

Ethics from the ground up:
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Lecture 2: The role of the virtues in the ethical life: Habits of right behaviour. Justice and temperance

1. Virtues

Aquinas organises his writing on ethics according to *virtues* (“an operative habit essentially good”). While ours is not a virtue-*based* ethics (since virtues must be justified by their connection to something more basic, the worth of persons), it is still useful to look at the different “habits” that humans should have in order to be ethical.

An advantage of looking at virtues is that it gets away from the negative “thou shalt not”s of rule-based ethics and considers positive ideals for humans - what is the “good life” for a human being. Consider for example Aristotle's ideal of the “great-souled man”. He has “greatness of mind”, delights in acts of benevolence and in guiding the state well. He is above meanness and injustice. He encounters danger with tranquillity and firmness, and his noble spirit “prompts him to sacrifice personal ease, interest and safety for the accomplishment of useful and noble objects.”(adapted from *Webster's Dictionary* definition of ‘magnanimity’)

That is an ideal somewhat different from a Christian one based more on love. It is a problem as an ideal for someone who is sick, who is unable to take those actions. (On the other hand, if your platoon is pinned down by enemy fire, you might be grateful if your commanding officer is a “great-souled one”.)

We look at the traditional list of the virtues and examine two in particular, **justice** and **temperance**.

There is a standard list of seven virtues, 4 “philosophical” or “cardinal” or “strictly ethical” (from Socrates and Plato), 3 “theological” or spiritual:

The four “philosophical” virtues

(Brief definitions adapted from the *Catholic Encyclopedia* article ‘Virtue’ (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15472a.htm>))

Justice:

Regulates humans in relations with their fellow-humans. It disposes us to respect the rights of others, to give each man his due.

(Note: there are two meanings of “justice”: justice the finished product, as in “he received justice”, versus justice the virtue, the habit of acting justly.)

Prudence:

The right method of conduct ... directs the choice of means most apt, under existing circumstances, for the attainment of a due end. (common sense? planning?)

Courage/Fortitude:

“The virtue by which one meets and sustains dangers and difficulties, even death itself, and is never through fear of these deterred from the pursuit of good which reason dictates”

(includes patience, perseverance)

Temperance/Restraint

Moderates in accordance with reason the desires and pleasures of the sensuous appetite attendant on those acts by which human nature is preserved in the individual or propagated in the species

(includes continence, humility, meekness, modesty/decorum)

The three “theological virtues”

Faith/Faithfulness/Fidelity

Hope

Love/Charity

And for completeness and colour let’s have the **Vices** or “seven deadly sins” too: (From Wikipedia)

“Ranked in order of severity as per Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the seven deadly vices are:

1. Pride or Vanity — an excessive love of self (holding self out of proper position toward God or fellows; Dante’s definition was “love of self perverted to hatred and contempt for one’s neighbor”).
2. Avarice (covetousness, Greed) — a desire to possess more than one has need or use for (or, according to Dante, “excessive love of money and power”).
3. Lust — excessive sexual desire. Dante’s criterion was “lust detracts from true love”.
4. Wrath or Anger — feelings of hatred, revenge or even denial, as well as punitive desires outside of justice (Dante’s description was “love of justice perverted to revenge and spite”).
5. Gluttony — overindulgence in food, drink or intoxicants, or misplaced desire of food as a pleasure for its sensuality (“excessive love of pleasure” was Dante’s rendering).
6. Envy or jealousy; resentment of others for their possessions (Dante: “Love of one’s own good perverted to a desire to deprive other men of theirs”).
7. Sloth or Laziness; idleness and wastefulness of time allotted. Laziness is condemned because others have to work harder and useful work cannot get done.”

(An aside: are vices more attractive than virtues? Naively, they are, and it takes work to make virtue more attractive than vice. Jane Austen is the expert, for example in the contrast in *Pride and Prejudice* between Elizabeth and Lydia. Lydia is unrestrained, and the reader is exasperated at the stupidity of the little minx.)

2. Justice

Justice is possibly the easiest virtue to appreciate, perhaps because it is so directly based on the worth of persons. If someone’s worth is violated or insulted by an injustice to them, one naturally reacts angrily. Fundamental to justice is the *equality* of the worth of persons. The sense of the injustice of unequal treatment is seen early in most children – a seven-year-old will say, “my sister got an ice-cream and I didn’t, it’s *not fair*.” A basic sense of injustice is central to moral development. We understand that an injustice to us is a violation of our worth, of what we deserve. (Unless we have some emotional disturbance making us doubt our own worth due to, for example, abuse or autism.) Then we understand by symmetry that other people are the same as us, so they deserve justice too – if necessary from us or at inconvenience to ourselves.

(Anna Wierzbicka, however, argues in *English: Meaning and Culture* that there is something special about English in this regard: though other languages have “just”, they do not have any word quite like the English “fair”, which plays a huge role in English-speaking debate and politics.)

Justice, the “giving to each his due”, requires justice the virtue: habits in people of acting justly. (And institutional arrangements like courts to back them up and clean up messes.)

What is the relation of (ethical) justice and legal justice? Officially, judges are supposed to consult what is written in the law, not their own consciences. But Catholic judges in particular have often argued that justice in itself is a deep value inherent in the law and should be consulted. This became an issue in the Mabo case in the High Court of Australia, where the Court overturned precedent in favour of a principle of equality of persons. (See *Catholic Values and Australian Realities*, ch. 10, for the story.)

Social justice

Justice is normally about the relations of individuals (e.g. I must repay a debt to you; I deserve a fair trial if I am accused of crime). But Catholic theory in particular has defended a theory of “social justice” which applies to societal arrangements (a very brief intro at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_justice#Development_of_Catholic_social_teaching). It deals especially with economic questions, and is conceived as a more cooperative alternative to “laissez faire capitalism” and to class-conflict based theories like Marxism. There is a special need to deliver justice to those in society with little power (e.g. non-voters such as resident aliens, the mentally ill, children, refugees, the old frail).

A reading from Amos 8:4-7:

Hear this, you who trample on the needy
and bring the poor of the land to an end,
saying, “When will the new moon be over,
that we may sell grain?
And the Sabbath,
that we may offer wheat for sale,
that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great
and deal deceitfully with false balances,
that we may buy the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals
and sell the chaff of the wheat?”
The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
“Surely I will never forget any of their deeds...”

(More on some aspects of this next week.)

Handout: Lisa Pryor’s *SMH* column on “queue-jumping” of fee-paying university students to be admitted to courses they would not otherwise be eligible for. It is an example of relatively minor justice issue but one where it is important to work against a gradual degradation of standards.

Complaints or doubts about justice:

There is a danger of “moral vanity” in denunciation, or seeing oneself as “speaking the truth to power” when one is merely letting loose with ill-informed indignation. E.g. economists often criticise bishops and pundits for putting forward simplistic “justice”-based views on economics (which is not to say the economists shouldn’t be argued with).

Is “justice” a “gung-ho” male ideal, and should we (as some feminist ethicists suggest) move to an “ethic of caring” instead?

The class felt there was no opposition between the two: care involves justice – for example, if you care about your children, you wish them to receive justice at school.

Finally, there is a saying from my late father: “don’t be too keen to always demand justice – there’ll be a time when you don’t want justice, you’ll want mercy”.

Break: The class split into groups of 3 to list justice issues, esp. neglected ones. Suggestions were:

- Incarceration of refugees, especially children
- Location of health-care and education facilities
- Institutional bribery; buying mark sheets
- Environmental global justice
- Aboriginal community justice
- The right to refuge, e.g. for abused women
- Retribution and the rights of victims in criminal cases

Condoning of David Hicks' imprisonment
 Immigration laws
 Migrant reunions, after the abuse of laws by extended families
 Custody of children
 Evasion of building site safety laws
 Media accountability without inhibiting free press: paparazzi and inflammatory reporting

3. Temperance/restraint

Restraint acts both to prevent damage to oneself (e.g. by overindulgence in drink, drugs, food etc) and hence to preserve one's ability to help others.

Temperance or restraint is a rather neglected virtue – especially since the Sixties, which did its best to give the virtue a bad name. And it is not a very easy virtue to love – it can be hard to get past the image of the grim “wowser” who doesn't want anyone to enjoy themselves. But the ending of the film *Casablanca* shows restraint at its most attractive: Rick (Bogart) nobly gives up Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) in the service of a greater good. And it is not hard to think of cases where lack of restraint is simply disgusting. We considered a reading from an address of NSW Governor Gipps to a meeting of the New South Wales Temperance Society in 1841:

There is nothing in the whole catalogue of crime, so thoroughly revolting as drunkenness in a woman; there is no object of disgust or horror that offends the sight of God or man, so entirely loathsome as a drunken woman. It has been too much the practice of writers of fiction, and of Poets to exhibit vice in an alluring or seductive aspect, but still I cannot call to mind a poet of any age or country who has pictured as an object of attraction a woman in a state of drunkenness. Ovid, the poet of love, the tender and gentle Ovid, keenly expresses the horror of it; and Anacreon, the poet of wine, as well as love, though he does indeed, when outstretched upon a bed of roses and of myrtles, call upon his mistress to bring to him his cup of wine, even Anacreon himself, does not, as far as I remember, invite his mistress to come and get drunk with him ...

(Temperance Advocate and Australasian commercial and agricultural intelligencer, vol. 1 no. 29 (21/4/1841), p. 4, quoted in E. Windschuttle, 'Women, class and temperance: moral reform in Eastern Australia 1832-1857', Push from the Bush 3 (1979), 5-25)

Many later initiatives in temperance have been led by women, e.g. the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, recent campaigns against drink and violence in aboriginal communities.

Restraint was more powerful and more visible in the mid-twentieth century – for example in the Depression there were unusually low rates of murder, suicide and fertility. Do we need to bring back some aspects in, for example, the education of teens? What are the ethical aspects of the story we should be telling on why they should look after themselves?

I have a grant for work on the “Restraint Project”, <http://www.maths.unsw.edu.au/~jim/restraintproj.html>
 There is casual work available for people who can show evidence of ability in research and writing.