

NOTES ON ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS (CLASSICAL VIRTUE ETHICS)

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- We are constantly faced with moral problems; it seems an intractable fact of human life. Do I donate to charity, do I lie in this or that situation to not hurt somebody's feelings, should I call the cops on my neighbors, is stem cell research wrong, should I eat meat, and so on.

- Previous theories such as consequentialism and deontology focused on the nature of goodness, per se, and gave rules for moral behavior. Virtue Ethics, rather, will be concerned with such questions as How Should One Live? & What Is A Life Well-lived? We will be concerned, here, with what the Greeks called *eudaimonia* which might roughly be translated as "well-being" or some form of "happiness."

"Moral theories are concerned with right and wrong behavior. This subject area of philosophy is unavoidably tied up with practical concerns about the right behavior. However, virtue ethics changes the kind of question we ask about ethics. Where deontology and consequentialism concern themselves with the right action, virtue ethics is concerned with the good life and what kinds of persons we should be. "What is the right action?" is a significantly different question to ask from "How should I live? What kind of person should I be?" Where the first type of question deals with specific dilemmas, the second is a question about an entire life. Instead of asking what is the right act here and now, virtue ethics asks what kind of person should I be in order to get it right all the time." -- Nafsika Athanassoulis, *IEP*, "Virtue Ethics."

- For Aristotle, virtue takes two forms: moral and intellectual. (*NE*, 91*) Intellectual virtue as well takes two forms: theoretical and practical. **Theoretical wisdom** concerns the human, *qua* rational animal, ability to contemplate and deliberate. **Practical wisdom** concerns the ability to *act* in such and such a manner at such and such a time.

- Thus, it is only a rational person that can *become* morally virtuous. (*Driver*, 138 **, 140, & 142)

- But the question remains: What does one have to do to become morally virtuous? First of all, one must practice being virtuous – virtue will become a habit. For example, *NE* 91 **

-Next, one learns how to develop one's habit – one learns how to be virtuous. This is done with the **Doctrine of the Mean** in their purview. The DotM is simply a "guide" that allows you to avoid **excess** and **deficiency**. Virtue, then, is a mean between two vices. *NE*, pp. 94-95, & 104.

"Which specific project we set for ourselves is determined by our character. A good person starts from worthwhile concrete ends because his habits and emotional orientation have given him the ability to recognize that such goals are within reach, here and now. Those who are defective in character may have the rational skill needed to achieve their ends—the skill Aristotle calls cleverness (1144a23-8)—but often the ends they seek are worthless. The cause of this deficiency lies not in some impairment in their capacity to reason—for we are assuming that they are normal in this respect—but in the training of their passions." -- Kraut, "Aristotle's Ethics," SEP

So, a virtuous person for Aristotle is one who acts in the right way, in the appropriate situations, and with the appropriate feelings and attitudes. Somebody who, say, pays their taxes, but does so grudgingly is said to not be a virtuous person. They are doing the right thing, but they do not have the appropriate feelings and attitudes toward the action. A person who saves a child from a burning building, but boasts about how brave they were is said to not be a virtuous person. They are doing the right thing, but with an inappropriate attitude.

- For Aristotle, every rational activity aims at some end or result. "Every art and every investigation, and similarly every action and pursuit, is considered to aim at some good." It is that at which all things aim.
- Politics is the science that studies the supreme good of man. *NE*, 63-64
- What is *eudaimonia*, then? *Driver*, pp. 142-143
- A eudaimonious person is one who is rational, who possesses theoretical and practical wisdom, and who not only acts between the extremes of vices (the mean), but does so with the proper attitudes and feelings. Thus it is a person who strives to be virtuous, and who becomes virtuous, and whose feelings and desires do not conflict with what she knows to be right that knows eudaimonia. (*Driver*, p. 141)

"Aristotle then observes that where a thing has a function the good of the thing is when it performs its function well. For example, the knife has a function, to cut, and it performs its function well when it cuts well. This argument is applied to man: man has a function and the good man is the man who performs his function well. Man's function is what is peculiar to him and sets him aside from other beings--reason. Therefore, the function of man is reason and the life that is distinctive of humans is the life in accordance with reason. If the function of man is reason, then the good man is the man who reasons well. This is the life of excellence or of eudaimonia. Eudaimonia is the life of virtue--activity in accordance with reason, man's highest function." -- Athanassoulis, §3a.

Criticism of Virtue Ethics

1. Unity of the Virtues. Since Practical Wisdom is necessary for Moral Virtue, i.e., anyone who is morally virtuous will be practically wise, then the morally virtuous person will be brave (not a coward), will be temperate (not rash), etc . . . In other words, if a morally virtuous person has one virtue, then they will have practical wisdom; but this implies that since one has practical wisdom enough to be just, then it is sufficient that they be temperate and courageous and magnanimous – all virtues are created equal.
2. Three types of friendships: based on business, pleasure, virtues. Forget business & pleasure. These don't seem to be friendships worthy of anything. But since friendship is a virtue for Aristotle, then if one has practical wisdom, then one must have friendship. And, of course, a friend is one who also displays all of the virtues which includes having virtuous friends. This doesn't seem to really be the case though. *Driver* says that we are all familiar with virtuous people who have less than virtuous friends. But this is contradictory to what must be if Aristotle's account of virtue is correct. Therefore, virtue does not seem a proper avenue to study ethics.
3. An intellectualist problem of moral perception. One must be rational to be moral for Aristotle. *Driver*, p.145
4. VE is too strict and would mean that, like the criticism before, that if any person was mistaken (or failed to perceive) some morally relevant fact about some action, then they would not be virtuous; but this seems contrary to what we see in society. Surely, we are not going to say that someone is not virtuous just because they got something wrong (morally).
5. Which emotions are governed by the DOM? Isn't it fair to assume that being really angry (even for no reason) is an unusual, but quite normal aspect of being human? Could we really live a well-lived life never knowing such emotions, etc...?

In the end, Virtue Ethics seems to be too idealistic. Is there a totally virtuous person to look to for an example that is not subject to cultural norms?