

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2006
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Lecture Notes, March 13

I. Two notes on Kant:

1. Universalizing a maxim does not mean that if every one acts as I do, then it is morally permissible.

It means that we have to imagine a world in which every one acts as I do.

An action will be immoral if such a world is impossible.

Even if such a world is possible, an action will be immoral if we can not consistently will such a world.

Note that (consequentialist) considerations of whether we would like to live in such a world are irrelevant.

Relatedly...

2. Distinguish Kantian deontology from the Golden Rule.

The Golden Rule says that the actions we perform which affect others are only permissible if we are willing to have others affect us in the same way.

Kant's deontology concerns actions which affect others and actions which affect ourselves.

So, it is more broad than the Golden Rule.

Furthermore, according to the Golden Rule, if I am willing to suffer, I am allowed to make others suffer.

If I am willing to be punched, I can punch some one.

There are masochistic people in the world, but it seems wrong to think that they are permitted to harm others.

Returning to Virtue Ethics...

II. The virtues

We saw that Aristotle approved of Plato's four virtues:

Courage

Wisdom

Temperance

Justice

Note the differences between Plato's first three virtues and his fourth.

The first three seem clearly in one's self interest.

The fourth is different, embodies the Kant/Mill-style morality.

Aristotle adds as virtues, among others:

Liberality with money, between prodigality and meanness

Proper pride, between vanity and boastfulness

Ambition, between undue humility and mock modesty

Wit between buffoonery and boorishness

Friendliness between obsequiousness and surliness

Modesty between shamelessness and bashfulness

Righteous indignation between enviousness and spitefulness

What is important about these virtues is that there are some character traits which will lead us to happiness (eudaemonia) and others which will not.

We should practice those habits which benefit us in the long run.

III. Criticism #1: Virtue is supposed to be in our interest, but justice, seems to be against our interests

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

Virtues are those characteristics which lead a man to happiness.

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

But justice seems to be on the other side.

Would we be just, if it were not in our self-interest?

Consider, as Plato does, the Ring of Gyges, an invisibility ring.

Suppose that there were two magic rings, and the just man put on one of them and the unjust man the other; no man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice. No man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market, or go into houses and lie with any one at his pleasure, or kill or release from prison whom he would, and in all respects be like a God among men. Then the actions of the just would be as the actions of the unjust; they would both come at last to the same point. And this we may truly affirm to be a great proof that a man is just, not willingly or because he thinks that justice is any good to him individually, but of necessity, for wherever any one thinks that he can safely be unjust, there he is unjust. For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice, and he who argues as I have been supposing, will say that they are right. If you could imagine any one obtaining this power of becoming invisible, and never doing any wrong or touching what was another's, he would be thought by the lookers-on to be a most wretched idiot, although they would praise him to one another's faces, and keep up appearances with one another from a fear that they too might suffer injustice. (Plato, *The Republic*, Book 2)

If the virtues are supposed to lead us to eudaemonia, then why should we take justice to be a virtue?

It seems more appropriate to take avoiding being caught when being unjust as a virtue.

It is in our interest to be unjust, as long as we are not caught.

IV. Criticism #2: Morality is supposed to oppose self-interest.

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 is not a theory of how to do the right thing.

MacIntyre will defend virtue ethics against this charge, if indirectly.

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 are not the questions we should be asking.

V. Criticism #3: Not all virtues are means between extremes.

Consider honesty.

Here, we are tempted to say that the virtue lies very close to an extreme, if not right at it.

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

VI. Criticism #4: 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.

This is an eliminable element, like the claim that all virtues are means between extremes.

That is, one could strive for universalism within virtue ethics, a universal set of virtues.

But this would destroy the advantage of considering one's moral starting point.

We proceed to MacIntyre's defense of patriotism as a virtue.

VII. Contrasting virtue ethics with liberal morality

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

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

It is a historical use, referring to defenses of individualism and liberty.

Both Kantian and utilitarian ethics are liberal, in this sense.

MacIntyre is attacking the universalizability aspect of traditional moral theory.

He presents five clauses of liberal morality, p 414:

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

VIII. 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 impartial standards?

That is, if I am to sacrifice, I should have some motivation.

But in important moral cases, this is exactly what's missing, pp 417-418.

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," p 418.

They may not think for themselves, or look to impartial standards.

(The oddity of 'An Army of One' marketing.)

Liberals undermine this kind of bond.

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 415.