

Virtue ethics is  
useless giving no  
clear guidance  
philosophy essay



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Virtue ethics is person rather than action based; it does not focus on actions being right or wrong but rather how to be a good person. Virtue ethics looks at the virtue or moral character of the person carrying out an action, rather than at ethical duties or rules, or the consequences of particular actions. Essentially, Virtue ethics provides guidance as to the sort of characteristics and behaviours a good person will seek to achieve; it looks at what makes a good person and the qualities or virtues that make them good. Therefore, the immediate answer would be that virtue ethics is useless for guiding action; an ethical system centred on the individual person and what it means to be human does not provide clear guidance on how to act or behave in moral dilemmas. However, presumably a person who is totally virtuous would, as a result, know what to do in certain circumstances, and we could consider these virtues or characteristics that a virtuous person has as a suitable guide for action.

Like Plato, Aristotle also placed eudaimonia or happiness as the final and overriding end of human activity and therefore goes on to discuss the character traits of a person who is going to achieve eudaimonia. Like Plato and the Cardinal Virtues, Aristotle saw two types of virtues: intellectual virtues which are developed by training and education, and moral virtues developed by habit. Aristotle identified nine intellectual virtues, wisdom being the most important, and suggested that by using our reason we are all capable of being virtuous. However these virtues, including prudence, justice, fortitude, courage and so on, and the overall idea of being virtuous is a bit like a playing musical instrument- it needs teaching and then practiced before it can be played well. Aristotle did, however, suggest that while all

people do have the potential to develop these moral and intellectual virtues, only few will actually achieve this.

Essentially, these traditional virtues themselves are useless in giving clear guidance for action. A person being courageous or just, for example, perhaps has no use or relevance for someone who is considering an abortion.

Guidance for action needs to be somewhat absolute, or if not, at least relative to certain situations and circumstances; consequences may need to be considered and duties may need to be taken into account. Virtues ethics, being centred on the person and what a person should become, seems to ignore all of these concepts and instead only values certain characteristics that make a person 'good'. Being a virtuous person is not necessarily clear guidance for action. While it may be conceivable that a completely virtuous person would therefore know what to do or how to act, it still seems illogical to suggest the use of virtues or characteristics of an individual as a way to determine how to act. You also need to consider that if, as Aristotle suggested, only a few will achieve these virtues, then even aspiring to become a virtuous person seems a waste of time.

The fact that there is no general agreement on what the virtues are suggests that Virtue ethics is completely useless itself, whereby the virtues that are supposed to benefit human beings are themselves not even absolute or universal. Most virtue theorists say that there is a common set of virtues that all human beings would benefit from, rather than a set for different sorts of people. When considering guidance for action, it seems logical that everyone should abide by the same rules to ensure that everyone is behaving in a way that is perhaps universally acceptable or expected. Since the lists of virtues <https://assignbuster.com/virtue-ethics-is-useless-giving-no-clear-guidance-philosophy-essay/>

vary from different times, different societies and cultures and so on, virtue ethics, if common for all humans, does not provide clear guidance on what to do in moral dilemmas. Everyone is different, and if action was to be sought from virtue ethics, then essentially anyone could do what they wanted to if it appears to make them a virtuous person, even if it was frowned upon by others, i. e. being courageous or having magnificence. Ultimately, Virtue ethics is not culturally relative and agent-centred and therefore does not have anything to do with decision making or guiding action.

Phlipa Foot suggested that virtues benefit the individual by leading to flourishing and that virtues are good for us by helping us correct harmful human passions and temptations. However, flourishing and correction of harmful human activities has no relevance to action. There is perhaps no denying that Virtue ethics does provide general guidance on how to be a good person, but being a good person has no relevance to someone who faces the dilemma of telling a lie to save an innocent life, for example. A virtue ethicist would focus less on lying in any particular instance, but instead consider what a decision to tell a lie or not tell a lie said about the persons character and moral behavior. When someone needs to decide to tell a lie or not, there is no use in them considering what it says about them as a person. Virtue ethics moves away from any sense of duty or belief, and completely ignores the action, yet when considering clear guidance for action, it is the action itself that usually matters.

Rosaline Hursthouse defends Virtue ethics and claims that virtues are virtues because they help a person achieve eudaimonia, and so living a virtuous life is a good thing for a human being. For Hursthouse, being a virtuous person is <https://assignbuster.com/virtue-ethics-is-useless-giving-no-clear-guidance-philosophy-essay/>

the most reliable path to flourishing. Hursthouse also attempts to address the criticism that Virtue ethics provides no guidance in moral dilemmas- not by telling us how a virtuous person would act, but by showing how a virtuous person would think about a moral dilemma. However, this approach still seems to ignore the actual action itself and the need for guidance. How a virtuous person thinks about a moral dilemma is not a clear guide for action. Presumably someone who is a virtuous person may be seen as a role model for others, but not necessarily for action. Different individuals are faced with completely different dilemmas, and so advice or guidance is not rooted with the characteristics and talents of another person who is considered virtuous.

Robert Louden raised the problem that Virtue ethics cannot be applied to moral dilemmas. He outlined the major criticism that it does help people who are facing a crisis because it does not give any clear rules for action. He argued that it is difficult to work out the virtuous response to stem-cell research or abortion, for example. Essentially, Virtue ethics does not give us an concrete information or answers and instead says that it is more a matter for the practical wisdom of the individual facing the situation. Louden also highlighted that it is difficult to even decide who is virtuous, as acts may appear virtuous on the outside but may not have good motives, and vice versa. Ultimately, Virtue ethics does not accommodate rights and obligations, and so is perhaps inadequate for dealing with big issues or decision making; it does not seem to have a view on what makes an act right and wrong.

Overall, Virtue ethics is useless, giving no clear guidance for action. Many may consider the fact that Virtue ethics does not rely on any formula to work <https://assignbuster.com/virtue-ethics-is-useless-giving-no-clear-guidance-philosophy-essay/>

out what we ought to do and instead focuses on the kind of person we are as good thing, allowing room for emotions and commitments, friends and family. However, it is this that seems to make Virtue ethics a useless approach to action; Virtue ethics does not provide any rules or guides and instead roots everything in the person and their characteristics, but being a virtuous person does not lead to concrete answers on what to do in complex situations. Decisions about abortion, euthanasia or genetic engineering, for example, does not come from us being virtuous or good people.