Week 5: Virtue Ethics
February 6, 2023
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.
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
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<th>DEFICIENCY</th>
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<td>Honour and Dishonour(minor)</td>
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<td>Shame</td>
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<td>Indignation</td>
<td>Envy</td>
<td>Righteous indignation</td>
<td>Malicious enjoyment/Spitefulness</td>
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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
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?
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 and Against Virtue Ethics
Contrast with other theories

- Suppose it is obvious that someone in need should be helped.
Virtues in other theories