

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

Virtue 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??) Prudence – 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. In the same way, 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 diet for all athletes, nor is there any mechanical way to determine the appropriate diet for athletes from dietary principles.

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.