

Norms and Aims: The Teleological Ethics of Social Roles¹

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(1) A need for relativism?

[M]odern societies have inherited no single ethical tradition from the past but fragments of conflicting traditions: we are Platonic perfectionists in saluting gold medallists in the Olympics; utilitarians in applying the principle of triage to the wounded in war; Lockeans in affirming rights over property; Christians in idealizing charity, compassion and equal moral worth; and followers of Kant and Mill in affirming personal autonomy. No wonder that intuitions conflict in moral philosophy. No wonder people feel confused.²

(2) A strategy of justification

Suppose you reproach a car manufacturer (call them CM) for producing fuel-inefficient cars, despite available technology to do otherwise. Suppose the management of CM replies: 'We rely on what customers want. They want cheap cars and do not care about fuel efficiency. If this changes, we will change our production. Our job is to satisfy our customer's demands. In fact, it's the only way we can survive. It is not our business to tell people what they *should* want to buy.'

This kind of justification is omnipresent in business. The general strategy is this: it is not part of the *role* of a manager or of a business to address moral concerns. That is, moral reasons are relative to *social roles*. More precisely, what is right and wrong for someone occupying a particular role depends on the *aims* that the occupied social role comes with. As there is a rich diversity of social roles and their aims, (role) obligations vary accordingly. Attaching obligations to social roles is thus a form of *moral relativism*.

(3) Role obligations and role permissions

This view allows us to define *role obligations* and *role permissions*. *Role obligations* are those things that one ought to do in virtue of inhabiting certain role. In other words, the social role is explanatory necessary or relevant to explain why someone is under a specific obligation. For instance: a doctor is obliged not to provide medical information about her patients to third parties. In contrast, a family member of a patient is not necessarily under this obligation. *Role permissions* cover those acts that a person is morally permitted to perform in virtue of inhabiting a certain role. Those occupying other social roles may thus

¹ This lecture is primarily based on chap. 3 of Sanbu's 'Just Business: Arguments in Business Ethics'.

² Pence, 'Virture Theory', p. 251.

lack such permission. Policemen are permitted to restrain the free movement of individuals; ordinary citizens are usually not permitted to do so.

(4) Virtues and aims: The foundations of a role-based ethics

Why should an adequate ethical theory leave room for our social roles in determining our moral obligations? Why is it the case that what we have moral reason to do is at least partly founded in the social position and activities we engage in?

Aristotle's moral philosophy has been organized around that idea; it is the grounding of his *virtue ethics*.

'Virtue' in Aristotelian ethics expresses 'excellence' or 'perfection'; 'virtuous' thus means 'accomplished'. Virtue is thus a standard of perfection – it is what makes something good. In sum, something possesses virtue if and only if it is in a state of accomplishment. Aristotle expresses this as follows:

every virtue causes its possessors to be in a good state and to perform their functions well; the virtue of eyes, *e.g.*, makes the eyes and their functioning excellent, because it makes us see well; and similarly, the virtue of a horse makes the horse excellent, and thereby good at galloping, at carrying its ride and standing steady in the face of the enemy.³

In short, the virtue of X is what makes X a good/excellent/accomplished X. What makes X good depends in turn on the purpose of X. Aristotelian *virtue ethics* is thus a *teleological ethics* ('telos' meaning 'purpose' or 'end'); in short, an ethical human is one that lives according to fulfilling his or her natural and social functions. On p. 35, Sandhu develops a schema to identify virtues.

The purpose or *telos* of X is to q; therefore:
A good X is an X that qs well; therefore:
The *virtues* of X are what makes it q well.

Can we use this schema to identify what makes humans virtuous? Aristotle thought that 'the virtue of human being will likewise be the state that makes a human being good and makes him perform his function well'⁴. In order to capture human function, we not only need to look at natural functions of human beings (e.g. survival), but also the functions of their social roles. Social roles derive their meaning from social practices of which they are a part of. A social practice manifests itself in a regularized social interaction that comes with a shared social understanding.

Describing something as a social practice already sets a normative standard. For example, by describing the social practice of *medicine* will include a reference to

³ *Nicomachian Ethics*, 1106a.

⁴ *Ibid.*

'being conducive to health'; describing the practice of *policing* may involve a reference to 'being conducive to public security'. Thus, a social role may be defined by its standard of excellence or accomplishment. It is that standard that may serve as an evaluative and reason giving norm for a social practice; and we may expect the occupant of a social role to act accordingly. These norms may be permissive; they may allow the occupant of a social role to act in a certain way that is not permitted of individuals outside the practice. These norms may also be restrictive. That is, they may disallow the occupant of a social role to act in certain way that is open to others. Social roles thus come with a normative standard 'built in'. It may even be impossible to understand a social role without understanding what it means to fulfil the normative standard that comes with it.

(5) A virtue approach to business ethics

Business – described generally – is a social practice. At the very least business is a social practice of coordinating production and exchange of commodities. Does this suffice to say that there are permissive and restrictive norms for business? To answer this, we need to ask 'What virtues pertain to business decisions?' and 'Can we derive how a businessperson should act *qua* businessperson from the answer to this question?'. In short, adherence to which particular norms and character traits enables a businessperson to succeed in her role? Do these norms have ethical and normative force?

Robert Solomon, a virtue ethicist, identifies the character traits that are essential for fulfilling the social aims of business.

There are many great virtues that are relevant to business life [...]. Just for a start, we have honesty, loyalty, sincerity, courage, reliability, trustworthiness, benevolence, sensitivity, helpfulness, cooperativeness, civility, decency, modesty, openness, cheerfulness, amiability, tolerance, reasonableness, tactfulness, wittiness, gracefulness, liveliness, magnanimity, persistence, prudence, resourcefulness, cool-headedness, warmth and hospitality [...]. Then there are those virtues that seem peculiar (though not unique) to business, such as being shrewd and ruthless and 'tough', which may well be vices in other aspects of life.⁵

This list invites the following criticism of the *virtue approach*: it just reduces ethics to a (very long) checklist. Moreover, the *virtue approach* bears the burden of specifying what this list means for *practical actions*. It needs to show why this approach says more than simply encouraging us to 'be nice'. In particular, it needs to tell us how we can use this list to answer the question: 'What am I ought to do, all things considered?' (Think, for example, about 'courage' and 'loyalty'. Often, these two traits go together; but sometimes the courageous thing to do is to be disloyal.)

⁵ Solomon, 'Corporate roles, personal virtues: An Aristotelian approach to business ethics'.

(6) Ethics out of the internal logic of practices?

Virtue theory invites us to locate business ethics in the social nature of the practice of business. However, as soon as we see ethics as practice-relative, it is not entirely clear that the content of ethics can maintain a connection with – for example – the greater social good. What happens, for instance, if the internal logic of a practice requires antisocial behavior?

Albert Carr has claimed that in fact the internal aim of business resembles that of a competitive game, namely poker. He writes:

We can learn a good deal about the nature of business by comparing it with poker [...]. No one expects poker to be played on the ethical principles preached in churches. In poker it is right and proper to bluff a friend out of the rewards of being dealt a good hand. A player feels no more than a slight twinge of sympathy, if that, when [...] he strips a heavy loser [...] of the rest of his chips. It was up to the other fellow to protect himself.

Poker's own brand of ethics is different from the ethical ideals of civilized human relationship. The game calls for distrust of the other fellow. It ignores the claim of friendship. Cunning deception and concealment of one's strength and intentions, not kindness and openheartedness, are vital in poker. No one thinks that any the worse of poker on that account. And no one should think any the worse of the game of business because its standards of right and wrong differ from prevailing traditions of morality in our society.⁶

Like Solomon's argument, Carr's approach is also a *practice-relative* one. It conceives of business as a special social practice that is role-relative and governed by certain norms that arise from the aim of business. However, the *content* of their ethical theories – i.e. what counts as right and wrong – stand in stark contrast to each other. For example, Carr argues

Most executives from time to time are almost compelled, in the interests of their company or themselves, to practice some form of deception when negotiating with customers, dealers, labor unions, government officials, or even other departments of their companies. By conscious misstatements, concealment of pertinent facts, or exaggerations – in short, by bluffing – they seek to persuade others to agree with them. I think it is fair to say that if the individual executive refuses to bluff from time – if he feels obligated to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth – he is ignoring opportunities permitted under the rules and is at a heavy disadvantage in his business dealings.⁷

⁶ Carr, 'Is business bluffing ethical'.

⁷ Ibid.

One should emphasize that Carr's reasoning here is entirely teleological. 'Dishonesty' is defended as a means to succeed in the game of business. 'Bluffing well' is a virtue of a good businessperson, and so is deceptiveness. Aristotelian virtue theories can thus not contradict Carr's argumentation on methodological terms; their method is the same. Instead, they seem to differ on empirical terms, i.e. as to which strategies will be aims of business best.