worthless, or if he had good ones who are now dead.” (RTD p. 45)

This contrasts starkly with Socrates’ and Plato’s views, who maintained that virtue was not only necessary but also sufficient for happiness. As soon as you know you have done the right thing, according to them, you are happy, whatever the honors, wealth, health etc you have.

→ *At the end, Aristotle gives us a definition of a happy man: the man who exercises his practical rationality in acting virtuously, who consistently enjoys doing so, and, on top of this, who is minimally furnished with external goods such as wealth, honors, health, good friends, and dear family.*

Now, to make sense of this definition, we need to know what it is to act virtuously!

16.4 What is it to act virtuously?

Virtues are acquired – Aristotle starts with an important point:

- Virtues are not natural: men are not born brave or just – Contrast with Rousseau
- Virtues are not against nature: men are not born coward and unjust – Contrast with Hobbes

“The moral virtues, then, are engendered in us neither *by* nor *contrary* to nature; we are constituted by nature to receive them, but their full development in us is due to habit.”

—→ *Aristotle’s point is that human beings do not have an innate moral or immoral character. Instead, moral character is acquired through education. The essential nature of human beings is to be perfectible.*

What kind of education induces virtue?

Virtues are acquired by habituation – Aristotle’s thesis is that virtues are acquired through habituation. That is to say, we learn how to be virtuous is practicing virtue.

“the virtues we do acquire by first exercising them, just as happens in the arts” (p.47)

- His argument is based on a analogy with learning a craft: one becomes harpist in playing the harp and one becomes a good harpist in playing the harp well.
- Applied to virtue this becomes: one becomes virtuous (temperate, brave etc) in doing virtuous (temperate, brave etc.) actions
- Further evidence : education in the city – citizens become habituated to behave according to the laws.
- Careful! It goes the other way around as well: bad actions provokes bad habits inducing bad character

SO:

“In a word then, like activities produce like dispositions. Hence we must give our activities a certain quality, because it is their characteristics that determine the resulting dispositions. So it is a matter of no little importance what sorts of habits we form from the earliest age – it makes a vast difference, or rather all the difference in the world... (p. 47-48) ”

—→ *So, the way to become a virtuous person is to practice virtue. Virtues are acquired by habituation through performing virtuous actions.*

Is not this circular? Are we not already virtuous if we perform virtuous actions? According to Aristotle, actions are not enough. To be truly virtuous, virtuous actions must come as a second nature. You must develop virtues as *dispositions*.

Virtues are dispositions – What are dispositions and what does it mean that virtues are dispositions?

Disposition :

Definition 43 – Disposition

A disposition is property that manifests itself only under certain conditions.

Paradigmatic example: fragility – glass is fragile

Virtues as dispositions – The point is that through habitual good actions, we come to have the tendency to have the *appropriate emotional response* to what happens.

Let's try to understand:

1. Aristotle admits that emotions, feelings, and desires are necessary part of virtue. There is no way to deny that emotions are part of us. We should expect them to be part of our actions. So to have a virtuous character is to be virtuous concerning our emotions and desires.
2. What is virtue in that case? It may easier to see what it is to be vicious: you arguably won't be able to be virtuous if you are overwhelmed by your emotions to the point that you are completely blind. This suggests that we will be vicious or virtuous according to the type of emotions we have in a given situation.
3. So: *Virtues thus consist in having the right kind of emotional response to the circumstances.*

Example: Fear. Well, there is no way to deny that fear exist. Fear is a feeling that we have and even need. Fear should be managed by reason though. *The brave person is the one that has the appropriate amount of fear in given circumstances.*

—→ *The point is that you get used to show the appropriate emotional response in being attentive to have the right kind of emotional response. Soon it becomes a second nature and you do not have to think about it anymore. This is then that you are truly virtuous: when the habit is fixed. The truly virtuous man will consistently have the right kind of emotional response in every circumstance, and even under pressure.*

Now, what is the right kind of emotional response??

Virtues as a mean – This is one of the most well known claims of Aristotle: virtue consists in a mean.

Virtue between two excesses – “...it is in the nature of moral qualities that they are destroyed by deficiency and excess”

Analogy with boby: the appropriate amount of food and exercise for being healthy is a mean

Example – Courage – the brave person is in between the rash person and the coward

To be brave is to show the appropriate amount of *fear* given the circumstances:
- Not having enough fear is inappropriate: Fear is necessary in moral life: not taking unnecessary risks is important

- Having too much fear to the point when you get paralyzed is inappropriate as well.

Illustration: the movie on WWII: how much fear do you need to protect a Jewish child?

Find more examples

→ *So, the idea is that perfection is always found between two excesses*

Two aspects of the doctrine of the mean :

“By virtue I mean moral since it is this that is concerned with feelings and actions” (p.48)

One can read the doctrine of the mean (DM) in two ways:

DM1 – Virtuous actions are the actions that lay in between two alternative actions that are respectively excessive and deficient.

In this case, the doctrine of the mean applies to actions

DM2 – Virtue of character is an emotional state in between two excessive states.

In this case, the doctrine of the mean applies to our emotional state.

Aristotle seems to suggest that both are true. That said, DM2 is more likely to be true than DM1.

DM1 is problematic – it is not necessarily the case that the appropriate action is an intermediate between two extremes:

- Sometimes, the appropriate action must be extreme;

- At other times, when we face a moral conflict, there is nothing “in between”. Rather, we have to make a choice if we want to act. Example: the woman in the wood outside of the concentration camp

→ *So, the doctrine of the mean does not seem to tell us what actions are the right one to do. This is not much of a surprise, virtue ethics tell us about what kind of person we should be, not the things we should do.*

DM2 is promising – The virtuous person pays the right degree of attention and concern to all relevant elements of the situation, he or she has the right kind of emotional response: the appropriate amount of fear, of confidence, of joy or sadness, of compassion.

“But to have these feelings at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way is to feel them to an intermediate, that is to the best, degree; and this is the mark of virtue.” (p. 48)

→ *The doctrine of the mean is best understood as applying to our emotional state than to the actions themselves.*

Disclaimers – What the doctrine of the mean *does not say*:

- There is no general rules: Aristotle's notion of virtue is twice relative (see p. 49): relative to the individual and relative to the particular circumstances. There is not general rules in ethics for Aristotle.

- Strong emotions are NOT ruled out: Strong emotions can be perfectly appropriate depending on the situation

Examples:

- Following the analogy from body health: diet for the couch potato vs diet for an athlete

- Anger (contrast with stoicism)

Conclusion – So: what is a virtue according to Aristotle?

- Virtues, according to Aristotle, are thus the dispositions to display to right kind of emotional response to the particular circumstances one faces.

- The right kind of emotional response always consists in a mean between two excesses.

- Virtues are acquired by habituation: while at first we need to force ourselves to be virtuous, that is, to respond emotionally to the circumstances in the appropriate way, we gradually build a reliable response pattern, which becomes like a “second nature”.

16.5 Conclusion: what to take from virtue ethics?

Advantages – solves both problem of :

- The cold-hearted man
- Partiality

What to do with it – Two options:

1. Virtue ethics is in complement of the other theories
2. Radical Virtue Ethics: Virtue Ethics stands alone

Radical Virtue Ethics – Objections and answers

Conflicts between virtues – Example from Rachels : honesty and kindness

Rachels is not fair here because:

1. Other theories of ethics have problems with conflicting values: this is not specific to virtue ethics
2. One can imagine a way to design of hierarchy of virtues, just as the other theories try to figure out a way to prioritize between absolute values.
3. Aristotle explicitly claims that virtues are true virtue only if they are possessed together.

Example: were the terrorists in 9/11/2001 brave?

To possess all the virtues together is to possess *Prudence*.

The problem of incompleteness :

- Virtue Ethics does not tell us what actions are the right ones, but only which emotional state is the right one to show consistently

- Aristotle's answer: Aristotle tells us that the right thing to do is what a prudent man would do. This can seem trivial, but it is less than it seems.

One would be tempted to say that prudence consists in judging the situation in the light of either utilitarian rules, or kantian rules, or some mixture of both. But this is missing the point. Aristotle's point is that *there are no absolute rules in ethics*. Ethics is a matter of practical wisdom. The only way we can learn what the right thing to do is in looking at the great men of all times, and try to imitate their judgement. Surely, there are such men on which we can take example.

—> *This is why, in a way, it would seem contradictory to think that we can supplement virtue ethics with absolute rules. Virtue ethics asks you to give up the idea that there are absolute rules which can be applied in every situation. Instead, virtue ethics encourages you to exercise your practical reason, and follow what virtuous men do.*

Summing up :

1. Being virtuous consists in having the appropriate emotional response to the particular situation at hand. The appropriate emotional response is a mean between two excesses.
2. Virtues are acquired by habituation: one becomes virtuous in acting virtuously. Only when the habit is fixed is someone truly virtuous. Virtues are a second nature, and as such, practicing true virtue is pleasant by itself.
3. Virtues come together: prudence, which is wisdom for practical reason consists in harmony and proper balance in all emotions.
4. There is no absolute rules in ethics: what is appropriate depends both on the individual and on the particular circumstances
5. The standard and measure of virtue is the prudent man.