

Introduction to Ethics

1. Introduction

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that considers the ways of life and conduct that are best suited to the kind of creatures we human beings are. Thus we see that ethics is a practical discipline, and when thinking about how to act, our reflections begin from what is called the first principle of practical reason: good should be done and pursued, and evil avoided. One of the oldest and most pressing questions in ethics, or moral philosophy, concerns what it is that human beings most desire. In his primary work on ethics, Aristotle asserted that what most satisfies human beings is eudaimonia, or possessing a well-ordered soul. The Greek word “eudaimonia” is usually translated as happiness, but for Aristotle happiness was not a feeling, or the enjoyment of a moment, but the state of confident satisfaction one enjoys when he is inwardly well-developed, that is a condition in which the will, or rational desire, is under the supervision of the intellect, and the emotions are trained and regulated by the mind and the will. In the 4th century A.D., St. Augustine of Hippo Regius in North Africa wrote a treatise titled “On the Morals of the Catholic Church.” In this writing, Augustine observes that philosophers for centuries have asserted that the highest desire of the human soul is to be happy. But, Augustine argued, thinkers have mostly defined happiness incorrectly. Happiness, according to Augustine, is the inner peace that is the natural effect of being in proper relationship to God, who is the highest good of the human soul. We see, however, that before the modern period, around 1600, philosophers understood that in order for a life to be lived with joy and satisfaction, one has to be well developed morally and intellectually. Now, this does not mean that in order to be happy one needs advanced university degrees, and thousands of books in a personal library, but that one must be oriented intellectually to truth, which is the nourishment of the mind that effects, or brings about, healthy order in the soul. We see in this the fact that ethics properly understood is not a set of rules drafted by lawyers and served to the masses in corporate professional development sessions for the purpose of managing exposure to litigation, but a serious intellectual discipline seeking to understand the highest goods of the human person the possession of which makes life happy and rewarding.

2. Philosophy

Philosophy begins with the understanding that the world and the things in it are intelligible, which means they can be understood by an intellect. Thus a thinking human being possesses the power to understand the reality we inhabit. This is important because the good of the mind, its nourishment, is truth. We know also that Americans in general are skeptical-to-dismissive of philosophy. There are two broad reasons for this. First, as the Canadian philosopher George Parkin Grant has contended, the United States and Canada are two countries in the western tradition with no history that pre-dates modernity, which means we do not have in our American history a pre-modern philosophical tradition. One of the important errors many thinkers have made in the modern period, especially in the 18th century and afterward, has been to adopt ideology in the place of philosophy. Philosophy seeks to understand what appears to us, and to grasp its meaning and implications. In doing this, we use theory to come ever closer to understanding. Thus we test a theory by seeing how well, or completely, the theory explains the phenomenon it purports to explain. Where gaps or errors appear, we know the theory has a problem and we seek to correct it, or maybe replace it with a better, more complete theory. Ideology works in the opposite direction wherein people fashion a theory, like the abstract equality of all people or the incurable racism of European societies, and then demand that reality be made to conform to the prescriptions of the conjured theory. Thus where reality does not conform to the theory, it is not a fault with the theory, but a fault with reality, and so it is reality that must be remade. It is important to see that when moral theories are framed in this way in which the theorist seeks first systematic elegance in the theory rather than explanatory compatibility with real life, we establish a condition in which moral disagreements become impossible to resolve because theories advanced without concern for truth create contradictory interpretations that cannot be harmonized, and mostly because the theories fail to capture the nature of reality. Moreover, ideology is a solvent that dissolves cultural tradition, which is the human situation alone in which philosophical questions can be understood and answered. The consequence of this is that modern philosophy, and especially modern moral philosophy, cannot give coherent answers to the questions that animate it. It thus appears to people that philosophical questions have no answers, so there's no point to them.

Second, since the war of 1861-65, commonly called a civil war, American education has become utilitarian, that is to say that education has aimed at preparing workers first for an industrial economy and later for a technological economy. But such education has little time for the consideration of such ideas as goodness, truth, beauty, and justice, or even how to think skillfully about them.

3. Education

The kind of work-oriented training that is American education today has not always been like this. We get a sense of how this happened by observing a difference between the people from England who settled the Tidewater region of Virginia and the coastal regions of the Carolinas, and the people who settled New England. The English settlers in the South were initially from southern England, they were members of the Church of England, loyal to the British crown, and migrated to North America to acquire land, raise crops, and trade with the world. The ruling class that developed among those people was interested in liberty and property rights, and understood education to be a preparation for the life of the mind. This was done largely to be the study of Latin and Greek, and the writings of ancient Latin and Greek authors. This kind of education trains the mind in the discipline of thinking, and gives to the student a kind of maturity of mind that is difficult to acquire by the experience of a single lifetime focused largely on the studies that fit one for economic activity in the present. Rather, classical education introduces people to the wisdom of what is arguably the most fruitful time in the intellectual history of western civilization.

The people who settled New England were Puritans from farther north in England than the southerners. They rejected the Church of England and were loyal to the Parliament, were opposed to the crown, and were among the victors in the English civil wars that went on from 1642-1651, resulting in the execution by beheading of King Charles I. American children are told in school that the Puritans came to North America for religious freedom, but this is not true, since Puritans believed themselves to be the true children of God, sent by Him on an “errand into the wilderness” of North America to build the shining city of God on earth. In that pursuit, the Puritans weren’t about to tolerate religious liberty (it is sometimes quipped that Rhode Island was first populated by people who had been thrown out of Massachusetts for religious non-conformity). At first, Puritan education was theological, but as time went on, and the industrial revolution progressed in New England, education became utilitarian, aimed at training industrial managers and businessmen. In fact, Thomas Jefferson founded the University of Virginia in order to provide for southern young men an alternative to what he called “the dark federalist mills of the north.” By dark federalist mills, Jefferson meant Harvard, Yale, and other northern schools. Of course, the North, and New England in particular, won the war of 1861-65, and were thus able to determine the nature of education in America since then. This goes far to explain why Americans tend to be skeptical of philosophy, or of pursuits in general that seem not to have immediate practical benefits.

4. The Requirement of Knowledge

However, we possess in our western tradition more broadly a rich treasury of philosophical understanding, and we do well for ourselves to be familiar with it, as well as our actual history, for freedom cannot thrive among a people who do not know their past. People of our founding generations understood this well. For example, Abigail Adams wrote to her son John Quincy Adams (our sixth president) saying: “Learning is not attained by chance, it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence.” James Madison wrote about the necessary conditions for freedom to flourish writing: “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.” Thomas Jefferson recognizes this when he writes: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free it expects what never was and never will be.” Benjamin Rush of Pennsylvania was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, he was surgeon general of the Continental Army during our war for independence, founder of Dickinson College, and served as professor of chemistry, medical theory, and clinical practice in the University of Pennsylvania, wrote this about freedom and learning: “Freedom can exist only in the society of knowledge. Without learning, men are incapable of knowing their rights.” In a speech commemorating the Boston Massacre, John Hancock said: “Surely you never will tamely suffer this country to be a den of thieves. Remember, my friends, from whom you sprang.” If we are to be a free and self-governing people, we must remember our history, examine it honestly, learn from it, and celebrate it, rather than looking only at errors as if America alone is the place of wrongdoing, and magnifying them beyond the truth for present political advantage. This generates the ignorance in which freedom dies.

5. What do We Want?

With this in mind, it is to be hoped that Americans will come to appreciate the value of philosophical inquiry. How might we understand, in broad lines, the moral and intellectual development of a human being? We share a common human nature which is moral and intellectual, and while we each express our shared nature differently, the number of different expressions our nature can take that are healthy for a person is limited by our nature itself. When a human being is conceived, he receives all of the human nature he will ever have. In other words, we do not acquire more human nature as we grow, for

if this were the case, those individuals who are more highly developed would possess more human nature than those who are less well developed. Rather, at conception, the capacities of our nature exist in potential, waiting to be actualized by individual effort. Recall Abigail Adams telling her son that learning does not happen by chance, but must be sought after with diligence and ardor. Thus the more capacities of our nature we actualize, the more highly developed we become. In this development, the argument goes, as it becomes ever more complete, we achieve the level of inner order that makes one confident and inwardly at peace, which we may say is happiness. St. Augustine writes famously about this in 388 A.D. saying:

How then, according to reason, ought man to live? We all certainly desire to live happily; and there is no human being but assents to this statement almost before it is made. But the title happy cannot, in my opinion, belong either to him who has not what he loves, whatever it may be, or to him who has what he loves if it is hurtful or to him who does not love what he has, although it is good in perfection. For one who seeks what he cannot obtain suffers torture, and the one who has got what is not desirable is cheated, and one who does not seek for what is worth seeking for is diseased. Now in all these cases the mind cannot but be unhappy, and happiness and unhappiness cannot reside at the same time in one man; so in none of these cases can the man be happy. I find then a fourth case where the happy life exists—when that which is man’s chief good is both loved and possessed. For what do we call enjoyment but having at hand the objects of love? And no one can be happy who does not enjoy man’s chief good, nor is there anyone who enjoys this who is not happy. We must then have at hand our chief good, if we think of living happily.

So then, to be happy we must possess our chief good. But what is that? Ever since Aristotle explained the idea of a chief good for the human soul, thinkers have sought to explain what that is, or if there even is one. What is meant by “chief good?” It is important to see that for Aristotle and for Augustine, one cannot be happy in possession of that which can be taken from him against his will, for then one will be forever fearful of losing what he loves. But if one is inwardly well developed and mature in the actualization of the moral and intellectual capacities of his nature, that condition, happiness, cannot be taken away.

6. Human Acts and Habits

When human beings act, we generally act for a purpose. The 13th century Dominican friar St. Thomas Aquinas held that an act is any exercise of a power held by a being. In humans, acts have two parts. The first is in an inner exercise of volition, one wills to perform some act, and this is followed by the material act itself, which Aquinas calls the “commanded act.” This is the structure of a human act, but we may contrast this with what Aquinas called an “act of man” which is something we do without thinking about it first, as for example when one suddenly sneezes. Human acts are done for a purpose, but most often, the purpose for which we act is aimed at a result that is farther away than the goal of the immediate act. For example, a young person goes to college, but rarely for the pure joy of learning. Rather, the student goes to school in pursuit of a job or career path that seems attractive, and attending classes now and studying at this time is the means to the longer range goal. However, the career path is also not a goal in itself because one needs to work to support himself, and so the career being pursued is also the means of self-support. But even that is not the end of the chain of goals because among the benefits of earning a living is acquiring the means to other good things like marriage and family, but does the line of interrelated goals end here. The question Aristotle asked that initiated this discussion about a highest good is whether there is for human beings a “master good,” that is a good one desires for itself and for no other purpose. Aristotle answers that the master good suited to human beings is eudaimonia, or a well-ordered soul. St. Augustine, more than 600 years later, argued that the peace that comes with a well-ordered soul is the consequence of living in harmony with God. In other words, one pursues God, and happiness, understood as inner peace, is a consequence of this. So we see here deeply embedded in western tradition the idea that the goal of the moral life, of ethics, is to develop the moral and intellectual capacities of our human nature, and in this way to achieve the inner peace that makes life confident and happy.

Aristotle tells us that the key to a good life is to develop the moral and intellectual virtues of which we are capable. There are many different virtues, but Aristotle identifies four virtues as the cardinal virtues from which the other virtues take their meaning. A virtue is a habit of character by which we steadily use the capacities of our nature for good and never for evil purposes. By “habit” Aristotle meant a settled determination within us to conduct ourselves in all departments of life for the good. So for Aristotle, a habit is not something one does unthinkingly, as by rote repetition, but something we are purposefully and steadily disposed to do. There are four cardinal virtues because we have four basic faculties in need of guidance. These are intellect, will, appetite of desire and appetite of aversion. Prudence is the basic virtue of the intellect, justice of the will, temperance to regulate the urge to enjoy what is pleasant, and fortitude (or courage) to manage the instinct to flee from what is painful. Let us now examine these virtues in greater depth.

7. Prudence

A well-known source of writings in moral philosophy defines prudence this way. The virtue of prudence is “an intellectual habit enabling us to see in any given juncture of human affairs what is virtuous and what is not, and how to come at the one and avoid the other.” Prudence is an intellectual virtue in that it aims at orienting the intellect to truth, but it may be held also to be a moral virtue because it seeks truth in taking practical decisions for action. A person possessed of prudence is able to see within the circumstances of any situation what virtue requires, and is guided by the idea that virtuous action always finds a mean between what Aristotle called “excess and deficiency,” that is, between too much and too little in one’s actions. The idea is that a definition of a virtue does not tell us how to develop it or how it can guide our actions. Aristotle argues that for every action, the virtuous course is a middle path between too much and too little. If we consider as an example the virtue of liberality, which is the virtue of being disposed whenever one is able to give money or other aid to people in need, we should say that if one withheld assistance when it could be given without harm to oneself, such a person would be miserly. Which is a vice, and not a virtue. If on the other hand one gave away all he had leaving nothing over for the care of his family, we could say such a fellow was foolhardy. The path of liberality is to be found somewhere in the middle wherein one relieves the need of another without causing harm to himself and to those dependent on him. It is the function of the virtue of prudence to discover that middle path in all circumstances in which one is called on to take a decision on action.

8. Courage

The concept of the virtues is ancient having its emergence in European thought in Greece, but finding its fullest development in Latin western Europe in the High Middle Ages of the thirteenth century, and especially in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, in whose hands courage is called fortitude. Plato famously discussed the human soul as comprised of psyche and nous in which nous is the intellect present within us and psyche, usually translated as “soul,” is the spirited and often undisciplined element within us. Thus a human being is likened to a chariot driver who has two horses, one calm and obedient, and the other wild and unpredictable, and the skill of the driver is found in his ability to train the spirited horse to cooperate with the obedient one for the accomplishment of the charioteer’s mission. St. Thomas would say that we may understand that element of human nature that Plato likens to a wild horse as the fallen

and sinful nature we have inherited from our first parents. It is this in us that calls for the virtue of courage, or fortitude.

In the development of the understanding of courage from Greece in the 4th century B.C. to Paris in the 13th century, we see it beginning as the martial virtue of the soldier in battle, standing firmly and with clarity of purpose in the midst of danger, to a steady disposition of endurance under the demands of challenges of all kinds. In an early dialogue of Plato, Socrates is approached by a group of men who ask him how they can make their sons courageous. Socrates predictably asks the men what they take courage to be, and the fathers reply with instances of bravery in combat, or valiant management of ships in dangerous seas. To this, Socrates says that the men have given examples of courage, but what is needed is a definition. Typical for Plato's early dialogues, the question at issue is not decisively answered, but in the process, much is said that casts light on the question, and certainly provides guidance for future thinkers on the topic. Aristotle follows Plato but differs eventually by defining courage to be that which firmly faces the gravest risks to life in battle. We can say, then, that for Aristotle, courage expresses itself in the attack in the presence of danger. Thomas Aquinas, however, finds courage to reside in endurance under hardships of any kind whatever. This is important for Thomas, and for our understanding of courage, because Thomas argues that this firm disposition to meet hardships with endurance is the basis for the steady expression of all of the virtues of the human soul, because a virtuous person does not take holidays from virtue to dabble in behaviors that might be fun or momentarily exciting but are in fact morally corrupting.

9. Temperance

Courage, as we have seen, is the virtue that refines and manages the appetite of aversion. Prudence is the virtue of the practical intellect, although it manages also the will by presenting to it proper objects of desire and choice. Temperance is the virtue that attends to our appetite of desire. We are rightly repelled by that which is disgusting or hazardous, and we are rightly attracted to that which is good and pleasurable. While we can say that someone who is undisciplined in the face of danger is cowardly, we may say also that someone who is incontinent, or undisciplined, in the management of pleasures, especially bodily pleasures, dissipated. This is so because pleasures are ordered hierarchically where we find the pleasures of the mind to be superior to the pleasures of the body because our intellect is our noblest part. Also, we have seen from millennia of experience that people who indulge inordinately in pleasures of the body become soft, undisciplined, and even unhealthy

We may say that the moderation temperance brings is a defining characteristic of all of the virtues. An important source on this virtue describes it this way: Temperance is “the righteous habit which makes a man govern his natural appetite for pleasures of the senses in accordance with the norm prescribed by reason.” The pleasures of concern here fall into three classes: those associated with the preservation of the individual, those associated with the perpetuation of the human race, and those associated with the well-being and comfort of a human life. Thus we see three attendant and subordinate virtues in harmony with temperance: abstinence, chastity, and modesty. Abstinence functions in relation to food and drink and here one must follow the counsel of reason because temperance in food and drink will vary from one person to another. Men in general need more food than do women in general. Athletes will need more food and drink than retired office workers, and so on. Abstinence avoids the vices of gluttony and drunkenness. The function of chastity is to regulate the sensual satisfactions of propagating the species, that is, to avoid the excesses occasioned by the vice of lust. Modesty is the virtue by which we manage the human passions that lie in us less violently than do the passions for food and drink, and sex. It expresses itself in us as a kind of humility by which one’s interior life is set in order (and contributes importantly to inner peace). Modesty regards such things as style of life, manner of speech and dress, habitual bearing, that is how one carries oneself, and the like, and this helps us understand why temperance is a cardinal virtue.

10. Justice

Justice is considered the most important of the cardinal virtues because it regulates our interactions with others. “It is a moral quality or habit which perfects the will and inclines it to render to each and to all what belongs to them.” The virtue of charity inclines us to assist others out of our own means. Justice requires us to give to others what belongs to them. This includes normal and accepted social courtesies and manners, keeping one’s agreements with others, keeping one’s word and promises, keeping one’s hands off of others without their permission, and certainly and foundational to liberty, keeping one’s hands off of other people’s property. It has long been understood that no society can be free that does not hold secure the property rights of individuals. When government takes to itself the authority to determine how much of a man’s property he may keep, liberty is at an end.

In the theory of justice, the idea is that human beings are created by God with natures that are moral and intellectual, and given the obligation of developing the powers of our nature for the accomplishment of our natural destiny. Because this is so we are given liberty by which we are free to

work, each for himself and in community together, toward the destiny the lies before us. For this reason, we have rights borne of our nature, and thus primordial, existing before the establishment of any government, and therefore government exists to protect the rights of individuals, and so any violation by government of someone's rights is unjust. So when government takes what one person owns and gives it to another, claiming that justice requires it, this is false because relieving the need of those among us who are ailing is a duty of charity, not justice. Justice gives to each person what belongs to him, it does not take it away.

11. Conclusion

Now, rights are possessed both by individuals and by communities, since it is in community with others alone where individuals can flourish. It is here that we say, in American political tradition, that sovereign authority to govern is the right of the people of each state, and not a right of any government. At the foundation of society is human nature with its needs, wants, and aims that is the source of our natural rights. In turn, people establish government to protect their rights. With our rights protected, people may safely go about their lives as they see fit in the interests of themselves, their families, and their communities. Once we understand this, it becomes clear why it is important to develop the virtues, especially prudence, courage, temperance and justice, for these habits will go far to assure that our lives are well-lived and happy, and our communities free, healthy, and homes well-suited to human beings.