Virtue Ethics Arguments

Nancy L. Green

University of North Carolina Greensboro, Greensboro, North Carolina, USA

Abstract

This short paper is the beginning of an exploration of argumentation schemes for virtual ethics, extending my previous work on modeling utilitarian and deontological argumentation. According to virtual ethics, having a certain positive character trait or disposition is sufficient for determining the moral thing to do, independent of duty or consequences.

Keywords

Ethical arguments, Argumentation schemes, Virtue ethics, Environmental virtue ethics

1. Introduction

According to virtue ethics (VE), having a certain moral virtue is sufficient for determining the moral thing to do, independent of notions of duty or rules (deontology) or of good consequences of actions (consequentialism).

> A virtue is an excellent trait of character. It is a disposition, well entrenched in its possessor—something that, as we say, goes all the way down, unlike a habit such as being a tea-drinker—to notice, expect, value, feel, desire, choose, act, and react in certain characteristic ways. To possess a virtue is to be a certain sort of person with a certain complex mindset. A significant aspect of this mindset is the wholehearted acceptance of a distinctive range of considerations as reasons for action [8, p.2].

Environmental virtue ethics (EVE) is virtue ethical theory applied to environmental ethics [3, 4,12]. Environmental virtues include environmental benevolence (expanding the traditional notion of benevolence to other species, ecosystems, etc.), gratitude (towards nature and the environment), humility (the opposite of arrogance towards the natural world), temperance or simplicity, wonder, and reverence for life [4].

This paper, extending my previous work on modeling utilitarian and deontological arguments, is the beginning of an exploration of argumentation schemes for virtue ethics. The next section surveys related work on ethical argumentation. Then Section 3 gives examples of arguments based on VE and proposes two argumentation schemes.

2. Related Work on Ethical Argumentation

Walton [14] proposed a two-layered model for evaluating ethical argumentation in biomedical ethics case studies. The first layer models the selection of a course of action using practical reasoning (PR). The conclusion of the argument is that an agent *should* do X, in the prudential sense of 'should'. The second layer represents an ethical dilemma for discussion in which "the ethical principles underlying the decision in the case are revealed" (p.236).

Value-based practical reasoning (VBPR) [2] models the role of values in practical reasoning. A VBPR argumentation scheme is formulated as: "In the circumstances R, we should perform action A to achieve new circumstances S, which will realize some goal G which will promote some value V" (p. 49). VBPR models ethical dilemmas as value conflicts, e.g. between freedom to act in a certain way versus risk to human life.

In a statistical approach to ethical argumentation, Landowska et al. [9] annotated and analyzed several corpora of online political debates and discussions on social media in terms of moral values from Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) [7]. MFT classifies moral beliefs as opposing values of Care/Harm, Fairness/Cheating, Loyalty/Betrayal, Authority/Subversion, and Sanctity/Degradation. They proposed that MFT can be incorporated with VBPR so that positive values promote and negative values detract from commitment to a goal. For example, fairness supports commitment to a goal of equality while dishonesty detracts from a goal of trust. However, modeling ethical argumentation solely in terms of values, and just five opposing values, fails to represent many aspects of ethical theories.

In contrast to the above approaches, we proposed modeling deontological and utilitarian arguments using argumentation schemes tailored to those ethical theories, and whose conclusions specify whether an action is obligatory, forbidden, or permitted. A set of deontological schemes were defined in terms of duty, rights, and justice. For example, one of the deontological schemes [6] was defined as follows:

> Argument from Duty-forbidden
> Premises:
> - Agent has duty D to not do Action.
> - Doing X is tantamount to doing Action in the current situation S.
> Conclusion: It is forbidden for Agent to do X in S.

This scheme could be used to model the argument: *You have a duty not to harm animals. Eating meat is tantamount to harming animals. Thus, it is forbidden to eat meat.*

One of the schemes for utilitarian arguments [5] was defined as follows:

> Risk-Benefit argumentation scheme (obligatory version)
> Premises:
> - Benefits: A has certain expected positive outcomes furthering certain values, where each outcome has a magnitude M(b) and probability Pr(b).
> - Risks of doing A: A has certain expected negative outcomes opposing certain values, where each outcome has a magnitude M(h) and probability Pr(h).
> - Risks of not doing A: Not doing A has certain expected negative outcomes opposing certain values, where each outcome has a magnitude M(n) and probability Pr(n).
> - Utility (utilitarian ethic): The Benefits of doing A and Risks of not doing A outweigh the Risks of doing A (by some calculus).
> Conclusion: It is obligatory (ethically required) to do A.

An example of this type of argument is: *The only way to prevent starvation in the world is to grow genetically modified food (GMF). The benefit to humanity outweighs the risks of GMF. Thus, we should grow GMF.*

One benefit of defining the ethically tailored schemes versus PR-based approaches is that the latter fail to specify the intended moral sense of 'should' (i.e., obligatory, forbidden, permitted) in the conclusion. Also, for representing utilitarian arguments, the latter approach fails to represent the aggregate utility of all expected positive outcomes versus expected negative outcomes. Another benefit of the ethically tailored schemes is that they have critical questions derived from the underlying ethical theory. In addition, they allow one to model conflicting arguments based on differing ethical approaches, e.g., a deontological argument versus a utilitarian argument. Recognizing an argument's underlying ethical theory provides a deeper understanding of the argument.

3. Argumentation Schemes

So far, we have identified two argumentation schemes based on virtue ethics. The virtues of patriotism, altruism, and sacrifice are praised in JFK's inaugural speech [10], excerpted here:

In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course. Since this country was founded, each generation of Americans has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty. The graves of young Americans who answered the call to service surround the globe.

Now the trumpet summons us again--not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need—not as a call to battle, though embattled we are-- but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, "rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation"--a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.

Can we forge against these enemies a grand and global alliance, North and South, East and West, that can assure a more fruitful life for all mankind? Will you join in that historic effort? In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility--I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it--and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country.

The implicit conclusion is that the current generation should serve their country. Although the form of service is not specified, "less than six weeks after his inauguration, on March 1, President Kennedy issued an executive order establishing the Peace Corps … as a pool of trained American volunteers who would go overseas to help foreign countries meet their needs for skilled manpower" [10]. The argument can be described with the following argumentation scheme:

Have Virtue
Premises:
- You have moral virtue(s) V
- Having V determines that it is obligatory to do A

Conclusion: You should, in the obligatory sense, do A

This argumentation scheme also could be used to argue for veganism: *You have the moral virtue of compassion for animals. Having compassion for animals determines that you should not eat meat. So, you should not eat meat.* However, virtue ethics " … does not categorically prohibit killing animals who threaten our lives or insects that, for example, infest our homes" [15, p. 23]. Also, an argument for veganism based upon the virtue of compassion for animals does not apply to those who live in societies with no available plant-based alternatives to eating meat [15]. Such exceptions could be covered by a critical question such as (CQ1): You are not required to do A if it would compromise your survival. Another critical question (CQ2) could cover a situation in which V is not relevant to the current situation. For example, compassion "is not operative … in a situation where one's activities or decisions do not impact the well-being of sentient others. Compassion is not operative when skipping stones" [12, p. 4].

In environmental VE, "moral exemplars" such as Aldo Leopold, Henry David Thoreau, and Rachel Carson "serve as models and inspiration for future generations" [3, p. 21]. For example, Thoreau exemplified the virtues of living simply and in harmony with nature. Negative exemplars are used to serve as models of what not to do. In Greta Thunberg's speech to the United Nations [11], she castigates those who do nothing to mitigate the effects of climate change, shaming them ("How dare you!") for their selfishness and for willfully ignoring science:

You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!

For more than 30 years, the science has been crystal clear. How dare you continue to look away and come here saying that you're doing enough, when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight.

These types of arguments can be characterized with the following argumentation scheme:

Be Like Virtuous Person
Premises:
- Be like virtuous person VP+ (Don't be like unvirtuous person VP-).
- VP+ would do A in situation S. (VP- would not do A in S.)
Conclusion: You should (not), in the obligatory sense, do A in a situation similar to S.

CQ1 above is relevant to this argument scheme. For example, a person without access to plant-based alternatives to meat would not be obliged to act like a person following a vegan diet who did have access to nutritional alternatives to meat.

4. Conclusion

One of the major ethical theories, virtue ethics is an alternative to deontological and utilitarian ethical approaches. Environmental virtue ethics has recently been recognized as playing a significant role in environmental arguments. Extending our previous work in modeling deontological and utilitarian arguments using specialized ethical argumentation schemes, we plan to follow a similar approach for virtue ethics. We have just begun collecting examples of virtue ethics-based arguments, focusing on environmental ethics.

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Declaration on Generative AI

The author has not employed any Generative AI tools.

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