

444 Lecture 24

Private Vices and Public Virtues

Brian Weatherson

April 6, 2023

1/20

Day Plan

Virtues and Vices

Virtue Epistemology

Private Vices as Public Goods

Objections

2/20

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).

3/20

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.

4/20

Day Plan

Virtues and Vices

Virtue Epistemology

Private Vices as Public Goods

Objections

5/20

Dharmottara Cases

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

6/20

Virtues and Vices
○○○

Virtue Epistemology
○○○○○

Private Vices as Public Goods
○○○

Objections
○○○○○○○○○

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.

Virtues and Vices
○○○

Virtue Epistemology
○○○○○

Private Vices as Public Goods
○○○

Objections
○○○○○○○○○

Other Virtues

- Open-mindedness
- Inquisitiveness
- Modesty
- Curiosity

Virtues and Vices
○○○

Virtue Epistemology
○○○○○

Private Vices as Public Goods
○○○

Objections
○○○○○○○○○

Two Questions

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

Virtues and Vices
○○○

Virtue Epistemology
○○○○○

Private Vices as Public Goods
●○○○

Objections
○○○○○○○○○

Day Plan

- Virtues and Vices
- Virtue Epistemology
- Private Vices as Public Goods
- Objections

Virtues and Vices
○○○

Virtue Epistemology
○○○○○

Private Vices as Public Goods
●●○○

Objections
○○○○○○○○○

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.

Virtues and Vices
○○○

Virtue Epistemology
○○○○○

Private Vices as Public Goods
○○●

Objections
○○○○○○○○○

Epistemic Equivalents?

1. 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

Virtues and Vices

Virtue Epistemology

Private Vices as Public Goods

Objections

13 / 20

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.

14 / 20

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"?

15 / 20

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.

16 / 20

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 .

17 / 20

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**.

18 / 20

- 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?

- 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.