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24.120 Moral Psychology
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XXVI Character and Morals

NORMATIVE ETHICAL THEORIES

Some more broad (and again horribly simplified) distinctions, this time of normative theories:

Consequentialist theories (of which the most famous is utilitarianism) take the right act to be determined by its consequences. The task facing the consequentialist is thus to formulate the measure of consequences in such a way that they don't give rise to absurd results.

Deontological theories (of which the most famous is Kant's) take the right act to be determined by the rules that one must obey. The task facing the deontologist is thus to formulate the rules in such a way that they don't give rise to absurd results.

Prompted by the apparent failure of either of these approaches, a number of theorists have returned to an approach that was more prominent in the classical period, one that characterized the right act in terms of the virtues that it exhibited (Aristotle is the most frequently cited authority here, but Plato and the Stoics also made use of the approach). There are two ways of developing this approach. The first proceeds by characterizing the individual virtues, and then holds that the right act is one that exhibits them (problem: what to say if two virtues clash, e.g. justice and mercy). The second proceeds by characterizing the virtuous agent, and then holds that the right act is the one that they would perform (problem: how to characterize the virtuous agent in a way that provides predictive or explanatory power, a problem exacerbated by the fact that virtue theory may be combined with particularism, the view that there are no exceptionless rules governing morality).

DORIS

Doris understands virtue theory to be premised on the idea that there are certain personality traits that the virtuous agent possesses: they are brave, just, generous etc. Virtue theory could be understood either as a descriptive claim—virtuous acts do in fact stem from the exhibition of these virtuous personality traits—or as a normative claim—virtuous acts should stem from the exhibition of these traits, even if in fact nobody is virtuous enough to possess them. His challenge is that social psychology has shown that there are no personality traits; or at least, that they are so weak that they cannot be usefully employed in explaining action.

FOUR FAMOUS STUDIES (SUMMARIZED IN KAMTEKAR)

Hartshorn and May's *Cheating, Stealing and Lying*

Low correlation between cheating, stealing and lying behavior.

Milgram's *Obedience to Authority*

26 out of 40 in the initial study continued to the limit.

Isen and Levin's *Feeling Good and Helping*

Finding a dime in the phone booth increases helping behavior

Darley and Batson's *Good Samaritans*

Being in a hurry decreases helping behavior

These studies certainly show that circumstance is a good predictor of behavior. Do they show that character is not? The first and the fourth address this most explicitly.

Doris concludes that the descriptive claims of virtue theory are false. He further holds that the normative claims are unhelpful. One would do better suggesting that people be more aware of the influence of situation, the better to confront it. (Kamtekar objects that we cannot always avoid bad situations; but that seems unfair to Doris. Avoidance is only one strategy that is suggested by situationism; another is just the awareness that one's actions are likely to be corrupted by circumstance.)

THREE RESPONSES TO DORIS

1. Dispute that social psychology has really shown that there are no personality traits. After all, 14 of Milgram's subjects didn't reach the limit. Further, consider Bem's idiographic approach:

Consider how we proceed when we seek to characterize a friend. We do not typically invoke some a priori set of fixed dimensions that we apply to everyone. Instead, we analyze the data first. We review our friend's behavior and then select descriptors that strike us as pertinent precisely because they seem to conform to the patterning of his or her behavior. If Dick always does his schoolwork early, always returns his library books on time, and is meticulous about his personal hygiene, we are likely to describe him as conscientious. On the other hand, if Jane always does her schoolwork early but never returns her library books or changes her underwear, we might well describe her as a totally dedicated student who has time for little else. The point is that we would not characterize Jane as inconsistently conscientious. The trait term *conscientious* would not occur to us in the first place because it fails to identify any salient feature of her overall behavior. In this way we artfully finesse the inconsistency problem at the outset. Jane will not embarrass our description of her with some unexpected act of nonacademic negligence or personal slovenliness.

Even Nisbett and Ross concede something similar:

Knowing that a particular individual has displayed an extremely "high" response on even a single occasion makes it safe to conclude that the person's response on some other occasion is much more likely to be extremely high than extremely low. And knowing that an individual's mean response over a great many observations is extreme makes these differences in the relative likelihood of particularly high or particularly low future scores reach dramatic levels indeed.

2. Deny that the personality traits that social psychology denies are what the virtue theorist was after in the first place.

Kamtekar insists that traits cannot be evaluated solely in terms of behavior, but must include discussion of judgment and feelings; insists that different traits will be playing off against each other, and it is only by looking inside the agent that we can see this; stresses the importance of how the agent sees things.

3. Question whether virtue theory needs to make reference to character traits at all. Couldn't it make do just with the idea of the ideal agent? And couldn't it make use of this even if in fact no one is an ideal agent?