

Virtue Ethics

Lecture 2-5

Computers & Society (CPSC 430)

Kevin Leyton-Brown

<https://www.cs.ubc.ca/~kevinlb/teaching/cs430>

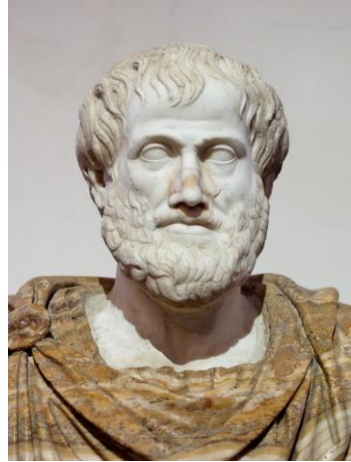
Social Contract Theory

- What is a social contract?
- What are different kinds of rights?
- What is Rawls' Difference Principle?
- Any questions?

Virtue Ethics

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

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



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

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)

Virtues and Vices according to Aristotle

Vice of Abstinence	Virtue	Vice of Excess
Being too afraid to act (cowardice)	Doing the right thing when necessary (courage)	Acting without thinking (rashness)
A lack of awareness or concern for others (insensibility)	Self-control and the ability to moderate one's behaviour (temperance)	Lack of self-control, endangering others (intemperance)
Meanness/unwillingness to share with others (illiberality)	Giving and spending one's money freely on others (generosity)	Being wasteful and focused on one's own pleasure (prodigality)
Being small minded; concerned with trivial matters (pettiness)	Being open to ideas and free from prejudice (munificence)	Holding obscene and extremist views (vulgarity)
Being overly humble (humble-mindedness)	Having strong moral principles (high-mindedness)	Having excessive pride in oneself (vanity)
Being unmotivated/lacking ambition (want of ambition)	Having a just and good purpose to one's actions (right ambition)	Seeking to put oneself above all others (over-ambition)
Not caring about life, lacking excitement, vigour, spirit (spiritlessness)	Enjoying life and sharing this with others (good temper)	Being too easily angered (irascibility)
Being unfriendly to others (surliness)	Being civil and kind to others (friendliness)	Being too obsessed with serving others (obsequiousness)
Being too self-deprecating (ironical deprecation)	Being sincere about yourself and others (sincerity)	Boasting about one's own achievements (boastfulness)
Being a boring person (boorishness)	Being witty/funny/charming (wittiness)	Acting the fool to please others (buffoonery)
Having no shame when it comes to one's actions (shamelessness)	Being modest about one's achievements (modesty)	Being overly embarrassed about one's behaviour (bashfulness)
Being uncaring about the feelings of others (callousness)	Wanting justice for those that deserve it (just resentment)	Choosing to hurt others (spitefulness)

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



Comparing Workable Ethical Theories

