

## Aristotle and Virtue Ethics

[Notes for a lecture given in London, April 27<sup>th</sup> 05, and based on the relevant sections in Introduction to Philosophy and Ethics. Copyright is retained by the author, but permission is hereby given to use this material for the purpose of individual study.]

All ethical theories acknowledge that there are virtues and vices. They are seen as dispositions to follow (or go against) certain principles or rules. But:

- Other theories examine general principles and rules for moral action. Virtues are simply ways of describing the habit of following those principles.
- Virtue Ethics, by contrast, starts with a consideration of the virtues that make for living a good life.

When we describe someone as ‘good’ or ‘moral’ we do not generally refer to **particular** decisions they have made (a good person may sometimes make a mistake; a rogue may sometimes behave honourably), but to a **disposition** – a quality that they have as a person. It is not so much concerned with what we should **do**, but what sort of person we should hope to **be**.

**Virtue ethics is about the virtues that make for the good life.** This approach, which became popular once more from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, developed an approach that had already been explored by Aristotle. (Because it originated in Greece, it is sometimes known by the Greek term **Aretaic Ethics**, which comes from the Greek word for virtue – *arete*.)

Aristotle does not explain right or wrong simply in terms of rules; rather, he examines the personal qualities that make a person ‘virtuous’ and therefore able to act well in a variety of situations, each of which may be unique and which therefore cannot be covered adequately by way of a general rule.

So note particularly an implied criticism of other ethical systems. They assume that you judge what to do by reference to rules. But each situation and person is unique. By contrast, virtue ethics starts with personal qualities. In a difficult situation, say if I am seriously ill, I might want someone looking after me who is kind, sympathetic, gentle and so on. That might be better than someone who holds fixed rules about exactly what you should or should not do for the terminally ill!

Aristotle saw ‘happiness’ (*eudaimonia*) as the goal in life. It was about living a good life, as well as enjoying the good things of life. He considered qualities that enabled people to live together; only when those qualities were displayed could one enjoy happiness, because they were necessary for one’s development as a social being.

In Nichomachean Ethics, he says:

‘Since all knowledge and every pursuit aims at some good, what do we take to be the end of political science – what is the highest of all practical goods? Well, so far as the name goes there is pretty general agreement. ‘It is happiness’, say both ordinary and cultured people; and they identify happiness with living well or doing well. But when it comes to saying in what happiness consists, opinions differ, and the account given by the generality of mankind is not at all like that of the wise. The former take it to be something obvious and familiar, like pleasure or money or eminence, and there are various other views; and often the same person actually changes his opinion...’

He also describe pleasure in acting virtuously...

‘...lovers of beauty find pleasure in things that are pleasant by nature, and virtuous actions are of this kind, so that they are pleasant not only to this type of person but also in themselves. So their life does not need to have pleasure attached to it as a sort of accessory, but contains its own pleasure in itself. Indeed we may go further and assert that anyone who does not delight

in fine actions is not even a good man; for nobody would say that a man is just unless he enjoys acting justly, nor liberal unless he enjoys liberal actions, and similarly in all the other cases. If this is so, virtuous actions must be pleasurable in themselves'

In other words, true happiness is to be found in those things that are virtuous. So a rational person – seeking happiness – will want to act virtuously. He can then examine what those virtues are, and relate them to human nature.

NB. Considering personal virtues is not selfish, but is related to the needs of others.

Aristotle thought that developing the virtues was a necessary feature of living alongside other people. His ethics are social and political, not just personal.

Aristotle saw the virtues as qualities needed to live a moral life and to achieve the 'final cause' or overall purpose in life. He also considered it important to strike a balance (or mean) between extremes – and it is recognising that balance that leads to virtue. [e.g. courage is mid way between being a coward and taking suicidal risks] His aim is to have a life that follows reason and is therefore balanced. Reason is the distinctive feature of human beings.

BUT the 'mean' does not apply to acts that are considered to be wrong (e.g. murder, theft); it is applied to dispositions, rather than to actions in themselves.

Perhaps the best way of thinking about the 'mean' in Aristotle is to consider what makes a balanced and mature friendship or relationship. Do you want someone who is desperately anxious to please you and agree with you no matter what? Do you want someone who is hyper critical and ready to challenge you at every point? Or do you want someone who is balanced – sometimes being happy to please, sometimes about to challenge? (Maturity is being able to maintain a rational mean!)

Four **cardinal virtues** are found in Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and Aquinas. They are: **temperance (moderation), justice, courage and wisdom**. [c.p. the seven capital vices: pride, avarice, lust, envy, gluttony, anger and sloth – generally called the 'seven deadly sins'.]

Key question: what virtues will I display if my life is ruled by reason and is lived in a way that will enable me to achieve my purpose as a human being?

NB

At some point in your course, you will have examined Natural Law Ethics – a moral theory that was developed (particularly by Aquinas, and prominently in the Catholic Church) from Aristotle. In Natural Law, something is good if it fulfils its natural purpose. And Christians add – 'for which God created it'.

How does this relate to Virtue Ethics?

Both Virtue Ethics and the Natural Law approach are based on a fundamental understanding of the nature of humankind. They both start from a view of what constitutes the 'good life' – without that, neither makes sense. It is therefore possible to see them as two aspects of a single moral argument. **Natural Law requires me to seek my 'end' as a human being; the virtues are the personal qualities that enable me to make the moral choices that will enable me to do so.**

My view on Natural Law and Virtue Ethics has changed recently. Because they approach ethical question from very different directions, I assumed that they were fundamentally different. Natural Law (think about Abortion issues, or sexuality or contraception) tends to

work from general principles and applies them to situations – while Virtue Ethics starts with the qualities that make for a good life.

BUT

They are both based on an understanding of the ‘end’ or purpose of life. What is human life about? If you know that, you can start to frame general principles that will enable it to fulfil itself (Natural Law), but you will also be able to assess those dispositions which may lead to fulfilment and happiness (Virtue Ethics). Hence Natural Law and Virtue Ethics are effectively two sides of a single coin.

So let us now turn to the modern developments in Virtue Ethics...

But first... a general background note....

In the West – particularly in the period before the Reformation – morality was defined by the Church. It was rule-based, Natural Law, and closely related to religious belief, metaphysics and Church authority.

Following the reformation, but particularly later with the European Enlightenment, there was a quest for rational ethics – **acceptable to everyone on the basis of reason, quite apart from their religious beliefs**. Two approaches developed: Kantian ethics and Utilitarian Ethics. They rather dominated ethical thought from their origins in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, through until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup>. People tended to take either the Kantian absolutist view, or the utilitarian view of the greatest happiness to the greatest number. (They were the secular ones, while Natural Law was the religious one.)

All of those were being challenged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – as part of a general rejection of authoritarianism and rules. Hence the re-examination of Aristotle and virtue ethics....

### **Modern Virtue Ethics:**

Virtue Ethics stands in contrast to the two major ethical theories that have dominated western philosophy in the modern period: Kantian absolutist ethics and Utilitarianism. They take as their starting point **the moment of moral choice**. They require you to assess whether a chosen action is:

- a) able to be universalised (Kant), or
- b) likely to give the greatest happiness to the greatest number (utilitarianism).

But the problem with both of these is that one may ask ‘Why should I bother?’ since both depend on a prior agreement about fundamental values.

The revival of Virtue Ethics in modern times is generally thought to have started with Elizabeth Anscombe’s *Modern Moral Philosophy* (1958). This was in contrast to the prevailing ethics of the day because it moved moral debate away from general rules and principles of behaviour, and towards more general questions about value and meaning in life, and qualities that were worth developing and encouraging. It was thought that the other main theories were inadequate and lacked a sound foundation, since many people no longer believed in God as an external law-giver or guarantor of rewards.

Anscombe felt that the older systems could not be effective as guides for the moral life. The only answer, she felt, was to return to some Aristotelian idea of what it was to live well (eudaimonia) – a goal which would be good in itself, as well as producing good for society as a whole.

There was also debate about whether you should follow your duty even if (and especially if) it goes against your natural disposition. Philippa Foot, a modern virtue ethicist, discussed

(in *Virtues and Vices*, 1978) whether Kant was right in considering that a person who behaved morally against his or her own inclinations was more or less moral than one who was naturally virtuous. Virtue Ethics sees the virtuous person as one who has a natural disposition to do what is good. In other words, doing what is right is about 'being good, or kind, or generous. It is not simply a matter of obeying an external command, nor being able to add up expected results. In a world where a majority do not believe in an external lawgiver, and all results are ambiguous, there needs to be some other criterion for moral action.

**Virtue Ethics involves personal responsibility and is entirely secular – it is about developing qualities that will promote *eudaimonia* – happiness.**

However, the terminology has changed a bit since Aristotle. In modern debates, what Aristotle called 'happiness' is generally termed 'human flourishing'. And that, of course, has the sense of happiness, of living and doing well, of fulfilling one's own natural abilities etc etc. We all know what it is to say that a plant or even an organisation or a company is 'flourishing' – it thrives, it prospers, it lives to the full. So what does it mean to say that a human being is 'flourishing'? That is the key question, and it requires the 'Natural Law' question as well: What is life for?

Virtue Ethics is therefore compatible with religion, since Religion does have views about what life is for, but it is also independent of it. Human flourishing can be completely secular.

The revived virtue ethics appealed to **feminist thinkers**, who felt that the other ethical theories, based on rights and duties, were a particularly male ways of approaching life, whereas virtue ethics included a recognition of the value of relationships and intimacy. Virtue Ethics is **naturalistic**: it moves away from the idea of obeying rules, to an appreciation of **how one might express one's own fundamental nature, and thus fulfil one's potential as a human being.**

Questions to be considered:

- Do we have a fixed '**essence**'? Do we all have the same essence? Are there particular qualities that we should ALL seek to express?
- Is our nature dependent upon our surroundings and upbringing? If it has been shaped by factors over which we have no control (e.g. our culture or religion, or some traumatic experience in childhood) are we **responsible** for those virtues and vices that lead us to behave as we do?
- If there are different ways of expressing the same virtue (e.g. out of love, one person might seek euthanasia, another seek to prolong life), how should you choose between them? Moral dilemmas occur because people **want to be good, but do not know what they should do to be good.**
- We may all **want** to be virtuous, but may not know **how** to be virtuous.

It is therefore possible to criticise Virtue Ethics on the grounds that it does not say what you ought to do – it leaves it all vague and open. But that is exactly the point. It was the attempt to set down and apply general principles to particular situations that led to a dissatisfaction with traditional Kantian and Utilitarian ethics. So you can't expect Virtue Ethics to give you simple and clean-cut answers to everyday problems. It expects you do develop the virtues and then act naturally.

The key thing to remember: Virtue Ethics has shown that morality goes beyond rules and regulations, is concerned as much with dispositions as with actions, and should be concerned with questions about the value and purpose of human life.

[NB A most influential book: *Virtue Ethics* by Alistair MacIntyre, 1981]