

CS 3001-C: Computing, Society, and Professionalism

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Week 5: Virtue Ethics

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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

Virtue Ethics

- 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

Virtue Ethics

- Importantly the virtue ethicist rejects the idea that we should:
 - follow rules *
 - try to produce certain consequences
- * Moral wisdom or discernment takes precedence over any rule



Response of a Virtue Ethicist – two examples

What are Virtues?

- A virtue is an excellent trait of character
- Rosalind Hursthouse says:
 - *A virtue such as honesty or generosity is not just a tendency to do what is honest or generous, nor is it to be helpfully specified as a “desirable” or “morally valuable” character trait. It is, indeed a character trait—that is, a disposition which is well entrenched in its possessor, something that, as we say “goes all the way down”, unlike a habit such as being a tea-drinker—but the disposition in question, far from being a single track disposition to do honest actions, or even honest actions for certain reasons, is multi-track. It is concerned with many other actions as well, with emotions and emotional reactions, choices, values, desires, perceptions, attitudes, interests, expectations and sensibilities.*

What are virtues?

- 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.
 - E.g. honesty (Quinn)

Examples of virtues

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

Examples

SPHERE OF ACTION OR FEELING	EXCESS	MEAN	DEFICIENCY
Fear and Confidence	Rashness	Courage	Cowardice
Pleasure and Pain	Licentiousness/Self-indulgence	Temperance	Insensibility
Getting and Spending(minor)	Prodigality	Liberality	Illiberality/Meanness
Getting and Spending(major)	Vulgarity/Tastelessness	Magnificence	Pettiness/Stinginess
Honour and Dishonour(major)	Vanity	Magnanimity	Pusillanimity
Honour and Dishonour(minor)	Ambition/empty vanity	Proper ambition/pride	Unambitiousness/undue humility
Anger	Irascibility	Patience/Good temper	Lack of spirit/unirascibility
Self-expression	Boastfulness	Truthfulness	Understatement/mock modesty
Conversation	Buffoonery	Wittiness	Boorishness
Social Conduct	Obsequiousness	Friendliness	Cantankerousness
Shame	Shyness	Modesty	Shamelessness
Indignation	Envy	Righteous indignation	Malicious enjoyment/Spitefulness

Working example A: Virtue and vice

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

Problem of virtue used for evil ends

- Is a Nazi soldier who fights valiantly and faces risk without flinching, courageous?

How much of a virtue is enough?

- How much generosity is enough?



Are the virtues the same for everyone (or are they culturally relative?)



Does virtue require adherence to absolute rules?

Different Formulations of Virtue Ethics

- arete (moral progress)
- phronesis (practical or moral wisdom)
- eudaimonia (flourishing)
- agent-based (exemplarism)

Working Example B

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

Working Example C

- 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?

The Case For and Against Virtue Ethics

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?

Contrast with other theories

- *Suppose it is obvious that someone in need should be helped.*

Virtues in other theories