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VIRTUE ETHICS AND POLITICAL CORRUPTION

Logos II – An Ethical Case Study

Nicholas Potter

Selected Case Study:

“You work for the public service. In the course of your ordinary work, you receive an email that was not meant to be sent to you. It seems suspicious. When you read down through the history, it seems to suggest a politician is accepting bribes to give a certain business special preference when deciding to whom government contracts will be awarded. That is serious corruption! You mention it to your supervisor, but she tells you not to mention it to anybody. She says you could be fired for sharing an email that was not intended for you and that the politician could make your life hell. But you know he is doing the wrong thing – and you have a friend who is a journalist. You could leak the emails to her and she would make sure the public knew what was happening. What do you do?”

The work of the virtue ethicist in a point in history that seems locked in a state of moral conflict is, at the very least, a curious mission. Without attacking the theory, it seems that the legitimacy of virtue may conflict with the dominant material pressures of the contemporary age. Can 21st century humans find validity in the idea of employing abstractions of ‘goodness’ to guide our ethical sensibilities? This case study seeks to examine the applicability of virtue ethics in a world that appears so deeply entrenched in the discourse of political corruption and an increasing scepticism towards government. First, the principles of virtue ethics are explored, and a process for moral-decision making is extrapolated. The scenario presented as the basis for this case study is then analysed and a decision is reached through the decision-making process. The approach is scrutinised according to the literature of Loudon, Tassone, Macintyre, and Cunningham, and finally concluded with a personal reflection on the validity of the theory in the 21st century.

Virtue ethics can be described as an approach that emphasises the pursuit of a fulfilling life, guided by an adherence to virtue and practical wisdom. It seeks ‘eudaimonia’, the socially-unifying concept of ultimate fulfilment: the realisation of self-interest, so long as no one person’s happiness comes at the expense of another.¹ ‘Virtues’ are character traits deeply

¹ W. J. Cunningham, “Virtue Ethics”, in *An Introduction to Philosophy and Theology within Catholic Liberal Education*, ed. Angus Brook (Sydney: McGraw-Hill Education, 2015), 129.

engrained within the one who possesses them, which direct he or she to not only live their life to a degree of excellence, but project their values through their actions.² A virtue is it also a quality that spans a person's whole life, and theoretically allows them to pursue a good life despite the vices of modern living.³ This is not to imply, however, that the individual alone retains the only level of responsibility for the good life: the onus also rests upon the 'polis'. For virtue ethicists, independent political structures must be equipped to provide all its citizens with the unification needed for the achievement of eudaimonia, and as such, a concern for virtue and the public good should underpin all government does.⁴

Virtue ethics is concerned with imagining the human experience as a "narrative", in which the human person has an infinite number of possibilities to shape his or her "narrative" at any given point in life. To act ethically, we envisage the most morally-fulfilled version of our life – and from there, work to decide what virtues must be followed to achieve that goal. Simultaneously, we must be careful that fulfilment of our narrative is not achieved by infringing upon someone else's; it is unreasonable to assume that fulfilment can only come through conflict or subjugation, and to do so conflicts with the unifying project of eudaimonia.⁵ This is the basis for making decisions within the framework of virtue ethics: the decision-maker asks, "which action will best help me reach moral fulfilment, without encroaching on anyone's dignity?" To answer this, one must be able to identify what constitutes virtuous behaviour. The Western philosophical tradition offers a few examples. Aristotle divided the moral experience into various spheres of influence, each of which have an associated virtue, practised and applied to maintain our fulfilment in that area. Our fears of being "damaged" require courage to overcome; to live with others and have meaningful discourse requires honesty and truthfulness; and we need to have "greatness in soul" to act in a way that reflects our worth.⁶ A contemporary ethicist, however, may extend ethical understanding to other levels of consideration, such as Hursthouse, who links between an individual's ethical decisions and his or her society by identifying virtue as action that ultimately supports the following endpoints of human civilisation: "(1) its individual survival, (2) the continuance of its species, (3) its characteristic

² Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove, "Virtue Ethics", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016), ed. Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>

³ Cunningham, "Virtue Ethics", 131-132.

⁴ Thomas D. Lynch and Cynthia E. Lynch, "Virtue Ethics: A Policy Recommendation", *Public Administration Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2002): 492-495.

⁵ Gerard Hughes, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Aristotle on Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2003), 175-176.

⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (1988): 35-38.

freedom from pain [...] and (4) the good functioning of its social group...”⁷ Both serve a similar social function: achieving the co-existence of the “excellent” human species.

Cunningham suggests that although virtue ethics does not necessarily provide one concrete structure for moral decision-making, some situations allow for the direct application of virtue to solve a problem. In these circumstances, the simplest course of action is to discover what virtues are present to be capitalised upon and act with respect to them, while also acknowledging the vices and moving away from them. For a more holistic consideration, we would be wise to reflect on our personal narrative. Even if one course of action seems easier or more advantageous to ourselves in the short-term, it is no way to live in the long-term if it compromises our virtue.⁸ To put it in the most basic of terms, decision-making with virtue ethics necessitates that we must always subscribe to the virtues in order to act in ways that display good living. Morality is a life-long project; we cannot have virtue only sometimes.⁹

Our approach to our chosen scenario will be two-pronged, according to two of the virtues (and their opposite – the vices) relevant to this situation. The first is honesty, or truthfulness in words & deeds. It is obvious to us that the politician’s action here is wrong – our initial response is that taking bribes to give a business preference in policy matters is serious corruption, which we assume to be a moral evil. The vice displayed here is one of deceit and dishonesty; when the politician takes the bribe in secrecy, he hides his true nature from his constituents, and throws away any commitment to transparency. Average citizens may not be directly affected, but if the nature of the state in virtue ethics is to provide people with what is needed for eudaimonia, then public administrators at all levels have an obligation to establish an ethical standard that promotes an honest and compassionate approach to governance¹⁰. Democracy is undermined when an opportunistic agent violates this ethic, and so the political system cannot secure the good life for its citizens. We are presented with the ability here to do the opposite, defending virtue and protecting the good life by exposing corruption. By doing so, we present honesty and a commitment to truth, virtuous behaviour that allows us to live better among people; additionally, we undermine the dishonest individual’s attempts to secure a comfortable yet morally bankrupt lifestyle at the expense of others.

The other virtue to consider is courage. The politician could make our life hell: given his resources and social status, it would be unwise to assume he is bluffing. Our supervisor

⁷ Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 250.

⁸ Cunningham, “Virtue Ethics”, 132-133.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁰ Lynch & Lynch, “A Policy Recommendation”, 465-466.

warns us against doing the honest thing in this situation, not because she stands to gain anything, but because she is afraid of the impact on both of your livelihoods – her vice is cowardice, a fear to do what is right because of the potential for harm. But thus is the nature of courage: it is a trade-off between comfort and achievement that requires we be willing to lose our security in exchange for preventing a more significant loss.¹¹ By overcoming our fear of harm in this situation, we excel beyond the vice of cowardice, and better equip ourselves to make sacrifices for the whole of our lives. In other words, by practising courage, we gain the ‘backbone’ needed to ensure our safety in the long-term.

Therefore, if we follow virtue ethics, we would leak the e-mails. If not, two things would follow. One, we would become dishonest in our words and deeds, because we are knowingly concealing information regarding an injustice, and colluding with dishonest individuals to that end. Two, it would display cowardice, because we are unwilling to act in an honest manner due to fear of reprisal. Neither of these can do: our disposition must be comprised of behaviours that can last our life. If we falter by not acting honestly and courageously, it sets a precedent of vice, and thus we cannot pursue the good life.

Virtue ethics is one of the oldest normative ethical theories of the Western tradition, and has been championed by many since antiquity. However, the concerns of modernity have drawn into question some of its assumptions about the nature of morality. Louden argues that because virtue ethics is concerned with the characteristics of the “agent”, not the morality of the action itself, “discrete acts” are de-emphasised in favour of prescriptive abstractions. He maintains that virtue ethics fails to account for cases in which one’s morals are forced into change or distortion due to circumstances outside their control,¹² and moreover, dismisses the concept of a modern society that can identify consistent ideals of virtue as impractical utopianism.¹³ Tassone identifies a dilemma in his analysis of virtue ethics by way of Eagleton: virtue ethics cannot be utilised for both moral reflection and moral action as long as the agent’s society is “wrong”. If freedom and knowledge is suppressed by the political structure in a society, then one can neither act upon their reflections, nor can they eschew reflection without being subject to “moral reversal”.¹⁴ On the strengths of virtue ethics, however, MacIntyre posits that virtue is born from the needs of a community in a time and place; for him, virtue is the

¹¹ Andrei G. Zavaliy & Michael Aristidou, “Courage: A Modern Look at an Ancient Virtue”, *Journal of Military Ethics* 13, no. 1 (2014): 183.

¹² Robert B. Loudon, “On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (1984): 229-232.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 234-235.

¹⁴ Giuseppe Tassone, “Antinomies of transcritique and virtue ethics: An Adornian critique”, *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 34, no. 6 (2003): 677-678.

channelling of “practical reason” into what can be decided as the right thing to do in a given space.¹⁵ Likewise, Cunningham views life as intuitively harmonious, and thus virtue contains the ability to transcend the “wrongness” of a social situation: what truly matters is that we retain our moral compass in spite of our circumstances, so no matter what, our actions express virtue¹⁶.

I strongly agree with the conclusions drawn from this case study. It is not only right to leak the e-mails, but a moral imperative to expose a corrupted government. This is because, as virtue ethics points out, any independent political structure must have the capacity to secure the well-being of its citizens without discrimination. By placing a level of moral obligation on the citizen to act virtuously, the citizen is mobilised to progress themselves and their society according to the characteristics they embody when their governance does not represent them – virtue ethics is, in this sense, quite beneficial for moral action. However, I share the concerns of Loudon and Tassone. I feel that virtue ethics lacks a distinctly pragmatic dimension – it is too concerned with abstractions, and while MacIntyre is correct in suggesting that virtue is born from what our society needs for its fulfilment, it continually feels impossible to know what can be done to discover our values in a society so currently atomized politically and socially, let alone find the right way to act with respect to them. To use the example of Black Lives Matter activists, we see a maligned social group asserting its humanity and dignity that is routinely shut down by varying axes of power in society. When the self-determination of a people and the will of the power structure conflict in this way, who determines what the virtues are? Whose moral experience will be seen as more valid in the procession of history? Therefore, although I align myself with the conclusion of this case study and the principles of virtue ethics, I find that its structure for decision-making would generally not be useful for me in my personal or professional life. I attribute this to the nature of the modern-day society, which has produced an experience of morality that is ultimately difficult to navigate.

¹⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007): 162.

¹⁶ Cunningham, “Virtue Ethics”, 133-134.

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