

VIRTUOUS JUST CONSEQUENTIALISM: EXPANDING THE IDEA MOOR GAVE US

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ABSTRACT

We find Moor's paper on just consequentialism from 1999 to be an interesting take on how developers can process ethical issues in developing software. However, we think it stops short from its goal by only mentioning virtue ethics. Thus, we integrate virtue ethics into the model in this paper. We find that habits based on compassion through virtual virtue friendship can fill the gap and create better developers; developers who habitually take into account the users, targets and organisations using the software they develop.

KEYWORDS: Virtue ethics, Just Consequentialism, Ethics, Aristotle, Moor.

1. INTRODUCTION

As an IT professional, one has power over others through the decisions one makes. These decisions do not only create possibilities to create value through work or entertainment, but also value through moral decisions by allowing or limiting the growth of the users' characters. The decisions made in the system design (e.g. UI, functionalities, and communication methods), when designed correctly, can affect the character building process of the user by allowing, denying, and most importantly of all supporting certain actions. Therefore, the developer can promote virtues or vices and affect in the development of the users' character with the choices in design. (Heimo et al., 2018)

The IT professional can hence be in the position of a virtual virtue friend (see Heimo et al., 2018) – for a person whom they will very probably never meet nor whom will never hear about the professional – and support the virtuousness of that user through the decisions they make in the design, e.g. encouraging honest and truthful actions in multiplayer computer games. Yet, as is evident, being virtuous is a sort of vague moral guideline – especially when these persons do not know much about each other, and therefore more specific instructions and short time aims should be clarified.

Hence we turn to Moor's just consequentialism which in turn can evaluate specific situations in everyday life. It is rather easy compared to the virtuous to see and examine ones motivations and consequences. Thus we want to mate Aristotle (even though through more modern interpretations) to Moor. One can make a virtue out of being Moorean by making a habit of having ones motivations just, and evaluating ones actions, whether they have just consequences. To extend this to the role of an IS/IT designer to be a "virtue friend" in a "virtual world", to support the users' possibilities in acting for just motivations and just end results (on virtual friendship elsewhere see e.g. Briggie, 2008 or Elder, 2014, although their handling is more direct than ours). However as we clarify, this does not mean

forcing the motivations nor forcing the desired consequences but, rather, as a friend supporting others develop their character to a more Moorean view.

2. JUST CONSEQUENTIALISM

James Moor (1999) in his paper on just consequentialism and computing says that he is approaching the topic from both deontological and consequentialist perspectives – and thus he indeed does. He uses a Rawlsian approach of justice and consequentialist considerations to build a framework through which a developer can evaluate the function of their application. If an action is both justified and its consequences are good, the function of the application is also good. In this paper we claim this is not quite enough. We intend to show that combined with an interpretation on friendship from Aristotle the argument can be strengthened.

Moor (1999) is aiming to create a practical guideline to follow for systems developers – consider whether the system you are building is just and whether the consequences of the system are good; and this is what he does in his paper. Unfortunately, that can lead to a mechanical, rather than an internalised method of evaluating whether a solution is good. We want to go a step further, to build an Aristotelian character for the designer, which automatically does the right thing, rather than needs to stop and consider every choice based on a two-by-two table: “is this just?”, “are the consequences good?” As Moor (1999, p.65) says “Policies are rules of conduct ranging from formal laws to informal, implicit guidelines for action.” We fear the latter, implicit action, cannot be reached by just consequentialism, and thus emphasize the building of character through automated habits, which the designer will internalise as well as they have internalised the use of charts, design methods and coding. Namely, the kind of thinking Moor (1999, p. 65) calls for, “Every action can be considered as an instance of a policy – in this kind of situation such and such action is allowed or required or forbidden” we want to “automate” through a habit, and later through building a character via a virtue ethics approach.

We applaud Moor’s (1999) goal of finding a unified theory, but think virtue ethics provides a more solid basis for this than the just consequentialism he proposes, although it obviously has its merits, which we propose to be integrated into our model. We think a character based approach will solve the issues Moor raises; being a holistic perspective not tied to either the justness or the consequences alone. Of course, even the person with the best of characters is likely to make *mistakes*, but not out of malice, but out of situational limits on understanding. Thus, we do not see our proposed theory as contradicting Moor’s ideas, but rather taking the unification of ethical theory – at least when it comes to computer ethics – a step closer to the goal.

Even though Moor (1999 p. 66) takes some preliminary steps towards this thinking in his paper, merely mentioning Aristotle’s concept of “human flourishing” and claiming it necessary is not enough, we need actual tools to reach this end. In the next chapter we argue that the developer becoming a virtual virtue friend of the users, targets – even the organisations – which the systems are designed for is the necessary, and yet unstudied next step towards this goal.

3. VIRTUE ETHICS

Aristotle states that to reach Eudaimonia, one must be virtuous in their everyday life by fulfilling his or her telos by achieving virtues, avoiding vices and developing their character. This is how a person flourishes in their life. Developing character by implementing virtues as a part of everyday life, following virtues, acting virtuously and thus making the virtuous acts as a natural aspect of ones actions

is a trait shared by good people. (Heimo, 2018; Heimo et al., 2018.) Vallor (2013) states that moral skills are necessary for moral virtue:

Someone could have moral skills in the sense of practical moral knowledge but fail to be virtuous because they are unreliable in acting upon this knowledge, or because they act well only for nonmoral reasons. Still, moral skills are a necessary if not a sufficient condition for moral virtue. Without the requisite cultivation of moral knowledge and skill, even a person who sincerely wishes to do well consistently and for its own sake will be unsuccessful.

Differing from other versions of normative ethics, virtue ethics does not generate a set of norms but rather guidelines both encouraging people to avoid vice and promote the virtues. The normativity is in the level of ideas rather than a set of strict rules governing our daily actions. True value, according to Aristotle, is only generated through virtues – and vice versa with vices. In Aristotelian sense a character is not virtuous by following virtue alone, since one might follow virtue reluctantly and in the face of temptation but rather, when a person automatically aims toward all virtues, the character can become virtuous. (EN I, 9 – 10; 1098a, 15 – 21; 1098b 5 – 30; 1100a31 – 1101a21, II, 1; 1103a31 – 1103b25, 1104a10 – 1105a16; McPherson, 2013). Or, as Vallor (2009) explains:

[...] the moral development of individuals cannot be assessed or predicted simply by looking at what they think, feel or believe—we also have to know what kinds of actions they will get in the habit of doing, and whether those actions will eventually promote in such persons the development of virtues or vices.

Therefore being virtuous is a life choice rather than a situational choice and only through life choices can a happy and good life be enjoyed. Yet socially valued virtues might not equal ethical virtues (Beauchamp & Childress 2001, p. 27). Humans are often expected in e.g. at work to follow socially valued virtues even when they conflict with their personal moral virtues. (e.g., Murphy, 1999). Excelling at one's work does not equal being virtuous. The human life as a whole, not divisible into parts that can ignore other parts, must be taken in accordance and constructed virtuously (MacIntyre, 2004, pp. 240 – 241; 2007, p. xv).

Yet only higher-level abstraction can be derived from Aristotelian virtue ethics thinking – be brave and do not act cowardly, foolhardily, or rashly! Churchland (2011, p. 115) however turns the higher abstraction-level as a favourable position to virtue ethics with the higher-level concepts – ideas rather than rules – as they tend to work better with the human mind. With this Churchland implies that *there cannot be universal categorical laws* which offer us the right from wrong all the time. We are more able to understand the right from the wrong – truthful from the false – from ideas than via a complex set of norms or rules. (Churchland, pp. 114-116.)

According to Aristotle the actions, not mere words define the honesty and truthfulness but moreover the life itself. Repeated practice over time in truthfulness leads the person to the concept of honesty and to see the value in it. Or as Vallor (2013) explains, those who have cultivated themselves in the virtue of honesty have “[...] learned how to excel at truth-telling in any situation that might arise: who to tell the truth to, when and where, in what way, and to what extent.”

MacIntyre (2004) states that to interpret Aristotle, humans must not just study Aristotle, but moreover comprehend that he wrote for his time. In that time the world, linguistics, and culture varied from what we know and to understand Aristotle is in connection in understanding ancient times as social norms and social actors are different. Even the meanings of the words have changed. To understand

and interpret the virtues required in relation to modern world is a key element in understanding Aristotle (MacIntyre, 2004).

To understand how the virtues in that society were seen is a key element in understanding Aristotle since he aimed to be understood by other educated Greeks, not by barbarians who live in the Northern part of the continent and over two millennia later. According to MacIntyre (2004), language and society are bound to each other and we live in rather different society than the ancient Greeks did. Hence to comprehend the virtues and vices we should focus on the translation and modernisation of the term and understand the virtue itself. We should aim to understand how to be a good person.

Interpreting Aristotle is clearly not the easiest task and the referred authors (Vallor, MacIntyre and Churchland) with many other prominent philosophers give seemingly contradictory results. Yet, the key idea behind Aristotelian virtue ethics in general – one promoting virtues and avoiding vices – works rather well, at least in this case. The limitations such as the meaning of virtue and what can be interpreted as a virtue can be kept in margins for they clearly are problems belonging to meta-ethics. The focus of this paper is in the aim of developing character, which none of these authors seem to contradict with.

4. VIRTUAL VIRTUE FRIENDSHIP

Aristotelian concept of friendship requires as bearing mutually recognized good will and wishing well for each other. [EN, VIII, 2-3, 1155b30-1156a10] This demand is hard if not impossible to pursue in the situation where the friends are not aware of the other as a person but only as an entity. However, it should not be impossible for one to act with good will and wishing well in modern times where digitalization has made everyday life increasingly virtual. Let us call that *virtual friendship*; friendship from one person to a group or an entity of people which they may or may not meet but whom their professional decisions affect.

It is sort of friendship between host and guests [see EN, VIII, 3, 1156a30-32] but not limited to it. It could be motivated by pleasure [see e.g. EN, VIII, 2-3, 1156a1-1156b32], but that is not necessary. In addition, joint benefit must not be symmetrical in status and those in better positions should act accordingly [EN VIII, 13, 1162a33-1162b3]. The benefit from it is therefore sometimes asymmetrical [EN VIII, 13, 1162b3-1162b4] – e.g. money, status, career etc. for the developer and possibilities to work, pleasant pastime and social interaction for the user – yet the friendship is beneficial to both parties. For example, the most pleasurable game developing experience can and should come when the audience is enthusiastic about the game – the developer has done good work and the pleasure affected to the gamers gives him or her joy, for then the developer knows they have succeeded in making a good product and thus being virtuous in work.

But to achieve the highest level of friendship requires the element of virtue where the friends trust the other not to intentionally harm them, act against them or aim only to benefit them even though the element of benefit is duly present. Most of all virtue friends aid each other by helping each other, offering kindness and companionship, and aiding the development of their character. [EN, IX, 11-12, 1171a22-1172a15]

Thus as an IT professional being a virtue friend to the users – those dependent on their decisions – seems just and virtuous. To support them, not to force them or be indifferent about them, to make a habit of having their motivations just, evaluating their actions through not just motivations but also through the consequences and steer their habits towards what they themselves have learned and discovered to be just. As friends treat others whose virtuous actions they try to support, so that their motivations become just and habitual, so that the consequences of their acts be just and the

Promethean values meet the Epimethian thinking to promote the habit of creating iterations of more just consequences.

Thus, it seems to us that plain just consequentialism will not, unfortunately, give us the results computer ethics aims for in practice. Rather, instead of following an algorithm in which the developers consider whether an act is both just and that its consequences are good, they must become a kind of virtual virtue friends of the users, targets and the organisations which will be using or targeted by the systems they design, lest they just “tick the boxes”, of which Professor Emeritus Gotterbarn always warns us of. Building the right kind of character is of paramount importance; making it a habit to always consider the benefits – and possible draw backs – of the systems developed must become second nature to the developers. And this, we claim, can only be achieved through a virtue ethics approach where the developers truly internalise their connection with the users and targets of the systems they develop.

However, for the virtual friendship to be virtue friendship, a virtual virtue friendship, the good will and wishing well must actualise. The developer should not only do a good product, but they should treat the users as a good host does for their friends; as their esteemed guests. They should not lure them to the vices for a short time benefit but to promote the virtuous development of those they are being the host to, but to aid the friend to achieve, thus improving the character of both and making both more vigilant in their respective virtues.

5. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Therefore it seems that virtual virtue friendship is a set of actions where a developer acts as a friend should act towards the users. The point that Aristotelian thinking in how to build character through virtues and virtues through friendship is still sound today – when it is interpreted through modern thinkers, rather than just the original, somewhat era dependent values (see e.g. MacIntyre 2004).

It seems to be obvious that we do not want to treat everyone as we treat our closest friends. We do not want to share our lives, health (see e.g. Wahlstrom, Fairweather & Ashman, 2011), possessions or time with everyone, but with a selected few we consider close and trustworthy. Virtual virtue friends are just that – a group of people we do not so much share our life with, but we treat as virtue friends. Yet, to promote the virtues of others, helping them develop their character and aiding others while doing the work we do seems to be good from the viewpoint of what is just, and from the viewpoint of where the consequences, at least in the large scale, could be beneficial.

Whereas consequentialist and deontological models treat the user more as a target of the moral action and asserts the developer with a strict set of dos and don'ts, virtue ethics brings out the deeper connection between the two. As the relationship is viewed more as of that of friends, the users become more as those we wish well and aim to help in the world – and through that the world itself becomes a better place.

Adding virtue ethics to the Moorean thinking therefore strengthens the multi-ethical approach but also makes it more complicated. It requires not only the understanding of what is just, or the capability to see the consequences behind the actions, but those two and the capability to understand the users, their needs, wants, and situation in life. Most of all it requires the understanding of the product, the market, and the user groups, which is a rather gruesome task to accomplish on its own. Yet again, a virtuous developer must aim to understand those tasks even if difficult and therefore should be able to develop their character towards the virtue of virtual virtue friend. It is not an easy task, but to reach higher understanding of virtues, by not only fulfilling the just and proper consequences, but also by treating people in such manner that they are more able to avoid vices and develop their virtues, a

developer can aid other human beings to be the best versions of themselves possible. This is optimal both a priori and a posteriori.

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