

Lecture: Virtue Ethics

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What are the virtues, and why are they important for our lives? Aristotle's answer is that the virtues are those character traits that we need in order to live a successful, happy life, given our nature and purpose as human beings. To give you a sense of what he means, consider the following:

Every so often we hear of some superstar athlete who, it turns out, achieved his or her success and fame by cheating, leading to often fierce criticism and sanctions. Moreover, most of us were probably taught that it was important to "play fair", that "cheaters never win", and so forth. But why is this?

Let's take an example. There are motors that one can put on a bicycle that are quite small and can be hidden so well that they are very difficult to detect. Obviously putting a motor on one's bike to give you an advantage in something like the Tour de France would be cheating. But why would it be wrong?

It's not enough to say that it would be wrong simply because it goes against the rules, because we want to know why those rules are there in the first place (assuming they are good ones). It also seems inadequate to say it would be wrong because it may have harmful consequences, since not only is that not obvious in the case of putting a motor on a bike, taking risks is already an inherent aspect of normal bike racing. And it also might seem inadequate to say that it's wrong because it gives the cyclist using the motor an advantage; after all, some cyclists already have advantages over others due to better equipment, better coaching, better nutrition, and indeed better natural abilities.

Besides, what if we changed the rules so that motors were allowed, we ensured that they were safe and didn't pose additional risks for the riders, and that everyone had equal access to them? Would it be wrong to use a motor on one's bike in a cycling race?

For many, the answer would be "yes", because if everyone used a motor we would no longer be talking about bike racing, but something else. That is, it is part of the nature and purpose of bike racing for the bikes to be powered entirely by the athlete's body rather than some other source.

Based on this insight, imagine two cyclists in a race like the Tour de France. Cyclist #1 races with the help of a hidden motor on his bike that no one discovers. Cyclist #2 races in a way that displays excellent endurance, skill, and determination, acquired through a combination of natural ability, discipline, and hard work. Whose performance would we be inclined to praise more? Which one would we consider to be an excellent, flourishing cyclist? For most of us, the answer is the second one. Would that change if it turns out that the first cyclist actually won the race? Probably not.

Those who agree that the second one is the more praiseworthy and successful of the two (despite the fact the he or she did not win) are thinking the way that Aristotle thought about the ethical human life and the virtues. Asking the question of why putting a hidden motor on your bike would be wrong led us to consider what makes cycling what it is, what the aims and goals of a cyclist should be, and what qualities a cyclist needs to fulfill those. In a similar way, when we enquire about whether something is morally right or wrong, Aristotle thinks that we are led to consider what makes human life what it is, what the aims and goals of human life are, and what qualities a person needs to fulfill those. This aim and goal of human life is what Aristotle called “eudaimonia”, often translated as happiness but perhaps better translated as flourishing or living well. And those qualities that a person needs to fulfill that aim, to flourish and live well as a human, are what we call the virtues.

When it comes to living well as a human, the virtues – qualities such as courage, honesty, benevolence, and moderation of one’s appetites – play a similar role that qualities like endurance, skill, and determination play when it comes to doing well as a cyclist. A cyclist that does not have such excellences is not praiseworthy, even if they achieve some of the ends and goals of the activity by other means (such as winning by cheating). Similarly, a person who does not possess and exercise the virtues is not praiseworthy, not truly flourishing or happy, even if they may seem to achieve some of the goods we recognize in human life by other means, such as dishonesty or indulgence of one’s appetites.

A similar analogy could be drawn by considering what it is that makes someone a good piano player, farmer, electrician, or soldier, to take just a few examples. The most difficult question is whether human life as a whole has a purpose or goal in the way these activities do, such that we can give an account of the virtues that are necessary for any human to live well. Philosophers who follow Aristotle have given a range of answers to this question. But what is important for us to remember is that even though contemporary ethical reasoning tends to be dominated by utilitarian and rule-based forms, the Aristotelian approach remains alive and well in lots of other areas of life. This has led many contemporary philosophers to think that it might be the best approach to ethical questions as well.