

Robert Audi, *Moral Value and Human Diversity*, 2007, 160 pages, ISBN13: 9780195312942

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Robert Audi's *Moral Value and Human Diversity* is a short, non-technical book that attempts to find a way to approach today's ethical issues. The first part of the book formulates a generic ethical position, pluralist universalism, which incorporates aspects of virtue ethics, Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, and common-sense intuitionism. The second part applies pluralist universalism to contemporary ethical challenges in order to show, despite major cultural and religious differences, that this position is able to serve as a foundation for dealing with these contemporary challenges.

In part I, Audi describes virtue ethics as a focus on the development of good character for the basis for making ethical decisions. On this approach, good character development is the focus rather than the actions a good character does or does not perform. Because of this, moral education is crucial for virtue ethics. The ideal role model is a person who possesses practical wisdom, because they exemplify all the virtues and are good ethical guides. The person of practical wisdom chooses to develop virtues because they are good in and of themselves, not for other reasons. Therefore, for the virtue theorist the primary ethical question is "what is it to be a virtuous person?" (22).

Next, Audi distinguishes Kant's and Mill's rule-based ethics from virtue ethics. Audi considers both of these positions rule-based because they focus on a single fundamental principle in order to create rules distinguishing right actions from wrong ones. Rules for Kant establish a maxim for creating universal laws of equality, and rules for Mill focus on the contribution that rules make to our well being. These competing fundamental principles put importance on a person's actions rather than their character. Unlike virtue ethics, rule-based ethics puts the greatest importance on providing the right rules, trusting that the right rules will lead to the development of a virtuous character. First Audi introduces Kantian ethics with two formulations of the Categorical Imperative which

state that (1) we must act in a way that our maxims can become a universal law, and (2) we must act in a way that we treat people as ends, not merely as means. Therefore, “we must not only treat persons as ends but—as the rational universalizability of our principles would suggest—equally so. Everyone matters and matters equally” (10). The primary ethical question for the Kantian theorist is “What kinds of acts—understood in terms of appropriate principles of action—are intrinsically appropriate for us as, above all, free beings with dignity?” (23).

Next, Audi introduces Mill’s idea of utilitarianism, which holds that rules are no good unless the actions they promote increase happiness and decrease suffering. The difference between Kant and Mill is the significance of the consequences of actions. If given the choice between two acts, the utilitarian must weigh the good and bad consequences then select the one that most decreases suffering and increases happiness. Audi notes that the popular characterization of utilitarianism as ‘the greatest good for the greatest number’ is a misrepresentation. “Utilitarians are concerned above all to maximize the good” and doing this does not always result in the greatest good for the greatest number of people (11). For the utilitarian, the primary ethical question is “what kinds of acts have the best consequences?” (23).

The last major ethical theory Audi introduces is Rossian common sense intuitionism. This theory differs from the other three because it has no one basic principle; rather it relies on common sense to categorize basic duties into a set of into a multiple-rule view in order to determine the proper course of action in a given situation. This theory incorporates several aspects of virtue and rule-based ethics in order to create a multiple rule system to categorize our moral obligations. Common sense ethics, like virtue ethics, recognizes that there are different dimensions of morality; and, like rule-based ethics, holds that there must be some set of principles to govern our actions. According to Ross, there are *prima facie* obligations, which individuals intuitively know and commonly recognize. Because *prima facie* duties conflict at times, individuals must rely on common sense and intuitions to determine where their duties lie.

After introducing these competing positions, Audi describes his position, *pluralist universalism*. Pluralist universalism, as Audi explains,

requires optimizing happiness so far as possible without producing injustice or curtailing freedom (including one's own); and this principle is to be *internalized*—roughly automatically presupposed and normally also strongly motivating—in a way that yields moral virtue (17).

This view, using Rossian common sense intuitionism as a starting point, comes from a combination of elements from virtue theory, Kantian ethics, and utilitarianism. It is important to note that the foundation for Audi's position is not a single fundamental principle, but rather common sense. The appeal to common sense establishes a priority rule for balancing these three positions. In the case of conflict between the principles, the priority rule establishes that justice and freedom have priority over happiness. This is what allows the pluralist universalist to adapt the position according to the needs of the situation. Within this position, moral virtue should be taught by example, preserving the merits of virtue ethics, in conjunction "with the utilitarian drive to make life better and the Kantian insistence that persons be treated as free and equal" (17). By incorporating aspects of these three theories, Audi believes pluralist universalism also incorporates the three primary ethical questions he attributes to the virtue ethicist, the Kantian and the utilitarian bring forth concerning character, kinds of actions and the overall consequences for happiness respectively.

In part II, Audi attempts to reconcile individual ethical standards with inter-personal conduct. Audi says that individuals have a plurality of values, but this plurality does not lead to a fragmented ethical theory, namely relativity. Fragmentation occurs when an ethical theory either allows its followers adhere to different fundamentally conflicting standards for evaluating actions, or when disagreements arise concerning how to deal with specific situations. Audi accepts the idea of circumstantial relativity, agreeing that everything is relative to the circumstances (hence is appeal to common sense). He wants to avoid status relativism because status relativism not only recognizes the different factors of individual situations, but rejects that societies can have *prima facie* obligations that should be upheld. Instead, the view of status relativism believes that there are no universally binding moral principles.

In order to understand how pluralist universalism avoids the fragmentation of status relativism, consider the following quotation in which Audi explains that a pluralistic view is not fragmented because it recognizes humans' rational abilities.

That there are many kinds of goods, as pluralism affirms, does not entail that it is unimportant which goods one realizes or, especially, that whether to realize them at all, and whether some are superior to others, is not an objective matter. The good and the bad, like the right and the wrong, are grounded in facts about the world—including facts of human psychology—and both the good and the bad can be rationally appraised. (61)

Despite the wide range of values and circumstantial relativity, universal pluralism recognizes that even though humans strive for things in different ways, there is a common thread which allows humans to distinguish and evaluate rationally between the good and the bad, namely value. Audi explains, "There are universal values, but they are realizable in a multitude of ways...it is difficult, if possible at all to find any culture in which values do not have a significant place" (80). Because Audi recognizes the common element of value in all cultures, he believes this allows his theory to avoid the problem of fragmentation due to status relativity.

In the remainder of part II, Audi emphasizes the importance of not only developing an ethical theory, but also the importance of being able to apply it to contemporary ethical issues. Here Audi emphasizes the importance of a moral education in order to develop responsible, complex democratic societies. There is an emphasis on the role of institutions while recognizing that individuals ground these institutions and they alone cannot bear all the weight of the moral responsibility. It is this disconnect between the individual and institutions that lead Audi to combine different ethical approaches into one. He believes that virtue ethics can provide for the individual, however rule-based ethics are necessary in order to participate within a community. Audi argues that "no specific single standard can be our sole moral guide" (17); because, he believes, there will always be cases where single principles conflict with one another; therefore a combination of standards from virtue theory, the Kantian view, and utilitarianism, governed by the common sense priority rule, is necessary to create a moral guide. Pluralist universalism

combines the virtue theory's development of character and teaching through example with the Kantian view that people should be treated as free and equal ends in themselves and the utilitarian drive to make life better. Because pluralist universalism appeals to multiple moral standards organized under the multiple-rule based common sense approach, it can serve as a moral guide.

One point of criticism against Audi is that pluralist universalism is attempting to gain the benefits of multiple ethical approaches without recognizing the complexities of the individual theories. In an attempt to create a new ethical template, Audi ignores the similarities pluralist universalism as a whole has to the individual theories which constitute it. It is probable that a Kantian, utilitarian, Rossian, or Aristotelian would argue that their own theory already provides for the things Audi achieves with their combination. For example, Neo-Aristotelians, such as Susan Collins, argue that the development of a virtuous character through the principle of virtue accounts for the Kantian ideal of treating people as equal and utilitarian drive to make life better (which Audi incorporates into pluralist universalism as a way to make his position applicable to institutions as well as individuals) along with the recognition that virtue itself has an independent end. Collins believes this is the case because virtues require the common good and the common good leads to individual flourishing. Thus, virtue ethics alone can solve the ethical challenges presented by Audi in democratic societies. Collins' view differs from Audi's in that it does not need to appeal to common sense priority rule to establish proper ethical action because there is already a hierarchy of human ends (which is explained more completely below) present within virtue ethics. Often contemporary Aristotelian scholars "tend to ignore or understate [Aristotle's] treatment of the authoritative place of the political community and of law (*nomos*) in ordering human action" (48). According to this reading, virtue ethics does allow for the development of political communities and has a proper place for rules within its virtue developing framework.

The aim of virtue, both moral and intellectual, is the good. Collins believes that an understanding of full human good can come from an investigation of the political community's highest aim, justice. Justice is "the most complete of the virtues" (54) because it is concerned with both the devotion to the common good and dedication to

one's perfection of virtue. Collins links justice with equality through the idea of reciprocity by saying,

Reciprocity in the form of an original equality among individuals must exist if a community is to exist. Indeed, this equality, however it is ultimately elaborated, is the ground of law, since law is natural only among those 'for whom there is equality in ruling and being ruled' (1134b14-15). (55)

This notion of reciprocity is strikingly similar to the Kant's Categorical Imperative, which is the key component of Kant's ethics that Audi incorporates in order to ensure equality within society. Because virtue ethics recognizes the idea that laws are created to ensure equality, and equality is essential to the community Aristotle is developing, there is a built in recognition of the importance of laws and the Kantian idea of treating people as equal (therefore Audi's appeal to Kantian theory is not necessary).

Now Collins turns to the intellectual virtue of wisdom which is also necessary in order to achieve the highest human good. Wisdom lies outside the boundaries of moral virtue. This is possible, Collins argues, because

Aristotle acknowledges the authoritative status of the law and moral virtue, and then shows that they nevertheless require guidance in establishing the hierarchy of ends for a human being. (58)

Virtue ethics requires the development of moral virtue and the recognition of the authority of the law. This is done through the guidance of wisdom, which establishes a hierarchy of ends. Wisdom governs moral virtues and makes humans capable of establishing just communities.

In order to understand better the connection between wisdom and justice, Collins provides an examination of friendship. She says, "Friendship is not only conducive to the pursuit of wisdom but to promise a perfect common good or 'justice in the fullest sense' that legislators seek to emulate in instilling a common vision of the good in citizens" (59). In terms of friendship, one must not only actively make like better for the self, but for his true friends as well. In other words, virtue ethics is not only concerned with the actor's personal character, but with the actions taken as well. And, if a community of friends

serves as a model for the political community, the political community must appeal to both wisdom and justice to ensure that life will continually get better as it moves closer to full human good. Therefore, virtue's aim of the good promotes both the common good and the perfection of personal virtue. The idea of life continuing to get better eliminates the need for Audi's appeal to utilitarianism.

A possible response for Audi would be that Collins' understanding of the political community does not apply to today's large-scale political communities. Like Audi, Robert Louden in "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics" advocates a combination of virtue and rule-based ethics in order to confront the challenges of contemporary societies. Because Louden shares many of the same beliefs about the necessity for combinations moral theories and provides a more in-depth discussion on the shortcomings of virtue ethics, I will consider his explanations as a stand in for Audi. Audi and Louden both argue that moral theory must be capable of being removed or separated from moral agents in order to be a consistent moral guide capable of being universalized in widespread and diverse communities. The weakness of virtue ethics implied by Audi and explicitly addressed by Louden is that the political community Aristotle shapes is "a small face-to-face community," which is unable to deal with the problems faced by modern communities of strangers (233). Therefore, justice and wisdom fail to establish a notion of the common good for large-scale political communities.

Louden attempts to prove this by pointing out that there is no way to know who is a virtuous person. This makes it easy to be skeptical of this ethical position. This skepticism "doubts our ability to know the motives of our own behavior" (233). Virtue ethicists attempt to answer this skeptical problem by referring to the *phronimos* (man of practical wisdom); however Aristotle "does not give the reader any hints on how to track down a *phronimos*" (233). This is because in the small political community Aristotle is writing about, there is a wide agreement about character judgment. Unfortunately, in contemporary societies there is not such wide agreement on values. Louden explains,

Within the context of a *polis* and an ethical theory intended to accompany it, the strategy of pointing to a *phronimos* makes a certain sense. However, to divorce this strategy from its social and economic roots and to then apply it

to a very different sort of community—one where people really do not know each other all that well, and where there is wide disagreement on values—does not. And this...is what contemporary virtue ethicists have tried to do.
(233)

By applying the ideas of virtue ethics, which was designed to apply to only small social communities, the applicability of concepts dissolves. Audi might argue that a contemporary virtue ethicist is wrong to apply the concepts of virtue ethics to a situation where there is no common agreement on values or shared economic and social roots. Although virtue ethics can work in small-scale communities, Loudon believes there must be some other ethical theory that can be universalized in order to apply to the ethical challenges of the modern world. This is why Audi considers it profitable to combine multiple theories. The addition of rule-based ethics in pluralist universalism allows for universalizable standards while still providing individuals with freedom.

This criticism ignores the potential of virtue ethics to expand beyond Aristotle's restrictive text. Simply because virtue ethics is an individual centered ethical theory, it does not mean that it cannot apply to large-scale communities. The development of personal virtue creates a chain of events that allows the principles that apply to face-to-face communities to make the next logical step to large-scale communities. Audi himself points out that "all of the ethical views examined in part I can be applied to these contemporary challenges" (ix), and that the basis of the major ethical issues stem from problems of role models and moral education. This leads to suspicion about Audi's requirement for a multiple principle based ethical system. By associating the virtue ethicist with only character development, the Kantian with only kinds of actions, and the utilitarian with concern only for the overall consequences for happiness, Audi limits each view by reducing each to one ethical concern, ignoring the fact that a virtue ethicist, while concerned with character development, is also concerned with happiness and kinds of actions. Although this view centers around one principle (developing moral character), it does not abandon the other principles Audi attributes to utilitarianism or Kantian ethics. This is not to say that virtue ethics incorporates all the aspects of Kant or Mills ethical positions; however it does address the parts that Audi felt necessary to incorporate in order to apply the position to contemporary ethical issues.

Work Cited

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