**Intro to Virtue Ethics and**

**Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I**

PHIL 230, Fall 2014

Questions for those who don’t have a presenter today

1. In virtue ethics, how do we decide what the virtues are? Are some of them universally applicable, or are there going to be different lists of virtues for different societies? And if the latter, must virtue ethicists be moral relativists?

2. If virtues are accumulated over a lifetime of different experiences, how can any two people share the exact same virtue and instinctively know how to apply that virtue consistently in a variety of situations (since their moral education never ends and their character may still change)?

3. What are some benefits/drawbacks to focusing on what kind of *person to be* in a moral theory rather than determining the right *action* *to do* based on a fundamental principle like the GHP or the CI?

**A different approach to ethics**

(IEP entry on Virtue Ethics, sect. 2)

Consequentialism and Kantianism focused on determining right and wrong *actions*

* Argue for fundamental principle, use that to evaluate morality of actions (or rules, which then are used to evaluate actions)

Virtue Ethics focused on what kinds of *persons* we should try to become

* Instead of specifying principles or rules to guide action, VE emphasizes becoming the kind of person who can determine themselves how they should act
* VE often argues that human action is too complex to be captured in any single set of rules or grounding principles (IEP on VE, sect. 2c)
  + Depends on circumstances that differ greatly in diff situations
  + Need to become the kind of person who can judge correctly in diff situations, who has “practical wisdom” (term from Aristotle)
  + Not everyone can do this well; and takes long experience to develop (so children can’t do it well)

Virtue ethicists don’t start by coming up with a fundamental principle of ethics (like GHP or CI) and then derive from that all possible answers as to what ought to be done

* Aristotle doesn’t give us a list of moral rules to follow, derived from one principle
* Rosalind Hursthouse, a modern V Ethicist, does say we can get a set of rules from VE; discuss this later
* Even if we could come up with a clear set of rules based on a fundamental principle that could cover every circumstance, we’d still need to develop persons who can apply these rules well

**What kind of person should one be, in VE?**

Someone who possesses virtues of character: e.g., honesty, courage, benevolence, moderation, (the right amount of) pride (some of Aristotle’s examples)

* Virtues (IEP on VE sect. 2b)
  + stable, reliable character traits
  + have to do with having the right “inner states”
  + also about acting; you can’t have the virtues w/o acting in certain ways
* Virtuous person (As Aristotle talks about him/her)
  + V person uses reason as practical wisdom to determine what would be the “courageous,” “honest” or “benevolent” thing to do in certain circumstances
    - This will lie in a “mean” between two extremes
  + V person does the honest or courageous, etc., thing because it is the honest or courageous thing to do (rather than b/c fear of punishment, e.g.)
  + V person’s desires and emotional states are in line with what reason says would be “courageous,” etc.
  + V person gets pleasure from acting virtuously

**Aristotle: 384-322 BCE (Greece)**

**Some terms needed to understand Aristotle’s text**

\* happiness – *eudaimonia*: living well, flourishing (more than just pleasure)

\* end – *telos*: aim, goal, purpose

\* Aristotle’s *teleology*: he views objects/organisms as moving towards or serving certain purposes/ends/goals

* *human-made objects* are created to serve certain purposes
* *organisms also have ends*: they develop towards the goal of becoming good individuals of the type of organism they are (and also reproducing)
  + many do this just naturally or instinctively, if environmental conditions are right
  + humans can fail to do more often b/c we have rational choice, & our environmental conditions more complex & can lead us to aim at bad ends

\* function – *ergon*: task, work, characteristic activity; that which a thing does especially well or which *only* that sort of thing can do

* e.g., the function of a knife is to cut
* organisms like humans have functions/characteristic activities too: acc. to AR, for humans it is activity guided by reason (b/c only humans can do this, he thinks)

\* virtue – *arête*: excellence in performing function well; being an excellent individual of the kind of thing that one is.

* Human function is activity guided by reason, so human virtue is doing this excellently.

The goal (*telos*) of all human action is *eudaimonia*

To reach this goal means one is living well as the kind of thing one is, a human, which means we are performing our function excellently (we have virtue).

In other words:

* e*udaimonia* is not merely a state of pleasure: it is a life of activity, of living well
* where we are performing our function excellently, which is to guide our actions by reason
* performing our function excellently just *is* what it means to have virtue, for Aristotle

**Aristotle’s argument for the nature of *eudaimonia* and its relation to virtue** (Book I.1-I.8)

Note: in this argument Ar. uses what humans *do value* (descriptive) to argue for what is *valuable* (prescriptive) (like Mill)

* b/c humans, like other organisms, tend (in general) to aim at, consider as good, what really *is* good for them—we tend to aim at what will allow us to flourish
* but we don’t always do so, so AR uses reason to determine more precisely what really is good, what will lead to human flourishing

*Argument connecting eudaimonia to virtue*

1. All human action aims at some single end as a final goal, at something that is the “highest good” in action, and knowing this will help us live better (I.1-I.2)

2. Common belief: highest good in action is happiness/*eudaimonia*; this fits with need for highest good to be both final and self-sufficient. (I.4-I.7)

-- But people disagree on what happiness is and how to achieve it; we need to find a way to say what *eudaimonia* really means, even if not everyone agrees with this

4. Can specify what *eudaimonia* is by considering human function/characteristic activity: activity that follows or implies reason (I.7)

a. *eudaimonia* means flourishing, living well as a human being; so to determine what *eudaimonia* consists in, consider what it to live well *as a human*

b. to determine how to live well as a human, refer to the characteristic activity of humans, that which we can do especially well (or only we can do):

* activity “which follows or implies a rational principle” (I.7)
* or, using another phrase, guiding our activity by reason

c. Therefore, the human end/telos (*eudaimonia*) consists in doing this function well: to flourish/live well as a human, guide activity by reason well.

4. Specifically “virtue” means excellence in performing one’s function, so happiness requires “activity of the soul in accordance with virtue” (I.7)

-- Thus: reaching the human end/telos (happiness) requires virtue—performing the human function excellently (guiding activity by reason)

5. happiness also requires external goods and not having too much bad fortune (I.8, I.10)

-- being virtuous is necessary for happiness, but not sufficient

**Conclusion:** the *eudaimon* (flourishing) person is the one who lives well as a human being, given what sets us apart from other things: guiding our activity by reason; external goods, a complete life, and lack of significantly bad fortune are also necessary.

**Pairs or groups:**

Similarities to/differences from Mill’s utilitarian view?