Virtue ethics

Aristotle

Telos

Aristotle was convinced that all things and all human beings have a purpose or function — a **telos**. A complete explanation of anything would include its final cause or purpose, which is, ultimately, to realise its potential and to fulfil its goal. For human beings, the ultimate goal was a human flourishing and developing those characteristics best suited to the realisation of a virtuous human being. His emphasis was not on what people *do*, but on what kind of person they *are*.

A good life

Aristotle maintained that the virtues were those qualities that lead to a good life — qualities such as courage, compassion, honesty and justice. The person who aimed to cultivate these qualities was maximising their potential for a happy life — a quality of happiness described as *eudaimonia*, which involves being happy and living well. It is of intrinsic value, not a means to an end, and should be desired for its own sake, not only for the individual but also for the society of which they are a member.

The Golden Mean

For Aristotle, the right way to act was a Golden Mean. This is a perfect balance between two extremes, such as cowardice and foolhardiness, which are both vices. The Golden Mean is courage: a virtue which a person should cultivate in the way that they might cultivate good health or fitness. They should learn from good role models, train and exercise this virtue, until it becomes an automatic way of living and behaving and part of their character which they could exercise without conscious effort or will. This may involve performing courageous acts, but more importantly, their character would have acquired the virtue of courage and their actions would be motivated by courage.

The appeal of virtue ethics

Virtue ethics has an appeal because it can be accommodated by both religious and secular morality. Despite Taylor's observations, Jesus can be held up as a model of the virtuous man, in whom weakness becomes strength and death is transformed into life. It is a simple system based on universal wellbeing for the individual and the community.

In holding up models of virtuous people it does not set unrealistic goals and acknowledges that humans are faced with changing situations and cannot always respond in the same way, but need to develop a character that is morally consistent. It places value on virtuous characteristics that are gained through effort and struggle and yet which may not make the agent popular. It is accessible by reference to the real world, since if I describe a person as courageous, the description immediately generates a picture of someone who lives in a particular way and whose way of life recommends itself to the observer.

Which virtues to cultivate?

How do we decide which virtues are those to be cultivated the most? Why should we prefer certain ideals to others? Virtues have relative value in different cultures, and while physical courage is considered highly valuable in some societies, intellectual prowess is rated more highly in others. It is possible that even the most self-evidently virtuous person might not be considered by everyone to be a desirable role model. Susan Wolf writes: 'I don't know whether there are moral saints. But if there are, I am glad that neither I nor those about whom I care most are among them.' In other words, not everyone wants to cultivate the virtues or maintains that they are intrinsically good.

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Criticisms

Eighteenth century

In the eighteenth century David Hume criticised 'artificial virtues' which were the product of obedience or conformity, and praised 'natural virtues' which could be shared by everyone, such as honesty and justice.

Twentieth century

In the twentieth century G. E. M. Anscombe observed that ethical codes which lay stress on moral absolutes and laws were outdated in a society that had effectively abandoned God, and she urged a return to a morality based on human flourishing.

Similarly, Richard Taylor rejected a system of morality that was based on divine commands and that discouraged people from achieving their potential. He described virtue ethics as 'an ethic of aspiration rather than an ethic of duty'.

Philippa Foot argued that although the virtues could not guarantee happiness, they could go some way to achieving it, while Alastair MacIntyre noted that in moral dilemmas naturalistic theories of ethics are of little value as they are time-consuming and overly complex.

The emotions

Aquinas did not deny the role of the emotions but recognised them as an essential part of the moral agent and as having an influence over their moral decisions. Reason controls the emotions but does not act independently of them. Phronesis — practical wisdom, which is gained through experience and previous decisions — characterises the mature and wise will of the virtuous agent.

Obstacles

Not easy to apply

Aristotle's principle of the Golden Mean is not easy to apply to all virtues. While courage does appear to be a mean between cowardice and foolhardiness, is there a mean virtue of compassion or loyalty? Is it possible to take compassion to an extreme whereupon it becomes a vice?

No guidance

Aristotle gives no guidance in situations where virtues conflict and where we need rules to guide our actions. For example, a soldier will consider bravery a virtue, while a pacifist will consider tolerance or non-retaliation as virtuous. Because the emphasis of the approach is on *being* rather than *doing*, then it can also be seen as a rather selfish theory, which places greater emphasis on personal development than the effect our actions have on others.

Cultural and gender issues

Virtues may be culturally relative; some evils may be promoted as virtues (e.g. suicide bombing).

Virtues tend to be gender specific and based on stereotypes associated with the battlefield (e.g. female virtues revolve around relationships and motherhood, masculine virtues around competitiveness and the workplace).

Free to act?

Whether by pressure, coercion or fear, not everyone is able to exercise freedom to act virtuously. Even those who can freely choose to follow virtuous role models were criticised by Sartre for acting in 'bad faith' rather than making moral decisions entirely for themselves.