

CS 4001: Computing, Society & Professionalism

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Week 4: Virtue Ethics

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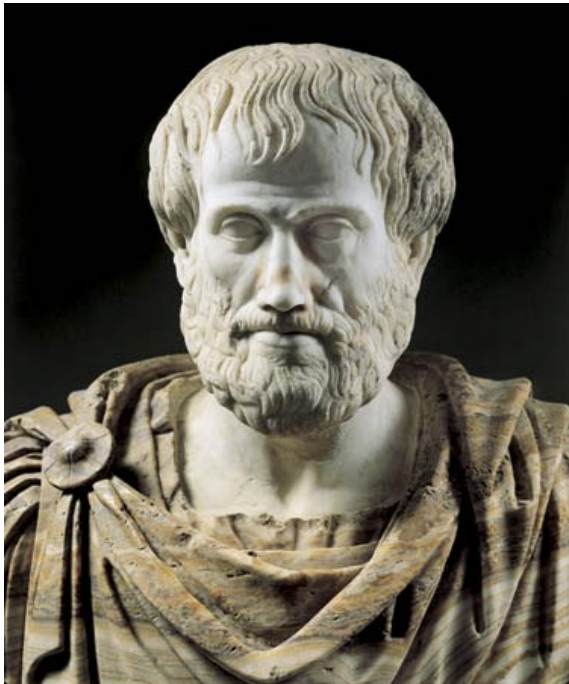
Definition

- A virtue is an excellent trait of character
- The virtue ethicist argues that what matters morally is not what we do at a time, but what we become over time.
- To the virtue ethicist it is the acquisition of a good character that is – or should be – our moral aim

Examples of virtues

- Courage
- Honesty
- Benevolence
- Compassion
- Justice
- Temperance

Definition



- One of the oldest normative ethical theories founded in ancient Greece.
- Aristotle, the founder of virtue ethics, believed that human beings are unique in having a potential they can fulfill by their own efforts.
- The only way to fulfill this potential, and achieve happiness (welfare or well-being), he argued, is to acquire the virtues.

Definition

- Importantly acquiring the virtues cannot be understood as a means to happiness.
- Anyone who attempts to be virtuous because they want their own happiness has missed the point.
- **Virtue is its own reward**

Definition

- Importantly we can't be born virtuous, virtue is something that must be acquired
- Being virtuous is a matter of acquiring the right habits
- Human beings must habitually act in accordance with virtue to avoid becoming morally flabby
- If you acquire the right habits you will, over time, become a person with the disposition to do certain things in certain circumstances.

Two tenets

- Virtue
- Practical Wisdom

A virtuous person

- Once you have become virtuous you will:
 - know what the right action is;
 - perform the right action;
 - perform the right action because it is the right action.
- Has a complex mindset

A virtuous person

- **Honesty example:**
- An honest person's reasons and choices with respect to honest and dishonest actions reflect her views about honesty, truth, and deception
- Valuing honesty as she does, she chooses, where possible to work with honest people, to have honest friends, to bring up her children to be honest. She disapproves of, dislikes, deploras dishonesty

Practical wisdom

- A virtuous person possesses *phronesis*—moral or practical wisdom
- The virtuous agent is motivated by emotion or inclination, not by rational choice
- Given that virtues lead to intentions to act well or “do the right thing”, we may say that practical wisdom is the knowledge or understanding that enables its possessor to do just that in any given situation.

Practical wisdom

- The practically wise agent has the capacity to recognize some features of a situation as more important than others, or indeed, in that situation, as the only relevant ones.
- The wise will tend to see the personally disadvantageous nature of a certain action as competing in importance with its honesty or benevolence or justice.
- **Example: mom's (or SO's) bad haircut**

Virtue Ethics

- Importantly the virtue ethicist rejects the idea that we should:
 - follow rules
 - try to produce certain consequences

Contrast with other theories

- *Suppose it is obvious that someone in need should be helped.*
- A utilitarian will point to the fact that the consequences of doing so will maximize well-being
- A deontologist to the fact that, in doing so the agent will be acting in accordance with a moral rule such as “Do unto others as you would be done by”.
- Virtue ethicist to the fact that helping the person would be charitable or benevolent.

Contrast with other theories

- Consequentialists will define virtues as traits that yield good consequences
- Deontologists will define them as traits possessed by those who reliably fulfill their duties
- Virtue ethicists will resist the attempt to define virtues in terms of some other concept that is taken to be more fundamental.
- Rather, virtues and vices will be foundational for virtue ethical theories and other normative notions will be grounded in them.

Response of a Virtue Ethicist

- Despite his fear a fireman judges that running again into the burning house might enable him to save a child. He springs into action. Sadly he fails to save the child and injures himself in the attempt.

Response of a Virtue Ethicist

- A poverty-stricken scientist is offered money by a rival company to share details of her work. The scientist knows these details will soon be in the public domain, so no harm would be done by accepting. Nevertheless she rejects the offer, unable to betray her company.

Response of a Virtue Ethicist

- An unemployed biologist is interviewed for his dream job. The interview goes well until he discovers the company is funded by a religious organization that expects employees to be of that religion. Although he could get away with claiming to be of that religion, the biologist doesn't want to lie and so loses the job.

Working Examples

- You discover Bill Gate's wallet lying on the street. It contains \$1000.00 Do you send it back to him?
- You are shopping and notice an older woman of likely less fortunate financial standing stuffing a pair of stockings into her purse. Do you report her?

Virtue Ethics

- A virtue theorist insists there is no such thing as a manual that will tell us how to act morally.
- The only way we can learn how to act morally is by emulating those who already act morally.

Virtue Ethics

- The only guidance virtue ethics theory offers us when it comes to our own actions is to tell us to seek out virtuous people and emulate them.
- Moral knowledge is practical, not theoretical, knowledge.

Forms of virtue ethics

- **Eudaimonist virtue ethics**
- Defines virtues in terms of their relationship to eudaimonia.
 - A virtue is a trait that contributes to or is a constituent of eudaimonia and we ought to develop virtues, the eudaimonist claims, precisely because they contribute to eudaimonia.
 - The concept of eudaimonia, a key term in ancient Greek moral philosophy, is standardly translated as “happiness” or “flourishing” and occasionally as “well-being.” [Not material happiness, but value-laden or moralized concept]

Forms of virtue ethics

- **Agent based or exemplarist virtue ethics**
- Agent-based virtue ethicists argue that forms of normativity—including the value of eudaimonia—are traced back to and ultimately explained in terms of the motivational and dispositional qualities of agents
- Define rightness or wrongness in terms of agents' motivations; in other words, by reference to the emotions, motives and dispositions of virtuous and vicious agents

Forms of virtue ethics

- **Agent based or exemplarist virtue ethics**
- How do you identify virtuous motivations and dispositions?
- “We do not have criteria for goodness in advance of identifying the exemplars of goodness” (Zagzebski 2004: 41).
- As we observe the people around us, we find ourselves wanting to be like some of them (in at least some respects) and not wanting to be like others. The former provide us with positive exemplars and the latter with negative ones.
- Our understanding of better and worse motivations and virtuous and vicious dispositions is grounded in these primitive responses to exemplars

Forms of virtue ethics

- **Agent based or exemplarist virtue ethics**
- How do you identify virtuous motivations and dispositions?
- As we encounter a wider variety of exemplars and begin to draw systematic connections between them, noting what they have in common, how they differ, and which of these commonalities and differences matter, morally speaking.
- Recognizable motivational profiles emerge and come to be labeled as virtues or vices, and these, in turn, shape our understanding of the obligations we have and the ends we should pursue.

The Case For

- In many situations it makes more sense to focus on virtues than on obligations, rights or consequences
- Personal relationships can be morally relevant to decision making
- It recognizes that our moral decision making skills develop over time
- There are no irresolvable moral dilemmas
- It recognizes the important role that emotions play in living a moral life

The Case Against

- Different people may have quite different concepts of human flourishing
- It cannot be used to govern government policy
- It underlines attempts to hold people responsible for their bad actions

Where Virtue Ethics is Difficult to Apply

- You run an orphanage and have had a hard time making ends meet. A car dealership offers you a new van worth \$15,000 for free if you will falsely report to the government that the dealership donated a van worth \$30,000. You really need the van and it will give you an opportunity to make the children happy. Do you agree to take the van?

Comparison of workable ethical theories

	Consequentialist Duty	Virtue
Deliberative process	What kind of outcomes should I produce (or try to produce)?	What are my obligations in this situation, and what are the things I should never do?
Focus	Directs attention to the future effects of an action, for all people who will be directly or indirectly affected by the action.	Directs attention to the duties that exist prior to the situation and determines obligations.
Definition of Ethical Conduct	Ethical conduct is the action that will achieve the best consequences.	Ethical conduct involves always doing the right thing: never failing to do one's duty.
Motivation	Aim is to produce the most good.	Aim is to perform the right action.

Class Activity

People give a variety of reasons for copying a music CD from a friend instead of buying it. Refute each of the reasons given below, using one of the viable theories covered in the class. (You don't have to use the same theory each time.)

- I don't have enough money to buy it
- The retail price is too high. The company is gouging customers.
- Since I wouldn't have bought it anyway, the company didn't lose a sale.
- Everyone else is doing it. Why should I be the only person to buy it when everyone else is getting it for free?
- This is a drop in the bucket compared to Chinese pirates who sell billions of dollars worth of copied music.

Question

- Can moral decisions be made on a completely codified, algorithmic basis, or are there fundamental weaknesses to this approach to moral decision making?