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LOGOS II ETHICAL CASE STUDY: VIRTUE ETHICS AND THE CHEATING PARTNER

Rebecca Saleme

I. Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics is a normative ethical theory that emphasises the centrality of virtue to pursuing the *eudaimon* life.¹ It emerged out of Ancient Greece, and is articulated most prominently in the work of Aristotle who proposed that every decision one makes ought to contribute to a life of flourishing.² Whilst there are various forms of virtue ethics that differ in the application of virtue for moral decision making, this case study will focus on the eudaimonistic formulation.³ Eudaimonist virtue ethics is founded on three complementary concepts: *eudaimonia* is the goal of human life, virtue is required to achieve this, and virtue is perfected through practical wisdom.⁴ *Eudaimonia* translates to fulfilment or well-being, in relation to the true flourishing that is the supreme good for human life as a whole.⁵ A virtue is a characteristic or trait that allows one to attain this fulfilment internally and socially.⁶ It is a firmly established disposition within the person, cultivated over time through practice and experience.⁷ Practical wisdom, the perfected practical intellect, is required in order for one to discern virtuous behaviour and respond ethically to a situation.⁸ It is through the interrelationship between virtue and practical wisdom that one may coordinate their actions to achieve *eudaimonia* and make moral decisions according to virtue ethics.

Determining what trait constitutes a virtue requires an examination of its contribution to the harmonisation and success of human life on an individual and social level. Whilst there

¹ William J. Cunningham, "Virtue Ethics," in *An Introduction to Philosophy and Theology within Catholic Liberal Education*, ed. Angus Brook (Ryde: McGraw-Hill Education, 2015), 127-135, 128. See also Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove, "Virtue Ethics," *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition).

² Cunningham, "Virtue Ethics," 128.

³ Hursthouse and Pettigrove, "Virtue Ethics."

⁴ Christopher Taylor, "Aristotle," ed. John Skorupski, *The Routledge Companion to Ethics* (London Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 41-51, 41; Cunningham, "Virtue Ethics," 129.

⁵ Taylor, "Aristotle," 44; Hursthouse and Pettigrove, "Virtue Ethics."

⁶ William K. Frankena, *Ethics* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 64; Steven D. Hales, *This Is Philosophy: An Introduction* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2012) 53; Cunningham, "Virtue Ethics," 131.

⁷ Hales, *This Is Philosophy*, 53.

⁸ Julia Annas, "Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 78, no. 2 (2004): 61-75. 61, 62.

is no universally accepted list of virtues, commonalities exist between different constructions. Plato and the Ancient Greeks propose the four cardinal virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance and justice.⁹ Aristotle further includes generosity, friendliness, honesty, loyalty and patience.¹⁰ And the Catholic Church advances the three additional theological virtues of faith, hope and charity.¹¹ Arguably, any excellent trait or characteristic which engenders *eudaimonia*, true human flourishing, may be considered a virtue.¹² For a virtue ethicist, one ought to cultivate the virtues to achieve internal harmony which may be replicated for good functioning of the community through ethical decision making.

Making a moral decision according to virtue ethics requires one to first possess virtue and practical wisdom.¹³ It is only through the dual application of these that one is able to identify the morally salient features of a situation and evaluate a course of action based on what is truly good, important and necessary for the *eudaimon* life.¹⁴ Ethical decision making through virtue ethics requires one to first recognise the pertinent virtue to pursue, or vice to avoid, in the situation.¹⁵ Second, one must exercise their practical wisdom to determine the best course of action by considering the relevant virtue. Third, the relevant virtue and course of action can be directly applied and enacted. In certain circumstances, more than one virtue may be relevant, however true virtues will not demand incompatible solutions.¹⁶ Virtue ethics does not prescribe determinative rules, but rather provides a framework by which the virtuous person may exercise their practical wisdom to pursue ethical decisions.

II. Scenario 7 – Application of Virtue Ethics

Moral decisions in accordance with virtue ethics require one to act in a way which upholds the supreme good, *eudaimonia*.¹⁷ Hursthouse proposes this to be acting in a way which promotes the four characteristic ends of human life: “survival, continuation of the species, freedom from

⁹ Frankena, *Ethics*, 65; Cunningham, “Virtue Ethics,” 132.

¹⁰ Hales, *This Is Philosophy*, 53; Cunningham, “Virtue Ethics,” 132.

¹¹ Frankena, *Ethics*, 67.

¹² Hursthouse and Pettigrove, “Virtue Ethics.”

¹³ Cunningham, “Virtue Ethics,” 128.

¹⁴ Hursthouse and Pettigrove, “Virtue Ethics.”

¹⁵ Cunningham, “Virtue Ethics,” 132.

¹⁶ Cunningham, “Virtue Ethics,” 132; Hursthouse and Pettigrove, “Virtue Ethics;” Hales, *This Is Philosophy*, 56.

¹⁷ Taylor, “Aristotle,” 45.

pain and characteristic enjoyment, and good functioning of the social group.”¹⁸ One must identify the salient virtues and then exercise practical wisdom to act accordingly. The current ethical scenario involves finding out my best friend has been cheated on by his girlfriend. In this situation the primary virtues are courage, honesty and loyalty.

A. *Courage*

Courage is defined as “responding well to threats, being neither too rash nor too fearful.”¹⁹ Courage enables one to react appropriately and pursue the right course of action. For this scenario, courage is required to speak to Ricardo about his girlfriend, when it is a sensitive issue.

B. *Honesty*

Honesty may be conceived as “the refusal to fake reality – i.e., to pretend that facts are other than they are.”²⁰ This is a disposition to live in truth and not merely to tell the truth when prompted. An honest person would not act so as to lead another into a mistaken belief or misrepresentation of reality. Honesty must be exercised for Ricardo to be fully informed of the truth.

C. *Loyalty*

Loyalty may be understood in terms of faithfulness and fidelity as “the willing, practical and thoroughgoing devotion of a person to a cause.”²¹ Loyalty is an integral component of close friendships.²² Exercising loyalty in the ten-year friendship with Ricardo is an important consideration.

¹⁸ Cunningham, “Virtue Ethics,” 132, quoting Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2003) 250.

¹⁹ John Turri, Mark Alfano and John Greco, “Virtue Epistemology.” *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 edition).

²⁰ Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Meridian, 1993), 267.

²¹ Josiah Royce, *The Philosophy of Loyalty* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1908), 16-17.

²² John Kleinig, “Loyalty.” *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 Edition).

D. Course of Action

A virtue ethics approach to this ethical situation requires the application of the above virtues, through the use of practical wisdom, to foster *eudaimonia*. As one's internal life is in communion with the wider social life, *eudaimonia* is contingent on coordinated harmony to pursue good ends for all. In order to create an environment where all may flourish, it is necessary for all to be exposed to reality in its truth. One would be unable to achieve true *eudaimonia* if they are under the false belief that they have a faithful girlfriend. Therefore, virtue ethics would require informing Ricardo that his girlfriend is cheating on him.

I would first provide Jenny the opportunity to exercise honesty and tell Ricardo the truth. I would explain to my girlfriend that keeping this from Ricardo is incompatible with living a virtuous life and it is essential for Ricardo to know what happened. I would ask my girlfriend to tell Jenny that she must inform Ricardo immediately or I would tell him myself when I entered his house. If my girlfriend was unwilling to tell Jenny, I would contact Jenny myself and request she tell Ricardo immediately.

The virtue of courage is required to tell my girlfriend, and Jenny, that this situation is unethical, especially considering the close friendships of the group. Informing Ricardo would change the group dynamic and have consequences that may potentially negatively impact on us all. However, it is the virtuous thing to do irrespective of any inconveniences it may cause.

The situation also requires exercising the virtue of honesty by telling Ricardo the truth. Whilst it may be uncomfortable, it is necessary to prevent deceiving Ricardo into living a false reality.

It may appear that there is a conflict between the loyalty I have to my girlfriend due to the promise I made, before the fact, not to say anything, and the loyalty I have to my best friend. Where the loyalty established between myself and Ricardo is virtuous, loyalty to my girlfriend was created on a promise to deceive my best friend. Virtue ethics would not consider loyalty to be virtuous if it does not lead to good ends for all or contribute to *eudaimonia*. Loyalty which would be detrimental to my best friend cannot be considered true loyalty, and only the appearance of loyalty. Therefore, there is not a true conflict, and the loyalty towards Ricardo to tell him the truth would take precedence.

A virtue ethics approach to the above scenario identifies courage, honesty and loyalty as the relevant virtues. It is only when Ricardo is enlightened with the true status of reality that he is able to pursue the *eudaimon* life. Therefore, through a direct application of these virtues to the scenario, it becomes evident that the virtuous course of action requires telling Ricardo the truth, whether it comes from his girlfriend Jenny or from myself as the best friend.

III. Strengths and Criticisms of Virtue Ethics

A. Strengths

A strength of this ethical theory is inherent to its virtue centrism. Perfectly emulating virtue ethics requires one to cultivate and fully possess the virtues. Where one exercises virtue in the pursuit of living the good life, moral decisions will naturally transpire. Therefore, unlike other ethical theories which force individuals to ‘do good deeds’ out of duty, a virtuous person will freely ‘do good deeds’ by merit of their excellent character disposition.

Furthermore, virtue ethics encourages individuals to pursue a good life both for themselves and the community. Fundamental to virtue ethics is considering actions which promote *eudaimonia* for the good functioning of society.²³ This eradicates any concept of ‘competing for the good life’ or attaining fulfilment at another’s expense.²⁴ In understanding the connection and harmony between the self and society, virtue ethics fosters community relationships and social fulfilment.

B. Criticisms

Virtue ethics has been criticised as being relative to culture or values. How is it that virtues can be universally guiding when it seems that one society cherishes honesty, but another values

²³ Hursthouse and Pettigrove, “Virtue Ethics.”

²⁴ Cunningham, “Virtue Ethics,” 129.

craftiness?²⁵ In his *Nicomachean Ethics*,²⁶ Aristotle counteracts this in understanding that human fulfilment is reflective of the interdependent nature of human life and the intrinsic goods.²⁷ Cultivating intrinsic goods, such as friendship, has collective benefits and is not competitive.²⁸ Consequently, any view which promotes competition between individuals or places instrumental goods, such as wealth, over the intrinsic goods, is misdirected in its conception of the *eudaimon* life.²⁹ If a culture or a set of values diverges from another in its promotion of “moral” principles which do not foster unity and harmony, it may be disregarded as misinterpreting the virtue ethics understanding of humanity. Thus, a proper understanding and application of virtue ethics overcomes this criticism.

IV. Is Virtue Ethics Applicable to My Own Life?

Virtue ethics can certainly assist in my own moral life. This theory encourages personal development of excellent character traits which will lead one to a life of flourishing and fulfilment. Whilst it is a lifelong process refined through experience and practice, I believe it is a worthwhile commitment. When faced with the option of pursuing an unfulfilling, competitive, miserable life compared to one filled with goodness, happiness and well-being, to me, the answer is clear and lies within the latter. What is truly important to my life is not the accumulation of wealth or power, but cultivating love, friendship, truth and goodness. Therefore, virtue ethics is perfectly positioned to develop my own dispositions so that I may achieve the *eudaimon* life I desire in both my personal and professional life.

²⁵ Cunningham, “Virtue Ethics,” 129.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, (Ontario: Batoche Books Kitchener, 1999).

²⁷ Hales, *This Is Philosophy*, 57.

²⁸ Cunningham, “Virtue Ethics,” 129.

²⁹ Cunningham, “Virtue Ethics,” 129; Hales, *This Is Philosophy*, 57.

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