Week 5: Virtue Ethics
February 7, 2022
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
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPHERE OF ACTION OR FEELING</th>
<th>EXCESS</th>
<th>MEAN</th>
<th>DEFICIENCY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear and Confidence</td>
<td>Rashness</td>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>Cowardice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasure and Pain</td>
<td>Licentiousness/Self-indulgence</td>
<td>Temperance</td>
<td>Insensibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting and Spending(minor)</td>
<td>Prodigality</td>
<td>Liberality</td>
<td>Illiberality/Meanness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting and Spending(major)</td>
<td>Vulgarity/Tastelessness</td>
<td>Magnificence</td>
<td>Pettiness/Stinginess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honour and Dishonour(major)</td>
<td>Vanity</td>
<td>Magnanimity</td>
<td>Pusillanimity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honour and Dishonour(minor)</td>
<td>Ambition/empty vanity</td>
<td>Proper ambition/pride</td>
<td>Unambitiousness/undue humility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Irascibility</td>
<td>Patience/Good temper</td>
<td>Lack of spirit/unirascibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-expression</td>
<td>Boastfulness</td>
<td>Truthfulness</td>
<td>Understatement/mock modesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>Buffoonery</td>
<td>Wittiness</td>
<td>Boorishness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Conduct</td>
<td>Obsequiousness</td>
<td>Friendliness</td>
<td>Cantankerousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>Shyness</td>
<td>Modesty</td>
<td>Shamelessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indignation</td>
<td>Envy</td>
<td>Righteous indignation</td>
<td>Malicious enjoyment/Spitefulness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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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)
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?
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