

Some basic notes on 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. It is also very different from the earlier Natural Law approach to Christian ethics.

All three of these take as their starting point **the moment of moral choice**. They require you to assess whether a chosen action is:

- in line with a rational interpretation of nature (natural law),
- able to be universalised (Kant), or
- likely to give the greatest happiness to the greatest number (utilitarianism).

BUT, 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.

Virtue ethics is about the virtues that make for the good life. This approach, which became popular once more from the middle of the 20th century, developed an approach that had already been explored by Aristotle.

The other approaches acknowledge virtues, but make them secondary to formulating general principles and rules of moral action. The virtues are seen as dispositions to follow certain principles or rules. Virtue Ethics, by contrast, makes them central.

For Aristotle, you can't explain right or wrong simply in terms of rules, but rather you can show how a virtuous person can be trusted to do the right thing in a variety of situations, each of which may be unique and cannot therefore be covered by way of a rule.

Developing qualities is not antisocial, or unrelated to the needs of others. Aristotle saw 'happiness' (*eudaimonia*) as the goal in life. But that was about living a good life, as much 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.

So developing the virtues is a necessary feature of living alongside others – it is therefore a social, political and moral feature of life, not just a personal one.

Aristotle also considered it important to strike a balance (or mean) between extremes – and it is recognising that balance that leads to virtue.

Four **cardinal virtues** are found in Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and Aquinas. They are: temperance (moderation), justice, courage and wisdom. They represent the human qualities that reason suggests are required in order to live a moral life and to achieve the 'final cause' or overall purpose in life.

The opposite of these cardinal virtues are the seven capital vices: pride, avarice, lust, envy, gluttony, anger and sloth - often referred to as the 'seven deadly sins'.

For Virtue Ethics, morality is about the person, not so much the action. What is it like to be a good or moral person? What qualities should I develop?

Virtue is a disposition, a habitual way of acting. You can only gain virtues by practice – and you are only described as virtuous once you are seen to act in a particular way, apparently of your own free will and with honesty of intention (i.e. pretending to be kind in order to gain something is not the same thing as actually being kind).

Virtue Ethics was revived by Elizabeth Anscombe in *Modern Moral Philosophy*, (1958), who developed an approach to ethics based on the qualities or virtues that are associated with someone who lives a 'good' life.

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 – particularly Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics – were inadequate and lacked a

sound foundation, since many people no longer believed in God as an external law-giver or guarantor of rewards.

Virtue Ethics involves personal responsibility and is entirely secular – it is about developing qualities that will promote *eudaimonia*. It is therefore compatible with religion, but independent of it.

BUT, what do you do when you are faced with two different possible courses of action, neither of which seems to be any more an expression of virtue than the other? Moral dilemmas occur because people **want to be good, but do not know what they should do to be good.**

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.**

These are some of the key questions raised by Virtue Ethics:

- Do we have a fixed '**essence**'? Are there particular qualities that we should all seek to express?
- Is our nature dependent upon our surroundings and upbringing?
- If our nature 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 our actions?
- 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?

This last question is important. Virtue Ethics revived because it was thought that the existing ethical theories did not have an adequate foundation. But if there are dilemmas about what action can express a virtue, do you not then fall back on one of the other ethical theories in order to judge between your options?

Virtue Ethics has shown that morality goes beyond rules and regulations, and should be concerned with questions about the value and purpose of human life.