Virtue Ethics
Virtue Ethics

- Virtue ethics is an ethical view originating in ancient Greece which says that ethics is fundamentally about learning to live well.
- The basis of virtue ethics is the idea of *eudaimonia*, which means “the good life” or “life lived well” or “flourishing” or “happiness.”
- As we saw with Mill, Aristotle argues that there is only one thing which is purely valuable in itself—happiness—and all other things are desirable because they lead to living well/happiness, so they are only instrumentally valuable.
- Unlike Mill, Aristotle thinks many people disagree on the nature of happiness, and one of the major projects of ethics is trying to figure out its nature.
Virtue Ethics

- Aristotle argues that eudaimonia should be understood as a state of living life well.
- In general, being an excellent ______________ involves being good at fulfilling the function of ______________.
- Therefore, being good at living the human life will involve fulfilling the human function.
- Everything has a proper function (scissors, horses, manufacturers, sailors, etc.)
- Human function has to be something peculiar to humans
- The only thing peculiar to humans is that we think (we are rational animals)
- Thus human function must be a life led by reason, or “the activity of the soul in accordance with reason.”
- Eudaimonia thus depends on living a life led by reason.
Virtue Ethics

- The other major concept of virtue ethics is that of virtue.
- A virtue is a trait which allows one to fulfill one’s function well.
- What is required to be an excellent teacher is different than what is required to be an excellent soldier, because teachers and soldiers have different functions.
- Thus, there are different virtues for teachers, for soldiers, for knives, for clocks, etc.
Virtue Ethics

- A virtue is a trait which allows one to fulfill one’s function well.
- The proper function of a basketball player is to play basketball well. The things that fulfill this function are various activities, like shooting, dribbling, passing, etc. She will be able to fulfill her function well if she has certain virtues such as dexterity, agility, speed, athleticism, etc.
- A properly functioning body is called “healthy.” It fulfills its health function by various activities such as self-healing, disposal of waste, energy absorption. The virtues which help a body fulfill its function are things like a strong cardiovascular muscle, proper sleep patterns, strong immune system.
- A properly functioning knife is one which is useful for cutting. It fulfills this function by incidents of cutting things. It can fulfill its function well if it has the virtues of sharpness, durability, etc.
Eudaimonia/living well consists in “the activity of the soul in accordance with reason.”

The classic “virtues” (courage, justice, temperance, prudence, generosity, compassion, etc.) are things that allow us to fulfill our function well—Without developing virtues we cannot live well the life of reason.

The idea is, since living well is the most generic activity, the one for which we do all other activities, it will require the most general virtues.

Things like courage and patience are needed to be excellent at any activity, so they are certainly needed for the activity of living life in accordance with reason.
Applying Virtue Ethics

- One of the problems of virtue ethics is that it seems to have a lot less informative answer to normative ethics.
- In short, its rule is: “do what the virtuous person would do.”
- This answer is unhelpful precisely because virtue ethics is not so much interested in giving answers as it is in developing people.

*Scientific exactitude is impossible in treating of particular ethical cases. They do not fall under any art or law, but the actors themselves have always to take account of circumstances, as much as in medicine or in navigation.*

— Aristotle
Applying Virtue Ethics

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—Aristotle

▶ One should not interpret this comment as saying everyone is equally good at living life or that every way of living life is equally good; you are no more likely to be good at life naturally than you are to be good at medicine naturally, and obviously not every way of practicing medicine is equally good.

▶ Given that we need to learn to be good at life, Aristotle tries to tell us some illuminating things about virtue to help us in getting better at doing virtuous things.
What do we actually know about virtue?

- Virtues are trained habits (like the arts)
- Virtues give us reasons to act in a certain way
- Doing a virtuous action is not the same thing as having a virtue (and the latter is better)
- Having a virtue affects not just one’s actions, but one’s thinking, desires, emotions
What do we actually know about virtue?

- Virtues are the mean between two extremes (deficiency and excess)
- Virtues can be closer to one extreme than the other
- To hit the mean, you should aim towards the extreme which is less natural for you
- There is no value in knowing about virtue, only in having the virtue
- Virtues allow us to perform our function well (our function being the activity of the soul in accordance with reason)
- Living virtuously increases one’s understanding of virtue (not everything about virtue can be known by the non-virtuous).
Examples

How should a virtue ethicist think about the following?

- Studying
- Exercise
- Partying
- Defending others with lethal force
- Divorce
- Abortion
Problems for Virtue Ethics

- Does virtue ethics generally give us the results we think are right?
- Ethics is supposed to tell us what to do, but virtue ethics is often not good at giving a particular answer.
- It is questionable whether happiness/living well actually consists in living virtuously.
- Virtue ethics requires that we have a proper function, but it is difficult to justify how we have a way we are supposed to work. How, evolutionarily, would that have come about?
- Does proper function as a human conflict with other, more specific proper functions you have?
Why be virtuous?

- Virtue ethics is much more driven by its meta-ethics than the other views we have looked at.
- Aristotle gives slightly different answers to the egoist and nihilist.
- To the nihilist he says that there is in fact one proper way to live (the way that fulfills our function).
- To the egoist, he says that given what living well consists in, it requires virtue. He would think of the egoist as someone who says, “to be healthy you should eat whatever you are craving at the moment.” They have just not grasped what is necessary for happiness.
Recall that in the *Republic* Socrates is defending that justice is so much better than injustice, that the just person who is thought completely unjust will be happier than the unjust person who is thought completely just.

His arguments for this thesis generally start with an analogy between parts of the soul and something else (for instance, parts of the city, or various animals, or a charioteer and horses).

What is common to all the various analogies is that there are three parts of the soul: appetite, spirit, and reason.
Plato’s defense of the ethical life

- What is common to all the various analogies is that there are three parts of the soul: appetite, spirit, and reason.
- The appetite is our basic desires (money, comfort, satisfaction) etc. All it really does is form desires for basic things; Socrates thinks that if we are using it well it will form only necessary and good desires (e.g. desires for healthy sustaining food, rather than desires for gallons of ice cream).
- The spirit is your heart/your passions. It is the part of the soul responsible for emotions. Using it well will result in emotions which are appropriate to any given situation.
- Reason is your head; it desires truth and wisdom. Used properly, it keeps everything in accord with truth.
Plato’s defense of the ethical life

- Socrates’ argument against the egoist, that it is always better to be just than unjust, is psychological in nature.
- When we are being just (or virtuous), we are letting reason use the spirit to control the appetites (so the head is in charge of the stomach).
- When we are unjust, we feed and strengthen our appetites while we starve our reason (so the stomach is in charge of the head). Socrates thinks it is clearly a happier life when reason is in control.
- When reason is in control, we are free to pursue what reason desires and we in fact gain most of what we desire.
- On the other hand, if our appetites control us, then we will be enslaved to the least human part of us.
Plato’s defense of the ethical life

- Socrates argument against the egoist, that it is always better to be just than unjust, is psychological in nature.
- Worse than this, appetites grow the more they are fed, so if we continue to give the appetite control, it eventually will desire more than it can possibly get.
- This means that the egoist who just does whatever she desires will end up with many more unfulfillable desires than the virtuous person.
- Assuming that happiness at least partially depends on being able to do what we want to do, then the just life is happier than the unjust life.
Formalizing Plato’s Argument

1. Being vicious strengthens the appetite part of the soul while weakening the rational part of the soul.

2. Being virtuous strengthens the rational part of the soul while weakening the appetite part of the soul.

3. When the appetite is strengthened it desires more than it did before.

4. Being vicious makes us desire more than we did before (1, 3).

5. There is a point at which not all desires can be fulfilled.

6. Being vicious will lead us to a point at which not all our desires can be fulfilled (4, 5).

7. We are more free when we are more able to choose from a variety of options.

8. The rational part of the soul is able to choose from various options.

9. The appetite part of the soul always chooses what it immediately desires.

10. We are more free when we are virtuous than when we are vicious (1, 2, 7, 8, 9).

11. The appetite is the least human part of us.

12. The more we are vicious, the more we are enslaved by the least human part of us (1, 11).

13. The vicious person will be less free, less human, and have more frustrated desires than the virtuous person (6, 10, 12).

14. Freedom, humanness, and fulfilled desires are necessary for full happiness.

15. Therefore, the virtuous person is always more happy than the vicious person (13, 14).