

CS 4001: Computing, Society & Professionalism

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Week 4: Virtue Ethics
February 1, 2018



Critique of Enlightenment Theories

- Kantianism, utilitarianism, social contract theory ignore important moral considerations
 - moral education
 - moral wisdom
 - family and social relationships
 - role of emotions
- Virtue ethics
 - *arete*, virtue, excellence: reaching highest potential

Virtues and Vice

- 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

Question: Pick Five

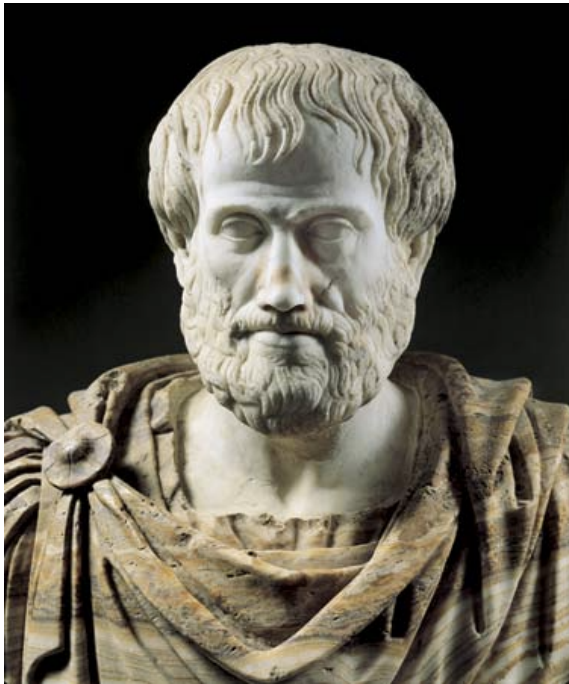
- Friendship
- Justice
- Courage
- Temperance
- Loyalty
- Fortitude (perseverance)
- Honesty
- Generosity
- Humor
- Ambition
- Wealth
- Humility
- Faithfulness
- Hope
- Agape (unconditional love)
- Anger
- Obedience



Vices

- Vices are opposite of virtues
- Vice: a character trait that prevents a human being from flourishing or being truly happy
- Often, a virtue situated between two vices
 - Courage between cowardliness and rashness
 - Generosity between stinginess and prodigality

Aristotle: Happiness derives from living a life of virtue



- 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
- **Habit:** If you acquire the right habits you will, over time, become a person with the disposition to do certain things in certain circumstances.

Definition

- The virtuous agent is motivated by emotion or inclination, not by rational choice
- Connection of virtues to emotions
 - Being courageous means you have to overcome fear

Working Example A

- You discover Bill Gate's wallet lying on the street. It contains \$1000.00 Do you send it back to him?

Working Example B

- 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?

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.

Two tenets

- Moral progress
- Practical wisdom

Moral Progress – By Training

- Over time and by practice, you will achieve moral progress when you will:
 - know what the right action is;
 - perform the right action;
 - perform the right action because it is the right action.

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
- 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; honesty vs. compassion**

Working example of practical wisdom

- For the virtues below, write when their deficiency can be a vice and when in excess they can also turn vice:
- Anger
- Magnanimity
- Courage

Working example of practical wisdom

- For the virtues below, write when their deficiency can be a vice and when in excess they can also turn vice:
- Anger (protesting against injustice or murder/using power and status to control innocent people)
- Magnanimity (mercy to foes/helping a homeless person)
- Courage (suicide bomber/inability to complain against injustice)

Virtue Ethics

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



Class Activity 1

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

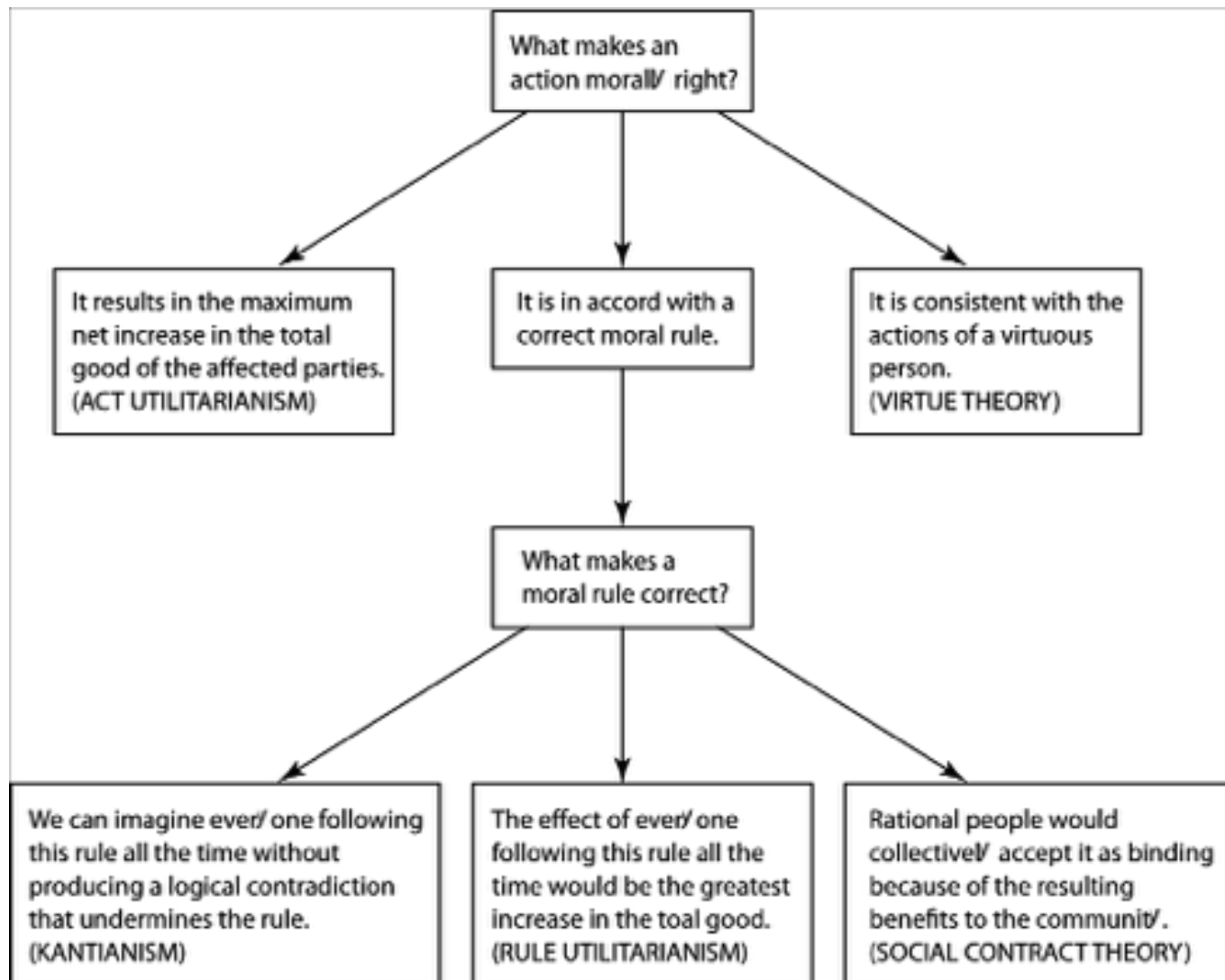
- **Agent based or exemplarist virtue ethics**
- Agent-based virtue ethicists argue that forms of normativity—including the value of eudaimonia—are traced back to and ultimately explained in terms of the motivational and dispositional qualities of agents
- Define *rightness or wrongness in terms of agents' 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



Comparison of Ethical Theories



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.



Class Activity 2

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?

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

Class Activity 3

- Can moral decisions, basing on any of the theories we have discussed, be made on a completely codified, algorithmic basis, or are there fundamental weaknesses to this approach to moral decision making?



Stakeholder Analysis

Business Ethics: Who are stakeholders?

- Stakeholders are broadly defined as anyone who is impacted by a decision-maker's decision.
- Some examples of corporate stakeholders would be shareholders, employees, customers, suppliers, financiers, families of employees and the community in which the corporation is located.
- Stakeholders could also be less directly related to the operations of a corporation.

Ethical dilemma and stakeholders

- Identification of potential stakeholders is essential for ethical behavior, and failure to identify stakeholders has led many to make unethical decisions without ever realizing they had a moral dilemma in the first place.
- E.g., profit vs. low wage
- E.g., Production vs. pollution

Stakeholders and Ethical Dilemma Applied

- Evaluate the potential actions you can take and then pick the course that is least morally problematic to a specific stakeholder (from an action, moral obligation, social contract, or agent's virtue perspective).