CS 4873: Computing, Society & Professionalism

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Week 5: Virtue Ethics

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Slides adapted from Sauvik Das, Munmun de Choudhury, and Amy Bruckman

Critique of Enlightenment Theories

- Kantianism, utilitarianism, social contract theory ignore important moral considerations
  - Moral education
  - Moral wisdom
  - Family and social relationships
  - Role of emotions
- Virtue Ethics
  - *Arete*, virtue, excellence: reaching highest potential

Virtue Ethics

- The virtue ethicist argues that what matters morally is not what we do at a time, but what *we become over time*.

- To the virtue ethicist it is the acquisition of a good character that is – or should be – our moral aim

Virtue Ethics

- Importantly the virtue ethicist rejects the idea that we should:
    - follow rules exactly *
    - focus solely on the consequences of our actions

- Moral wisdom or discernment takes precedence over any rule or context-agnostic heuristic

Response of a Virtue Ethicist

- A poverty-stricken scientist is offered money by a rival company to share details of her work. The scientist knows these details will soon be in the public domain, so no harm would be done by accepting.

- Nevertheless she rejects the offer, unable to betray her company.

Response of a Virtue Ethicist

- An unemployed biologist is interviewed for his dream job. The interview goes well until he discovers the company is funded by a religious organization that expects employees to be of that religion.

- Although he could get away with claiming to be of that religion, the biologist will not lie because she doesn't want to dishonest.

What are Virtues?

- A virtue is an excellent trait of character

- Rosalind Hursthouse says:
    - *A virtue is not just a tendency...It is a disposition well entrenched in its possessor...[and] it is multi-track. It is concerned with...emotions...choices, values, desires, perceptions, attitudes, interests, expectations and sensibilities.*

What are Virtues?

- Importantly acquiring the virtues cannot be understood as a means to happiness.

- Anyone who attempts to be virtuous because they want their own happiness has missed the point.

- **Virtue is its own reward**

What are virtues?

- Importantly we can't be born virtuous, **virtue is something that must be acquired**

- Being virtuous is a matter of acquiring the right habits

- Human beings must habitually act in accordance with virtue to avoid becoming morally flabby

- **Habit**: If you acquire the right habits you will, over time, become a person with the disposition to do certain things in certain circumstances.
  - E.g. honesty (Quinn)

A virtuous person

- **Honesty example:**
- An honest person's reasons and choices with respect to honest and dishonest actions reflect her views about honesty, truth, and deception
- Valuing honesty as she does, she chooses, where possible to work with honest people, to have honest friends, to bring up her children to be honest. She disapproves of, dislikes, deplores dishonesty

What are Virtues?

- The virtuous agent is motivated by emotion or inclination, not by rational choice

- Connection of virtues to emotions
  - Being courageous means you have to overcome fear
  - E.g., Courage (Quinn)

Examples

- Courage
- Temperance
- Loyalty
- Fortitude (perseverance)
- Honesty
- Generosity

- Humor
- Ambition
- Humility
- Faithfulness
- Hope
- Agape (unconditional love)
- Obedience

Vices

- Vices are the opposite of virtues

- Vice: a character trait that prevents a human being from flourishing or being truly happy

- Often, a virtue situated between two vices
  - Courage between cowardliness and rashness
  - Generosity between stinginess and prodigality

Examples

SPHERE OF ACTION OR FEELING	EXCESS	MEAN	DEFICIENCY
Fear and Confidence	Rashness	Courage	Cowardice
Pleasure and Pain	Licentiousness/Self-indulgence	Temperance	Insensibility
Getting and Spending(minor)	Prodigality	Liberality	Illiberality/Meanness
Getting and Spending(major)	Vulgarity/Tastelessness	Magnificence	Pettiness/Stinginess
Honour and Dishonour(major)	Vanity	Magnanimity	Pusillanimity
Honour and Dishonour(minor)	Ambition/empty vanity	Proper ambition/pride	Unambitiousness/undue humility
Anger	Irascibility	Patience/Good temper	Lack of spirit/unirascibility
Self-expression	Boastfulness	Truthfulness	Understatement/mock modesty
Conversation	Buffoonery	Wittiness	Boorishness
Social Conduct	Obsequiousness	Friendliness	Cantankerousness
Shame	Shyness	Modesty	Shamelessness
Indignation	Envy	Righteous indignation	Malicious enjoyment/Spitefulness

Working example A: Virtue and vice

- For the traits below, outline a scenario when both their deficiency and their excess can be a vice:

- Anger

- Magnanimity

- Courage

Working example A: Solution

- For the virtues below, write when their deficiency can be a vice and when, in excess, they can also turn vices:

- Anger – get taken advantage of / using power and status to control innocent people

- Magnanimity – inability to helping a homeless person / letting dangerous people "off the hook"

- Courage - inability to complain against injustice / forfeit one's life out of recklessness (e.g., a suicide bomber)

Different Formulations of Virtue Ethics

- arete (moral progress)

- phronesis (practical or moral wisdom)

- eudaimonia (flourishing)

- agent-based (exemplarism)

Moral Progress – By Training

- Over time and by practice, you will achieve moral progress when you will:
  - know what the right action is;
  - perform the right action;
  - perform the right action because it is the right action.

Practical wisdom

- A virtuous person possesses *phronesis*—moral or practical wisdom

- Given that virtues lead to intentions to act well or *"do the right thing"*, we may say that practical wisdom is the knowledge or understanding that enables its possessor to do just that in any given situation.

- A virtuous agent with practical wisdom are flesh and blood creatures
  - When things are going right, their feelings and thoughts are in alignment

Practical wisdom

- The practically wise agent has the capacity to recognize some features of a situation as more important than others, or indeed, in that situation, as the only relevant ones.

- They will see the personally disadvantageous nature of a certain action as competing in importance with its honesty or benevolence or justice.

- **Example: SO's bad haircut; honesty vs. compassion**

Eudaimonia

- Eudaimonia: "happiness", "flourishing", "well-being." [Not material happiness, but value-laden or moralized concept]

- Defines virtues in terms of their relationship to eudaimonia.
  - A virtue is a trait that contributes to or is a constituent of eudaimon and we ought to develop virtues, the eudaimonist claims, precisely because they contribute to eudaimonia.

Agent-based (exemplarism)

- **Agent based or exemplarist virtue ethics**

- Define rightness or wrongness in terms of agents' motivations; in other words, by reference to the emotions, motives and dispositions of virtuous and vicious agents

- How do you identify virtuous motivations and dispositions?

- What would _____ do?

Agent-based (exemplarism)

- "We do not have criteria for goodness in advance of identifying the exemplars of goodness" (Zagzebski 2004: 41).

- *As we observe the people around us, we find ourselves wanting to be like some of them* (in at least some respects) and not wanting to be like others.

- Our understanding of better and worse motivations and virtuous and vicious dispositions is grounded in these primitive responses to exemplars

Working Example B

- You discover Bill Gate's wallet lying on the street. It contains $1000.00 Do you send it back to him?

Working Example C

- You are shopping and notice an older woman of likely less fortunate financial standing stuffing a pair of stockings into her purse. Do you report her?

The Stop Sign

You are driving out in the desert. You can see in all directions for miles. No one else is around. You see a stop sign. Do you stop? Why or why not?
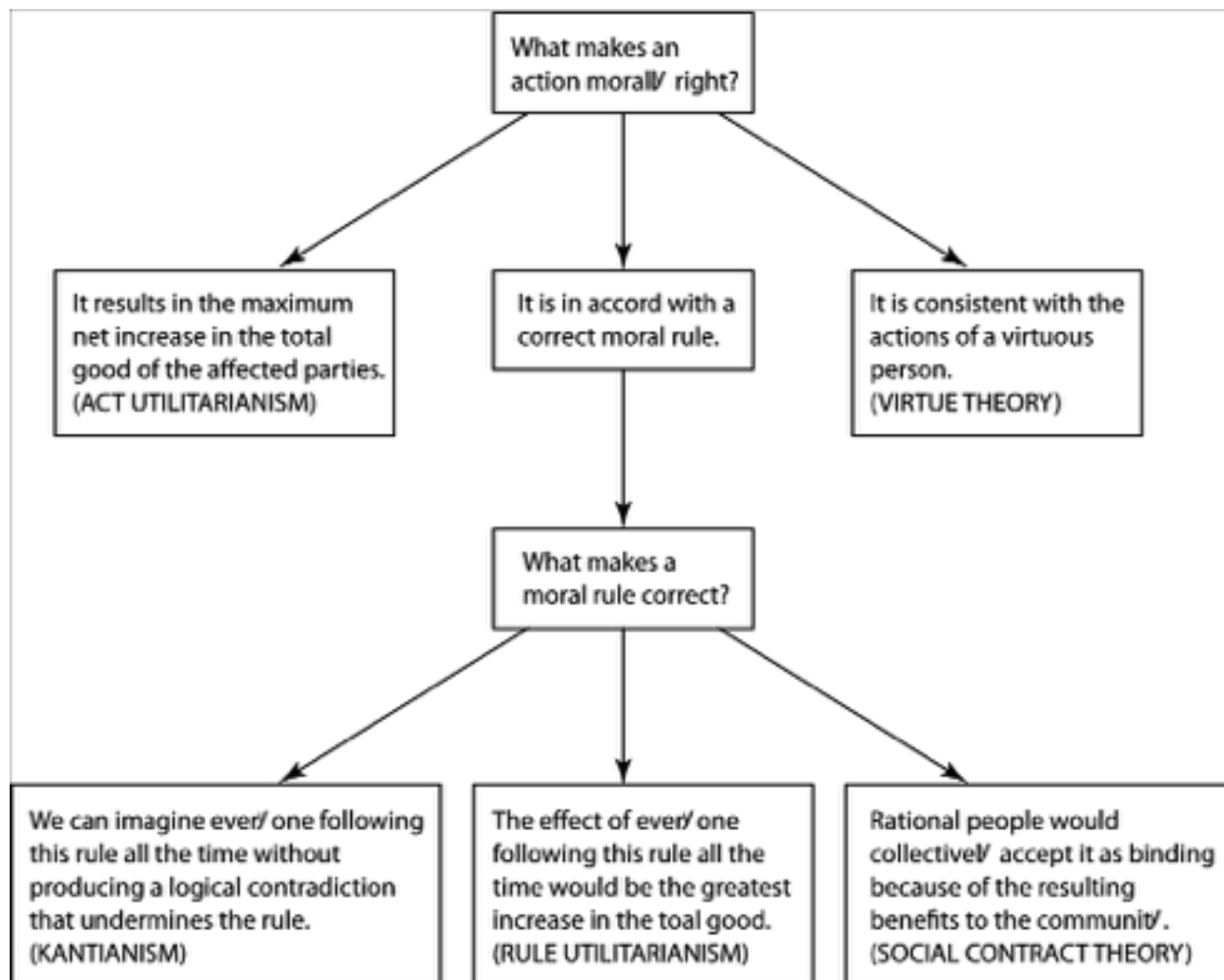
The Case For

- In many situations it makes more sense to focus on virtues than on obligations, rights or consequences

- Personal relationships can be morally relevant to decision making

- It recognizes that our moral decision making skills develop over time

- It recognizes the important role that emotions play in living a moral life

The Case Against

- Different people may have quite different concepts of human flourishing

- It cannot be used to govern collectives – self-centered view

- It underlines attempts to hold people responsible for their bad actions – relativist parallels

Comparison of Ethical Theories

What makes an action morally right?

It results in the maximum net increase in the total good of the affected parties. (ACT UTILITARIANISM)

It is in accord with a correct moral rule.

It is consistent with the actions of a virtuous person. (VIRTUE THEORY)

What makes a moral rule correct?

We can imagine everyone following this rule all the time without producing a logical contradiction that undermines the rule. (KANTIANISM)

The effect of everyone following this rule all the time would be the greatest increase in the toal good. (RULE UTILITARIANISM)

Rational people would collectively accept it as binding because of the resulting benefits to the community. (SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY)

Contrast with other theories

- *Suppose it is obvious that someone in need should be helped.*

- A utilitarian will point to the fact that the consequences of doing so will maximize well-being

- A deontologist to the fact that, in doing so the agent will be acting in accordance with a moral rule such as "Do unto others as you would be done by".

- Virtue ethicist to the fact that helping the person would be charitable or benevolent.

Contrast with other theories

- Consequentialists will define virtues as traits that yield good consequences

- Deontologists will define them as traits possessed by those who reliably fulfill their duties

- Virtue ethicists will resist the attempt to define virtues in terms of some other concept that is taken to be more fundamental. Rather, virtues and vices will be foundational for virtue ethical theories and other normative notions will be grounded in them.

Homework 3:

Applying Different Ethical Frameworks to a Dilemma

(due: Feb 24)