

CS 3001-A: Computing, Society, and Professionalism

Munmun De Choudhury | Associate Professor | School of Interactive Computing

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.

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

How much of a virtue is enough?


- How much generosity is enough?

Problem of virtue used for evil ends

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



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?

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