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A Utilitarian View vs a Virtue Ethicist View

The Situation

Say my dying friend is an art collector, who has sacrificed all other comforts in order to be able to spend his every spare penny on acquiring some works of great beauty and value. He takes great pride in his collection and regards it as one of the great achievements of his life to have assembled it and to be able to pass it on to his children after his death. As it happens, however, his family have suffered such difficult circumstances that, during his illness, and unknown to him, they have had to sell the collection off in order to get by. He has nothing left to pass on to them. Effectively his life’s achievement has been reduced to nothing. The family are desperate to keep this from my friend so that he can die happy. Should I tell him? (Bennett, What is this thing called Ethics, pp. 104-105)

The Utilitarian View

In our hypothetical situation, a utilitarian would factor in the happiness of everyone involved, themselves, the friend, and the family. If the utilitarian were to tell the friend what happened, they would probably become upset that their life’s work is now gone. This would probably lead to arguing between the friend and their family. The friend could potentially become angry at the utilitarian for meddling in family business or for even telling them, when maybe they had preferred to not know. If the utilitarian goes the route of not telling the friend, the friend would die happy thinking he passed a great inheritance to his family. As well, the friend would have no bad will towards the family compared to if the friend had been told and the friendship with the utilitarian would remain intact. Because the utilitarian strives to create the most amount of net happiness, valuing each person’s happiness equally, the second option of not telling the friend seems to be the correct course of action. The second option creates more happiness than the first, therefore it is better in the eyes of a utilitarian.

The Virtue Ethicist View

The virtue ethicist strives to be a “moral person” by doing what they believe a “moral person” would do. What makes the “moral person” moral is the set of virtues they value. The particular virtues the virtue ethicist values in this situation are those of truthfulness and friendship. Because the virtue ethicist values truthfulness and friendship, they think the “moral person” respects their friendships and the truth so they should too. Therefore, considering the same two options from above, they will be inclined towards the second option, to tell the friend the truth about what happened to their collection. The virtue ethicist is not to concerned with the outcomes of their actions, only that they act morally and do what the “moral person” would do.

The Superior View

While both views are valid ways of handling the situation, I think the utilitarian view is superior because in this situation it feels more compassionate while the virtue ethicist view seems to be more selfish. Fundamentally the utilitarian view tries to produce the most amount of happiness possible so the situation where the friend doesn’t find out about his collection results in much happier outcome for everyone involved. While the virtue ethicist’s decision results in an overall sadder outcome because they are only concerned about making moral decisions and doing what the “moral person” would do and not necessarily the outcomes from those decisions.