

The Simpsons “Life on the Fast Lane”

Virtue Ethics

Two Moral Questions

- How ought I to act?
 - Utilitarianism
 - Kantian Deontology
 - Egoism
 - Divine Command Theory
 - Etc.
- What kind of person ought I to be?
 - Virtue Ethics
 - Feminist Moral Philosophy

Act Centered Ethics

- Virtue ethics criticizes act centered ethics (utilitarianism, Natural Law theory, Kantian Deontology, etc.)...
 - Assumes that acts take place in a “void”.
- Must have both components:
 - Acts centered
 - Character-centered

Knowing

- Epistemological theory (theory of knowing) distinguishes between at least two types of knowledge:
 - Epistemic
 - Propositional knowledge such as “I know that George Washington was the first President of the United States of America.”
 - Theoretical knowledge (biology, physics, etc.)
 - Logical inferences
 - Phronesis (practical or pragmatic knowledge)
 - Knowing how to make a soufflé
 - Problem-solving skills
- For Aristotle being ethical, or virtuous, requires both epistemic and phronetic knowledge.

Being Virtuous

- “We become just by performing just acts, temperate by performing temperate acts, brave by performing brave acts.”
- A person is not deemed (un)ethical based upon their actions in isolated circumstances.
- A person is *virtuous*, or not, as a result of habitual behavior carried out daily in all circumstances.
 - “Being virtuous” is a character trait in as much as those measured by the Meyers-Brigg Personality Test:
 - Introvert/Extrovert
 - Sensing/Intuitive
 - Thinking/Feeling (emphasized by Aristotle)
 - Judging/Perceiving

Virtue as Habit

- The virtues are habituated much as the ability to ride a bicycle.
 - “For just as one swallow or one day does not make a spring, so one day or a short time does not make for a fortunate or happy man.” (Nicomachean Ethics)
- The virtues are also part of who we are (our personal identity).
 - “One becomes a lute player by playing the lute, one becomes a builder by building; likewise, one becomes courageous by doing courageous acts.” (Nicomachean Ethics)

Emotion

- Emotion is necessary for virtue.
 - Compassion
 - recognizing the suffering of others
 - Empathy
 - emotional attunement
 - others often need to feel that you care

Achieving Eudaimonia

- Human flourishing is achieved by:
 - The function (ergon) of reason (arete) utilizing theoretical (epistemic) and practical (phronetic) reasoning properly expressed (emotions) habitually towards oneself and others.

The Golden Mean

- Virtues are the mean between deficiency and excess.
 - Virtues are necessary for bringing about *eudaimonia* (human flourishing)
- The particular mean (where the virtue lies between excess and deficiency) may vary by person.

Cardinal Virtues

- 4 Cardinal Virtues:
 - Prudence (phronesis aimed at bringing about the appropriate results for the appropriate reasons)
 - Temperance (governs our appetites for pleasure)
 - Justice (right relations with others in society)
 - Fortitude (determination in the face of adversity)
- These virtues (all virtues) are interconnected. Must have all in order to be virtuous:
 - A person might know what is good (episteme), know what s/he must do to get good results (prudence), but if s/he lacks temperance his/her decisions will be swayed by his/her love of pleasure.
 - A person who risks her life for small rewards has bravery but lacks prudence.

The Virtuous Life

- Virtuous behavior (character traits exhibited habitually) are the mean between two extremes (vices):
 - Courage is the mean between cowardice and foolhardiness.
 - Monogamy (possibly) is the mean between chastity (not abstinence) and sexual wantonness.
 - Charity is the mean between miserliness and spendthrift.
 - Altruism is the mean between self-deprecation and egoism.

Rationality and Emotions

- Emotions are morally relevant for Aristotle but are subject to reason.
 - Emotional responses must be appropriate to the situation.
 - Emotional responses can be learned and habituated (by rationality).
 - Emotional responses may fall anywhere on the spectrum between excess and deficit (“defect”).
- Rationality (epistemic and phronetic) “seeks” the temperate, the mean between excess and deficit.
 - Epistemic rationality is necessary for:
 - Identifying the mean
 - Acting on the mean in individual cases
 - Habituating the mean
 - Suppresses or trains the desires/appetites
 - Phronetic rationality
 - Discerns differences and similarities between cases
 - Weighs the relevance of the differences and similarities
 - Makes decisions based upon those comparisons

Character Types

- Aristotle discussed 5 different character types; we will examine the following four:
 - Virtuous (or Temperate)
 - People whose desires are naturally, or through habit, second-nature directed toward that which is good (well-being).
 - Continent
 - People who have unruly desires but manage to control them.
 - Incontinent
 - Individuals who cannot keep their desires under control but can recognize what is right.
 - Vicious
 - People who desire that which is not-good; cannot recognize what is right.

Case-study

- Lets us suppose 4 different people find 4 wallets on the street. Each person represents one of the four main Aristotelian character types, respectively:
 - Lisa
 - Lenny
 - Bart
 - Nelson

- (These are based upon characters from *The Simpsons* and as discussed in Halwani, Raja. 2001. "Homer and Aristotle." *The Simpsons and Philosophy*. Edited by William Irwin, Mark T. Conrad, and Aeon J. Skoble.

Virtuosity

- The virtuous person:
 - *Knows* the right thing to do
 - Desires to do the right thing
 - And *habitually* does the right thing.
- So, Lisa knows the right thing to do is:
 - Return the wallet to the owner in the same condition it was found.
 - Wants to return the wallet (her desires are consistent with and subject to her reason).
 - Actually does return the wallet without a second thought and is happy *about* doing so (not *for* doing so).

Continence

- The continent person (Lenny):
 - Is capable of determining the right thing to do, but
 - Struggles against desires to actually do the right thing.
 - Must force himself to do the right thing.
- So Lenny can figure out that the right thing to do is to return the wallet in the same condition it was found but, he
 - Must struggle against his desire to remove some of the money and lie about the condition in which it was found.
 - Sometimes fails to do the right thing because of desires but would most likely return the wallet.
 - Is happy *for* doing the right thing but is not happy *about* doing the right thing.

Incontinence

- The incontinent person (Bart):
 - Is capable of *recognizing* the right action but
 - Desires not to do the right thing, and
 - Is incapable of doing the right thing.
- So Bart would
 - Be able to *recognize* that the right thing to do is return the wallet intact,
 - But succumbs to his desires to keep the wallet and not return it, and
 - Is happy *for* keeping it.

Viciousness

- The viscous person (Nelson)
 - Cannot recognize the right thing to do.
 - Desires to do what is self-interested.
 - And actually does what is wrong (exclusively self-interested).
- So Nelson would
 - Desires to keep the wallet;
 - Is incapable of recognizing that he should even consider returning it;
 - Would actually (and always) keep the wallet, and
 - Is happy *for* keeping the wallet.

- (Larry Langford, based upon his public rant after the verdict, is viscous.)

The End of Virtue

- The end, or goal, of living a virtuous life is human flourishing.
 - Human flourishing is a regulatory-state not an end-state.
 - An end-state is one that can be *completed*.
 - Graduating from college is an end-state.
 - Regulatory-states are those that can be obtained but are on-going; they are not completed.
 - We can obtain happiness but happiness guides our decision on an on-going basis in order to maintain or preserve it.
 - Being healthy is also a regulatory state—it guides our daily decisions regarding diet and exercise/physical activity.
 - (Being a life-long learner is a regulatory state.)
 - Hence, being ethical—being virtuous—must be a regulatory-state, according to Aristotle.

Characters

- The following slide (created by my former colleague Trevor Smith) examines the virtuosity of each main character in “Life on the Fast Lane”

Life in the Fast Lane: The Simpsons

Homer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Homer attempts to express his love for Marge via PB&J sandwiches Forgets Marge's birthday "Look at how he wolfs down his food" (Selma to Patty about Homer's dinner etiquette.) Homer clearly doesn't know how to be with his own children. "If something is bothering you, and you are not smart enough to fix it, just keep your fool mouth shut." (Advice from Homer to Bart) "First we eat and we have eaten well" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emotion is filtered through appetites. Self centered Wife's b-day dinner is only (for him) about the food. Lacks practical wisdom (reason) Bad way of living (not smart) First thing to do is eat (appetite) 	
Marge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "I'm here out of spite" (to the bowling clerk) Lies about the name on her bowling ball to Jacque. After flirting with another man, she feels guilty, and this guilt drives her actions. (The lunches she makes for her children) When at the crossroads, what drives her to go to the nuclear power plant? Marge is clearly attracted to Jacque, which leads her to contemplate adultery. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Driven by emotion Driven by emotion Her appetites are overcome by reason/emotion Appetites 	
Lisa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lisa understands the "overcompensation" expressed in her lunch. She is not swayed by Marge's bad argument about which gift she likes best, and yet knows that it has swayed her brother. She lets him have the moment. Her gift for her mother is thoughtful, caring, and exactly what she would love. She has the proper emotions (at the right time) while dealing with her parents "separation." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very Smart (reason) Not merely smart, but also has practical wisdom about how to treat her brother Mix of reason and emotion Reason helping with proper emotions. 	
Jacque	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> His primary drive is his libido "My mind says stop, but my hear and my hips say proceed." (To Marge in the car) "You have a lovely friend... lets hope something runs over her." (To Marge about Ms. Lovejoy) "So... 120 pins later I am the better man." "Laugh out loud Marge, it will help you lose weight." He is extremely vain. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Driven by appetites Reason subject to emotion (heart) and appetite (hips). Improper emotion Excess Pride Bad view of others (based in appetites) Again, excess emotion. 	
Bart	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tongue in beaters Accepts Marge's bad argument about which gift she likes best "I am not... Am Not... AM NOT" "Hey man, don't rock the boat... we're making off like bandits" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appetites over reason Not so smart Bullheaded/Anger over intelligence Selfish, appetites over empathy 	

Lisa the Wise

- Lisa is virtuous because
 - Her gift to her mother is:
 - An expression of love (proper emotion)
 - Considers her mother's desires (phronesis and proper emotion)
 - Lisa is rational yet loving and caring:
 - Recognizes and rejects Marge's bad argument (logical inferences) but understands the intent behind why her mother gave the argument (recognition of proper emotional expression).
 - She is altruistic, the mean between self-interest (egoism) and self-deprecating.
 - Rationality regulates Lisa's behavior:
 - She knows and understands why she is having the emotional responses to her parents' troubles, and acts appropriately to the emotions; that is, her epistemic knowledge allows her to understand why she is having these emotions and her phronetic knowledge allows her to regulate (properly express) those emotions.