Normative Ethics

Lecture 3
Virtue ethics
The plan for today...

1. Being and doing

2. What would the virtuous person do?

3. Conflicts and dilemmas

4. Relativism and situationism
§1. Being and doing
Virtue ethics is about being not doing...

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

What determines whether or not a person is virtuous/of good character...?
What determines whether or not an action is morally obligatory/permissible...?

Whether or not it produces the most happiness...

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

Whether or not they have those character traits that produce the most happiness...
‘...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)

This is why we shouldn’t value the ‘monkish virtues’ of humility, celibacy, etc.
What determines whether or not an action is morally obligatory/permissible...

Whether or not it breaks the *moral law*...

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

Whether or not they have those character traits that help them never to break the *moral law*...
Perhaps the point isn’t just to answer a different question...

...a question about *being* not *doing*...

...but to give a distinctive non-Kantian, non-utilitarian, answer to the question about doing...
Perhaps the point is that the question about being is the one we should be trying to answer if we want to do the right thing...

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...

But what determines whether or not a person is virtuous...?
A person is virtuous just in case they possess the virtues...

Whether or not an action is morally obligatory is determined by...

...whether or not it is the action that a person possessing the virtues would characteristically perform...
But what are the virtues...?

Honesty...

Courage...

Moderation...

Kindness...
But what are the virtues...?

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 dispositional*...

They can’t be analysed in terms of single counterfactual conditionals...

...e.g. Rob is brave if and only if he wouldn’t run away if someone threatened him with a knife...
‘...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)
Whether or not an action is morally obligatory is determined by whether or not it is the action that a kind, fair, honest, courageous person would characteristically perform...

But 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...?
Isn’t this just a form of...

*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.
These could even be expressed in the form of *moral rules*...

Rosalind Hursthouse calls them *v-rules*...

Don’t do *dishonest* things...

Don’t do *unkind* things...
‘...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)
Knowledge of what we ought, morally, to do isn’t like knowledge of what we ought, legally, to do...

...we shouldn’t be trying to identify rules or general principles that we can apply to particular situations...
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 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 \textit{prima facie} duty in this particular situation...

But there is no fact of the matter as to whether a keeping a promise is a \textit{prima facie} duty in every situation...
§3. Conflicts and dilemmas
Suppose my friend asks if I like the song they’ve just written...

It would be dishonest to say I like it if I really don’t...

It would be unkind to say that I don’t like it...
What about the standard topics of applied ethics...?

Abortion...

Euthanasia...

Designer babies...

Does virtue ethics tell us anything about how to solve these problems...?
You see a runaway tram hurtling towards five workmen...

If you push a fat man off a bridge into the path of the tram, it will be stopped...

Is it morally permissible to push the fat man...?
Does virtue ethics tell us anything about what to do in this situation...?

Are we supposed to reflect on whether it would be unkind, or unfair, to push the fat man...

...or unfair on the workers not to push the fact man...?

It’s not at all clear what virtue ethics tells us about this case...
Is it an objection to virtue ethics if it fails to solve these problems?

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.
§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*. 
Are *modesty* and *humility* virtues...?

Some cultures treat them as virtues...

Some don’t...

Do we want to say that some of these cultures are just getting it wrong...?
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.
The relativist objection...

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.