

Handout 7: Rachels's *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*: Chapter 12

THE ETHICS OF VIRTUE

13.1 The Ethics of Virtue and the Ethics of Right Action

Classical Formulation: Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*

- **Summary**

- "The moral virtues are the virtues of persons as such" (162): "Categorical" Virtues
 - not just "hypothetical" virtues as *teachers*, as *musicians*: say I'm a bad teacher & you just condemn my pedagogy
 - say I'm morally bad & you condemn ME outright.
- Aristotle says :"

This [account of the chief human good] might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or an artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he born without a function? " (1097b25)

- **Aristotle's Argument** (1098a20)
 - "[T]he function of F, e.g. of a harpist, is the same in kind . . . as the function of an excellent F, e.g. an excellent harpist."
 - a harpist is someone who plays the harp
 - an excellent harpist is one who plays the harp well
 - "The same is true unconditionally in every case, when we add to the function the superior achievement that expresses the virtue [proper to that function]."
 - the virtue of harpists *as harpists* resides in their harp playing ability
 - the virtue of teachers *as teachers* resides in their teaching ability
 - the virtue of fuel pumps *as fuel pumps* resides in their fuel pumping ability
 - The human function is to live a *human* life
 - not just to feed & breed (plants do as much)
 - not just to *enjoy* feeding, breeding etc. (beasts do as much)
 - a life subject to rational oversight.
- **Subordinates the question of right conduct to the question of good character**
 - Good character
 - having certain human excellences or virtues we naturally admire in others and wish for in ourselves
 - Examples: courage, wisdom, generosity, friendliness, honesty
 - Good conduct: doing the sort of things that
 - spring from virtues (in those that already have them)
 - inculcate and perfect the virtues (in those who yet aspire)

- Good deeds are just the sorts of deeds that good (rational & admirable) people do.

Legalistic Morality (Contrast)

- Good conduct = obedience to moral law
 - God given: Divine Command
 - As dictated by Utility: Rule Utilitarianism
 - As dictated by pure reason: Kant
 - As part of the social contract: SCT
- Virtue or good character = propensity to follow these rules
- Good people are the sort of people who do good (lawful) deeds.
- Contrast
 - Virtue ethics
 - begins with a conception of the good person
 - defines good conduct as the sort of conduct that
 - people who are that way go in for
 - and that makes people that way.
 - rules just rough generalizations
 - about what sorts of things good folks do under various circumstances
 - "among statements about conduct . . . those which are particular are more genuine, since conduct has to do with individual cases, and our statements must harmonize with the facts in these cases." (1107a28)
 - Legalistic ethics
 - begins with rules
 - defines good conduct as that which accords with the rules
 - defines good persons as those who conduct themselves accordingly

Should We Return to the Ethics of Virtue?

Anscombe's complaint

- legalistic ethics rest on the incoherent notion of a "law" without a lawgiver: DCT unacceptable
- and the alternative sources of moral "legislation" are inadequate substitutes

13.2 The Virtues

What Is a Virtue?

- they are traits of character
- expressed by habitual patterns of behavior
 - same patterns of behavior through which they are acquired
- that are good (bad) for people *as such* to have
 - traits we take to be desirable (undesirable) or admirable (shameful) for people as such
 - virtue of anything consists in performing (or having the capacity for performing) its proper task well
 - e.g., virtues of cars: reliability, handling, braking, acceleration

- virtues of cat burglars: stealth, agility, fearless of heights, skillful at lock picking.
- c. Proper function of humans as such?
 - Aristotle
 - vegetative fulfillment: health & reproduction
 - animal fulfillment: pleasure & sensation & travel
 - personal fulfillment:
 - thought
 - artistic creativity
 - self direction (moderation & self control)
 - Freud: to love & work

What Are the Virtues?

To name a few:

Trustworthiness	Kindness	Cleanliness
Loyalty	Obedience	Reverence
Helpfulness	Cheerfulness	Humor
Friendliness	Thrift	Social aptness
Courteousness	Courage	Strength of Will

What Do These Virtues Consist In?

- Aristotle:
 - a **virtue is** "the mean by reference to two vices: the one of excess and the other of deficiency"

 - "to feel [and do things] at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue."

- **Examples**
 - Cowardice - **Courage** - Rashness: facing dangers for at the right place, at the right time, for the right purposes.
 - Geach v. Rachels issue about courage: were any Nazi's (or 9/11 bombers) *brave*?
 - Geach (& Aristotle?) - *no* (it's not for "the right purposes")
 - Rachels - *yes*
 - Stinginess - **Generosity** - Wastefulness: sharing of goods
 - Dishonesty - **Honesty** - Tactlessness: telling the truth
 - Geach v. Rachels concerning lies
 - Geach: an honest person never lies -- but he approves of Athanasius' deception
 - Rachels: an honest person never lies except "in rare circumstances" for "compelling reasons" (179)

- **Discussion**
 - Is Loyalty to family and friends a Virtue? : Bringing the notion of impartiality back into question.

Why Are the Virtues Important?

- Aristotle: the cultivation and exercise of the virtues is self-actualizing -- truly "virtue is its own reward"
 - Virtues are characteristics that make for human fulfillment: a well rounded & happy life
 - for psychological health & mental balance: psychological self-actualization

Are the Virtues the Same for Everyone?

- **Discussion**
 - Why isn't virtue ethics just a kind of relativism?

12.3 Advantages of Virtue Ethics

1. Correct Account of moral motivation:

- the case of Smith (the dutiful hospital visitor)
- the problem of moral schizophrenia

2. Makes room for partiality

- return to the question of whether loyalty and friendship are virtues
- one is allowed -- even required -- to show partiality for family, friends, etc.
- to the right right persons, in the right circumstances, to an appropriate degree, etc.

3. Speaks to feminist concerns about masculine bias

- restores focus on the personal & private: on individual ties to particular people
- not just the impersonal and public: on humanity & society

4. Explains centrality of Moral Heroes in almost Every Ethical Tradition

- Jesus & the saints: WWJD?
- Mohammed
- Moses and the prophets
- Buddha & the Bodhisattvas
- Heroes of Old (in Greek & other traditional lores).

The Problem of Incompleteness

- Gives us no formula for deciding conflict cases
 - E.g., between friendship & justice: case of the rapist buddy
 - E.g., between filial piety & patriotism: Sartre's case
 - E.g., between truthfulness & prevention of suffering: Gestapo questioning case
- Reply: ethics is like that
 - Conflict cases cause trouble for other theories as well: e.g., Kant's
 - life as art: a creative adventure: no rules for artistic creativity