

Virtue ethics notes

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



Aristotle was a Greek philosopher who lived between 384 and 322 BCE. He was deeply interested in the idea of cause and purpose. On the Foundation Paper, you will have explored the ideas of the Four Causes and the Prime Mover. Both of these theories look at the idea of how things are caused and how they move towards their purpose. In ethics, any theory that looks at how we become better people over time, or that looks at how we move towards our purpose is called a teleological theory, from the Greek word *telos* meaning goal or purpose.

Virtue ethics is teleological because it argues that we should practice being good, or virtuous people over time. Virtue ethics is therefore not deontological (like Kant's ethics) and it is also not normative. It is known as aretaic ethics from the Greek word *arete* meaning excellence or virtue. Virtue ethics is not concerned with what we ought to do, but with what kind of person we should try to become. Aristotle argued that every action we perform is directed towards some purpose, that it tries to achieve something. He then argued that there are superior and subordinate aims.

Subordinate aims are what we have to achieve first, before we achieve superior aims, for example, if you are hungry (which might be a superior aim) you need to make a sandwich to achieve that aim. Making the sandwich becomes a subordinate aim. The aim of life Aristotle argued that the superior aim of human life is to achieve something called *eudaemonia*. *Eudaemonia* is a Greek word that roughly translates to mean 'happiness' or 'flourishing'. Aristotle argued that this is the aim that should govern our lives: the pursuit of happiness or pleasure.

Eudaemonia is achieved when we become virtuous and Aristotle argued that this is a process that we grow towards by practising virtues. It is much like learning to play a musical instrument: the more you practise, the better you get. Some of you will have come across the word daemon before in the 'His Dark Materials' trilogy by Philip Pullman. All the characters in the books have daemons and Pullman says of them: 'the daemon is that part of you that helps you grow towards wisdom.' Lyra, the central character in the trilogy has a daemon called Pantalaimon who is instrumental in helping her deal with situations wisely as the story progresses. [Pleasure] is also thought to be most important for the forming of a virtuous character to like and dislike the right things because pleasure and pain permeate the whole of life and have a powerful influence upon virtue and the happy life, since people choose what is pleasant and avoid what is painful. '[1] Aristotle did realise however, that one person's view of happiness might be very different from another person's view of happiness. He distinguished between three types of pleasure/happiness:

1. Pleasure seekers: these are people who are driven by their basic desires and simply live from one pleasurable experience to the next: e. . eating good food, sleeping, drinking and having sex.
2. Seekers of honour: Aristotle saw politicians as seekers of honour. These are people who try to find solutions to important problems and get a sense of honour from doing that.
3. Those who love contemplation: these are philosophers and thinkers. Aristotle believed that the lowest forms of happiness are those found by the pleasure seekers.

He wrote: ‘ The utter servility of the masses comes out in their preference for a bovine [animalistic] existence. ’[2] For Aristotle, the distinguishing feature of humans is their ability to reason, which they get from their soul.

In plants, the anima or soul produces the search for nourishment and food, and in animals, the anima produces the ability to move. Humans have these two characteristics, but also the ability to reason. Aristotle called humans ‘ rational animals’. It is for this reason that he believed we should strive to achieve something better with our lives than simply living from pleasure to pleasure. Happiness for Aristotle is an activity of the soul, i. e. the correct and full use of the soul can help us to discover happiness. Aristotle divided the soul up into two parts, the rational part and the irrational part.

Both parts of the soul are then divided in two. The rational part contains the calculative and scientific parts. The scientific part of the soul holds types of knowledge that are factual and not up for debate: in other words, a priori knowledge. The calculative part does what it says; it calculates. It weighs up knowledge and helps us to arrive at decisions. The irrational part of the soul contains the desiderative part and the vegetative part. The vegetative part of the soul is concerned with basic needs that keep us alive and is effectively our survival instinct.

The desiderative part helps us to distinguish between needs and wants. For Aristotle, a correctly functioning soul uses all of the parts well and properly. Vardy and Grosch use the example of a fruitcake to demonstrate this. If the vegetative part recognises that I am hungry, it tells me to eat. The desiderative part may desire cake to alleviate the hunger: something I want, but don’t necessarily need. The scientific part of my soul knows that fruit is

better for me than cake and the calculative part, weighing up the evidence, comes up with the suggestion of fruitcake. Thus all the parts of my soul have been used in the decision.

This is very important, as only a soul that functions correctly can find happiness, or eudaemonia. The Virtues Now that we have seen the basic ideas that Aristotle had about humans and how they function, we can look at the virtues. Aristotle believed that the correct way to live, was to follow something called the doctrine of the mean, the middle way or temperance. Aristotle realised that human behaviour is made up of extremes which he called vices of excess and vices of deficiency. Aristotle argued that the best course of action falls between the two and that this is the virtue.

For example, if courage is the virtue, then cowardice is the vice of deficiency and foolhardiness is the vice of excess. Aristotle believed that there are two types of virtue: intellectual virtues and moral virtues. The intellectual virtues are learned through instruction i. e. they are taught. The moral virtues are developed through habit. The intellectual virtues are developed in the rational part of the soul and the moral virtues are developed in the irrational part of the soul. There are 9 intellectual virtues, as follows:

- Art or technical skill (techne)
- Scientific knowledge (episteme)
- Prudence or practical wisdom (phronesis)
- Intelligence or intuition (nous)
- Wisdom (sophia)
- Resourcefulness or good deliberation (eubolia)
- Understanding (sunesis)

- Judgement (gnome)
- Cleverness (deinotes)

Aristotle recognised that not all people will attain to the virtues, but he did argue that a balance between the intellectual and moral virtues was essential. Practising the moral virtues alone, might result in conformity and being an automaton. Aristotle urged us to think about the life we lead too. He believed that the virtues were essential to a harmonious society.

Aristotle believed that the overall well being of the group is much more important than the well being of individuals alone and argued that it is through encouraging the practise of the virtues that society will be a harmonious place. It is friendship that is the main aim of the moral life, for without friendship, justice is meaningless. Aristotle was not a deep believer in the after-life. Aristotle was a man who valued empirical (sense) evidence above all else and believed that if anything lived on, it would be our memories. Because of this, the point of being virtuous is not to achieve unity with God, or win a place in heaven, it is good because it is the right way to live.

Modern virtue ethics In 1958, Elizabeth Anscombe wrote an essay entitled ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’. In this essay, she argued that deontological ethics had become outdated. The existence of God had a considerable shadow cast over it and she argued that the religious basis to ethics and morality (i. e. that God gives rules to humans to follow and they must follow them if they wish to get to heaven) could no longer be trusted. She also felt that ethics had moved away from a focus on a person’s character and had instead

become obsessed with lots of rules and laws. Anscombe argued that it was time for a return of virtue ethics. Alasdair MacIntyre

In 1981, Alasdair MacIntyre (left) wrote a book called 'After Virtue' in which he argued that we should give serious consideration to Aristotle's theory. In his book, he traced the history of virtue ethics and tried to establish a system of virtue ethics for the modern age. His basic complaint was that modern ethics put too much emphasis on reason and not enough stress on people, their characters and the contexts of their lives. MacIntyre noticed that as societies developed 2,500 years ago, so different virtues developed too. In the age of Homer (who wrote the Iliad and the Odyssey), the following virtues were paramount;

- Physical strength
- Courage
- Cunning
- Friendship

These are known as the Homeric Virtues. As cities (the polis) developed, life slowly became more civilized.

Aristotle developed his theory of virtues for the city of Athens and his virtues became known as the Athenian Virtues. They were (briefly) as follows:

- Courage
- Friendship
- Justice: retributive (getting what you deserve) and distributive (making sure that the goods of society are fairly distributed)
- Temperance

- Wisdom

The emphasis on strength and cunning, needed in time of war, was gone. MacIntyre argued that the Athenian virtues of Aristotle were the most complete. For MacIntyre, the problems with ethics began during the Enlightenment, a period of time during the 17th and 18th Centuries when Science became more important for discovering truth.

It was thought that a single, rational cause for morality could be discovered and thinkers such as Hume and Kant attempted to do this. MacIntyre realised that whilst the theorists in universities were trying to work morality out, society still needed virtuous people in everyday life; people who run jumble sales to raise money for the local hospital for example. MacIntyre argued that despite the theories of people like Kant and Hume, the virtues have lived on. What's more, society depends for its very existence upon people who exhibit the virtues. MacIntyre argued that living a virtuous life depended upon getting into the habit of being moral and of striving towards being virtuous. He argued that this can give life an overall purpose and meaning.

The virtues for MacIntyre, are any human quality which helps us to achieve the 'goods' in life. MacIntyre's virtues are as follows:

- Courage: courage is very important as it helps us to face up to challenges that may come our way.
- Justice: this is a very important virtue. Justice is fairness and it is the art of giving someone what they deserve or merit. To be unjust is to be unfair.

- Temperance: this prevents us from acting rashly; losing our temper for example.
- Wisdom: this is not knowledge: it is the ability to know how to act in the right way in particular situations.
- Industriousness: hard work.
- Hope: being optimistic.
- Patience.

Underneath the virtues must be the good will of the person. To be virtuous, one must desire to do virtuous things, rather than do them involuntarily. An act is not virtuous if it is not intended. MacIntyre also used the idea of internal and external goods, a version of which is seen in Natural Law. An internal good is specific to the activity itself; for example, giving money to charity results in helping others and developing a sense of satisfaction. An external good, is a good that is not specific to the act. For example, when giving to charity, your example may inspire others to do the same. MacIntyre also warned that being virtuous does not prevent you from being open to vices.

He gives the example of a great violinist who could be vicious, or a chess player who could be mean spirited. The vices would prevent these people from achieving maximum virtue. MacIntyre suggests that the three most important virtues are justice, courage and honesty. We can only achieve moral excellence through practising these three. They are core virtues that help to prevent organisations and institutions from becoming morally corrupt. It is largely through institutions that traditions, cultures and morality spread: if these institutions are corrupt, then vices become widespread.

Philippa Foot Philippa Foot has also put together a modern version of virtue ethics.

She has argued that the wise person directs their will to what is good and a good is something that is both intrinsically and extrinsically good (see MacIntyre above). The wise, or virtuous person also knows that there are particular ways of obtaining certain goods and it is these ways of obtaining goods that are the virtues. She also argues that virtues and skills are different things. We may make a deliberate mistake with a skill, but not damage our character or reputation; for example, a teacher who deliberately misspells a word to draw their students attention to it. However, if you deliberately act in a non-virtuous way, your reputation and character will suffer. Foot also characterises virtues as ‘correctives’. She likens humans to planks of wood that are left out to season.

Wood naturally warps and changes shape and it needs continuous straightening to make it straight. Virtues do the same for the human character: they continually straighten us out so that eventually we can, through habit, become virtuous. Evaluation of virtue ethics argued that justice and truthfulness are not a middle way, but are ethical absolutes that we have a duty to follow. Grotius argued that there are absolute moral laws that we have a duty to obey and that can be worked out by anyone of sufficient intelligence.

References

1. Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics, X 1172a.
2. Ibid: I, 1095b.