

Ethics and moral principles philosophy essay

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Ethics is supposed to provide us with “moral principles” or universal rules that tell us what to do. Moral principles focus primarily on people’s actions and doings. But the fundamental question of ethics is not “What should I do?” but “What kind of person should I be?” Virtue ethics is a broad term for theories that emphasize the role of character and virtue in moral philosophy. Virtue ethics is person rather than action based: it looks at the virtue or moral character of the person carrying out an action, rather than at ethical duties and rules, or the consequences of particular actions. Virtue ethics not only deals with the rightness or wrongness of individual actions, it provides guidance as to the sort of characteristics and behaviours a good person will seek to achieve. In that way, virtue ethics is concerned with the whole of a person’s life, rather than particular episodes or actions.

“Virtues” are attitudes, dispositions, or character traits that enable us to discover through thoughtful reflection on what we as human beings have the potential to become. Virtues are developed through learning and through practice. Virtues are habits. That is, once they are acquired, they become characteristic of a person. As the ancient philosopher Aristotle suggested, a person can improve his or her character by practicing self-discipline, while a good character can be corrupted by repeated self-indulgence.

Virtue theory seems to have originated in ancient Greek philosophy.

Discussion of what were known as the Four Cardinal Virtues –

wisdom, justice, fortitude and temperance – can be found in Plato’s Republic.

The virtues also figure prominently in Aristotle’s moral theory (see below).

Virtue theory was inserted into the study of history by moralistic historians such as Livy, Plutarch, and Tacitus. The Greek idea of the virtues was passed

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on in Roman philosophy through Cicero and later incorporated into Christian moral theology by St. Ambrose of Milan. During the scholastic period, the most comprehensive consideration of the virtues from a theological perspective was provided by St. Thomas Aquinas

the roots of virtue ethics lie in the work of Plato and Aristotle, i. e from ancient Greek philosophy. In the West virtue ethics was the prevailing approach to ethical thinking in the ancient and medieval periods. The tradition suffered an eclipse during the early modern period, as Aristotelianism fell out of favour in the West. Virtue theory returned to prominence in Western philosophical thought in the 20th century, and is today one of the three dominant approaches to normative theories (the other two being deontology and consequentialism).[1] Virtue theory is not actually in conflict with deontology or teleology: those two viewpoints deal with which actions a person should take in any given scenario, whereas virtue theorists simply argue that developing morally desirable virtues for their own sake will help aid moral actions when such decisions need to be made.

the way to build a good society is to help its members to be good people, rather than to use laws and punishments to prevent or deter bad actions.

there is a common set of virtues that all human beings would benefit from, rather than different sets for different sorts of people, and that these virtues are natural to mature human beings – even if they are hard to acquire.

Kantian virtue is in some respects similar to Aristotelian virtue. For Kantians, the main role of virtue and appropriate character development is that a virtuous character will help one formulate appropriate maxims for testing. Kantian virtue is a struggle against emotions. Kant moral worth comes only from the duty of motive, a motive that struggles against inclination. This is quite different from the Aristotelian picture of harmony between reason and desire. Second, for Kant there is no such thing as weakness of will, understood in the Aristotelian sense of the distinction between continence and incontinence. Kant concentrates on fortitude of will and failure to do so is self-deception.

Consequentialists have found a role for virtue as a disposition that tends to promote good consequences. Virtue is not valuable in itself, but rather valuable for the good consequences it tends to bring about. We should cultivate virtuous dispositions because such dispositions will tend to maximize utility. This is a radical departure from the Aristotelian account of virtue for its own sake.

Objections to virtue ethics

1-Virtue ethics does not produce codifiable principles it is unable to provide action-guidance. The rule(s) would be stated in such terms that any non-virtuous person could understand and apply it (them) correctly. The objection was that , virtue ethics is “ concerned with Being rather than Doing”, as addressing “ What sort of person should I be?” but not “ What should I do?” as being “ agent-centered rather than act-centered”, its critics maintained that it was unable to provide action-guidance and hence, rather

than being a normative rival to utilitarian and deontological ethics, could claim to be no more than a valuable supplement to them. Answer is;” Do what is honest/charitable; do not do what is dishonest/uncharitable” Virtue theories promise that once we are successful in creating the sort of person we want to be, arriving at the correct moral decisions will come naturally.

2-What does virtue ethics have to say about dilemmas . Honesty points to telling the hurtful truth, kindness and compassion to remaining silent or even lying. What shall I do? Of course, the same sorts of dilemmas are generated by conflicts between deontological rules. Deontology and virtue ethics share the conflict problem

3-Another problem with virtue-based ethical systems is the question of what the “ right” sort of character is which a person should have. Many, if not most, virtue theorists have treated the answer to this question as self-evident, but it is anything but. One person’s virtue may be another person’s vice and a vice in one set of circumstances may be a virtue in another.

A virtue, unlike a mere habit, is a disposition to act for reasons, virtue requires doing the right thing for the right reason without serious internal opposition, as a matter of character.

Moral Virtues

The good life involves developing a good character. Moral virtues are cultivated by habit. To become a generous person, I must get into the habit of being generous. Put another way, it is not enough to be told that I should be patient. To become patient, I need to practice patience.

It is very difficult to translate some of Aristotle's moral virtues. 'Liberality' and 'Magnificence' (popular in many translations) both seem to mean generosity. The following list is an attempted translation:

courage, temperance, big-heartedness, generosity, high-mindedness, right ambition, patience, truthfulness, wittiness, friendliness, modesty, righteous indignation

Intellectual Virtues

Intellectual virtues are qualities of mind developed through instruction. They are:

practical skill, knowledge, common sense, intuition, wisdom;
resourcefulness, understanding, judgement, cleverness

Cardinal Virtues

The cardinal virtues are temperance, courage, wisdom and justice. These virtues work together, and it would not be enough to have one of these alone. Temperance and courage are moral virtues - we get into the habit of acting bravely. We learn self-control by practicing restraint. Developing right judgement requires training - we are educated in the skill of weighing up a situation. In our courts, judges don't just learn on the job, they require years of training before they earn the title 'Justice'. Wisdom sits above all of the other virtues, the culmination of years of learning.

The Doctrine of the Mean

Aristotle said that it is good to be courageous, but that you can have too much courage. For example, defending your land against invaders is courageous, but if you're outnumbered fifty to one, that's just foolhardy. Each of the moral virtues is a midpoint between excess and deficiency, the 'golden mean'

Moral Virtues Versus Intellectual Virtues

Seeking to clarify his arguments, Aristotle distinguished between moral and intellectual virtues. Moral virtues he argued are qualities of character such as courage, temperance and modesty.

These virtues are cultivated through habit. Every human person is able to cultivate these virtues through practice.

The second type is intellectual virtues. Intellectual virtues are qualities of the mind such as wisdom, understanding and judgment. Aristotle argues that a person is, born with these virtues which cannot be taught, only cultivated.

Virtue Can Only be Acquired Through Action

Aristotle was convinced that virtue is something that humans can acquire and not something which exists when we are born.

Different people are not inherently good or bad, but become good or bad through the habits they develop in themselves. Virtue can only be acquired by doing it said Aristotle.

He made the comparison with a craftsman, who learns his craft by constant practice and observation of others who have his skill.

He also pointed out that behaving in a virtuous way was not enough - the person should also have the right motivation to behave in that way as a virtuous person would.

Learning About Virtues

For Aristotle, the best way of learning about the virtues was to follow the example of a virtuous man.

Similar to Carl Jung's notion of an 'archetype', Aristotle argued that a virtuous man could be an 'ideal type' by following the example of how a virtuous person would behave.

It includes people such as Socrates, Jesus of Nazareth, Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King.

By following such people and constantly learning through habit to control our feelings, we should, according to Aristotle, begin to "have these feelings at the right times, on the right grounds, towards the right people, for the right motive and in the right way!"

living a life in accordance with virtue is necessary for eudaimonia. The concept of eudaimonia, a key term in ancient Greek moral philosophy, is central to virtue ethics. It is standardly translated as "happiness" or "flourishing" and occasionally as "well-being." A human life devoted to physical pleasure or the acquisition of wealth is not eudaimon, but a wasted

life . For Aristotle, virtue is necessary but not sufficient - what is also needed are external goods which are a matter of luck