

## Virtue Ethics

- **Virtue Ethics** – centres on the character of the person making the moral decision, rather than on the action itself.
- Agent centred – not act centred.

### Plato

- Happiness must be attained through the pursuit of virtue.
- Actions are good when they help to achieve happiness through the pursuit of virtue.
- Temperance, courage, prudence and justice = central virtues – when these virtues are in balance, a person's actions will be good.

### Aristotle

- Organon.
- Arête – relates to the idea of excellence – the way in which a thing fulfils its job.
  - Organ of a human body – it is arête when it performs its function well.
  - Organs work in harmony – heart cannot fulfil its job if the lungs do not work.
  - The good functioning of organs is harmonic – leads to eudaimonia.
- Each group in society has a function – slaves and rulers.
  - Arête of a slave – perform their duties to the satisfaction of the master.
  - Arête of a ruler – guide the state and ensure the harmonious interaction of groups in society.
- People do not exist in isolation – they live in societies.
- Each group and person fulfils a function – for a purpose and to an end within society.
- Arête will differ from one person to another and from one group to another – this is because roles of people differ from other roles.
- There is also a virtue which is common to all – the need for each person and group to live in harmony with others.
  
- Distinguishes between things that are good as means (for the sake of something else) and things that are good as ends (for their own sake).
- One final good = eudemonia – human flourishing.
- Human wellbeing/flourishing is a life characterised by the virtues – life lived in harmony and co-operation.
- 2 types of virtues:
  - 1) **Intellectual virtues** – developed by training and education.
  - 2) **Moral virtues** – developed by habit.
- We become just by doing just acts, temperance by doing temperate acts and courageous by doing acts of courage.
- Practice is needed to become virtuous.
- All people have the potential to develop moral and intellectual virtues – only few achieve this = philosophers.

- A persona who achieves eudemonia – person who uses their reason well.
  - Reason – supreme human virtue = reason is PRACTICAL and involves both UNDERSTANDING and RESPONDING.
1. Teaching.
  2. Reflecting.
  3. Understanding.
  4. Reflecting and thinking for yourself.
  5. Practice of virtues.

### **The Golden Mean**

- Golden Mean – the situation when something works efficiently by avoiding extremes and deficiency – a balance between excess and deficiency.
- Golden Mean achieves the best function of whatever is being examined.
- Is there to ensure that it works well – works in harmony with the rest.
- Water tap:
  - If water gushes out – not virtuous – hasn't performed its function well.
  - If no water comes out – not virtuous – hasn't performed its function well.
  - Good supply of water comes out – virtuous tap – functioning at its best.
- Also applies to people – soul is grounded in Aristotle's teleology of a function, purpose and end.
- Golden Mean of a soldier is courage
  - If they lack courage – coward.
  - Excess of courage – foolhardy.
  - If they find a balance and act courageously – they function best as a soldier.

<b><u>Deficiency</u></b>	<b><u>Golden Mean</u></b>	<b><u>Excess</u></b>
Laziness	Hard working	Exhaustion
Cowardice	Courage	Foolhardiness
Miserliness	Prudence	Recklessness
Laziness	Dedication	Exhaustion

- Human beings have certain virtues that are common to all – because all human beings exist in society.
- Each human being has a specific role – they have a particular virtue that conforms to their job or social position.
  - The Golden Mean of a soldier is different to the one of a slave – soldier must be courageous, slave does not need to be courageous.

### **The virtues – Cardinal Virtues**

- Courage – overcoming fear.
- Temperance – self-control and moderation.
- Practical wisdom – experience and education.
- Justice – virtue of fairness and consistency.

### **Christian Virtues**

- Faith – belief in God.
- Hope – that God is just and merciful and will reward us with an eternal life, if we repent and live a worthy life.
- Love – selflessness and sacrifice for the sake of others.

### **Moral Virtues**

- Developed through habit – to become a generous person I must get into the habit of being generous.
- Courage.
- Temperance (control).
- Liberality.
- Munificence (generosity).
- High mindedness.
- Proper ambition.
- Good temper.
- Friendliness.
- Sincerity.
- Wittiness.
- Modesty.
- Just resentment.

### **Intellectual Virtues**

- Developed through instruction.
- Linked to the rational side of the soul.
- Practical skill.
- Knowledge.
- Common sense.
- Intuition.
- Wisdom.
- Resourcefulness.
- Understanding.
- Judgement.
- Cleverness.

## **Eudaimonia**

- When animate objects find their Golden Mean – achieve eudaimonia.
- Eudaimonia – telos/end of all things and human beings.
- Might seem as though Aristotle's idea of virtue and eudaimonia lacks any moral basis because it is concerned with the fulfilment of a purpose – there is a moral point that should not be lost.
- Human beings live in communities and eudaimonia is designed to achieve the full happiness of a society, which brings peace and harmony – it is not just focused on personal fulfilment, contentment and happiness.
- Eudaimonia for a society is when all groups work in harmony – each group does this by fulfilling its Golden Mean.
- When one group does not fulfil their telos, the whole society is likely to suffer – organ analogy.

## The Virtuous Life

- Today's Virtue Ethics is agent centred – based on character traits.
- Modern Virtue Ethics – looks at the character traits that makes people good.

## Robert Adams

- Virtue cannot be self-contained – a virtuous person must do things that reveal their virtue, to be morally good.
- The moral agent needs examples of people who have been virtuous.
- The virtuous people have qualities in their lives in which virtue flourishes and will have put these virtues into practice – they act as exemplars or templates.
- Virtue Ethics rejects a law-based structure of morality.
- Moral agent should not follow the examples of a virtuous person from the past – should learn from the qualities that those people had.
- The moral agent will become more virtuous by admiring or respecting people who were virtuous – qualities rub off on the moral agent.
- The moral agent will become less moral by respecting or admiring people whose lives were immoral.
- Humans are prone to moral weakness – moral frailty
  - Contradicts the Aristotelian basis of virtue being about strong character traits such as courage.
  - Moral agents should be strong-willed and dedicated to virtue.
- Adam points out that life is not like that – psychology shows that human character is complex.
  - A person may be virtuous in one aspect of his or her life but in another aspect, they might be dishonourable.
- An important dimension of modern Virtue Ethics is Christian tradition – all human beings are sinners.
- Modern Virtue ethics is keen on the strength of the moral properties needed to become virtuous.
- **Alasdair MacIntyre** – wish list of being kind, courageous, just and fair, is not something a human being can possess – humans cannot possess all these virtues.
- Virtuous people ignore the problems they are faced with – it is hard to be virtuous in a racist or tyrannical society.
- It takes a strong character to be virtuous in these conditions.
- Nelson Mandela found the strength to reject violence for virtue – others did not – does this make them immoral?
- Virtue Ethics is criticised for not taking into account the moral situation.
  - Adams calls this the 'priest and playboy factor' – the idea that the environment in which a priest lives in is more encouraging to a virtuous life than the environment of a playboy.

## **Theoretical Virtue Ethics**

- Aristotle saw virtue as based on Natural Law – virtue ethicists reject the idea of any priori moral laws.
  - Reject the notion that 'is' can become 'ought' – naturalistic fallacy.
  - This is because morality is based on the moral agent.
- What you do morally should be based on the way moral actions affect you.
  - Some think that the moral action is important in the way it makes you virtuous.
  - Others think that the action is not important – moral agent's nature or their virtuous state is more important.

## **Rosalind Hursthouse**

- Chief exponent of the theoretical school of virtue ethics.
- The first group see the fruit produced by a fig tree as a way of telling the nature of the tree.
- Other group see the tree and say that it is healthy – therefore it can produce good fruit – they do not bother analysing the fruit because the nature of the tree is what counts.
- Do virtuous acts make a person virtuous? – Or does a virtuous person do virtuous things?
- Hursthouse is not interested in practical question of ethics – not concerned with them as the basis of morality.
  - They are the result of a moral state – it is this state that is important – not moral action.
- Hursthouse agrees with Aristotle on the golden mean – it is these moral virtues that she is interested in.
- If you are virtuous by nature – what you do will be virtuous.
- If you are bad – your actions cannot be virtuous.
- People should get into the state of living virtuously – then what they do will become virtuous.

## **Criticisms of Hursthouse**

- How do you judge what to do by a state of virtue?
  - What you do in a situation is difficult to judge on the basis of the moral agent – the intentions of the moral agent might not be virtuous.
  - May invade Iraq to get rid of a tyrant – but deep down may want oil.
- Conflicting states of virtue.
  - How can the moral actions be virtuous for both people?
  - May liberate Iraq virtuously, but might kill virtuous Iraqi in the process.
- How can a virtuous state be judged objectively?
  - People might appear to be virtuous – virtue cannot objectively be determined/tested.
  - Kantian deontologists might see themselves as virtuous because they accept the Categorical Imperative – Utilitarian might see themselves as virtuous because their actions can be judged on the 'greatest good of the greatest number' – there are no guidelines for a Virtue Ethicist.

## **Practical Virtue Ethics**

- A problem with Virtue Ethics is that it is unable to move forward from character traits to practical moral decisions (practical application).
- Hursthouse created a theory that could generally be applied to particular moral issues, such as abortion – but she did not demonstrate how a particular character trait could be applied to a specific case.

## **Martha Nussbaum**

- The Fragility of Goodness.
- Uses the principle of phronesis (practical wisdom – ability to reflect on what ought to be done to achieve a virtuous end and when effects that action will have) to examine particular issues.
- Concept of phronesis comes from Aristotle – moral life is inbuilt into rational human beings.
  - Humans discover the nature of the universe and its moral structure through a rational process – Sophia (wisdom).
  - Ethical theory needs practical application/
  - Humans use the rational process of phronesis to discover the best ways of applying a moral concept to life.
  - Phronesis is a rational process of the mind – discovers the practical means for applying moral concepts to life.
  - Involves reflection and deciding how to put reflection into practice.
- The Fragility of Goodness – looks at the issue of justice.
- By looking at the virtue of the moral agent – the meaning of justice can be lost.
  - People in history who have campaigned for justice – often destroyed or sacrificed in order to pursue it – SOCRATES.
- Second book – From Disgust to Humanity – looks at sexual orientation.
  - Defends the rights of homosexuals.
  - Nussbaum believes that the practical application of the virtuous life is important – tolerance of those who are different as long as they do not abuse others.
  - She supports the virtuous nature of a multicultural society – does not condone female circumcision.

## **Motive Virtue Ethics**

### **Elizabeth Anscombe**

- Intention.
- Conversion to Catholicism – determined her philosophical views.
- Rejects 'is/ought' clash – Houseplant:
  - Imagine you come home to find that one of your plants is limp because it lacks water.
  - You will give it water.
  - Just because the plant is limp, does not mean it ought to be limp.
- Analogy of a man who goes to the supermarket with a shopping list of ingredients to make a certain meal – if he buys things that are not on the shopping list, he cannot blame his list because it is his fault that he bought the wrong things.
- Shopping list can be seen as a list of moral virtues – moral agent walks around the ethical supermarket.
- Intention of the moral agent is vital – moral agent knows what the virtues (ingredients) are but it is their choice whether they decide to adopt those virtues.
- Virtue Ethics is concerned with ensuring that the moral agent makes the right decisions – concerned with intentions and ensuring that the individual chooses the right ingredients to live a good life.
- Anscombe asserts the importance of the law of double effect in morality – it is based on the intentions of the moral agent.
- Philippa Foot – the holocaust made her reject the idea that morality is subject to experience – virtue is objective in nature.
- Anscombe's shopping list of moral virtues and moral evils are real – human beings should be lead to buy the right things in life – right goods/virtues will develop the natural goodness of human beings.
- This is achieved by reason and the use of phronesis – practical wisdom.
- Phronesis – reflection on virtue and life – solution to a dilemma comes from reflecting on a course of action – looking at people involved and the action – realising the virtues needed to solve the situation.
- Anscombe and Foot assume that human beings want a moral life and that they want to live the good life for its own sake – MacIntyre argues that this assumption is wrong.
  - Virtues may be desirable – but humans need to have a reason for being moral.
  - No good relying on the concept of natural goodness – could be argued that people give presents in order to receive them.
  - MacIntyre argues that consequences matter – consequentialism should be added to Virtue Ethics.
  - People should know why they should be virtuous – they should work this out by using reason.



### **Michael Slote**

- Develops the idea of motives as the basis of Virtue Ethics.
- He calls this 'warm Virtue Ethics' because it is based on human sentiments and feelings – not just obedience to certain theoretical virtues.
- The moral agent must base moral judgements on virtues such as care or empathy – moral agent may sacrifice their life for a sick or elderly – moral thing to do.
- Being sentimental is morally good – Slote regards traditional approaches to Virtue Ethics as cold.

### Strengths of Virtue Ethics

- Emphasises the importance of examining the character of the moral agent – unlike other theories.
- Regards human relationships as important – other ethical systems ignore relationships – Kant.
- Human emotions and responsibility are regarded as important – other theories regard emotion as not logical and therefore see it as a danger to morality.
- Allows the individual to make moral decisions based on their moral well being now on what is legally right – distinguishes a virtuous person from someone who obeys the law.
- Rejects simplistic rules or maxims as a basis for morality – moral truth cannot be found in statements such as ‘the greatest good of the greatest number’ – morality is complex.
- Equips us with the virtues to make good decisions – does not assert that it is able to solve every problem.
- Places virtue at the centre of morality – truthfulness, courage etc.

### Criticisms

- **Robert Louden** – criticised Virtue Ethics for its concentration on the individual.
  - This does not help or resolve big moral dilemmas.
  - It may help the moral agent – but does not give answers to what someone could do when faced with a moral dilemma.
- It is particularist – concentrates on a limited number of virtues – moral society is far too big to be effected by a moral philosophy that looks at small things.
  - Moral democracies cannot make decisions based on an individual’s character traits – they must look at the consequences of actions on the population as a whole.
- Puts forward the idea that character traits exist – many psychologists reject this idea – Gilbert Harman regards character traits as an illusion.
- It praises the Golden Mean – in some situations this might be regarded as foolish.
  - Modern Virtue Ethicists do not distinguish a soldier’s courage from a civilian’s courage – might be virtuous for a soldier to be courageous in a battle, but might be foolhardy for a civilian to be virtuous in a risky situation.
  - Ignores the relativist dilemma – virtue might be different in different countries.