

makes us more prone towards licentiousness than towards temperance; so we describe as more contrary to the mean those things towards which we have the stronger tendency. This is why licentiousness, the excess, is more contrary to temperance.

*Summing up of the foregoing discussion, together with three practical rules for good conduct*

We have now said enough to show that moral virtue is a mean, and in what sense it is so: that it is a mean between two vices, one of excess and the other of deficiency, and that it is such because it aims at hitting the mean point in feelings and actions. For this reason it is a difficult business to be good; because in any given case it is difficult to find the midpoint—for instance, not everyone can find the centre of a circle; only the man who knows how. So too it is easy to get angry—anyone can do that—or to give and spend money; but to feel or act towards the right person to the right extent at the right time for the right reason in the right way—that is not easy, and it is not everyone that can do it. Hence to do these things well is a rare, laudable and fine achievement.

For this reason anyone who is aiming at the mean should (1) keep away from that extreme which is more contrary to the mean, just as Calypso advises:

*Far from this surf and surge keep thou thy ship.*

For one of the extremes is always more erroneous than the other; and since it is extremely difficult to hit the mean, we must take the next best course, as they say, and choose the lesser of the evils; and this will be most readily done in the way that we are suggesting. (2) We must notice the errors into which we ourselves are liable to fall (because we all have different natural tendencies—we shall find out what ours are from the pleasure and pain that they give us), and we must drag ourselves in the contrary direction; for we shall arrive at the mean by pressing well away from our failing—just like somebody straightening a warped piece of wood. (3) In every situation one must guard especially against pleasure and pleasant things, because we are not impartial judges of pleasure. So we should adopt the same attitude towards it as the Trojan elders did towards Helen, and constantly repeat their pronouncement; because if in this way we relieve ourselves of the attraction, we shall be less likely to go wrong.

To sum up: by following these rules we shall have the best chance of hitting the mean. But this is presumably difficult, especially in particular cases; because it is not easy to determine what is the right way to be angry, and with whom, and on what grounds, and for how long. Indeed we sometimes praise those who show deficiency, and call them patient, and sometimes those who display temper, calling them manly. However, the man who deviates only a little from the right degree, either in excess or in deficiency, is not censured—only the one who goes too far, because he is noticeable. Yet it is not easy to define by rule for how long, and how much, a man may go wrong before he incurs blame; no easier than it is to define any other object of perception. Such questions of degree occur in particular cases, and the decision lies with our perception.

This much, then, is clear: in all our conduct it is the mean that is to be commended. But one should incline sometimes towards excess and sometimes towards deficiency, because in this way we shall most easily hit upon the mean, that is, the right course. . . .

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## Virtue Ethics in TV's *Seinfeld*

Aeon J. Skoble

Contemporary moral philosophy is in a troubled state. Kantians, utilitarians, and other theoretical camps continue to quarrel while being beset by growing challenges from subjectivists and cultural relativists. To make matters worse, contemporary society seems to be in the thrall of an incoherent value system, wherein marijuana use often engenders longer jail time than murder, smokers are seen as more heinous than liars, and many people maintain, simultaneously, that they believe in God and that there is no such thing as right and wrong. What would it take to resolve the disputes within the academy and also enlighten a confused public? To do the former would require a splendid moral theory. To do the latter would require that powerful tool of mass learning, television. Not a documentary, not a high-band cable channel, but a popular program which reaches millions each week, one which can educate people even when they are intent on not learning anything. The moral theory which can

best address our concerns is Aristotle's virtue ethics. The television program is NBC's popular comedy *Seinfeld*.

### Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

*Seinfeld* has often been described as a comedy of manners, but it can actually be understood as an explication of Aristotelian moral theory. First, then, what is Aristotle's moral theory, and why is it a helpful one? Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is an example, indeed the *locus classicus*, of virtue ethics. In this moral paradigm, the important question is not so much "which acts are right and wrong?", but "what sort of character should I develop?"

Competing alternative theories are less satisfying in many respects. Utilitarianism, for example, is the view that the proper course is that which produces the greatest overall benefit for the greatest number of people—*act so as to produce the greatest good for the greatest number*. One common objection to this theory is that it seems to entail results which are so counterintuitive as to be unacceptable. For example, in its simplest form, the theory would allow us to inflict great suffering on a single innocent if it could benefit a larger number in a manner that outweighs that suffering. As a consequentialist theory, one which judges the moral acceptability of an action based on its consequences, utilitarianism holds that the end justifies the means, but our moral intuitions tell us that this is not always so. Utilitarianism is problematic, but, in any case, *Seinfeld's* main characters can hardly be said to be exemplars of promoting the greatest good for the greatest number. The duty-based theory of Immanuel Kant, which exhorts us to follow the categorical imperative—*act so that you could will that the maxim of your action would become universal law*—is also problematic. Kant's theory implies that we have certain duties, but when we are faced with conflicting duties, it seems as though the only way to resolve them is to appeal to consequences. Because duty-based theories try to avoid the obvious problems with consequentialist theories, this is an unhappy turn. In any case, for a Kantian, right actions must proceed from a sense of duty, but while Jerry and his friends are often curious as to how to act, they seldom seem to be concerned with absolute moral duties.

Virtue ethics, in contrast to utilitarian and Kantian theories, is concerned with how to act, but focuses the inquiry on the character from which the actions proceed. This seems closer to the concerns of Jerry and George. The question "What is the right thing to do in this situation?" is often examined via a consideration of "what sort of person acts

in such-and-such ways?" and "what would the wise person do in this situation?" These questions are the hallmarks of the Aristotelian approach, which is why the characters Jerry and George, in particular, can actually be understood as lessons in virtue ethics. While they sometimes seem to be concerned with "the rules," chiefly when they inquire into "protocol" or etiquette, closer investigation reveals that their primary concern is their character, what sort of person they should be. Of course, they are not perfect representatives of virtue ethics, but they nevertheless give us lessons in Greek wisdom.

For Aristotle, moral virtues are states of character one develops which, as they become more integral to one's being, help one to lead a happier, more fulfilled life. To acquire virtues, one needs to do three things: develop practical wisdom, discover and emulate positive role models, and practice acting well. Let us examine each of these in turn.

In Aristotle's theory, reason operates in more than one way. Reason tells me how to achieve a value or accomplish a goal efficiently, given any goal I might have. But reason can also tell me whether I should have the goals I have in the first place. For example, if I desire to eat cereal frequently, reason can tell me that I ought to have many bowls, much cereal, and ample milk in the house. But reason can also judge whether the desire for cereal is one which helps me live a better life overall, which, using skim milk, it does. Reason can judge the worthiness of a goal only with reference to a predominant goal. In other words, this-or-that value is good-for-me-to-have if and only if the pursuit of that value is conducive to my overall predominant value. On the Aristotelian view, there is such an overall predominant value, life, or more specifically, a flourishing or good life. One *naturally* desires to live a good life, and other desires must be shown to aid, not hinder, that larger goal.

Reason is also operative in deducing the proper course of action in a given situation. Aristotle recommends striving for the mean between extremes. Courage, for example, is said to be not only different from cowardice, but also from a rash faux-bravery. In other words, while cowardice is a vice, so is total fearlessness. The person who claims to be unafraid of *anything* is surely mistaken about the way the world works. One has ample reason to fear, say, angry grizzly bears, cannibalistic serial killers, or Crazy Joe Davola. Also, one must temper one's bravery with a consideration of circumstance—taking a foolish risk may look brave, but if it makes the situation worse, it's hardly virtuous. Now, this is no armchair philosophy. Aristotle says that one must learn how to be virtuous by practicing: by living through situations, and learning from experience.



Reason also leads us to the emulation of proper role models. The *phronemos*, or man of practical wisdom, is someone to be observed and learned from. The *phronemos* is not the same thing as a teacher, for one cannot teach virtues the way one teaches the alphabet. No one, for example, could "teach" Kramer to play golf, not even the caddy. To learn the game of golf, he had to study the fundamentals (such as angles, and body mechanics), observe good golfers, and practice, practice, practice. To learn virtue, one must study the fundamentals (such as the need for moderation between extremes), observe those who live well, and practice, practice, practice.

### *Jerry, George, and Aristotle?*

Jerry and George frequently attempt to use reason to realize a goal, though sometimes not a terribly lofty goal. What is the best way to switch from dating one roommate to the other? When can I ask out someone who has just ended a relationship? How can I do as little work as possible without getting fired? But more to the point, they are often also concerned with how these short-term goals contribute to their overall well-being. For instance, when Jerry has an opportunity to have sex with multiple partners, he reflects not on the momentary pleasure such an experience would bring, but rather on what sort of person he would thus become: "I don't want to be an 'orgy guy,'" he realizes. Note the emphasis is not on rule-following, as in rule based ethics. A Kantian, for example, would ask whether he could rationally will it to be universal law that everyone have multiple sex partners. The emphasis is not on consequences either. A utilitarian, for example, would ask whether the greater number of people would be made happy by this act (which, in this case, they would). Jerry's emphasis, however, is not on the act itself at all; rather, the focus of his self-examination is what sort of person he would be were he to engage in this practice. What sort of character produces this action? Jerry does not want to be that kind of person, an "orgy guy." That lifestyle, with its bathrobes and cigarette holders, is not a lifestyle that Jerry sees as conducive to his long-term happiness.

In the episode entitled "The Lip Reader," Jerry decides to simply approach and ask out a beautiful woman, rather than engage in any subterfuge. George cautions against this, on the grounds that Jerry would therefore become a different sort of person, one of "those guys," as George articulately describes it. Note that George is not concerned here with the objective rightness or wrongness of the act, nor with the outcome of the act, but rather with what sort of person Jerry would thus become.

Of course, George is extrapolating from his own fear of not being one of "those guys" that Jerry should not try to "cross over," but Jerry, judging that state to be one which would be conducive to his long-term well-being, chooses to ignore George's objection, correctly perceiving that the objection is not rational.

In addition to using reason to determine how to act, Aristotle says we ought to consider how a person of practical wisdom (a *phronemos*) would act in similar circumstances. The *phronemos* is supposed to be the role model for correct behavior. Here we can see another way virtue ethics manifests its influence in *Seinfeld*. For Jerry, of course, the primary role model is Superman. On occasion, Jerry seeks George's advice, typically on matters George might know better than Superman would, such as how to dump a girlfriend. But many times Jerry simply looks to and considers Superman. (The character Superman was, ironically, created by a person named Jerry, and the character Jerry was created by the real Jerry, perhaps suggesting that we are meant to see this connection.)

For George, who realizes he is "king of the idiots," the *phronemos* must be he who does the exact opposite of what George's instinct is to do. George comes to this realization in an episode entitled "The Opposite," and he is exactly right. George may refer to himself as king of the idiots, but paradoxically, his recognition of his idiocy is what enables him to create his own *phronemos* by doing the opposite. This, of course, is a good update of the parable of Socrates and the Oracle. Socrates, who claimed to know nothing, was said by the Oracle at Delphi to be, in fact, the wisest man in Greece. After much searching and pestering of politicians, playwrights, and craftsmen, Socrates surmised that this could only mean that only those who *recognize* their own ignorance are in a position to acquire wisdom and hence virtue. This is precisely analogous to George's deduction in "The Opposite." If everything his instinct tells him is wrong, the opposite must be right. Jerry aids in the deductive process here, applying the logical axiom known as the Law of Excluded Middle. George had suggested the connection, but was unsure as to its logical validity. Jerry steps in and assures him that it is indeed correct, thus assuming the role of Oracle, or perhaps Socrates. This is appropriate, for on many occasions, Jerry is actually George's role model, his *phronemos*. But Jerry cannot be a complete role model, as he is often confused himself. But the opposite-of-George would be a perfect source of guidance, given that George has had everything wrong to that point.

We see the proof of George's strategy immediately. He approaches a beautiful woman, and wins her affection. He refuses to be intimidated by obnoxious thugs in a theater, and instead intimidates them. He gets an

interview with the New York Yankees, and when introduced to the owner of the team, George Steinbrenner, he proceeds to upbraid "the Boss" rather than kowtow to him. Steinbrenner rewards this bold candor by offering him a job. Of course, George does not continue this strategy, and frequently lapses into error as a result, confirming the theory.

### *Elaine, Kramer, and Newman: Not Wise*

Elaine sometimes adopts a character-oriented approach, but she is less committed to it than George and Jerry, and frequently winds up in a jam as a result. For example, in "The Sponge," she tries to consider the character of her potential sex partners, surely a wise move (although she is actually motivated less by selectivity in her choice of men than by conservation of contraceptives). Other times, in fact more frequently, she does not consider the wise course, trying, for instance, to assassinate a noisy dog. She is often concerned with rules or "etiquette," suggesting that she may be thought of as a foil, an example of *not* using the Aristotelian approach. The trouble she gets into is often the result of sticking with rule-based approaches, which, as we have seen, often fail to account for the nuances which distinguish one situation from another. Elaine suffers accordingly. When she is guided by rules, she winds up dating the wrong man or stuck buying presents for people she doesn't like. When she tries to follow utilitarian strategies, this also backfires. She deduces that stopping to purchase Juicyfruits will only delay her trip to the hospital by a couple of minutes. But since this infuriates her injured boyfriend, he dumps her.

Kramer does not seem to participate in virtue ethics either. He lives so far outside the rest of the culture that, despite his friendship with Jerry and the others, he cannot take advantage of the social dialectic which helps produce virtue. He is more a figure of the Sartrean self-made self. On Aristotle's account, the virtuous soul requires interaction with other virtuous souls for its development. The price Kramer pays is that he ends up friends with Newman, and even FDR (Franklin Delano Romanowski), who tries to kill him.

Although Newman clearly is not a *phronemos*, he is sometimes ironically invoked as one. When Elaine and Kramer have a dispute over ownership of a bicycle, they both defer to Newman's judgment. When there is some dispute as to whether Elaine's nipple is visible on a Christmas card photograph, they call in Newman to confirm. These appeals are clearly ironical because it is only Elaine and Kramer who appeal to Newman's alleged wisdom. George admits when pressed that Newman is "merry," but has no real use for him. Jerry regards Newman only as his nemesis. Since we

can interpret both Jerry and George as participating in a Socratic investigation in search of Aristotelian virtue, Newman's role as nemesis serves to demonstrate one difficulty of virtue ethics. The *phronemos* must be chosen wisely, which is paradoxical in the sense that if we were wise enough to choose the right role-model, perhaps we would be wise enough not to need one. George is generally unimpressed by Newman; Jerry is wise enough to hold Newman in contempt; Kramer and Elaine actually defer to his judgment, indicating perhaps that they are less wise than Jerry and even George.

It is clear that Aristotelian virtue ethics presents a coherent moral theory, and a satisfactory alternative to utilitarian and Kantian theories. It stresses the use of both reason and experience in the development of character, producing the actions which lead one to flourish. What is less clear is whether Jerry and George can be seen as having learned as much as they might from their participation in this Socratic partnership in the search for virtue. That is, are they friends in the Aristotelian sense, augmenting and improving the virtues in one another? If the show were to have realized its full potential for moral education on the Aristotelian model, we ought to have seen a finale in which the characters translated their social dialectic into the good and happy life, rather than ending up in prison. But, perhaps this is a further subtlety. Recall that Socrates also ended up in prison (and was actually executed), and that Plato and Aristotle argued that happiness is a state of the soul, regardless of the political conditions in which one finds oneself. In the last hours of his life, Socrates persisted in philosophizing. When we last see the group in prison, Jerry is his usual self, doing his observational comedy routine. Perhaps we've made something out of nothing here, or perhaps there is a useful parallel to Greek wisdom, but one which was too subtle for the television audience.

## The Practice of Partiality

Marilyn Friedman

Hardly any moral philosopher, these days, would deny that we are each entitled to favor our loved ones. Some would say, even more strongly, that we ought to favor them, that it is not simply a moral option. This notion of partiality toward loved ones is lately gaining wide philosophical acclaim. (Ordinary people, fortunately, have held this view for quite some time.)