

Introduction to Philosophy

Tutorial 7, Week 9

Virtue ethics

- 1. What is the key difference between virtue theory and the other moral theories we've looked at? (Think of what virtue theory thinks of goodness as primarily a property of.)**

Virtue theory sees goodness as primarily a property of *agents*. The other theories we have looked at tend to see goodness as primarily a property of *actions*.

- 2. What are the most important virtues? Give about five examples and explain why you think these are the most important.**

There are many possible candidates for virtues. Some examples are: compassion, generosity, friendliness, integrity and loyalty. It is not clear how we should decide which are most important, though in some cases it could be that one virtue is a special case of having one or more other virtues. For example, one might try to argue that the virtue of charity is the combination of the virtues of compassion and generosity, and so the virtues of compassion and generosity are more basic in some way.

- 3. Aristotle believed the virtuous person would fare better in life. Rachels points out that virtuous people do not necessarily fare better in financial terms. What *might* they fare better in terms of? Is it plausible that virtuous people fare better in life?**

Aristotle believed that only virtuous agents could attain *eudaimonia*, which has been translated as "happiness", "flourishing" or "well-being." But it does not seem obvious that non-virtuous people cannot be happy, flourish or achieve well-being. This perhaps just shows that these are not satisfactory translations of '*eudaimonia*', but even if it is just something like happiness (happiness-worth-having, for example) then it seems that whether or not a virtuous agent will attain it will depend to some degree on their environment, and luck. For example, we can imagine a society in which ruthlessness and lack of consideration are rewarded, and goodness is seen as a weakness and is simply taken advantage of. In fact, I believe that Aristotle did recognize that whether a virtuous agent fares better than non-virtuous ones depends on luck to some extent.

- 4. Rachels suggests (p184) that some virtues will be useful in all societies, whereas others will be specific to societies/jobs/roles. What might be wrong with saying that virtues are whatever allow you to get on well in life? (Consider, for example, the situation of women in Britain until the 20th century)**

There have been and are societies that restrict the options for 'flourishing' for all or a sub-section of their members (present-day Britain may well be one such). If virtue is *defined* as whatever allows one to flourish (as best one can) in the environment in which one finds oneself, then, for example, it seems that things like obedience and submissiveness must have been virtues for women in Britain until the 20th century—without these character traits, a woman could find herself condemned by society, or unable to obtain the financial security available through marriage and only by luck through other means, and would probably suffer frustration at the limited options available to her. But if submissiveness and similar traits were virtuous, then, for example, the founders of the suffragette movement lacked virtue. It is perhaps the case that virtues are what will allow one to flourish in a good society. However, it is not clear that one can define what makes a good society without reference to virtues (perhaps it is one which enables virtuous agent to flourish), in which case we could not define, without circularity, virtue as what enables flourishing in such a society.

- 5. Kant believed that the moral agent performs an action because it is her duty. What, according to virtue theorists, is wrong with this?**

A compassionate agent is one who is moved by the suffering of another to act to alleviate that suffering. A Kantian could certainly endorse acting to alleviate suffering, but such an action would only be moral if

it were performed *because* it was a duty springing from the Categorical Imperative. This can seem very cold. To use Rachels' example, a Kantian would say that someone who visited a friend in hospital in order to cheer them up just because it was their duty was morally better than someone who visited their friend just because they wanted to cheer them up.

6. Is there a corresponding problem with the account of moral motivation according to consequentialism? (Consider the case of dealing with friends and family.)

It is not clear that consequentialism has anything to say about moral motivation. As long as an action has the best consequences, it is right, regardless of the intention of the agent performing it. So the agent could have evil intentions which, when acted on, accidentally have wonderful consequences. Such an action would be more morally good than an action performed with good intentions that, unforeseeably, had bad consequences. There may also be a problem even if an agent is acting from consciously consequentialist motives. A consequentialist may visit a friend in hospital to cheer them up, as they want to maximize happiness, and believe that is the way to do it. However, there may be a problem with the very generality of the desire for happiness. When it comes to personal relationships such as with friends or family, some particularity may well be called for. We perhaps should act because we want *them* to be happy, not because we want people in general to be as happy as possible.

7. Explain how virtue theory has a problem with accounting for the reasons for which virtuous agents act. Does this problem suggest that virtue theory is not, after all, distinctive, and collapses into some other moral theory, eg Kantianism or consequentialism?

One objection to virtue theory is that it cannot help us decide what to do—and that is surely a serious flaw in a moral theory. In a problematic moral situation, how does a virtuous decide what to do, and, what is much the same, what reasons or justification can he give for his actions? Using the case of the inquiring Murderer discussed last week as an example: a virtuous agent could see that telling the murderer where to find their friend exemplify virtue insofar as it is honest, but vice insofar as it displays a lack of concern for their friend's life. How would they then decide whether or not to answer the murderer truthfully? Rachels argues that the only way they could reasonably decide would be to use the rules of some moral theory like Kantianism or consequentialism, and so virtue theory is not an alternative to these other theories—it is incomplete and so can at most complement some moral theory. However, this assumes that all valid reasoning must proceed by specifiable, universal rules, and this is just what some virtue theorists deny. Questions 8 and 9 explore this idea further.

8. In philosophy, we draw a distinction between propositional knowledge, or knowing-that (eg knowing that the earth is round) and capacity knowledge, or knowing-how (eg knowing how to swim). In the case of knowing-how, though there may be rules that we are taught when we learn how to perform the activity, we cannot give a set of rules governing everything that we do when we perform it—and we certainly do not perform the activity *by consciously following* a set of rules. Try to think of some more examples of activities to which this applies.

Possible examples include riding a bicycle, playing a musical instrument, knowing one's way around a town or building (this can be propositional knowledge, but it seems possible that someone can find their way to a particular room, and know they can do this, without their being able to say in advance exactly what steps they need to take) and being able to speak a language.

9. Though Rachels does not mention this, the idea that performing good actions is more a matter of knowing-how rather than knowing-that seems to fit fairly naturally into a virtue theory. When knowing-how is at issue, sometimes the best (or only way) of finding out the best, or right, way of doing something is to see what an expert in that skill does. Make sure you understand this idea—consider, for example, the ability to use the word 'game'. How might this idea help virtue theory overcome the objection that it cannot help us resolve conflicts?

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested that we cannot supply rules for determining whether or not something is a game—that is, there is no set of conditions that we can give that apply to *only* and *all* games (try it and see whether you agree). Nevertheless, proficient English-speakers can certainly *use* the word 'game', and presented with enough information about a new activity we can usually decide whether or not it is correct to call it a game (though there can be cases in which we are unsure). We will

probably be able to give some reason for our decision—we will probably appeal to similarities or differences with other activities we already know are games—but these do not amount to rules we can use in any circumstance to determine whether or not an activity is a game. So a proficient user of English is able to decide whether or not some new type of activity is a game. What of someone who is not a proficient user of English? Suppose someone learning English as a second language has gone some way to learning the word 'game', but knows only that it can be applied to ball games and to arcade games. If this person is then confronted with board games, how can they decide whether or not these are also games? They can have no rule to enable them to decide—there is no such rule—it seems that all they can do is ask someone who is a proficient user of English. Hopefully, though, with time and effort the agent will develop proficiency in English, and the capacity to decide themselves whether or not activities are games.

It may be possible to argue that something similar applies to acting morally. There are no rules that can be given that distinguish all and only morally good actions. Nevertheless, virtuous agents presented with a new situation can usually decide what is the morally best thing to do (though there may be cases where they are unsure). They will probably be able to give some reason for thinking it is the morally best course of action—probably appealing to things like the consequences of the action—but these do not amount to rules we can use in any circumstance to determine whether or not an action is morally right. So a virtuous agent is able to decide whether or not some action is morally good, but someone who is not virtuous can only appeal to someone who *is* virtuous in difficult situations. Hopefully, though, with time and effort, such non-virtuous agents will become virtuous, and develop the capacity to decide for themselves whether or not actions are virtuous. This capacity that it is suggested virtuous agents have that allows them to decide what actions are morally good has sometimes been called, in Greek, *phronesis*, or, in English, 'practical wisdom'.

The objection that virtue ethics cannot help resolve moral conflicts seems to suppose that a moral theory must be able to give rules for determining in any given circumstances what the right course of action is. However, if such rules cannot be given, but we can instead understand the resolution of moral conflicts as relying on the exercise of a capacity of practical wisdom, then this objection is undermined.

10. Recall Divine Command Theory (DCT)—the idea that an action is right *because* God commands it. How might virtue theory help resurrect Divine Command Theory? (Of course, there are still lots of problems with the DCT, including the questions of whether God exists at all and how we can know that something is what God commands)

One of the main objections to DCT is that if actions are right simply because God commands them, then God cannot have moral reasons for his commands—they are morally arbitrary. If, on the other hand, God gives command actions because they are right then it seems that God is redundant in a moral theory. If, however, virtue ethics is correct, and God is a perfectly virtuous agent, then we can see God as a being who has the perfect practical wisdom to see the morally correct course of action in any circumstances. In this case, he can be seen as responding to real moral features rather than issuing arbitrary dictates, but his decision procedures cannot be codified into rules that non-perfectly-virtuous agents can use. So whilst God's command is not what *makes* an action morally right, we cannot decide for ourselves what is right without appeal to God—so he is not irrelevant to moral theory. We mere mortals are imperfectly virtuous and so we cannot decide as well as God what is right, and so must bow to his superior expertise. *Our* justification for knowing that an action is right will not be the same as God's, as that is not available to any less-than-perfectly virtuous agents, but rather we *know* an action is right because God commands it.