# 444 Lecture 13.2 - Private Vices and Public Virtues

**Brian Weatherson** 

## **Day Plan**

Virtues and Vices

Virtue Epistemology

Private Vices as Public Goods

Objections

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## **Epistemic Virtue**

The tradition they are working in traces back to Aristotle's ethics, and its emphasis on virtue.

- Or, more precisely, it traces back to the mid-20th Century rediscovery/reinvention of Aristotelian ethics.
- The very general picture is that ethics is abut character traits, not outcomes (like in consequentialism) or actions (as in deontology).

#### **Aristotelian Medians**

Aristotle had a particular take on virtue that we may, but don't have to, adopt.

- · Virtues are midpoints between two vices.
- So courage is the midpoint between cowardice and foolishness.
- Is this what virtue always consists in? I'm not sure; and the fact that we can ask that question means that we can sensibly talk about virtue theory independent of its Aristotelian origin.

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#### **Dharmottara Cases**

- Virtue epistemology was originally introduced to solve Dharmottara cases.
- Knowledge is true belief obtained via the exercise of an epistemic virtue.

## **Other Applications**

But the theory is both more and less interesting than that.

- Less because like all other solutions to the puzzle raised by Dharmottara's example, it doesn't work.
- But more because there are a lot of epistemic virtues that are interesting in their own right.

• Open-mindedness

- · Open-mindedness
- Inquisitiveness

- · Open-mindedness
- · Inquisitiveness
- Modesty

- · Open-mindedness
- · Inquisitiveness
- Modesty
- Curiosity



1. Which of these are about belief, as opposed to inquiry?

#### **Two Questions**

- 1. Which of these are about belief, as opposed to inquiry?
- 2. Which of these are Aristotelian means?

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Virtues and Vices

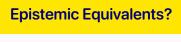
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#### **Historical Precedents**

- Mandeville's Fable of the Bees (on one interpretation): saving is private virtue but public vice.
- Being excessively confident, and going in for exploration or innovation, might be private vice but public virtue.



 Cultural evolution - over imitation is irrational but useful for spreading new ideas.

#### **Epistemic Equivalents?**

- Cultural evolution over imitation is irrational but useful for spreading new ideas.
- 2. Argumentation It's good if people are over-invested in defending their own view/finding flaws in others

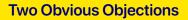
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1. These aren't public goods. Or, at least, they aren't epistemic public goods.

## **Two Obvious Objections**

- 1. These aren't public goods. Or, at least, they aren't epistemic public goods.
- 2. These aren't private vices. I'll spend more time on this.

#### **Imitation and Discrimination**

Someone who headbutts a light switch because they are imitating looks fairly silly. But are they irrational?

- They aren't actually maximising utility, but that's too high a standard.
- What does it really mean to say someone is "over-imitating"?

#### **Imitation and Discrimination**

Remember there are very good reasons for imitation.

- If someone does something, and they subsequently get a good result, that is evidence that the 'something' leads to a good result.
- This is especially true because the 'something' didn't just happen, it was an action.
- It's a good general practice to assume that things you see people do are done for reasons.
- That's especially true for the things you see successful people do.

#### **Second Order Evidence**

Very often, we get a reason to believe that p not by being given direct evidence of it, but by being given evidence that someone else has evidence of it.

- The fact that someone who wanted to achieve outcome O did action A to get it, and got outcome O, is in fact two bits of evidence.
- From the success, we get direct evidence that A leads to O.
- From the fact they did it, we get indirect evidence that A is a good way to get to O.

## Vigilence

But surely this is defeasible, and the claim is that ordinary people don't let it get defeated often enough?

- True, but that doesn't mean we have to check for ourselves that each bit of imitation is worthwhile.
- It certainly doesn't mean each bit of imitation has to be worthwhile.
- It just means that we have to be vigilant.

## Vigilence

To my mind, this is one of the most important ideas in recent epistemology.

- Good epistemic activity requires vigilence.
- Example: walking down crowded street.
- Really hard question: how do you implement vigilence in an artificial system?

#### **Imitation with vigilence**

My take on these examples is that copying with vigilence is good, i.e., is virtuous.

- So this isn't a public virtue that's a private vice.
- But maybe that's too optimistic a take on what the individuals are up to.