The Ethics of Virtue

James Rachels, Elements Ch. 13
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Outline

The Ethics of Virtue and the Ethics of Right Action

The Virtues

Some Advantages of Virtue Ethics

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Virtue and Right Action 173

The ethics of virtue ask, “What is the good of man?”

The central question is about character.

The Greeks asked, “What traits of character make one a good person?”
With the rise of Christianity, and the thinking of the church fathers, “righteous living meant obedience to the divine commandments.”
The Greeks had viewed reason as the source of practical wisdom—the virtuous life was, for them, inseparable from the life of reason.
In the divine command theory, distrusting reason, the “theological virtues” of faith, hope, charity and... obedience came to have a central place.

After the Renaissance, reason was again incorporated in moral theory replacing the divine command with Moral Law.

Instead of asking, “What traits of character make one a good person?” they began by asking “What is the right thing to do?”
See bullets on 174:

- Ethical Egoism
- Utilitarianism
- Kant’s theory
- Social Contract Theory
Elizabeth Anscombe wrote a paper in 1958 suggesting a return to the ethics of virtue claiming that contemporary moral theory was misguided.
Rachels gives us five components of any virtue theory:

1. Explanation of what a virtue is
2. A list of which character traits are virtues
3. What do these virtues consist in
4. Why are these qualities good for a person to have
5. Are these virtues universal, or particular to individuals or cultures.
What is a Virtue?

- Aristotle said that a virtue is a trait of character manifested in habitual action.
- It is good for a person to have.
- Moral virtues are the virtues that it is good for everyone to have.
What are the Virtues?

see the partial list on pg. 176
What do these Virtues consist in?

Each of the virtues has its own distinctive features and raises its own distinctive problems. For example:

- Courage
- Generosity
- Honesty
- Loyalty to family and friends
Courage is the mean between the vices of cowardice and foolhardiness.

This is plain for all ordinary cases of courage.

A problem arises when the virtue of courage is used for an evil cause or in defense of an evil regime. Is it a virtue then?
Peter Geach thinks it is not a virtue, but Rachels thinks this is a bit too simple.

He suggests that the Nazi soldier has two qualities:
1. that of courage which we can commend
2. a vice, being willing to fight for a despicable regime.
Generosity is a mean between the vices of stinginess and extravagance.

His reading of Jesus’ statement about giving all your riches to the poor is problematic because it is out of context, but...

A reasonable interpretation of the demands of generosity might... be something like this: We should be as generous with our resources as is consistent with conducting our ordinary lives, with the caveat that our ordinary lives are not too extravagant.
Honesty 179, 180

Honesty is not characterized as a mean between extremes.

A question arises about what constitutes an honest person.

1. That an honest person will never lie.

2. That an honest person will never lie except in rare circumstances when there are compelling reasons why it must be done.
Honesty 179, 180

Should we favor the first one, never to lie?

There are many reasons and examples that suggest this definition is inadequate.
Allowing the possibility of lying in certain circumstances allows other values such as self-preservation or loyalty to family and friends to have priority.
The nature of our relationships to family and friends is different from our relationships with other people.

Part of that difference is that our duties and responsibilities are different.

Friends are both a help materially and a psychological anchor.

Being a friend requires the virtue of loyalty.
We do not treat our friends like common people and this special status which loyalty binds together is larger than some other virtues such as justice.

If this is true of friends, it is truer with respect to family.

With family we also have blood and history and the protection of confidentiality by law.

This is why Socrates is deeply puzzled with Euthyphro for taking his father to court to exact the demands of justice.
Why are Virtues Important?

182 Aristotle gives the answer that a virtuous person will fare better in life.

Elizabeth Anscombe gives the answer that a virtuous life is a life that flourishes.

The virtues are not a path to riches and power, but they are needed to conduct our lives well.

183 Despite their differences, the virtues all have the same general sort of value: They are all qualities needed for successful human living.
183, 184 There is an obvious sense in which virtues may be thought of as differing from person to person.

- Different eras...
- Different lives...
- Different occupations...
- Different personalities...
- Different social roles...
But then there are some virtues that will be needed by all people in all times.

- Courage
- Generosity
- Honesty
- Loyalty
- etc. . . .
Are Virtues the Same for Everyone?

185 The major virtues are mandated not by social convention but by basic facts about our common human condition.
185 Is a virtue-based ethic superior to other forms of ethic? Here are two of the most important reasons.

- Virtue ethics is appealing because it provides a natural and attractive account of moral motivation.

- There are doubts about the ideal of impartiality.
Advantages of Virtue Ethics

185, 186 Virtue ethics is appealing because it provides a natural and attractive account of moral motivation.

- Duty and utility are very poor explanations of humane interaction. To do something from duty is completely impersonal. Any gesture lacks humanity. Personhood and fellow feeling is not a factor in the decision.

- Behavior based on utility is a calculation, not a relationship. It doesn’t take into account the persons involved, rather an estimation of some idealized form of happiness.
Advantages of Virtue Ethics

186 There are doubts about the ideal of impartiality.

Are we really impartial where our family and friends are concerned?

Should we be?

It seems that the love of family and friends is an inescapable feature of the morally good life.

Any theory that emphasizes impartiality will have a hard time accounting for that love.
The Problem of Incompleteness

187 Should virtue theory be counted as an adjunct to theories of right action?

Kant and Mill certainly think so.

Others think that virtue theory should be counted as an alternative to these other theories.
The Problem of Incompleteness

187 Theories of conduct fail to give a good account of character while virtue theories fail to give a good account of right action.

188 The incompleteness problem lies in the relation between moral rules and virtuous character.

189 Do we know what it means to say that someone is virtuous besides suggesting that it is the disposition to follow certain moral rules, say “do not lie?”
The Problem of Incompleteness

189 Giving an explanation for why a particular character trait is virtuous seems to take us past any pure virtue based theory.

A theory of virtue may not be able to handle a case of moral conflict where a choice between fulfilling one or another aim is also a conflict between virtues.

190 It seems best to regard the theory of virtue as part of an overall theory of ethics rather than as a complete theory in itself.