

Lecture 2-5

Virtue Ethics

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Case for Social Contract Theory

- Framed in language of rights
 - Intuitive and natural
- Explains why people act in self-interest without common agreement
 - Logically, it's the best thing to do (prisoner's dilemma)
- Provides clear analysis of certain citizen/government problems
 - Why is it right to punish someone for a crime?
 - Why is civil disobedience justifiable?

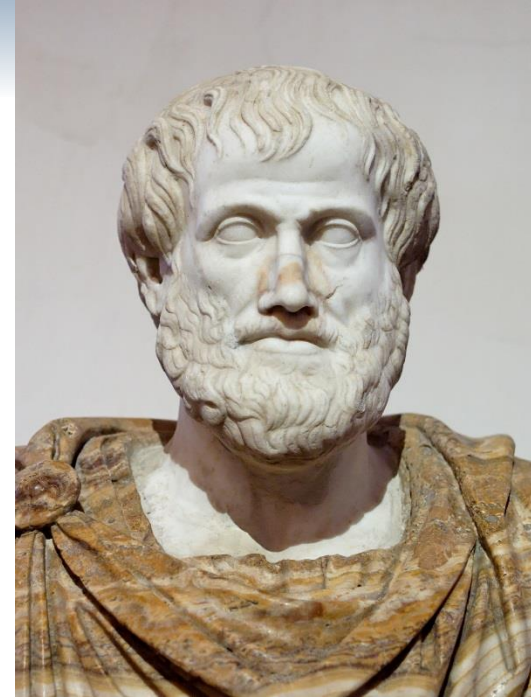
Case Against Social Contract Theory

- No one signed contract
- Some actions have multiple characterizations. In such cases, we don't learn how to make trade-offs between these conflicting rights.
 - Same problem we saw with Kantianism, though phrased in terms of duties instead of rights.
- May unjustly treat people who cannot uphold contract
 - In principle, we should distinguish between people who *can't* follow the contract, and those who *choose not to*.
 - In practice, this can be hard to do.

Virtue Ethics

Aristotle: true happiness and human flourishing lies in living a life of virtue.

- you develop virtues (e.g., honesty) by habitually repeating the relevant virtuous actions (e.g., telling the truth)
- virtues are not just dispositions towards action, but towards feeling



“A right action is an action that a virtuous person, acting in character, would do in the same circumstances. A virtuous person is a person who possesses and lives out the virtues. The virtues are those character traits human beings need in order to flourish and be truly happy.”

What are the virtues?

- Different virtues are emphasized in different cultures, but most cultures seem to prize the same things.
- Vices are the opposites of virtues
 - often there are two vices associated with the same virtue
 - e.g., courage lies between cowardice (too much fear) and rashness (too little fear)

Case for Virtue Ethics

- Reasoning from virtue may be more intuitive
 - e.g., stealing is bad because it is dishonest, not because it decreases utility
- We don't have to treat all other people equally
 - we can be partial towards our friends, family
- Recognizes that we mature morally over time
- “There are no irresolvable moral dilemmas”
 - not entirely clear how we're supposed to resolve everything
 - we're told “the right action can always be determined by a person with sufficient moral wisdom”
- Recognizes the importance of emotion

Case Against Virtue Ethics

- Disagreement over the virtues
 - our other workable theories are universal
 - virtue ethics can only be applied given a set of virtues—and reasonable people disagree
- Cannot be used to guide government policy
 - focus on moral actors, not on making good decisions
 - e.g., should we build a highway?
- Undermines attempts to hold people responsible
 - we develop over time, and we're the product of our environments
 - how can we say someone's responsible for acquiring vices instead of virtues?

Exercise

The British government has placed hundreds of thousands of cameras in public places and runs face recognition software that allows the tracking of individuals across cities. The resulting data is used by police to deter and prosecute crimes, and also by the intelligence services for purposes that are not disclosed publicly. The British public is broadly supportive of this initiative, but a substantial minority disagrees.

Is this initiative ethical from the following perspective:

- act utilitarian
- rule utilitarian
- social contract theory
- virtue ethics

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/mar/14/public-faces-mass-invasion-of-privacy-as-big-data-and-surveillance-merge>