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Good People with Bad Principles

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Conservatives think that liberals are good people with bad ideas, whereas liberals think conservatives are bad people.

Todd Zywicki, Cato Institute, 1/17/14

Republicans are good people... It's just their ideas are bad.

President Obama, 7/3/15

Introduction

Right now many countries seem quite divided about justice. Since the two sides hold incompatible principles, at least one side must be holding the wrong principles. And these people do not just hold bad principles, they act upon them. This is vice. Yet we all know people on *both* sides of the political divide whom we consider morally good. How can people who espouse and systematically act upon bad principles nevertheless be morally good people? I shall begin by putting some basics on the table, and then describe the challenge in more detail. Next, I shall describe and reject nine potential solutions. Finally, I shall propose a tenth solution based upon the distinction between personal and role virtue.

1. *Basics*

For virtue ethics, a virtue is an integrated package of dispositions to perceive, believe, feel, desire, choose, and act well. Now human life may be divided into different sets of situations concerned with different goods. A virtue is the best disposition for an agent to have when responding to one of these spheres of human life¹. *Virtues differ* if and only if they are

¹ I ignore the tiny possibility that two different dispositions might be equally good.

dispositions to think, feel, and act best within different spheres.

What does “best” mean? *Eudaimonism* takes a *personal virtue* to be a character trait which is generally in the best interest of its possessor. That does not mean that every virtuous act or feeling is in the agent’s best interest, or that the agent does things because they are in his or her interest, but merely that a virtue is better for the agent than all alternative character trait options for dealing with its sphere. Whether the virtues turn out to be good for, or valued by the society are empirical questions to be dealt with on a virtue-by-virtue basis. Some traits that society considers to be virtues may turn out to be eudaimonistic, personal vices.

Role virtues are character traits that are best for accomplishing the goal of some role. The role virtues of some roles are simply the same as the personal virtues. The collection of role virtues for other roles consists of personal virtues plus character traits that are morally neutral or even personal vices. For example, deceptiveness is personal vice, but a role virtue for trial lawyers.

To recapitulate: a *virtue* is a disposition to respond to a set of situations concerned with some good, in ways that are generally best. For eudaimonist personal virtues, “best” means best for the agent; for role virtues, “best” means best for accomplishing the goal of the role.

Bracketing numerous caveats, we might say that choice results from a practical syllogism whose premises are perceptions about the specific situation, general beliefs about the world, and normative principles tailored to the situation. A virtuous person perceives the situation correctly (insofar as that is reasonably possible), adds the right general beliefs about the world and normative principles, combines the conclusion with the appropriate motivating passions and/or desires, makes the right choice, and acts upon it.

Going wrong with respect to principles, passions, and actions is *vice*. More precisely, leaving aside people with severe environmental or hereditary bad moral luck, closed-minded people who feel and act according to principles which are significantly different from the principles of virtuous people are vicious. Sometimes “They didn’t know any better” is offered as an excuse for unjust acts. This might mean, “They misperceived the situation, or held false beliefs about the world through no fault of their own.” But if it means that they had the wrong principles, it is a condemnation rather than an excuse.

2. *The problem*

Let's apply these basics to a real-world issue. Roughly half the population of many countries seems to accept one principle (or a family of principles) of distributive justice; the other half accepts another principle. Each half of the country seems to feel strongly in accordance with its avowed principle, and to act accordingly when engaging in *social action* (e.g. voting, donating, demonstrating, boycotting, posting on Facebook). One unfortunate consequence of this division is that people dismiss, disparage, and unfriend folks whom they otherwise respect. By explaining how this is the result of a mistake about the nature of justice, I hope to help people mend and maintain relationships across the partisan divide.

In order to discuss this issue without offence, I shall give no examples. I'll just call the correct principle of justice, "principle A," and the incorrect principle, "principle B." Please assume that you hold principle A, and describe principles A and B however you see fit. Since believing bad principles, and feeling and acting accordingly is vice, it seems to follow that at least half of the population is unjust.

Let me raise the stakes. Justice is meta-virtue; it governs the distribution of many sorts of goods in many sorts of contexts. So justice and injustice subsume large portions of the other virtues and vices. For example, in situations of shared risk, safety may be distributed fairly or unfairly. Some cowardly acts may be described as taking more than one's fair share of safety; some rash acts as taking less than one's share. Thus, much of the sphere of courage falls into the sphere of justice. Courageous acts in situations of shared risk are also just acts; cowardly and rash acts are unjust acts. The principle of courage is an application of the principle of justice to situations involving shared risk. A just person is a courageous person. Conversely, someone who typically chooses, feels, and acts upon the wrong principle of justice across the board is not only unjust, but also lacking in courage. Similarly for other goods. For example, who should be paid, or honored, or told the truth, or teased, and when, and about what, and to what extent are also matters of justice. So if half of the country has the wrong principle of justice, then not only is half of the country unjust, but half of the country is also lacking in courage, liberality, good-temper, truthfulness, wittiness, and perhaps other virtues. Indeed, people who disagree about principles A and B typically have different views about whom to fear, pay, honor, deceive, and tease. Advocates of principle B are not merely people with a single vice; they are all-around vicious people.

What's the problem with that? After all, virtue ethicists recognize that personal virtue is rare. Indeed, the expectation is that considerably fewer than half of the people are just or virtuous.

The problem is not that half of the country is lacking in justice and generally in virtue. Rather the problem is this. We all know people whom we consider generally virtuous, and who are on the other side of the political divide. Think about your uncle or neighbor, Max, and your colleague or friend, Matilda. These are people you know very well and respect greatly. They are role models in many ways. They don't steal, cheat, play favorites when grading, etc. But they say things which you consider outrageous when talking about justice; they hold principle B. And they vote, donate, and demonstrate accordingly. Because justice is a meta-virtue, this is a larger problem. We all know people who seem generous yet espouse bad principles of generosity, people who seem courageous yet espouse bad principles of courage, etc. Virtue ethics implies that Max and Matilda (I shall call them "M&M.") are vicious people. Because M&M seem, to people who know them well, to be virtuous, the thesis that they are vicious people is counterintuitive.

This is a problem for every moral theory, but it hits virtue ethics particularly hard. For utilitarianism or deontology, the starting points and gold standards are general principles. People who don't have the right principles are bad people. But for virtue ethics, the starting points and gold standards are exemplary people. Just as we don't identify good teachers by reading their statements of teaching philosophy, so virtue ethics says that we don't identify virtuous people by pouring over their principles. Intuitions about people are primary. The right principles are derivatively defined as the ones that good people have and use. So to reject our intuitions about M&M in favor of our beliefs about principles is to back away from virtue ethics. Starkly put, the problem is this.

- (1) M&M are morally good people.
- (2) M&M firmly believe in a certain principle of justice despite numerous serious attempts to convince them otherwise. They also feel in accord with principle B, and vote, donate, and demonstrate accordingly.
- (3) M&M's principle, principle B, is the false principle of justice.
- (4) People holding, feeling, and acting upon a false principle of justice reliably without regret or reconsideration are unjust people.
- (5) Unjust people are bad people.
- (6) Therefore, M&M are morally bad people.

Statements (2) through (5) imply statement (6). But statements (1) and (6) are incompatible. In order to hold on to the observation that (1) M&M are morally good people, it seems that one must deny that (2) M&M believe principle B, (3) principle B is the wrong principle of justice, (4) the definition of vice, or (5) lack of justice is sufficient to make a person bad.

3. Solutions

This might seem to be a familiar, easily resolved issue, but I shall show that the usual ways of dealing with this objection don't work. I shall canvas nine unsuccessful strategies, and then advance a successful solution.

Deny (1): M&M are not actually good

Solution #1: Some people seem to be good people, even though they are actually far from good. They have acquired the mere appearance of virtue.

Reply: Admittedly, there are some natural con artists who can fool everyone around them for years. However, they are quite rare. This solution would not explain the vast number of people who hold principle B, yet seem, to those who know them well, to be good people.

Deny (2): M&M don't actually believe principle B

Solution #2: People can act in accordance with one principle, while actually holding another if they are mistaken about the relevant evidence. Some people actually hold principle A, but also hold false beliefs about economics and/or sociology, or they misperceive the economic and/or social situation. Yet other people hold the right beliefs, perceptions, and principles, but reason badly. When combined with principle A, these misperceptions, mistaken beliefs, or fallacies yield the votes, donations, demonstrations, etc. entailed by principle B. These people actually hold principle A, but *seem* to hold principle B because their practical syllogisms lead them to the wrong acts.

Reply: This solution doesn't help much. Let's face it; many folks hold false beliefs about the world, misperceive it, or reason fallaciously *because* they believe principle B, and not the other way around. They *want* to act in accord with principle B because it rationalizes their privileges and/or their prejudices, or at least they don't care enough to change their principles or behavior. Their ignorance about the world and/or their illogic is willful, or at least negligent. So this solution exonerates only a few people. The rest turn out to be not only unjust, but also intellectually dishonest or lazy.

Solution #3: Some people don't really believe what they say, especially when it comes to values. In particular, some people espouse principle B and use it when engaging in social action because it is fashionable in their circles, or because it sounds good when you say it fast, or because their spouses believe principle B, or for some other reason. But prod them a bit, and you discover that they are just mouthing slogans which are at odds with their actual values.

Reply: This solution doesn't exonerate many people, either. Sometimes people have good reasons for espousing a principle they don't believe, but mostly it is cowardly, deceptive, or an expression of some other vice. And they are not just talking. They are engaging in social action in accordance with principle B, and when they act wrongly at the ballot box, the protest, the checkbook, etc., they feel no regret. So these people may not be completely unjust, but they are far from the virtue of justice, and they are also hypocrites.

Solution #4: If virtue ethics is to apply to real people, then virtue must be a threshold concept. Real people's virtues have flaws. To have a virtue is to have a disposition, not a guarantee to think, feel, and act well. In particular, some people hold principle A, but are not perfectly virtuous. They are virtuous enough to be over the threshold, but they have a glitch which is that they talk and act according to principle B when engaging in social action.

Reply: Character traits with large glitches are not virtues. Teachers who think, feel, and act justly in all things except that they are unjustifiably lenient toward redheaded, six foot tall women making tearful grade appeals have a character flaw that is not a vice because such cases constitute only a tiny part of the sphere of justice. But the disposition to vote, demonstrate, donate, etc. according to principle B is far too large a part of a character to be a mere glitch.

Although these four explanations may cover (without exoneration) some of the people who both seem to believe B and seem virtuous, most remain. (#1) M&M really are good people. (#2) They understand the facts and the principles reasonably well. (#3) They are able and eager to express and act upon their actual opinions. (#4) And they fall below the threshold of the virtue of justice.

Deny (3): Principles A and B are both right

Solution #5: Perhaps principles A and B are equivalent. When applied correctly, they yield the same results. Half the country is applying them incorrectly.

Solution #6: Perhaps principles A and B are different, but equally acceptable because they apply to different spheres, or they apply to the same issues under different conditions.

Reply: These explanations are non-starters. The two principles clearly apply to the same set of issues, but yield different answers. For example, both principles imply that the tax code should be revised, but disagree about what revisions would make the tax code more just. They are neither equivalent nor disjoint.

Deny (4): Although M&M believe principle B, they are not blameworthy

Solution #7: Some people cannot help believing principle B because they have had a bad upbringing and no subsequent opportunity to discover the truth. They have been enveloped in a cocoon of misleading information and bad values for their whole life. The assertions and arguments that they regularly hear reinforce their view rather than challenging it.

Reply: This solution makes people who hold principle B vicious, just not *culpably* vicious. Their acceptance of principle B was involuntary, but they do hold it. Moreover, most believers in principle B are not victims of bad moral luck; rather they have *wrapped themselves* in the cocoon of false information.

Solution #8: Vice is not just holding, feeling, and acting on the wrong principles. Kids do that before they learn better. To be vicious one must also be unwilling to change. Some people who believe principle B are persuadable, however, and therefore are not vicious.

Reply: Persuadable people who hold principle B are not technically vicious, but they still believe, feel, and act as the vicious do. Unlike the vicious, they can improve, but they have a long, long way to go. Moreover, most people holding principle B are not open to persuasion, as you see when you try to persuade them. So this solution exonerates only a few folks at best.

Deny (5): Unjust people can be good

Solution #9: People who are missing a few virtues can still be good people. For example, temperance and appropriate ambition are virtues, yet intemperate, unambitious people are not evil. Similarly, even though people who hold principle B are unjust, they may, on balance, still be good people if they have lots of other virtues.

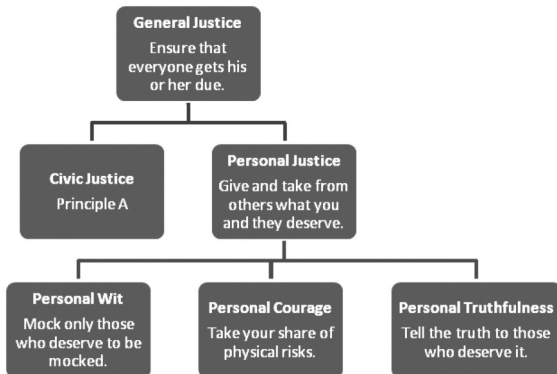
Reply: Justice is a huge part of being good. As mentioned earlier, justice and injustice subsume large portions of the other virtues and vices. An alternative measure of the scope of justice is that it includes respect for the

rights of others. Thus, justice includes most of the most important aspects of ethics. Those who hold principle B not only lack justice, they also lack most of the other virtues, and endorse rights violations right and left.

Like explanations #1, #2, #3, and #4, explanations #7, #8, and #9 cover some, but not most of these people who espouse principle B, yet also seem virtuous.

Deny (6): Neither principle is really a principle of personal justice

My Solution: First, recall that virtues are individuated according to spheres, and spheres are collections of different sorts of situations. The situations calling for choices of whether and how to participate in social action concerning some sort of social policy are different than situations calling for the personal choice to treat an individual justly or unjustly. The true and false principles of justice are not the principles that just people use in their personal life. Instead, principles A and B concern the ways in which cities, counties, states, and countries, should run. They resemble the principles of personal justice in the way that corporations resemble mom-and-pop stores, or smart phones resemble rotary phones. That is, they are not completely unrelated, but they are nevertheless quite different. Differences in associated passion and action are also accordingly great. At the most general level, there is one principle of justice. But at the next level, therefore, we can distinguish two character traits: one concerned with the civic sphere (decisions about society) and the other with the personal sphere (decisions about inter-personal matters). We might call these character traits *civic justice* and *personal justice*. Principle A is a principle of civic justice, but not personal justice. Since justice includes much of the other virtues, there are corresponding civic and personal versions of the other virtues.



Now recall that a personal virtue is a character trait which is in the best interest of its possessor. Now the virtue of personal justice helps its possessor in at least four ways. (a) It keeps its possessors out of trouble. They do not end up jailed for shoplifting, shunned for freeloading, or shot by outraged colleagues to whom they unfairly denied tenure. (b) More positively, people with the virtue of personal justice treat those around them justly. Thus, they are respected for their justice by others. (c) By serving as just role models, they help those around them to become more just². Thus, they are more likely to be treated justly by those around them. (d) The virtue of personal justice disposes people to treat themselves justly. They don't exploit themselves or allow themselves to be exploited. These are four reasons to consider personal justice to be a virtue. These advantages plus the warm glow of having acted rightly, and the pleasure from satisfying one's desire to forward justice generally outweigh any drawbacks of a just character.

Although it provides the warm glow and characteristic pleasure, civic justice does not help its possessor in the four aforementioned ways (or in any other ways, for that matter). Indeed, I suggest that it is not in the best interest of agents to possess either the character trait corresponding to principle A or the character trait corresponding to principle B. The reason is that each of these character trait is beneficial in only some circumstances. Let me be careful. Of course, the *implementation* of principle A or principle B by the state might make a big difference to the agents. They might gain more goods of fortune under one principle than the other. Again, it probably makes a big difference to agents whether they *espouse* principle A or principle B. They may gain friends by espousing one, and lose them by espousing the other, for example. My claim is that a disposition to vote, demonstrate, donate, etc. according to one principle or the other will not reliably be an advantage to agents. It will help some and hurt others, depending upon their place within society (socioeconomic status, location, age, gender, marital status, race, religion, etc.) To most, it will make no difference. By contrast, character traits are personal virtues because they are advantageous in almost every social position. Thus, civic justice is not a personal virtue.

Distinguishing civic justice and personal justice, and then denying that civic justice is a personal virtue solves the original problem of how M&M

² In particular, they help those over whom they have great influence (e.g. their children) to become more just.

can seem virtuous despite holding principle B. A good person is someone who has the personal virtues. Thus, M&M *seem* to be virtuous, good people because they *are* virtuous, good people. They have personal justice which ramifies through all of the personal virtues subsumed by justice. Statement (6) is false. M&M do not pay, fear, retaliate against, or make fun of the wrong people, in the wrong way, etc. But they *seem* like bad people because when the talk turns to justice, they think and talk in terms of civic justice and offer principle B. And their views about who the government and other social institutions should give to, fear, become angry at, etc. are correspondingly mistaken. Their bad principles indicate that they lack civic justice, but civic justice is not a personal virtue, anyway. The problem with the argument is equivocation. Statements (2), (3), and (4) are about civic justice; statements (1), (5), and (6) are about personal justice.

4. *Implications?*

I began by describing a familiar problem: how can good people have bad principles of justice? I rejected nine solutions to this problem. My own solution is that civic justice is not a personal virtue. Good people with bad principles have personal, but not civic justice. My solution seems to have a pair of unsettling implications.

First, if civic justice is not a personal virtue, then it seems that participating in social action in accord with principle A is not virtuous, and participating in social action in accord with principle B is not vicious. Now social action is a crucial vehicle for accomplishing many important things. A solution which takes social action to be orthogonal to virtue is counterintuitive.

Luckily, personal virtue is not the whole moral story. The role virtues of a citizen are character traits that forward the goals of the state. Those goals may be immoral, of course. Thus, as Aristotle says, a good citizen is a good person only in a good state (*Politics* 1288a 37-39). Because people are political animals, the roles of citizen and activist are not optional roles such as doctor and lawyer. In addition to acquiring and maintaining personal virtues, people also have the duty to be good citizens when living in good states, and good activists rather than good citizens when living in bad states³. To be a good citizen or good activist one must hold, feel, and act upon principle A. Thus, civic virtues are morally required virtues, even

³ One may also be a good activist in a good state, but it is not a duty.

though they not personal virtues. We do have a duty to vote, donate, and demonstrate for the right candidates, to the right causes, etc. It is a duty we have *qua* citizen or activist rather than *qua* person, but it is still a duty. The problem with M&M is not that they are bad people, but they do have a moral failing which is that they are bad citizens in a good state, or bad activists in a bad state. Thus, my solution does not take social action to be orthogonal to virtue.

My solution does have a different implication which some might find unsettling, however. The Reciprocity of Virtues doctrine says that a person cannot have only some virtues. If a person has any virtue, then he or she must have all virtues. Presumably, the complete package of virtues includes all of the virtues one needs in order to fulfill one's moral duties. Since the roles of citizen or activist are morally required roles, the role virtue of civic justice is part of the package. Now my solution says that M&M possess personal justice, but not civic justice. Thus, my solution and the Reciprocity of Virtues doctrine are incompatible. Although my solution enables us to acknowledge that M&M are good people, and thus helps to bridge the partisan divide, fans of the Reciprocity of Virtues doctrine may find my solution to be a bitter pill to swallow.

Abstract

Right now many countries seem quite divided about justice. Since the two sides hold incompatible principles, at least one side must be holding the wrong principles. To have bad principles, and to feel and act upon them reliably without regret or reconsideration, is vice. Yet we all know people on both sides of the political divide whom we consider virtuous. This poses a challenge for virtue ethics. How can people with bad principles of justice be good people?

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