

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College
Russell Marcus, Instructor
email: philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org
website: <http://philosophy.thatmarcusfamily.org>
Office phone: (718) 997-5287

Lecture Notes, October 13

I. Introduction to Virtue Ethics

It comes from Plato, and Aristotle.
Nicomachus was Aristotle's son, thus the 'Nicomachean Ethics'.
It has been recently revived, in several guises (e.g. feminist ethics).
It is a different kind of approach: 'How do I live?', rather than 'What shall I do?'

The right act is the act that a virtuous person would do.
In other words, evaluating individual actions is the wrong approach.
The questions of morality should be ones of development of character.
We can't evaluate individual acts without looking at the broader context.

Consider an investment scheme.
At first it looks good, the actions involved look at least morally neutral.
But when revealed in a wider context, we can see actions as leading to a scam.
Or consider the popular bully in school, who may eventually find himself without friends.
Or drug addiction, where using may seem fun, and satisfying at first.

Conclusion: you need a wider context, like a life, to evaluate the moral status of persons and their behaviors.
To find the answers to moral questions, you need to figure out what kinds of stories people tell about their lives .
The stories start before you were born.
This is your moral starting point, which includes your family and community.
And you don't find out the ending until the end of a life.

So, to say that the just (right) act is the one the good (virtuous) man would do is unhelpful.
We need to know who is the virtuous person.
This will be the one who has the most good, the one who has lived a good life, i.e. the good man

II. Human good

The virtue ethicist is not primarily interested in 'What is right?'
The right is to seek the good.
Happiness (eudaemonia) is the chief good.
This sounds like Mill, but Mill identified happiness with pleasure and the absence of pain.
Eudaemonia is the state of a person at the end of a long, productive life.

There are two senses of 'good'
1) As opposed to evil.

This usually entails self-sacrifice.
Nietzsche decries this 'Judeo-Christian' notion.
This seems to be the notion that Mill and Kant are pursuing.

2) Beneficial.

This notion might entail some self-sacrifice.
But it is primarily about self-interest.

Mill thinks that focus on the first notion leads to the increasing the second.

If we obey the dictates of utilitarianism, happiness will increase.

Kant makes no such promises.

Aristotle focuses on the second notion, and only looks to the first if it's required to achieve the second.

If we want to know what is good (in this second sense) for humans, if we want to know how to live, we have to look at the particulars of what humans are, and what they do.

III. Human ends

The end of all activities is that for which they are done.
Everything has a telos, a goal or end.
For example, plants have as a telos to flower and prosper.

Every activity has a telos, too.

The telos of playing drums is to play with rhythm and force.

The telos of dropping objects near the surface of the Earth is for them to fall to the ground.

So, what is the telos of human life?

See pp 3-4.

Happiness (Eudaimonia) is achieved at the end of a good life, not in the middle.

"For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy." (p 4)

This is the happiness Jefferson wrote of pursuing, in the Declaration of Independence.

It comes from growing and learning.

In particular, it comes from learning the virtues.

Virtues are just those characteristics which will enable you to live a good life, free from worry.

If we want to know what it is to be a good (thus happy, virtuous) person, we have to know what it is to be a person.

A good person will just be someone who performs that function well.

As the flute player and the good flute player have the same function.

What activity is particularly human?

Life?

But plants and animals have it

Perception, interaction with environment?

Other animals have this.

Only humans have rational activity, p 4.

Human good is thus activity of the soul (mind and body) in accordance with virtue.
That is, the good person is the one who thinks, and tries to develop good habits.

Still we haven't been told what the right thing to do is.
All we know is that there are some virtues (habits) that we should try to cultivate.
These will make us happy in the end.

IV. The virtues

Aristotle discusses two kinds of virtues: intellectual and moral, p 6.
The intellectual virtues are learned by teaching.
E.g. multiplication tables.
These are not our concern.

The moral virtues are learned by habit, practice.
These are the characteristics of the happy person.

Moral virtue is a mean between two extremes.
Excess and defect are fatal, pp 6-7.
We call these 'vices'.

Consider driving a car, at a moderate speed.
Courage lies between foolishness and cowardice.

There is no set list of virtues.
These will vary with our particular ends, and with our moral starting points.

Plato's four virtues:
Courage
Wisdom
Temperance (for most pleasures and pains)
Justice
(Plato was Aristotle's teacher.)

Aristotle adds, among others:
Liberalty with money, between prodigality and meanness
Proper pride, between vanity and boastfulness
Ambition, between undue humility and mock modesty
Wit between buffoonery and boorishness
Friendliness between obsequiousness and surliness
Modesty between shamelessness and bashfulness
Righteous indignation between enviousness and spitefulness

Next week we will examine some problems with virtue ethics.
Consider the differences between Plato's first three virtues and his fourth.