



6b. Plato and Aristotle: Virtue Ethics



Ethics is based in character

Virtue ethics is different from other ethical theories. Other ethical theories are more concerned with the actions, and the outcomes or principles behind the actions, than with the person who is acting. In virtue ethics, the person is considered more than the act. *Emphasis in virtue ethics is on Character, Virtue and Happiness.*

Questions in virtue ethics: What is the good life? How should I live? What kind of person do I want to be? These are questions about our lives, not only individual actions or moral dilemmas.

Character is not something that is expressed in single actions. Instead, character traits are stable, consistent and reliable. If someone has the character trait of kindness, they act kindly in different situations and in relation to different people.

To become a moral person is hard work

To live a good life is to be a virtuous person. A good person is one with a good moral character. Although the only way to find out whether a person has a good character is to see how they act, it cannot be based on just a few actions.

To have a virtuous character is a way of life. One is spontaneously acting in a virtuous way: the virtues are a way of living. Personal development is about actualising the potential that is already there in us. We have the capacity for becoming moral persons, but we are not born fully moral. We must work hard to develop our own character. To become a moral person takes practice.

Principles of virtue ethics

- An action is only good if it is an action that a virtuous person would carry out in the same circumstances.
- A virtuous person is a person who acts virtuously.
- A person acts virtuously if they "possess and live the virtues".
- A virtue is a moral trait that a person needs to live well.

The role of society is to help people become good and to live virtuous lives. Politics is therefore important to both Plato and Aristotle. Our moral lives are influenced by society and its structures. Virtue ethics is thus concerned with more than moral action, including friends, family, society and ideals.

Discussion: Perhaps in a market liberalist society, we become more greedy and selfish? Or could the lack of government intervention give more responsibility to individuals to take care of each other? These would be important questions for a virtue ethicist to judge whether market liberalism is a good society to develop our moral character.

PHRONESIS - understanding the situation

In virtue ethics, there are no absolute principles or moral rules to guide our actions. This differs from other ethical theories. Instead, one must think of what a virtuous person would have done in the same situation. To consider the context is essential, and this requires practical wisdom, or PHRONESIS.

What counts as honest, and not impolite or blunt, for instance, will depend on the situation. It is not honest to tell someone that you dislike their children, but impolite and hurtful. Tact, friendliness and respect must also be considered. Moral

character belongs to a person as a whole, so no trait can be considered in isolation.

Virtues must be exercised in a coherent way, in light of the social and cultural setting. The ultimate aim (TELOS) of our actions is to live a good life with constancy of a virtuous character.

Types of virtue ethics

Virtue ethics became popular again because of the work of G.E.M. Anscombe (1919-2001), Philippa Foot (1920-2010), Alistair MacIntyre (1929 -) and Rosalind Hursthouse (1943 -). There are three contemporary versions of virtue ethics that put emphasis on different aspects of the theory:

Eudaimonism bases virtues in human flourishing, or Happiness. All actions are aimed at a TELOS, where this is related to our function as Humans. We are happy when we function at our best. For Aristotle, this meant intellectually, morally and politically. E.g., Julia Annas (1946 -).

Agent-based virtue theory emphasizes that a good act is what a virtuous person would do. When we act, we should think of what a morally good person would do. A person is virtuous because they have certain personal traits. E.g. Michael Slote (1941 -) & Linda Zagzebski (1946 -)

The ethics of care argues that traditional ethical theories ignore feminine virtues such as care, self-sacrifice and patience, while focusing mainly on justice and freedom (autonomy). Care ethics is a criticism of the social, political and cultural context that downgrade these virtues. E.g. Carole Gilligan (1936 -) & Annette Baier (1929-2012)

Criticisms and defence of virtue ethics

Lack of moral principles or laws. Virtue ethics does not give us concrete rules for how to live our lives. Against this, one might argue that virtue ethics is more flexible and adaptable than ethical theories that have absolute and universal principles. Since each situation is unique, how can we expect a single principle to apply universally?

Self-centred: Virtue ethics is more focused on oneself than on others, on developing our virtues and being happy. Contra this, one might say that most virtues are about how one acts towards others. While other theories might encourage one to live by a single moral principle, virtue ethics requires us to instead consider the other person and their context.

Julia Annas gives counterarguments: Virtue rules are rules like "be honest" instead of "don't lie", but they are still rules. And virtues still have duties, but they are about self-improvement and being the best version of yourself (mother, teacher, friend) you can be, instead of about following demands.

Arguments using virtue ethics

- Focus on person and character traits: virtues and vices
- We need good role models
- Becoming a moral person takes practice
- No universal moral principles
- Contextual considerations are essential
- Practical judgement is required
- Leading a virtuous life makes one happy