PHI210 RS Module 6 Lecture Notes

Introduction

Welcome to this lecture on the cultivation of virtue.

The Cultivation of Virtue across Cultures

Probably all cultures have developed practices of cultivating feelings, mental states, and behaviors. Adopting such practices makes up the central message of virtue ethics. Thus, it is quite possible that virtue ethics is something like an originary approach to morality, and this might be due to the fact that human beings in all cultures undergo, from the period of earliest infancy, a process of education in which they are raised to become members of a human community.

Here we will look at Confucian and Buddhist virtues. For Confucian virtues, we will review the fundamental feelings and corresponding virtues as they are set out in the Book of Mencius in some chapters of Books 2 and 6. The Book of Mencius is thought to have been composed by Mencius’ disciples sometime in the 4th century BCE, or around the time that Aristotle was developing his own virtue theory. For Buddhist virtues, we will draw on what is reputed to be the most ancient written record expressing the Buddha’s teachings on virtues, and found in the Pali Canon, which is authoritative in Southeastern Asia. They are contained in Sutta (or Teaching) 22 of the Long Discourses of the Buddha. The Long Discourses were put in writing in the 1st century BCE.

Confucian Cultivation of the Virtues

In Mencian Confucianism, feelings are at the core of human morality. With proper nourishment and care, they develop into ways of acting that are recognized by all as appropriate. In times that human beings abdicate their role in properly educating human feelings, society breaks down and is submerged by unruly and violent behavior. This is something that Mencius knew well, since he lived in a time of war and instability. The way that is recognized by all as appropriate, the “nobility of heaven” as Mencius also called it, features primordially the cultivation of humanity. Or as, the Book of Mencius puts it, “humanity is man’s mind.” Moral cultivation requires the cultivation of humanity, or as the Book of Mencius puts it: “The way of learning is none other than finding the lost mind” (6A:11). The cultivation of humanity draws its source from the feeling of compassion, which is to be found in all human beings. Three other feelings are also singled out as playing an important role in moral education. The feeling of shame is identified as being at the source of righteousness. The feeling of respect and reverence, which one might also want to call admiration, is the beginning of propriety. While the feeling of right and wrong is the beginning of wisdom (6A:6 and 2A:6). The original feelings, when cultivated, develop into moral virtues. But the feelings have to be cultivated, otherwise, “without proper nourishment and care,” they will decay (6A:8).

What similarities do you see with the Aristotelian virtues? Do you see any differences?

Buddhist Cultivation of the Virtues

Buddhist ethics begins with the understanding that the source of both error and suffering is an attachment to the illusion that there is such a thing as the ego. Moral education and self-education is knowingly following the path that leads to the correction of this error and the cessation of suffering. This path is the Noble Eightfold Path. The Noble Eightfold Path consists in going through eight stages or aspects of cultivation. We will present the first six stages or aspects. The first two are traditionally classified as pertaining to wisdom; the third to fifth are traditionally thought to pertain to morality as accessible to the ordinary person. The last three are thought to pertain to meditative practices reserved for those who have withdrawn from the common life. We will include the sixth aspect of the Noble Eightfold path, since it may
be relevant for moral cultivation in everyday life. Here are the first six aspects of the path. All of them require cultivation of mental attitudes, feelings, and ways of behaving:

1. Right view: This is the knowledge of the doctrine just stated: that the source of error and suffering is in the attachment to illusion and craving; and that the way out is following the Noble Eightfold Path. Note the self-referential aspect of Buddhist cultivation: having the right view leads one to adopt the path to cultivation. But cultivation includes having the right view.

2. Right thought (sometimes translated as right aspiration or motivation): One must knowingly cultivate renunciation, non-ill-will, and harmlessness.

3. Right speech: One must refrain from lying, slander, harsh speech, or frivolous speech.

4. Right action: One must refrain from taking life, taking what is not given, and sexual misconduct.

5. Right livelihood: This is described as giving up wrong ways of making a living. Presumably, this includes those professions that violate right thought, right speech, and right action.

And finally,

6. Right effort: it is striving to prevent unwholesome mental states, or overcoming unwholesome mental states. It is also making an effort to produce, maintain, and develop wholesome mental states.

What professions do you believe would be considered incompatible with Buddhist moral virtue?

Virtue Ethics: Common Metaphors

Clearly, what all virtue ethics have in common is the idea that morality is a matter of cultivating feelings, dispositions to act, bodily comportments, and mental dispositions. Indeed, in both Mencian and Buddhist ethics, the notion of cultivation is expressed through the image of following a path or a way. The Aristotelian metaphor for acting virtuously is knowingly aiming to hit a target. Moral cultivation is finding what lies between the too much and the too little.

Are the two ways of thinking of acting virtuously similar or different? What do you think?