

VII Virtue Theory & Particularism

Kant and the utilitarians both offered something like a decision theory for ethics: a procedure that will tell you what to do, given sufficient information, in any situation. (It probably isn't a decision theory in the technical sense, of something that you could programme a Turing machine to do—we don't even have a decision procedure for validity in the predicate calculus. But it is in some weaker sense.) Virtue theory is often characterized in such a way that it doesn't offer that, except in the most unhelpful way: 'Do what the virtuous person would do'.

So is it a rival to the other approaches? Is it just asking a different question, and hence perfectly compatible with them? (After all, if you are a Kantian or a utilitarian, you can perfectly well ask what a good person would do; and you would have an informative answer.) Is it insisting that the aim of the traditional theory is misguided? Or have we mischaracterized it?

Let's start with a related doctrine, particularism.

Particularism

There is no rule or set of rules such that, given a complete description of a situation in non-ethical terms, will tell you what you ought to be done.

Arguments for this: holism (doesn't work on its own); induction on past attempts.

So is there no place for rules or principles? Some particularists embrace this, but it doesn't follow. (Note that Anscombe certainly thinks that some requirements are absolute: that one should never punish the innocent, for instance.) Contrast: For each complete description of a situation in non-ethical terms, there is a rule or set of rules such that will tell you what you ought to be done.

A comparison: Gödel showed that there is no set of axioms and rules that enable you to prove every true sentence of first order arithmetic; but he didn't show that every such sentence cannot be given a proof.

Compare also the form of the common law. Every decision needs to be justified from existing laws and their interpretations; but plausibly there is no set of laws that will cover every case.

Why might we want rules? One possibility is that they enable us to resist the kind of rationalization in the face of temptation that we looked at last week. Indeed it may be exactly because particularism is so plausible, and hence rationalizations can be so easily constructed, that we need moral rules of thumb. Note though that they are defeasible. Compare again with other resolutions.

Now let's return to virtue theory.

Anscombe 'Modern Moral Philosophy'

Many things are going on in this paper, but let us take one theme. Anscombe thinks that there is no useful notion of moral obligation or moral duty; or at least, they only make sense relative to a law conception of ethics (which Christianity gave us, but which 'no longer generally survives'). Better to talk in the first instance using 'thick' notions — an act is unjust, hurtful, selfish etc. (Presumably we can use 'ought' or even 'morally ought' to characterize what we get by using these notions; but it isn't really *explanatory*.)

These notions are on the negative side ('*don't* be unjust' etc.). Is there something more positive that can be said? Another idea in the Anscombe is that we need to turn towards more Aristotelian ways of thinking.

Some Aristotelian notions

Virtue (*arete*) Practical wisdom (*phronesis*); Flourishing (*eudaimonia*)

Virtues as multi-track character traits: to have the trait is to come to see certain characteristics as providing reasons for action, (and then to be in fact moved by them). Continence v virtue. *Akrasia* and weakness of will.

Can this provide an guidance on concrete questions? Yes, but it is going to be local and partial. Will there *always* be an answer? There is no guarantee.

Are there any virtues?

The 'situationist' critique from moral psychology: our actions are influenced much more by the situation than by the character traits of the agent (Doris; Harman).

The phone booth; Princeton theological seminary; Milgram.

But:

(i) these don't show anything about longitudinal features: whether some people would be more likely to consistently act in a virtuous way. Longitudinal studies come out rather differently: protected values and the like.

(ii) the virtue theorist is surely making a normative claim, not a descriptive one: that we ought to behave as the virtuous person would. Moreover, the normative claim need have nothing to do with the virtuous *person*. It might instead be characterized as the thought that we should be guided in our actions not just by prohibitions on vices, but by the promotion of virtues.