

444 Lecture 24

Private Vices and Public Virtues

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Day Plan

Virtues and Vices

Virtue Epistemology

Private Vices as Public Goods

Objections

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 about 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.

Other Virtues

- Open-mindedness

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- Inquisitiveness

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- Inquisitiveness
- Modesty
- Curiosity

Two Questions

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

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2. Which of these are Aristotelian means?

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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.

Epistemic Equivalents?

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

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2. Argumentation - It's good if people are over-invested in defending their own view/finding flaws in others

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Two Obvious Objections

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

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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

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 .

Vigilance

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**.

Vigilance

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

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

Imitation with vigilance

My take on these examples is that copying with vigilance 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.