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A Brief Study of Virtue Ethics in Greek Philosophy

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Abstract:

Virtue ethics is an approach to ethics that treats the concept of moral virtue as central. Virtue ethics is usually contrasted with two other major approaches in ethics, consequentialism and deontology, which make the goodness of outcomes of an action (consequentialism) and the concept of moral duty (deontology) central. While virtue ethics does not necessarily deny the importance of goodness of states of affairs or moral duties to ethics, it emphasizes moral virtue, and sometimes other concepts, like eudaimonia, to an extent that other ethical dispositions do not. Virtue ethics began with Socrates, and was subsequently developed further by Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. Virtue ethics refers to a collection of normative ethical philosophies that place an emphasis on being rather than doing.

Keywords: virtue, ethics, greek, philosophy, Socrates, morality, Plato, Aristotle, human, character

Introduction

The tradition receded into the background of European philosophical thought in these past few centuries, the term "virtue" remained current during this period, and in fact appears prominently in the tradition of classical republicanism or classical liberalism. This tradition was prominent in the intellectual life of 16th-century Italy, as well as 17th- and 18th-century Britain and America; indeed the term "virtue" appears frequently in the work of Niccolò Machiavelli, David Hume, the republicans of the English Civil War period, the 18th-century English Whigs, and the prominent figures among the Scottish Enlightenment and the American Founding Fathers.[1,2]

The aretaic turn in moral philosophy is paralleled by analogous developments in other philosophical disciplines. One of these is epistemology, where a distinctive virtue epistemology has been developed by Linda Zagzebski and others. In political theory, there has been discussion of "virtue politics", and in legal theory, there is a small but growing body of literature on virtue jurisprudence.[5,6] The aretaic turn also exists in American constitutional theory, where proponents argue for an emphasis on virtue and vice of constitutional adjudicators.

In the West, virtue ethics' founding fathers are Plato and Aristotle, and in the East it can be traced back to Mencius and Confucius. It persisted as the dominant approach in Western moral philosophy until at least the Enlightenment, suffered a momentary eclipse during the nineteenth century, but re-emerged in Anglo-American philosophy in the late 1950s. It was heralded by Anscombe's famous article "Modern Moral Philosophy" which crystallized an increasing dissatisfaction with the forms of deontology and utilitarianism then prevailing. Neither of them, at that time, paid attention to a number of topics that had always figured in

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the virtue ethics tradition—virtues and vices, motives and moral character, moral education, moral wisdom or discernment, friendship and family relationships, a deep concept of happiness, the role of the emotions in our moral life and the fundamentally important questions of what sorts of persons we should be and how we should live.[3,4]

Its re-emergence had an invigorating effect on the other two approaches, many of whose proponents then began to address these topics in the terms of their favoured theory. (One consequence of this has been that it is now necessary to distinguish "virtue ethics" (the third approach) from "virtue theory", a term which includes accounts of virtue within the other approaches.) Interest in Kant's virtue theory has redirected philosophers' attention to Kant's long neglected Doctrine of Virtue, and utilitarians have developed consequentialist virtue theories.

Given that a virtue is such a multi-track disposition, it would obviously be reckless to attribute one to an agent on the basis of a single observed action or even a series of similar actions, especially if you don't know the agent's reasons for doing as she did.

Possessing a virtue is a matter of degree. To possess such a disposition fully is to possess full or perfect virtue, which is rare, and there are a number of ways of falling short of this ideal.

The fully virtuous do what they should without a struggle against contrary desires; the continent have to control a desire or temptation to do otherwise.[7,8]

Describing the continent as "falling short" of perfect virtue appears to go against the intuition that there is something particularly admirable about people who manage to act well when it is especially hard for them to do so, but the plausibility of this depends on exactly what "makes it hard". If it is the circumstances in which the agent acts—say that she is very poor when she sees someone drop a full purse or that she is in deep grief when someone visits seeking help—then indeed it is particularly admirable of her to restore the purse or give the help when it is hard for her to do so. But if what makes it hard is an imperfection in her character—the temptation to keep what is not hers, or a callous indifference to the suffering of others—then it is not.

Another way in which one can easily fall short of full virtue is through lacking phronesis—moral or practical wisdom.[9,10]

It is thereby the sort of concept about which there can be substantial disagreement between people with different views about human life that cannot be resolved by appeal to some external standard on which, despite their different views, the parties to the disagreement concur.

It is, within virtue ethics, already conceived of as something of which virtuous activity is at least partially constitutive. Thereby virtue ethicists claim that a human life devoted to physical pleasure or the acquisition of wealth is not eudaimon, but a wasted life.

But although all standard versions of virtue ethics insist on that conceptual link between virtue and eudaimonia, further links are matters of dispute and generate different versions. For Aristotle, virtue is necessary but not sufficient—what is also needed are external goods which are a matter of luck. For Plato and the Stoics, virtue is both necessary and sufficient for eudaimonia.[11,12]

According to eudaimonist virtue ethics, the good life is the eudaimon life, and the virtues are what enable a human being to be eudaimon because the virtues just are those character traits that benefit their possessor in

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that way, barring bad luck. So there is a link between eudaimonia and what confers virtue status on a character trait.

Discussion

Rather than deriving the normativity of virtue from the value of eudaimonia, agent-based virtue ethicists argue that other forms of normativity—including the value of eudaimonia—are traced back to and ultimately explained in terms of the motivational and dispositional qualities of agents. It is unclear how many other forms of normativity must be explained in terms of the qualities of agents in order for a theory to count as agent-based. The two best-known agent-based theorists, Michael Slote and Linda Zagzebski, trace a wide range of normative qualities back to the qualities of agents. For example, Slote defines rightness and wrongness in terms of agents' motivations: "Agent-based virtue ethics ... understands rightness in terms of good motivations and wrongness in terms of the having of bad (or insufficiently good) motives" [13,14].

However, there could also be less ambitious agent-based approaches to virtue ethics. At the very least, an agent-based approach must be committed to explaining what one should do by reference to the motivational and dispositional states of agents. But this is not yet a sufficient condition for counting as an agent-based approach, since the same condition will be met by every virtue ethical account. For a theory to count as an agent-based form of virtue ethics it must also be the case that the normative properties of motivations and dispositions cannot be explained in terms of the normative properties of something else (such as eudaimonia or states of affairs) which is taken to be more fundamental.

Beyond this basic commitment, there is room for agent-based theories to be developed in a number of different directions. The most important distinguishing factor has to do with how motivations and dispositions are taken to matter for the purposes of explaining other normative qualities. For Slote what matters are this particular agent's actual motives and dispositions. The goodness of action A, for example, is derived from the agent's motives when she performs A. If those motives are good then the action is good, if not then not.[15,16]

This is not to say that every time we act we stop and ask ourselves what one of our exemplars would do in this situations. Our moral concepts become more refined over time as we encounter a wider variety of exemplars and begin to draw systematic connections between them, noting what they have in common, how they differ, and which of these commonalities and differences matter, morally speaking. Recognizable motivational profiles emerge and come to be labeled as virtues or vices, and these, in turn, shape our understanding of the obligations we have and the ends we should pursue. However, even though the systematising of moral thought can travel a long way from our starting point, according to the exemplarist it never reaches a stage where reference to exemplars is replaced by the recognition of something more fundamental. At the end of the day, according to the exemplarist, our moral system still rests on our basic propensity to take a liking (or disliking) to exemplars. Nevertheless, one could be an agent-based theorist without advancing the exemplarist's account of the origins or reference conditions for judgments of good and bad, virtuous and vicious.[17,18]

The touchstone for eudaimonist virtue ethicists is a flourishing human life. For agent-based virtue ethicists it is an exemplary agent's motivations. The target-centered view developed by contrast, begins with our existing conceptions of the virtues. We already have a passable idea of which traits are virtues and what they involve. Of course, this untutored understanding can be clarified and improved, and it is one of the tasks of the virtue ethicist to help us do precisely that. But rather than stripping things back to something as basic as the motivations we want to imitate or building it up to something as elaborate as an entire flourishing life, the

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target-centered view begins where most ethics students find themselves, namely, with the idea that generosity, courage, self-discipline, compassion, and the like get a tick of approval. It then examines what these traits involve.

A complete account of virtue will map out 1) its field, 2) its mode of responsiveness, 3) its basis of moral acknowledgment, and 4) its target. Different virtues are concerned with different fields. Courage, for example, is concerned with what might harm us, whereas generosity is concerned with the sharing of time, talent, and property. The basis of acknowledgment of a virtue is the feature within the virtue's field to which it responds. To continue with our previous examples, generosity is attentive to the benefits that others might enjoy through one's agency, and courage responds to threats to value, status, or the bonds that exist between oneself and particular others, and the fear such threats might generate. A virtue's mode has to do with how it responds to the bases of acknowledgment within its field. Generosity promotes a good, namely, another's benefit, whereas courage defends a value, bond, or status. Finally, a virtue's target is that at which it is aimed. Courage aims to control fear and handle danger, while generosity aims to share time, talents, or possessions with others in ways that benefit them.[19,20]

A virtue, on a target-centered account, "is a disposition to respond to, or acknowledge, items within its field or fields in an excellent or good enough way". A virtuous act is an act that hits the target of a virtue, which is to say that it succeeds in responding to items in its field in the specified way. Providing a target-centered definition of a right action requires us to move beyond the analysis of a single virtue and the actions that follow from it. This is because a single action context may involve a number of different, overlapping fields. Determination might lead me to persist in trying to complete a difficult task even if doing so requires a singleness of purpose. But love for my family might make a different use of my time and attention. In order to define right action a target-centered view must explain how we handle different virtues' conflicting claims on our resources. There are at least three different ways to address this challenge. [21,22] A perfectionist target-centered account would stipulate, "An act is right if and only if it is overall virtuous, and that entails that it is the, or a, best action possible in the circumstances". A more permissive target-centered account would not identify 'right' with 'best', but would allow an action to count as right provided "it is good enough even if not the (or a) best action". A minimalist target-centered account would not even require an action to be good in order to be right. On such a view, "An act is right if and only if it is not overall vicious".[23,24]

The fourth form a virtue ethic might adopt takes its inspiration from Plato. The Socrates of Plato's dialogues devotes a great deal of time to asking his fellow Athenians to explain the nature of virtues like justice, courage, piety, and wisdom. So it is clear that Plato counts as a virtue theorist. But it is a matter of some debate whether he should be read as a virtue ethicist. What is not open to debate is whether Plato has had an important influence on the contemporary revival of interest in virtue ethics. However, often they have ended up championing a eudaimonist version of virtue ethics rather than a version that would warrant a separate classification. Nevertheless, there are two variants that call for distinct treatment.[25]

Timothy Chappell takes the defining feature of Platonistic virtue ethics to be that "Good agency in the truest and fullest sense presupposes the contemplation of the Form of the Good". Chappell follows Iris Murdoch in arguing that "In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego", breaks this natural tendency by drawing our attention away from ourselves. Contemplating such goodness with regularity makes room for new habits of thought that focus more readily and more honestly on things other than the self. It alters the quality of our consciousness. And "anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity, and realism is to be connected with virtue". [26,27]The virtues get defined, then, in terms of qualities that help one

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"pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is". And good agency is defined by the possession and exercise of such virtues. Another Platonistic variant of virtue ethics is exemplified by Robert Merrihew Adams. Unlike Murdoch and Chappell, his starting point is not a set of claims about our consciousness of goodness. Rather, he begins with an account of the metaphysics of goodness. [28,29]Like Murdoch and others influenced by Platonism, Adams's account of goodness is built around a conception of a supremely perfect good. And like Augustine, Adams takes that perfect good to be God. God is both the exemplification and the source of all goodness. Other things are good, he suggests, to the extent that they resemble God.[30,31]

Results

The resemblance requirement identifies a necessary condition for being good, but it does not yet give us a sufficient condition. This is because there are ways in which finite creatures might resemble God that would not be suitable to the type of creature they are. For example, if God were all-knowing, then the belief, "I am all-knowing," would be a suitable belief for God to have. In God, such a belief—because true—would be part of God's perfection. However, as neither you nor I are all-knowing, the belief, "I am all-knowing," in one of us would not be good. To rule out such cases [32,33] we need to introduce another factor. That factor is the fitting response to goodness, which Adams suggests is love. Adams uses love to weed out problematic resemblances: "being excellent in the way that a finite thing can be consists in resembling God in a way that could serve God as a reason for loving the thing".[34,35]

a) In the early days of virtue ethics' revival, the approach was associated with an "anti-codifiability" thesis about ethics, directed against the prevailing pretensions of normative theory. At the time, utilitarians and deontologists commonly (though not universally) held that the task of ethical theory was to come up with a code consisting of universal rules or principles (possibly only one, as in the case of act-utilitarianism) which would have two significant features: i) the rule(s) would amount to a decision procedure for determining what the right action was in any particular case; ii) the rule(s) would be stated in such terms that any non-virtuous person could understand and apply it (them) correctly.[36,37]

More and more utilitarians and deontologists found themselves agreed on their general rules but on opposite sides of the controversial moral issues in contemporary discussion. It came to be recognised that moral sensitivity, perception, imagination, and judgement informed by experience—phronesis in short—is needed to apply rules or principles correctly. Hence many (though by no means all) utilitarians and deontologists have explicitly abandoned (ii) and much less emphasis is placed on (i).

Nevertheless, the complaint that virtue ethics does not produce codifiable principles is still a commonly voiced criticism of the approach, expressed as the objection that it is, in principle, unable to provide action-guidance.[38,39]

But the objection failed to take note of Anscombe's hint that a great deal of specific action guidance could be found in rules employing the virtue and vice terms ("v-rules") such as "Do what is honest/charitable; do not do what is dishonest/uncharitable". (It is a noteworthy feature of our virtue and vice vocabulary that, although our list of generally recognised virtue terms is comparatively short, our list of vice terms is remarkably, and usefully, long, far exceeding anything that anyone who thinks in terms of standard deontological rules has ever come up with. (b) A closely related objection has to do with whether virtue ethics can provide an adequate account of right action. This worry can take two forms. (i) One might think a virtue ethical account of right action is extensionally inadequate. It is possible to perform a right action without being virtuous and a

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virtuous person can occasionally perform the wrong action without that calling her virtue into question. If virtue is neither necessary nor sufficient for right action, one might wonder whether the relationship between rightness/wrongness and virtue/vice is close enough for the former to be identified in terms of the latter. (ii) Alternatively, even if one thought it possible to produce a virtue ethical account that picked out all (and only) right actions, one might still think that at least in some cases virtue is not what explains rightness.

Some virtue ethicists respond to the adequacy objection by rejecting the assumption that virtue ethics ought to be in the business of providing an account of right action in the first place.

Is it not the case that different cultures embody different virtues, and hence that the v-rules will pick out actions as right or wrong only relative to a particular culture? Different replies have been made to this charge. One—the tu quoque, or "partners in crime" response—exhibits a quite familiar pattern in virtue ethicists' defensive strategy. They admit that, for them, cultural relativism is a challenge, but point out that it is just as much a problem for the other two approaches. The (putative) cultural variation in character traits regarded as virtues is no greater—indeed markedly less—than the cultural variation in rules of conduct, and different cultures have different ideas about what constitutes happiness or welfare. That cultural relativity should be a problem common to all three approaches is hardly surprising. It is related, after all, to the "justification problem" the quite general metaethical problem of justifying one's moral beliefs to those who disagree, whether they be moral sceptics, pluralists or from another culture.[40,41]

A bolder strategy involves claiming that virtue ethics has less difficulty with cultural relativity than the other two approaches. Much cultural disagreement arises, it may be claimed, from local understandings of the virtues, but the virtues themselves are not relative to culture.

Authors introduced it as a problem for deontology and consequentialism. He pointed out that the agent who, rightly, visits a friend in hospital will rather lessen the impact of his visit on her if he tells her either that he is doing it because it is his duty or because he thought it would maximize the general happiness. But as Simon Keller observes, she won't be any better pleased if he tells her that he is visiting her because it is what a virtuous agent would do, so virtue ethics would appear to have the problem too. However, virtue ethics' defenders have argued that not all forms of virtue ethics are subject to this objection, and those that are are not seriously undermined by the problem.

In the metaethical debate, there is widespread disagreement about the possibility of providing an external foundation for ethics—"external" in the sense of being external to ethical beliefs—and the same disagreement is found amongst deontologists and utilitarians. Some believe that their normative ethics can be placed on a secure basis, resistant to any form of scepticism, such as what anyone rationally desires, or would accept or agree on, regardless of their ethical outlook; others that it cannot.

Virtue ethicists have eschewed any attempt to ground virtue ethics in an external foundation while continuing to maintain that their claims can be validated. Some follow a form of Rawls's coherentist approach, Aristotelians a form of ethical naturalism.

A misunderstanding of eudaimonia as an unmoralized concept leads some critics to suppose that the neo-Aristotelians are attempting to ground their claims in a scientific account of human nature and what counts, for a human being, as flourishing. Others assume that, if this is not what they are doing, they cannot be validating their claims that, for example, justice, charity, courage, and generosity are virtues. Either they are illegitimately helping themselves to Aristotle's discredited natural teleology, or producing mere rationalizations of their own personal or culturally inculcated values. [42]

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On the view that the exercise of the virtues is necessary but not sufficient for eudaimonia, such cases are described as those in which the virtuous agent sees that, as things have unfortunately turned out, eudaimonia is not possible for them.

The most recent objection (h) to virtue ethics claims that work in "situationist" social psychology shows that there are no such things as character traits and thereby no such things as virtues for virtue ethics to be about. In reply, some virtue ethicists have argued that the social psychologists' studies are irrelevant to the multitrack disposition that a virtue is supposed to be. Mindful of just how multi-track it is, they agree that it would be reckless in the extreme to ascribe a demanding virtue such as charity to people of whom they know no more than that they have exhibited conventional decency; this would indeed be "a fundamental attribution error." Others have worked to develop alternative, empirically grounded conceptions of character traits. There have been other responses as well.Notable among these is a response ,who steers a middle road between "no character traits at all" and the exacting standard of the Aristotelian conception of virtue which, because of its emphasis on phronesis, requires a high level of character integration. On his conception, character traits may be "frail and fragmentary" but still virtues, and not uncommon. But giving up the idea that practical wisdom is the heart of all the virtues, as Adams has to do, is a substantial sacrifice.

Even though the "situationist challenge" has left traditional virtue ethicists unmoved, it has generated a healthy engagement with empirical psychological literature, which has also been fuelled by the growing literature on Foot's Natural Goodness and, quite independently, an upsurge of interest in character education

Conclusions

Over the past thirty-five years most of those contributing to the revival of virtue ethics have worked within a neo-Aristotelian, eudaimonist framework. However, as noted in section 2, other forms of virtue ethics have begun to emerge. Theorists have begun to turn to philosophers like Hutcheson, Hume, Nietzsche, Martineau, and Heidegger for resources they might use to develop alternatives. Others have turned their attention eastward, exploring Confucian, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions.

This is sometimes, no doubt, because "the" issue has been set up as a deontologicial/utilitarian debate, but it is often simply because no virtue ethicist has yet written on the topic. However, the last decade has seen an increase in the amount of attention applied virtue ethics has received. This area can certainly be expected to grow in the future, and it looks as though applying virtue ethics in the field of environmental ethics may prove particularly fruitful. [43]

Whether virtue ethics can be expected to grow into "virtue politics"—i.e. to extend from moral philosophy into political philosophy—is not so clear. Writers have argued that however, recent work suggests that Aristotelian ideas can, after all, generate a satisfyingly liberal political philosophy. Moreover, as noted above, virtue ethics does not have to be neo-Aristotelian. It may be that the virtue ethics of Hutcheson and Hume can be naturally extended into a modern political philosophy. [45]

Following Plato and Aristotle, modern virtue ethics has always emphasised the importance of moral education, not as the inculcation of rules but as the training of character. There is now a growing movement towards virtues education, amongst both academics, and teachers in the classroom. One exciting thing about research in this area is its engagement with other academic disciplines, including psychology, educational theory, and theology. [44]

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Finally, one of the more productive developments of virtue ethics has come through the study of particular virtues and vices. There are now a number of careful studies of the cardinal virtues and capital vices. Others have explored less widely discussed virtues or vices, such as civility, decency, truthfulness, ambition, and meekness. One of the questions these studies raise is "How many virtues are there?" A second is, "How are these virtues related to one another?" Some virtue ethicists have been happy to work on the assumption that there is no principled reason for limiting the number of virtues and plenty of reason for positing a plurality of them. This highlights two important avenues for future research, one of which explores individual virtues and the other of which analyses how they might be related to one another. [46]

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