

what follows is a brief summary of the lecture notes from the discussion and presentation of teleological/virtue ethics.

Virtue/teleological Ethics:

For this theory, the norms of ethics are found in those activities and ways of living that allow us to flourish or live-well (happiness)

Definitions:

End – that for the sake of which something is done

Partial End – an end which is also a means to another end

Final End – an end in itself which it not a means to another end

Means – that which is done/chosen for the sake of something else

Happiness: the final end of human life in the sense that we do everything that we do for the sake of happiness, and we choose happiness for the sake of nothing else. For Aristotle, happiness means “getting it together” as a human being.

Formal characteristics of happiness – conditions of happiness that any “contender” for happiness must meet.

(1) final end of human activity – that for the sake of which we do all that we do and do not pursue for anything else. (so money cannot constitute happiness, since money is only a means to an end and never an end in itself)

(2) Self-sufficient – what constitutes happiness for an individual must be something that the individual can achieve for him/herself (for fame does not constitute happiness, since my fame is dependent upon the recognition that others gives me.)

(3) Distinctive to us as human beings – it’s as humans that we aim to be happy – not as some other kind of thing. E.g., pleasure does not constitute happiness since the capacity for pleasure is not distinctive of humans but pertains to all sentient beings (animals).

(4) Lies in an activity and not merely something possessed: As the excellence of a flute player is found when the person actually plays the flute not merely in the skill to play the flute, so happiness lies in actually living and doing it well. Notice, then that we are happy precisely when we are living and doing it well. Happiness is not the final end of human activity in the sense that it comes after everything else that we do, otherwise we would never be happy, since death comes after everything else that we do. (Aristotle does not have a theory of personal immortality for people.)

Aristotle argues that the condition of happiness lies in the unique “function” of human beings: that which humans do best or uniquely – this is found in human nature.

All living beings have souls – vegetative, sentient, rational Rationality that defines the human soul/person. Hence, happiness lies in rational activity – thinking AND act in terms of principles and rules.

Virtues.

The Greek term for virtue is arete or excellence. In Greek, the excellences of a thing are those characteristics that it needs to function well (to achieve the end for which it is designed or naturally inclined). So trees, tennis shoes, brain surgeon all must have certain characteristics if they are to perform their functions properly. Normally, in English at least, we do not refer to these characteristics as virtues. We don't ask sales people to show us a pair of virtuous tennis shoes for basketball playing. But the characteristics in a tennis shoe that make it well built to serve a function properly and effectively are analogous to the characteristics that we must have in order to regulate our various desires for material things connected with how we treat others and ourselves. These characteristics are the moral virtues – cultivated habits or dispositions by which we make good choices with respect to our desires. (So, professional mechanics and brain surgeons have developed the sorts of habits that allow them to perform their respective activities in a consistently effective manner. Morally good people have developed the sorts of habits that allow them to make good choices in consistently, effective manners regarding their various desires and how they treat themselves and others.)

Virtue is a mean (median) between two extremes of excess and deficiency: So greedy people desire excessive money. (What do we call someone who does not desire sufficient money??). One way to think of this idea of a mean is to think of an archer aiming at a target. The goal of the archer is to hit the target, neither undershooting, overshooting it. For Aristotle, the mean of an action is not a simple arithmetic mean (e.g., the arithmetic mean of 10 and 2 is 6). Rather, to use Aristotle's example, a trainer of athletes does not simply ask athletes what they would like to eat, but follows various dietary principles. Yet there is no standard/mean diet for all athletes, nor is there any mechanical way to determine the appropriate diet for athletes from dietary principles. The mean diet is one that is PROPORTIONATE to the particular athlete, the conditions in which he/she is training, and the specific tasks and activities in which the athlete is to engage.

The mean for an action is both discoverable and contextual. As mentioned in class, to understand this notion it's very important not to fall into the common trap of thinking of moral standards as either objective or subjective. That is, either moral standards are objective -- that is, they are universal rules that apply to everyone in the same manner (Kantian duties)-- or they are subjective, that is, merely a matter of personal taste or preference.

There are a variety of factors that are taken into account in a practical or prudential assessment of how one should act.:

The intention which specifies the ultimate consequence or goal that the agent seeks to attain. One determines this factor by asking the agent Why? (for what purpose) the action was performed.

The other factors to be considered are features of an action and its circumstances, external to the person acting.

The kind or nature of the action: This is determined by answering the question: What was done?

Instrumentality: the means used to perform the action -- with what was the action performed?

The manner in which the action was performed -- How was the action performed?

The agent who performed the action (including the relevant social roles): Who performed the action?

The time the action was performed -- When was the action performed.

The place in which the action was performed -- Where was the action performed.

The consequences of the action -- in particular the foreseeable consequences that the agent should have considered in performing the action.

The intention and the nature of an action are always relevant to assessing the morality of an act. The other factors often are, but not always. Note that we have a plurality of factors to consider, not simply consequences or the intrinsic features of an action. We always act in a context and thus actions are good or evil within a context. This does not preclude aiming for universal principles since there is a great deal of uniformity among people and the situations in which they act. Note also that while the assessment of actions is contextual, this does not preclude some actions being intrinsically wrong. Aristotle thought adultery was always wrong (there were never any contextual features that could make it right.)

Hence prudence or practical moral reasoning requires weighing contextual and other factors to determine an appropriate course of action in a situation. That is, while virtuous people recognize moral principles such as “do not take another person’s property without his or her permission,” one cannot simply follow a set of rules to determine how to act, since in particular situations, a number of factors come into play such as consequences, circumstances, etc that must be taken into account. Thus, while the mean for a particular action is discoverable it is not ‘objective’, at least in so far as objective is defined as universal.

Note that right intention is crucial for virtue ethics. As Aristotle says, the just person is not simply the person who performs a just action, but is someone who performs a just action in the way that a just person would perform it. Here, Aristotle would agree with Kant: there is a great deal of difference between the merchant who treats her customers honestly simply because of personal gain (pleasure) and the merchant who treats her customers honestly because it is a rational thing to do. For Aristotle, the virtuous person should enjoy being virtuous. Pleasure, however, is not the end or purpose of action but what accompanies action.

Since virtue ethics sees life as a quest for the attainment of well being (the end of human action) in light of our nature (who and what we are as humans). It is crucial that such an ethics develops a proper understanding of human nature. As we saw in class, this is often a controversial matter. For example, Christian fundamentalists would argue against Aristotle for, they hold that humans only get it together when they have a proper relation with Jesus that is based solely on faith in biblical teachings “literally” understood. Such individuals are likely to view reason as a corruptive force in human life (e.g., creationists regarding the theory of evolution). For these individuals, Aristotle is fundamentally mistaken in his view that the best life is one lived in conformity with reason. So too, for another example, we discussed how various interpretations of gender differences can determine conceptions of the sorts of virtues that it is appropriate or inappropriate for men and women to develop. Many would argue that gender differences are socially constructed and indeed that we ourselves are in some manner socially constructed. But if so, who are what we are is in part determined by the social worlds in which we live. If so, the determination of human well being is to some extent historically variable and not simply discoverable by reason. If this is the case, some would argue that virtue or character ethics is infected by cultural relativism.