

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College
Russell Marcus, Instructor
email: philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org
website: <http://philosophy.thatmarcusfamily.org>
Office phone: (718) 997-5287

Lecture Notes: Virtue Ethics

Now, consider a different kind of moral theory: Virtue Ethics
It comes from Plato, and Aristotle.
Nicomachus was Aristotle's son, thus the 'Nicomachean Ethics'.
It has been recently revived, in several guises (e.g. feminist ethics).
It is a different kind of approach: How do I live, rather than 'What shall I do, (or not do)?'

The right act is the act that a virtuous person would do.
In other words, evaluating individual actions is the wrong approach.
The question of morality is one of development of character.
We can't merely evaluate individual acts without a context!

Consider an investment scheme.
At first it looks good, the actions involved look at least morally neutral.
But when revealed in a wider context, we can see actions as leading to a scam.
Or consider the popular bully in school, who may eventually find himself without friends.
Or drug addiction, where using may seem fun, and satisfying at first.

Conclusion: you need a wider context, like a life, to evaluate the moral status of persons and their behaviors.
To find the answers to moral questions, you need to figure out what kinds of stories people tell about their lives
The stories start before you were born.
This is your moral starting point, which includes your family and community.
And you don't find out the ending until the end of a life.

So, to say that the just (right) act is the one the good (virtuous) man would do is unhelpful.
We need to know who is the virtuous person.
This will be the one who has the most good, the one who has lived a good life, i.e. the good man

So, what is human good?
Not 'what is right?' Then, the right is to seek the good.
Happiness (eudaemonia) is the chief good.
Sort of like Mill, but with a different, extended, sense to it.

There are two senses of 'good'
1) As opposed to evil.
This usually entails self-sacrifice.
Perhaps a Judeo-Christian notion.
2) Beneficial.
Self-fulfillment, might entail self-sacrifice.

The first is the basis for Kant and Mill

Mill thinks that focus on the first leads to the second, though Kant makes no such promises.
Aristotle focuses on the second, and only looks to the first if it's required to achieve the second.

If we want to know what is good (in this second sense) for humans, if we want to know how to live, we have to look at the particulars of what humans are, and what they do.

The end of all activities is that for which they are done.
Everything has a telos, a goal or end.
For example, plants have as a telos to flower and prosper.

Every activity has a telos, too.
Playing drums: to play with rhythm and force
Earthly motion: to the ground

So, what is the telos of human life? (pp 3-4)

Happiness (Eudaemonia): achieved at the end of a good life, not in the middle.
"For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy." (p 4c)
This is the happiness Jefferson was talking about pursuing, in the Declaration of Independence.
It comes from growing and learning.
In particular, it comes from learning the virtues.
Virtues are just those characteristics which will enable you to live a good life, free from worry.

If we want to know what it is to be a good (thus happy, virtuous) person, we have to know what it is to be a person.
A good person will just be someone who performs that function well.
As the flute player and the good flute player have the same function.

What activity is particularly human?
Life?
But plants and animals have it
Perception, interaction with environment?
Other animals have this.
Only humans have rational activity (p 4)
Human good is thus activity of the soul (mind) in accordance with virtue.
That is, the good person is the one who thinks, and tries to develop good habits.

Still we haven't been told what the right thing to do is.
All we know is that there are some virtues (habits) that we should try to cultivate.
These will make us happy in the end.

Defining the virtues:
Two kinds of virtue: intellectual and moral (p 6)
I: learned by teaching (not our concern).
M: learned by habit, practice.

Moral virtue is a mean between two extremes.
Excess and defect are fatal (pp 6-7), are vices.
Consider driving a car, at a moderate speed.

Courage between foolishness and cowardice.

What virtues are there?

There is no set list.

Courage, wisdom, temperance (for most pleasures and pains), and justice come from Plato.

Also: liberality (money, between prodigality and meanness).

Proper pride, between vanity, boastfulness, ambition and undue humility, mock modesty.

Wit between buffoonery and boorishness.

Friendliness between obsequiousness and surliness.

Modesty between shamelessness and bashfulness.

Righteous indignation between enviousness and spitefulness.

What other virtues are there?

One worry about Aristotle's ethics:

For Aristotle, virtue is supposed to be in your self-interest, by definition.

Note that courage, wisdom, temperance are all pretty clearly in one's self-interest.

But justice seems to be on the other side.

Consider the ring of Gyges: if we had it, we wouldn't be just.

This shows that it's in our interest to be unjust, as long as we aren't caught.

So, why should we think that this theory yields morality, as we think of it?

This may be a theory of how best to live, but it's not a theory of how to do the right thing.

Another criticism: It seems that not all virtues are really means between extremes.

Consider honesty.

But, this seems an eliminable part of Aristotle's theory.

Another eliminable element:

These virtues will vary from society to society, from individual to individual.

It depends on your moral starting point.

Aristotle had slaves, and thought women were mentally inferior to men.

These opinions seem open to adjustment.

For Aristotle, 'what is the right act?' is just the wrong question to ask.

We should rather ask: 'who should I become?' or 'what is the good life?' or 'How shall I live?'

These may not be very helpful in answering isolated moral questions.

But maybe those aren't the questions we should be asking.

MacIntyre counterposes two competing moralities: patriotism vs a 'liberal, impersonal' morality.

His use of 'liberal' is not meant as in current political climate.

It's a historical use: defenders of individualism and liberty.

The liberal conception may be Kantian or utilitarian.

He's attacking the universalizability aspect of traditional moral theory.

He presents five clauses of liberal morality: p 48

1. Rationality
2. Interest neutrality
3. Way-of-life neutrality
4. Individualism and Impartiality
5. Abstraction

Two problems with liberal morality:

1) Conflict of interest:

E.g. We both want the last oreo, or the Falkland Islands, or Iraqi oil

We can either impose force, or appeal to impartial standards (e.g. GHP, or CI)

Force abandons morality

But what motivation do I have to subordinate myself to these standards? (p 52)

2) Dissolution of social bonds

We need armed forces.

But the only reason for men and women to join is if they value their country over their own lives

“Good soldiers may not be liberals”

They can't think for themselves, look to impartial standards

Liberals undermine this kind of bond (pp 52-3)

For the liberal, impersonal morality, where and how we learn morality are as irrelevant as where and how we learn math facts.

These social bonds are in fact constitutive of morality in the first place.

Morality comes from family and community.

Also, the goods are defined by our community: how I live, what I value

Motivation and prevention of mistakes both come from the community, p 49

MacIntyre's argument in favor of patriotism:

1. The rules of morality are only understood via a particular community

2. The justifications can only be made within a community and with reference to the goods of that community

3. Only the community can provide moral sustenance

So, without this community, “I am unlikely to flourish as a moral agent”

This yields a loyalty which means that I should adhere to the community above any impartial standard

The story of our lives argument, p 52

We can only understand our lives in the context of these stories.

Patriotism is the kind of virtue that arises from taking seriously our moral starting points.

The liberal conception ignores these facts, about family and community, when deciding moral questions.

(p 50)

Note that virtue ethics, thus, is a fundamentally irrational position.

We place our country, if not necessarily its current political leaders, beyond rational criticism.

(In some fundamental way of understanding the nation as a project)

To summarize:

Kant and Mill sever morality from self-interest.

Aristotle tries to derive morality from self-interest.

But the Ring of Gyges shows that this is fruitless.

So, MacIntyre says that shows that the Kant/Mill-style morality is wrong.