Virtue and Professional Life

Overview  Questions about virtue – about morally admirable traits – are central to most ethical traditions. They are questions about human fulfillment and the communities which make that possible; they include qualities of the heart as well of the mind and will. Although philosophical ethics in the 20th century, largely ignored these issues (at least in the West) there has been a recent resurgence of interest, beginning about 20 years ago and growing steadily in strength. The topic is likely to be prominent in the years just ahead.

We will look both at historical and contemporary work on virtue. In general we will begin with Aristotle’s discussion, then compare and relate it to others in the West (and sometimes in the East). We will also look at the texts which brought virtue back to philosophical ethics in the last quarter of the 20th century, and at contemporary developments. In the second half of the course we will look at particular virtues, vices, and ambiguous traits (e.g., generosity, pride, shame, compassion, humility, loyalty) and at discussions of virtue within the professional ethics literature, especially that of health care, but also of other professions (law, engineering, teaching, and so on).

Texts

Required:


Recommended: (on reserve in the library)

- Hursthouse, Rosalind, *On Virtue Ethics*
- Ivanhoe, Philip J., *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation*,
- Pincoffs, Edmund, *Quandaries and Virtues*
- Statman, Daniel, *Virtue Ethics*
- Sherman, Nancy, *The Fabric of Character*
- Sherman, Nancy, *Making a Necessity of Virtue*

Requirements

Class Presentations: During each class one or two of you will present a discussion of a text assigned for that day’s reading (or, in the second half of the semester, an overview of the literature on virtue in one of the professions). Ideally you will talk rather than
read, but give me a written version. Your presentation will be both expository and critical. In the exposition, lay out what’s going on the text, e.g., what problem/question/issue the writer is addressing, what he or she is trying to accomplish, what the main line of argument or development is. Exposition demands sympathetic and careful reading. But also be critical: what doesn’t seem to make sense, what is undeveloped, what questions are left open.

When you make your presentation about the treatment of virtue in the ethics literature of particular professions, what you will hand in is an annotated bibliography, suitable for use by the other students in their future work, especially their teaching.

Notes for Discussion:

Those who are not giving a presentation will write a 2-3 page paper responding to the reading for the day. You might raise questions: what is unclear, or unconvincing? You might explore implications: If the author is right, what might follow? You might relate the material to previous reading and discussion in the course. These too are handed in at the end of the class session.

Term Paper

A term paper of approximately 10 pages will be due during finals week. The paper should be like a conference paper: a focused question, a brief survey of the literature on the topic, and the development of your own argument. Discuss your topic with me, and ideally a rough draft as well.

Grading

35% Class presentations (the lowest grade will be dropped)
30% Notes for Discussion (the lowest grade will be dropped)
35% Term paper

Schedule

(Subject to Revision)

Jan 7 Introduction

Jan 9 Overview

Jan 14 Aristotle on eudaimonia and its relation to virtue
   NE, I, 1-13

Jan 16 Aristotle’s other treatment of eudaimonia
   NE, X, 6-8
In contrast with pleasure
VII, 11-14
X, 1-5

Jan 21 Recent philosophical discussions of “eudaimonism”

Eudaimonism in the psychology literature Optional
