Normative Ethics
Lecture 7
Virtue ethics

§1. Being and doing

What determines whether or not an action is morally obligatory/permissible…?

What determines whether or not a person is virtuous/of good character…?

Utilitarians and Kantians can answer both of these questions…

T1 ‘…Personal Merit consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others…

(David Hume, Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, p.268)

Perhaps the point is to give a distinctive non-Kantian, non-utilitarian, answer to the question about doing…

Or perhaps the mistake of utilitarians and Kantians alike is to think that we can give an entirely general answer to the question about doing…

§2. What would the virtuous person do?

Whether or not an action is morally obligatory is determined by whether or not it is the action that a virtuous person would characteristically perform…

A person is virtuous just in case they possess the virtues…

But what are the virtues…? Should we just give a list…?

The virtues are those character traits that are necessary for a person to flourish, i.e. to achieve happiness or eudaimonia… But then what is eudaimonia…?

Virtues are multi-track dispositions… They can’t be analysed in terms of single counterfactual conditionals…

T2 ‘…virtue of character… is concerned with feelings and actions… and these admit of excess, deficiency and an intermediate condition… We can be afraid… or be confident… or get angry… in general feel pleasure or pain, both too much and too little, and in both ways not well… ‘…but [having these
feelings] at the right times, about the right things... towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way... is the intermediate and best condition, and this is proper to virtue.' (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p.44)

What determines whether or not a person is *kind, fair, honest, courageous*...? Isn’t it whether or not the actions they would characteristically perform are *kind, fair, honest, courageous*...?

**Pluralistic non-consequentialism**

There is an *irreducible plurality* of things that determine whether or not an action is morally obligatory, e.g. whether or not it is *kind*, whether or not it is *honest*, whether or not it is *courageous*, etc.

Rosalind Hursthouse on *v-rules*...

T3 ‘...moral knowledge – unlike mathematical knowledge – cannot be acquired merely by attending lectures and is not characteristically to be found in people too young to have had much experience of life... There are youthful mathematical geniuses, but rarely, if ever, youthful moral geniuses, and this tells us something significant about the sort of knowledge that moral knowledge is.’

(Rosalind Hursthouse, *Virtue Theory and Abortion*, p.231)

**Weak Moral Particularism**

There is a fact of the matter as to whether keeping a promise is morally obligatory *in this particular situation*... But there is no fact of the matter as to whether a keeping a promise is morally obligatory *in every situation*...

**Strong Moral Particularism**

There is a fact of the matter as to whether keeping a promise is a *prima facie* duty *in this particular situation*... But there is no fact of the matter as to whether a keeping a promise is a *prima facie* duty *in every situation*...

§3. *Conflicts and dilemmas*

Is it an objection to virtue ethics if it fails to solve ethical conundrums?

P1 We should accept a normative theory only if it gives us a clear answer to the question what we ought, morally, to do in difficult cases.

P2 Virtue ethics does not give us a clear answer to the question what we ought, morally, to do in difficult cases.

C We should not accept virtue ethics.
Is P1 true…?

Doesn’t virtue ethics at least tell us how to put ourselves in a better position to answer these questions…?

§4. Relativism and situationism

Relativism About Virtues

There is a fact of the matter as to whether a person has the virtues relative to 21st Century Britain or relative to Ancient Greece… But there is no fact of the matter as to whether a person has the virtues simpliciter.

Moral Relativism

There is a fact of the matter as to whether an action is morally obligatory/permissible relative to 21st Century Britain or relative to Ancient Greece… But there is no fact of the matter as to whether an action is morally obligatory/permissible simpliciter.

P1 The fact that a person has the virtues is only ever the fact that they have the virtues relative to some place/time/community.

P2 If virtue ethics is true then whether or not an action is morally obligatory is determined by whether it is what a person possessing the virtues would characteristically do.

C1 If virtue ethics is true then the fact that an action is morally obligatory is only ever the fact that this action is morally obligatory relative to some place/time/community.

P3 There are facts about which actions are morally obligatory simpliciter.

C2 Virtue ethics is false.

What explains why people act the way they do…? Is it more a matter of their particular disposition or character…? Or is it more a matter of the particular situations in which they find themselves…? Situationism calls the former response the fundamental attribution error…

T4 ‘In attempting to characterise and explain the movements of a body, folk physics places too much emphasis on assumed internal characteristics of the body, ignoring external forces… Similarly, in trying to characterise and explain a distinctive action, ordinary thinking tends to hypothesise a corresponding distinctive characteristic of the agent and tends to overlook the relevant details of the agent’s perceived situation.’

(Gilbert Harman, Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology, p.316)

The good samaritan experiment…
There is no such thing as an action that a person performs because of their character. …since it is the situations in which we find ourselves that explain our actions.

Virtue ethics can't tell us which actions are morally obligatory.

Virtue ethics can tell us which actions are morally obligatory only if there is such thing as an action that a person performs because of their character…. …for it is precisely which actions a virtuous person performs because of their character that a virtue ethicist thinks determines which actions are morally obligatory.

Does the experiment really establish P1…?

References

- Aristotle (1985) Nicomachean Ethics; Translated by Terry Irwin, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis IN.