

A thought on duty to the whole world, and why virtue must be an instrument to happiness.

Post by “smoothiekiwi” of January 15, 2022 at 4:38 PM

NOTE: [Cassius](#) , please move the thread into the right sub-folder, as I wasn't really sure to where it really belonged. Maybe somewhere in the Ethics section- like in the "Virtue as instrument to happiness" section, or how to live as an Epicurean, but I'm not sure to where exactly.

So, a few weeks ago, I picked up "Strangers Drowning: Voyages to the Brink of Moral Extremity" by Larissa MacFarquhar, and it was the initiator for a lot of thoughts on duty and morality. In this book, the author describes the life of people dedicated themselves to linder the suffering of other people, unknown to them, e.g. people in Africa. Some of the protagonists outright sacrifice their lives and happiness in order to help these poor souls, other gain pleasure and happiness from these noble deeds. But one thing unites them all: they feel some sort of moral obligation, or even of guilt, that forces them to help. They see live as a constant stream of drowning children in Africa, or starved chicken in huge animal farms, and they dedicate the free moments of their lives in order to fight against that.

I think that at least for me personally, that simply isn't a prospect of a life I would like to live through. To help other people brings a sense of fulfillment and pleasure- that's why I want to become a psychotherapist-, but that does imply that there are three ways of looking at the problem of "strangers drowning":

- The first would be to see some sort of moral obligation, or a sense of duty, imposed by God or someone other. That would, as a consequence, mean that every second of your life where you aren't helping in the best possible way, is wasted. You eat too slowly? That's a shame, because you could work during these five minutes and earn 30 pennies, which in turn would allow to vaccinate a child in Africa and save his life from some tropical disease. That's the logical consequence if one says that there is a duty to help others. There isn't a boundary to where you should help, and from where on you should care for yourself- or well, I should better say: you should only care for yourself in the most basic sense, like food and a shelter, because anything else could be deducted to help victims of civil wars. You would live in a constant state of self-deprivation, and although you would in the end help a lot of people, you would sacrifice your own life for it. I don't necessarily want to say that you would sacrifice your pleasure- maybe you gain much more pleasure by sacrificing yourself than not-, but you surely will have missed out on a lot of pleasurable experiences, which require money. Like traveling. Or having a party. Or purchasing a nice candle for Christmas.

- Here, the Aristotelian might jump in and exclaim. "For that, you need moderation- because virtue is the middle of two excesses!" And I will even partly agree with him- moderation often brings a lot of pleasure. But a) where is the middle, and b) who says that such an abstract concept as "helping others" even has a middle? If there's a child drowning, you would jump right in and rescue him. There's no middle ground there. So why doesn't the same apply with strangers in Africa? Basically, the Aristotelian would be forced to debate abstract thoughts with abstract answers. Maybe he would answer that you have to donate a small part of your income, because you can thus keep harmony and balance. In that case, your happiness stands above your total duty to these people, and that smells a bit like Epicureanism. Or the Aristotelian would say that the duty in itself is "in moderation"; e.g., that your duty is to donate 50%, and no more. But then once again, why this number, and not another? Although this concept is a thought I will think though in the future- that duty in itself is "in moderation", this seems impractical. A soldier who says after a year of war that he has to go home because his duty is done would be killed for desertion. Thus, one can conclude that societal duties are without boundaries: you are a soldier for as long as necessary. But when the whole world is a battle field, because everywhere children are starving and adults dying from war, your whole life is a war. So one would once again arrive at the first conclusion.
- Thus, the only remaining consequence would be to reject the abstract concept of duty altogether. There is no such concept as duty, there is no such concept as a "moral law". I only donate money because it brings me pleasure. This thought in itself is really scary, and seems immoral, but so far, I think that it's the only possibility to keep a happy and balanced life without sacrificing yourself for virtue. I think that the Stoics are much better in that; they believe that virtue and duty is the highest good. And well, they may be good police officers and firemen and soldiers. But would I want to be a constant warrior, a constant warrior fulfilling his invisible moral duty, and sacrificing his life for that? Damn, no! This thought only works when you have a paradise which will reward you for your current struggles- but as soon as one rejects the thought of an after-life, the prospect of sacrificing yourself for some abstract moral law becomes way, way scarier than the previous immoral thought of "living your life happily and doing the thing which will bring YOU the most pleasure". Because let's be honest: it's really scary to think of your death as a moment where you realize that your life has been wasted.

So, TL;DR: virtue **has to be subordinate to pleasure**. Because in the other case, pleasure becomes irrelevant, happiness and fulfillment don't have any value, in short- your whole life is a simple service to duty, virtue, a higher moral cause. And, as noble as it may sound, in the end, it's a waste of your very limited time. I've only one responsibility- and this responsibility is for myself. I love to help other people, as it brings me joy and pleasure- but in the end, it's only a mean to attaining happiness. That doesn't mean that virtue is irrelevant to me- but I recognize that I've only ONE life, and that there won't be a God in the afterlife. Sadly 😞

Well, that was some time invested there. I hope that my thoughts are more or less clear; at least for me, it was very helpful to sort them. Maybe this can help some other drowning Internet

stranger out there 😊

P.S.: Now I'm gonna delve into Aristotle, because the idea of a "limited duty", or of a duty "in moderation" still seems very interesting. Gonna update when there's something new 😊