

Virtue Ethics

A. What is Virtue Ethics?

1. Can be described as another part of normative ethics:
 - *axiology* studies what makes things (e.g. pleasure or knowledge) good or bad
 - normative ethics of behavior studies what makes actions (e.g. murder/charity) right or wrong
 - virtue ethics studies what makes the character traits of people (e.g., bravery, greediness) virtuous or vicious

A. What is Virtue Ethics?

2. Sometimes, however, it is described as an *alternative* approach to ethics altogether
3. A different explanation of why an **action** is right or wrong given might be given by a virtue ethicist
 - E.g. a lie is wrong not because of its consequences and not because it violates rules but because it is not what a virtuous and honest person would do
4. Focus is on **what sort of people we should strive to be**, not **what things should we do** on individual occasion
5. Proponents say it captures more of what is important: being an honest person is *more* than just not telling lies: it requires *thinking* and feeling about lies in a certain way.

A. What is Virtue Ethics?

6. Encourages us to think about moral heroes and saints:

E.g., Jesus, Mother Teresa, Gandhi, Martin Luther King

And consider what about their personalities made them virtuous.

7. Virtue ethicists don't ignore actions, but

regard them as *outgrowths* of a person's character.

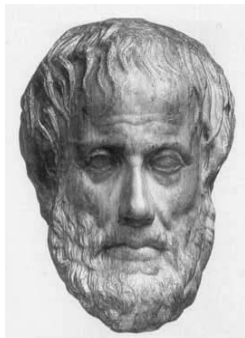
The notion of *character* is the morally more important concept.

8. We praise courageous acts, but *courage* is not really a feature of the act on its own, but of the person doing it.

E.g. grenade example.

B. Aristotle on Moral Knowledge

1. Most famous form of virtue ethics comes from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*



Aristotle
(384-322 BCE)

2. Two kinds of knowledge:

theoretical knowledge (*episteme*): aims at the *truth* in some kind of science or branch of mathematics.

practical knowledge (*phronesis*): aims at wisdom about how to act and what to be.

3. Ethical knowledge is a form of the latter.

4. Practical knowledge only comes with practice: doing it yourself.
(E.g., knowing how to ride a bike.)

C. Aristotle on the Good

1. Every art, craft or inquiry aims at something good.

The musical arts aim at the creation of music.

Engineering aims at the creation of bridges and houses, etc.

The medical arts aim at creating and maintaining health.

Etc.

2. Some arts or activities are parts of others.

E.g., Bridlemaking leads to the creation of bridles, which are used for riding horses.

Making bridles is good only because riding horses is good.

Aristotle asks the question as to whether there is some good that all other activities and arts are a part of creating?

C. Aristotle on the Good

3. His answer: all human activities aim at “eudaimonia”,

“Eudaimonia” is sometimes translated as “happiness” or “well-being”, but these translations can be misleading.

He does not mean a passive internal feeling, but something active: *living well*, living the best kind of life.

4. What is the best kind of life for a human being to live?

Aristotle here appeals to the notion of a *function*.

- The function of a knife is to cut. A knife is a good one when it cuts well.

- The function of a car is to transport people and their stuff from place to place. A good car is one that does this well.

C. Aristotle on the Good

5. Does a human being have a function?

Aristotle says yes.

a) Explains functions in terms of *what makes somewhat what it is*.

Something is a knife **because** it can be used to cut things.

b) What makes human beings distinct is our capacity for **rational behavior**, gaining knowledge and acting on reasons.

6. To live a good life, is to live a life of practical knowledge, one that expresses our capacities for learning and reason.

7. Aristotle thinks this is the same as living a life of virtue.

D. What is a Virtue?

1. A virtue is a trait that contributes to a person functioning well as a human being.

(Examples include *bravery, generosity, friendliness*, etc.)

2. A virtue is not just a feeling.

A person who “feels” brave but does not act on it is not brave.

3. A virtue is not just a natural inclination.

A person who is just born a certain way is not virtuous in virtue of being born that way.

4. A virtue is not just doing a given action on a given occasion.

A person who does something brave or generous once is not a brave or generous person.

D. What is a Virtue?

5. Aristotle concludes a virtue is a learned *disposition* to reason and act in a certain way.

a) A disposition is a tendency, a characteristic that regularly brings one to reason and act in a certain way.

b) A friendly person is a person who *tends* to act in a friendly manner on a regular basis.

(This does not mean that there can be no exceptions, especially in unusual circumstances.)

E. The Golden Mean

1. Aristotle describes a virtue as a “mean” or “intermediate” between two extremes: one of *excess* and one of *deficiency*.

2. Example: bravery (e.g. on a battlefield)

Involves how much we let fear restrict or modify our actions.

Bravery is the mean or intermediate between *cowardliness* and *rashness*.

- A *coward* is afraid too much, and lets it keep him/her from acting in the necessary ways during a battle.
- A *rash* person is afraid too little: (s)he takes unnecessary risks, and performs dangerous actions when there is little good to be got from them.
- A *brave* person is someone in the middle of these extremes.

F. Some Examples

1. Aristotle says the mean between pleasure and pain is “temperance”.

(What he means by this is the pleasures of the senses, like eating, drinking and having sex.)

a) The excess would be gluttony and nymphomania, leading to health or other problems.

b) The deficiency would be things like anorexia and/or painful asceticism.

c) The mean involves wisely and deliberately eating well, and restricting sexual activities to the appropriate times, places and relationships.

F. Some Examples

2. Aristotle says the mean for giving and taking money is *generosity*.

- The excess is wastefulness with regard to money.
- The deficiency is ungenerosity and miserism.

3. The mean for self-presentation is “magnificence” and “magnanimity”, by which he means presenting oneself well and modestly.

- The excess is ostentation, flashiness and/or vanity.
- The deficiency is vulgarity or inattention to one’s appearance.

4. The mean between self-deprecation (always putting yourself down) and boastfulness is truthfulness about the self.

F. Some Examples

5. The mean between buffoonery and boorishness is wit.

6. The mean between an insincere flatterer and an unpleasant character is a friendly person.

7. Aristotle also says that the mean is “relative to us”

a) He means that the mean might be different for different people at different times.

b) The same amount of food may be too much for one person, but just the right amount for someone else

c) An appropriate kind of sense of humor for a comedian might not be appropriate for a funeral director

G. Aristotle’s Advice on Achieving Virtue

1. Virtues must be learned through practice.

They cannot be learned on a purely intellectual level.

2. Sometimes certain virtues are closer to one extreme than the other.

- Bravery is closer to rashness than cowardice.
- Generosity is closer to wastefulness than miserdom.

If need be, err on the side of the extreme closer to the virtue.

3. Be mindful of your natural tendencies. (If timid by nature, be sure to be extra outgoing and forthright.)

4. Aristotle admits that he cannot give guidance for all cases. No set of principles can replace wisdom coming from practice.

H. Criticisms of Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

1. Is there really such a thing as a human *function*?
2. What constitutes the *mean* or *intermediate* between two extremes?

Here one can think of two possibilities:

- (a) the mean is the strict average, or
- (b) the mean is determined in some other way
 - Is it really just an *average*? An average of whom? All people? If so, then it being average is virtuous.

H. Criticisms of Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

c) An argument against thinking of the mean as just an average:

(P1) If the averagist interpretation of Aristotle's theory of virtue is the correct theory of virtue, then it is logically impossible for the average person to be too lazy, or not generous enough, etc.

(P2) It is not logically possible for the average person to be too lazy, or not generous enough, etc.

(C) The averagist interpretation of Aristotle's theory of virtue is not the correct theory of virtue.

H. Criticisms of Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

d) Can it really be determined in another way?

E.g., the *mean* is an *ideal*: the morally *right* way to be.

The problem with interpretation is that it would seem that another moral theory would be required to tell us what the mean should be.

e) Consider, e.g.,:

Trait-egoism: the golden mean is the trait most conducive to one's *own* happiness

Vs.

Trait utilitarianism: the golden mean is what is conducive to the the greatest *overall* happiness

H. Criticisms of Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

3. Can virtue ethics really give us guidance in concrete situations?

4. Is a special category of virtue ethics necessary at all?

E.g., can't the other theories tell us what *to do* with regard to cultivating traits within ourselves?

5. Makes the morality of individuals depend on ***luck***?

a) Modern psychology tells us that character traits depend largely on genetics and early environment.

b) But doesn't being moral just depend on being the person *you can be* in the situations you are in.

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H. Criticisms of Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

An argument based on this objection:

(P1) If Aristotle's virtue ethics is correct, then whether or not a person is moral depends mostly on factors outside of that person's control.

(P2) Whether or not a person is moral does not depend on factor's outside of that person's control.

(C) Aristotle's virtue ethics is not true.

What do you think?