

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College
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Lecture Notes, October 18

Continuing our discussion of Aristotle's ethics.

I. Criticism #1: Virtue is supposed to be in our interest, but justice, seems to be against our interests

For Aristotle, virtue is supposed to be in your self-interest, by definition.
Virtues are those characteristics which lead a man to happiness.
Note that courage, wisdom, temperance are all pretty clearly in one's self-interest.
But justice seems to be on the other side.
Consider the ring of Gyges: if we had it, we wouldn't be just.
This shows that it's in our interest to be unjust, as long as we aren't caught.

II. Criticism #2: Isn't morality supposed to be opposed to self-interest, anyway?

Why should we think that this theory yields morality, as we think of it?
This may be a theory of how best to live, but it's not a theory of how to do the right thing.
MacIntyre will defend virtue ethics against this charge, if indirectly.
For Aristotle, 'what is the right act?' is just the wrong question to ask.
We should rather ask: 'who should I become?' or 'what is the good life?' or 'How shall I live?'
These may not be very helpful in answering isolated moral questions.
But maybe those aren't the questions we should be asking.

II. Criticism #3: Not all virtues are really means between extremes.

Consider honesty.
But, this seems an eliminable part of Aristotle's theory.

III. Criticism #4: Virtues will vary from society to society, from individual to individual.

It depends on your moral starting point.
Aristotle had slaves, and thought women were mentally inferior to men.
This is another eliminable element.
That is, one could strive for universalism within virtue ethics, a universal set of virtues.

On to MacIntyre's defense of patriotism as a virtue...

III. The contrast between virtue ethics with other positions

MacIntyre counterposes two competing moralities: patriotism vs a 'liberal, impersonal' morality.
His use of 'liberal' is not meant as in current political climate.
It's a historical use, referring to defenses of individualism and liberty.
The liberal conception may be Kantian or utilitarian.

MacIntyre is attacking the universalizability aspect of traditional moral theory.
He presents five clauses of liberal morality: p 48

1. Rationality
2. Interest neutrality
3. Way-of-life neutrality
4. Individualism and Impartiality
5. Abstraction

IV. Two problems with liberal morality

1) Conflict of interest

E.g We both want the last oreo, or the Falkland Islands, or Iraqi oil.
We can either impose force, or appeal to impartial standards (e.g. GHP, or CI).
Force abandons morality.
But what motivation do I have to subordinate myself to impartial standards? (p 52)
That is, if I am to sacrifice, I should have some motivation.
But in important moral cases, this is exactly what's missing.

2) Dissolution of social bonds

We need armed forces.
But the only reason for men and women to join is if they value their country over their own lives
"Good soldiers may not be liberals"
They can't think for themselves, look to impartial standards
Liberals undermine this kind of bond (pp 52-3).
For the liberal, impersonal morality, where and how we learn morality are as irrelevant as where and how we learn math facts.
These social bonds are in fact constitutive of morality in the first place.
Morality comes from family and community.
Also, the goods are defined by our community: how I live, what I value
Motivation and prevention of mistakes both come from the community, p 49

V. MacIntyre's argument in favor of patriotism

1. The rules of morality are only understood via a particular community.
 2. The justifications can only be made within a community and with reference to the goods of that community.
 3. Only the community can provide moral sustenance.
- So, without this community, "I am unlikely to flourish as a moral agent".
This yields a loyalty which means that I should adhere to the community above any impartial standard.

VI. The story of our lives argument

We can only understand our lives in the context of these stories, see p 52.
Patriotism is the kind of virtue that arises from taking seriously our moral starting points.
The liberal conception ignores these facts, about family and community, when deciding moral questions.
(p 50)

Note that virtue ethics, thus, is a fundamentally irrational position.
We place our country, if not necessarily its current political leaders, beyond rational criticism.
(In some fundamental way of understanding the nation as a project)

VII. Summary

Kant and Mill sever morality from self-interest.
Aristotle tries to derive morality from self-interest.
But the Ring of Gyges shows that this is fruitless.
So, MacIntyre says that shows that the Kant/Mill-style morality is wrong.