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Extension

Twentieth-century virtue ethics

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An important fact to note about the revival of interest in virtue ethics in the twentieth century is the number of female and feminist philosophers who championed it. What follows is a selection of these philosophers and the key ideas that they developed.

G.E.M. (Elizabeth) Anscombe (1919–2001)

In 1958 Anscombe published 'Modern Moral Philosophy', arguing that 'we should return to the virtues, as the idea of a law without a lawgiver is incoherent.'

Iris Murdoch (1919–1999)

Better known by some as a novelist, in 1948 she became a fellow of St Anne's College, Oxford. She received honorary degrees from the Universities of Bath (1983), Cambridge (1993) and Kingston (1994).

Murdoch believed that no ethical tradition had ever adequately fashioned a picture of human beings as they truly are, and saw virtue as a result: 'Virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is' (*The Sovereignty of Good*).

Alasdair MacIntyre (1929–)

'Modern moral philosophy is bankrupt; it must recover the tradition of virtue.' (*After Virtue*)

MacIntyre stressed the importance of narrative as a 'live tradition' — you need to know where ethics has come from. He also believed that virtues change over time.

Philippa Foot (1920–2010)

Believed virtue contributes to the good life, and tried to modernise Aristotle.

'Ethics should not be about dry theorising, but about making the world a better place' (*Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*).

She was one of the founders of Oxfam.

Rosalind Hursthouse

Hursthouse is a neo-Aristotelian — arguing that Aristotle's views on women and slaves were wrong, and therefore we need not be limited to his list of virtues.

'We acquire virtues individually, and so flourish, but we do so together and not at each other's expense' (*How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues*).

Carol Gilligan (1936–)

Gilligan argues that developmental theories have been built on observations and assumptions made about the lives of men. This distorts views of female personality

'The kinds of virtues one honors depend on the power brokers of one's society' (*In a Different Voice*).

Michael Slote

Slote developed the feminist 'ethics of care'.

Inspired more by Hume and Hutcheson's moral sentimentalism than by Aristotle.

In Slote's version of virtue ethics, the moral rightness of acts is based on the virtuous motives or characteristics of the agent. His version is agent based, i.e. the motives are all important. This is in opposition to Aristotelian (agent focused) forms of virtue ethics.

Martha Nussbaum (1947–)

Says that justice, temperance, generosity etc. have been essential to human individuals and societies succeeding throughout history.

Interprets Aristotle's views as absolutes and develops a relativist approach incompatible with his virtue theory.

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