

# **VIRTUE ETHICS?**



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# Aristotle *versus* Nietzsche?

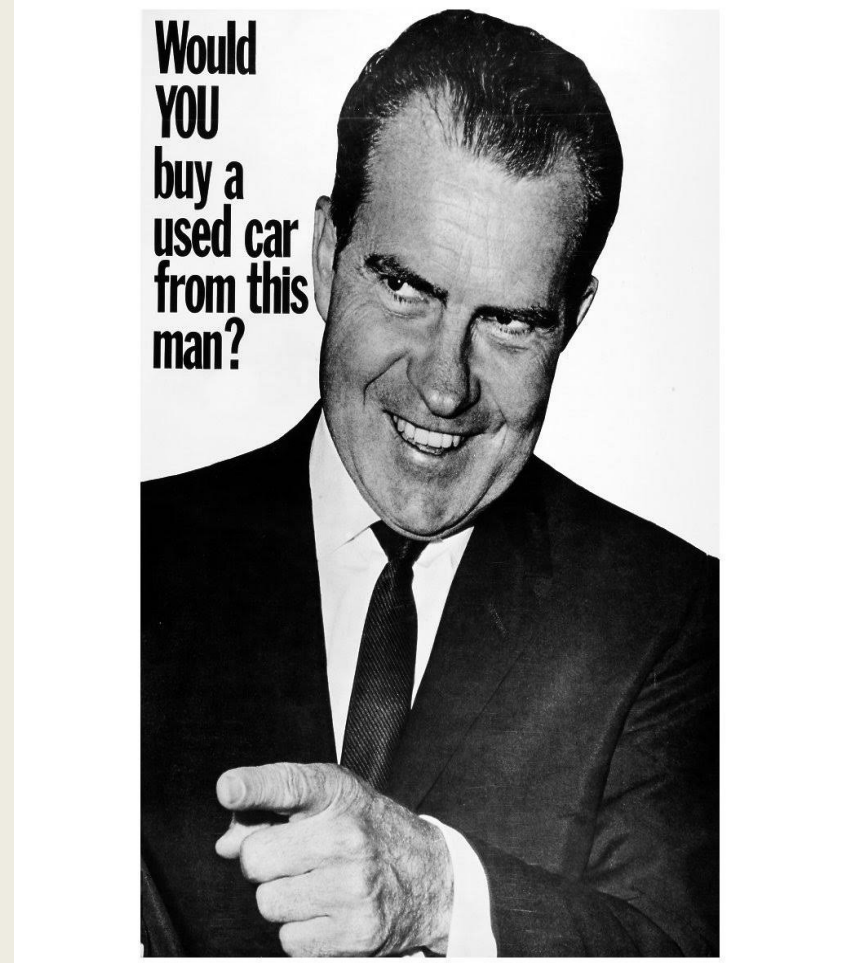
□ This quote from Rasmussen & Den Uyl (2016, xiii) summarizes the issues:

In the ... 1980s *Alisdair MacIntyre* argued that philosophy ... faced a fundamental alternative: *Nietzsche* or *Aristotle*. If understood in terms of essentials, we accept MacIntyre's claim ... Further, we, like MacIntyre ... for ... different reasons, choose Aristotle. We think ... the resources of the Aristotelian tradition are crucial to avoiding the ... pitfalls and intellectual dead-ends ... inherited from modern philosophy. Yet, unlike MacIntyre, who assume[s] ... that if one chooses Aristotle one must also reject ... liberalism ... we hold that there is ... a version of neo-Aristotelian ethics ... and ... of liberalism that are compatible ... Moreover, that this version of liberalism ... *natural rights classical liberalism* ... is best defended ... by ... [neo-Aristotelian] ethics ...

□ This brings up the whole question of the relationship between ethics and politics.

[Rasmussen, D.B. & Den Uyl, D.J. 2016. *Norms of Liberty: A Perfectionist Basis for Non-Perfectionist Politics*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.]

# Would you Buy ... ?



# Nietzsche

❑ According to Blackburn (1994, 162):

Nietzsche is unchallenged as the most powerful critic of the moral climate of the 19th century ... He is notorious for stressing the ‘*will to power*’ that [he thinks] is the basis of human nature, the ‘*resentment*’ that comes when ... denied its basis in activity, and the corruptions of human nature encouraged by religions ... (t)he powerful human being who escapes all this, the *Übermensch* [*Superman*] ... has mastered passion, risen above the senseless flux, and given creative style to ... [their] ... character.

❑ Nietzsche thought that Aristotle and the Greeks were ‘decadent’, blind to the ‘true horrors’ of life, *etc., etc., etc.*

❑ He wrote books with titles like *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Genealogy of Morals*.

❑ He introduced the notions of **Master Morality** (for the elites) and **Slave Morality** (presumably for the rest of us). The masters behave very differently from the slaves, but the slaves eventually bring them down by corrupting the society with their own attitudes.

[Nietzsche, F. 2003/1887. *The Genealogy of Morals*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.]

[Nietzsche, F. 1990/1886. *Beyond Good and Evil: A Prelude to the Philosophy of the Future*. London: Penguin Books.]

# MacIntyre *versus* Rasmussen & Den Uyl

- ❑ It is important to note that the word ‘**liberalism**’ is not used here in the distorted colloquial sense of contemporary North America - as a synonym for ‘progressive’ or something of that kind. The reference is actually to ‘**classical liberalism**’.
- ❑ MacIntyre was a well-known Scottish/American philosopher of the mid-20th century. His political stances varied between being what (in Canada) would be called a ‘**Red Tory**’\* to literal membership, at one stage, of the communist party (*i.e., not a liberal*).
- ❑ Rasmussen & Den Uyl, however, identify with the classical liberal tradition.
- ❑ A basic difference is how they view the relationship between ethics and politics. For MacIntyre, and others, politics is as a means of **enforcing** (this seems to be exactly the right word) the moral stances preferred by socio/political elites. However, for classical liberals, following Aristotle, while ethics is seen as matter of **individual perfectionism**, **political perfectionism** is not desirable. The role of politics, rather, is to ‘keep the peace’ – to allow space for multiple paths to agent-relative human flourishing, rather than enforce norms. It is **anti-collectivist** but not **anti-social**.

\* ‘Tory’ is a nickname that used to be given to the conservative party.

# Virtue

□ According to Blackburn (1994, 394):

Virtue ethics is ... ‘the theory of ethics that takes the notion of virtue as primary rather than either the ‘good’ for the sake of which we act ... or duty, law, reason ... [as] ... providing rules of action. Virtue ethics is typically modelled on the work of Aristotle ... although other virtues than those he recognized may be introduced ... the basic theoretical difference from other thinkers ... [is] ... that for these thinkers virtues are derivative, prized for the ends they serve or the duties they enable us to perform whereas for virtue ethics the direction of explanation ... [is] ... reversed ... virtue providing the concept to elucidate happiness ...

# Some More Definitions

**Classical liberalism** is ... ‘a political tradition ... which advocates free-market economics ... civil liberties ... the rule of law ... individual autonomy, limited government, economic freedom, political freedom ... freedom of speech’ (Wikipedia)

**Collectivism** is ... ‘(t)he political theory that regards the collective as the fundamental unit as the fundamental unit of social authority ...’ (Blackburn 1994, 69)

**Modern philosophy** ... the term ‘modern’ in philosophy does *not* mean ‘up-to-date’. It is the philosophy developed in the Western tradition between the 17th and early 20th centuries. It is full of mistakes. Adler (1985) speaks of **‘basic errors in modern thought – how they came about their consequences, and how to correct them’**.

**Natural rights** are ... those that are thought to be inherent in ‘nature’ (rather than systems of law) and required to allow for the possibility of ‘human flourishing’. They are typically ‘negative’ rather than ‘positive’ in the technical sense.

**Perfectionism** is ... ‘(t)he ethical position that the goal of life is to pursue a perfect ideal of conduct and character ...’ (Blackburn 1994, 282)

**[Adler, M.J. 1985. *Ten Philosophical Mistakes: Basic Errors in Modern Thought – How They Came About, Their Consequences and How to Avoid Them*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.]**

**[Blackburn, S. 1994. *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press]**



# What do we Usually Mean by ‘Fairness’?

❑ Consider the context of **income distribution** (Smithin 2018). Not a lot of ‘**virtue**’ on display here!  
What are the alternatives?

## Personal (Individual or Family) Distribution of Income

Discussions about the personal (individual) distribution of income, or the household distribution of income, usually focus on equality *versus* inequality. In the culture of contemporary North America, there is overwhelming emphasis on equality as a normative ideal - for the reasons famously identified by Allan Bloom.

## Social Justice

As the name implies the emphasis in this approach is on the term *social*, distribution by social groupings such as age, class, ethnicity, gender, national origin, physical disability, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, or some other collective attribute. Much less emphasis on the economic contribution of each individual to the society. ... [it is the legacy of the so-called ‘cultural Marxism’ of the Frankfurt School exported to the USA in the 1930s, now deeply ingrained in the social fabric in North America]...

## Functional Distribution of Income

The functional distribution of income is by economic class ... [this derives more from classical Marxism than cultural Marxism ... *capital v. labour* ... etc.] By definition, it is closely tied to economic function, but always contested. In some societies the functional distribution may cut across social distinctions. In other cases ... there may be greater correspondence between economic function and social status.



# Ramussen & Den Uyl Thesis

□ The basic structure of the argument is as follows:

1. **Self perfection** [*i.e.*, ‘living one best life’, and so forth] is the goal of any and every human being.
2. **Self direction** is necessary for the *possibility* of self perfection.
3. **Coercion** is incompatible with the nature of self direction.
4. **Liberty**, as defined and morally sanctioned by natural rights, entails that political arrangements must be such as to preclude coercion.

# Delacroix: Liberty Leading the People



# **R & D (continued)**

- ❑ Below are some section headings from Ch. 11 of *Norms of Liberty*.
- ❑ What do they signify?

**I. HUMAN FLOURISHING: INDIVIDUALIZED AND PROFOUNDLY SOCIAL**

**II. LIBERALISM'S PROBLEM**

**III. FINDING AN ETHICAL BASIS FOR METANORMATIVE PRINCIPLES**

**IV. INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: PROTECTING THE POSSIBILITY OF SELF DIRECTION AMONG OTHERS**

**V. JUSTIFYING THE POLITICAL/LEGAL ORDER: THE QUESTION OF LEGITIMACY**

## Discussion

- ❑ What is the difference between ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ rights?
- ❑ What is the relationship between ethics and politics?
- ❑ What is the difference between natural rights and natural law?
- ❑ What is the status of the ‘golden rule’?
- ❑ Who said ‘all animals are equal but some are more equal than others’?

