

Virtue ethics in the time of aristotle

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Virtue ethics dates back to Aristotle (348-322 BCE), and it does not focus on the action of being right or wrong but on how to be a good person. It looks on what makes a good person and the qualities or virtues that make them good. Virtue ethics is agent centred morality and it is a teleological approach' meaning; focusing on and " end" or " purpose". Aristotle maintained that human beings have a specific nature, or function and that we flourish when we fulfil that function. Virtue ethics lost its popularity for the most of history due to its infallible weaknesses however at the turn of the 20th century it was re-examined and redeveloped as it was found to fit into the society and culture we live in now- making Aristotle greatly ahead of his time. It will be judged that modern philosophers have had limited success in improving Aristotle's virtue ethics other than being able to modernise the theory to fit the societies of the 21st century.

It is indisputable that there are many weaknesses to Aristotle's theory, hence resulting in the theory being discarded for millennia. It is argued that one of the main weaknesses is that it does not tell a person what to do due to the inconclusive and subjective nature of the doctrine of the mean. Aristotle describes a virtue lying in " the mean relative to us" meaning that a virtue is different for each person. If a person with pyrophobia ran into a burning building to save a screaming child, it could be considered a vice as it would be said that this action would not be courage but instead foolhardy. This would be different for a prepared firefighter, for whom this would simply be the courageous thing to do; however if a person does not know how they feel on a particular issue they will be unable to place themselves on the spectrum. Furthermore, the doctrine of the mean argues that we need

experience in order to gain a virtue; simply by doing “ virtuous deeds”. As it is so hard to grasp what a virtuous deed is, it is even harder to practice it, even more so without the correct “ upbringing” which Aristotle believes is necessary. This hence clearly shows that Aristotle’s theory is too difficult to apply. Alasdair MacIntyre focused on fixing this issue by discarding it from his remodel of Virtue ethics. Much like Aristotle, MacIntyre also believed that values and virtues are relative as they developed over time which shows that he keeps many basic elements of virtue ethics alive in his work. At the most basic level, MacIntyre says that we value different qualities of character, practices and physical things, and that by understanding historical and social context, we can understand ethical issues that arise. When criticising MacIntyre it is important to note (and take into consideration his context) that his intention was not to create a new ethics but instead he wanted to change the course of ethics, he believed that ethics should not be tested by “ quandary ethcis”- where theories are tested by looking at implausible dilemmas, but as he was reluctant to do this, it meant that much like Aristotle he avoids giving a direct answer to any set question. Moreover; not explaining how to pinpoint what a virtue is for each person, MacIntyre made his ethics even more unclear. It may also be argued that, it is unjustified to say that a theory has been improved if MacIntyre merely took away the “ complicated” part of the original ethical theory – through this he did not provide a solution to the issue faced from the Doctrine of the mean. Although MacIntyre managed to push Virtue ethics back into the spotlight and managed to modernise it to fit the needs of the 21st Century, he did not manage to improve Virtue ethics greatly or effectively.

In contrast, it is argued by many that Philippa Foot is considered a much more successful enhancer of Virtue ethics, as Foot also picked up on one of the weaknesses of Aristotle's virtue theory. Many recognised that Aristotle's theory could make an immoral act virtuous, if it was done virtuously. This meaning if a robber wanted to rob a bank and he was courageous in doing it, then his robbery could be attributed to be "virtuous" and hence excused in a society using virtue ethics. This problem is addressed by Foot who, in her development of virtue ethics argued that if a virtue operates as a vice it is no longer a virtue. Thus no person committing an immoral act could not hide behind the mask of a virtue. However although successful in solving one issue of Aristotle's Virtue ethics, similarly to MacIntyre, Foot could not resolve the issue of virtue ethics being too relative. MacIntyre fully accepted that Virtue ethics could be relative to culture, time and society however Foot did not address this aspect of the theory at all – which leads to conclude that both Philosophers did not resolve the popular criticism that if an approach is relative, which culture or time has the best virtues. This weaknesses was also evident in Aristotle's virtue ethics, and hence this shows that neither philosopher managed to fix the issue and hence did not develop Aristotle's Virtue ethics to such a high extent as initially considered. Nonetheless, Foot can be considered much more successful than MacIntyre in developing Aristotle's Virtue theory. Foot tries to modernise Aristotle's theory and successfully resolves one of the main issues although it may be argued that her theory is also unclear as she only focuses on making the world a better place through ethics; which may be argued to be plainly idealistic and unachievable in this theory. Aristotle's theory focuses on one's own virtuous acts, which does not necessarily comply with making the world a better

place, as seen by the aforementioned example of a person with pyrophobia. Foot's arguments would imply that even if this person was severely scared of fire, it would be the courageous thing to do, to run into the fire and attempt to save a screaming child as it would make the world a better place. Hence Foot's theory brings about the question of whether we should focus on own virtue's or global virtues, so it may be argued that although she improved one part of Aristotle's theory, her virtue ethics creates new weaknesses.

Although neither MacIntyre nor Foot were able to successfully fight the barrier of Aristotle's, what can be considered "individualistic" approach to ethics, the same cannot be said for G. E. M. Anscombe. It can be seen that Aristotle had the aim of making an ethics that was focused on the community. Aristotle saw our communal relationships as an essential part of our moral growth and flourishing and argued that relationships were an important part of the 'good life', however this was not reflected in his ethics, hence making this a pointed weakness in Virtue ethics, as he was unable to put across his intentions in his theory. G. E. M. Anscombe on the other hand heavily criticised modern philosophy that she believed that relied on universal principles and a strict moral code as they were meaningless in modern, secular society because they make no sense without assuming the existence of a lawgiver—an assumption we no longer make. She argues that the return to Virtue ethics is right as 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; hence she believed that out of all available ethical theories, Virtue ethics "neglects the community of morality" the least. However, Anscombe can be heavily criticised when

considering; how far precisely did Anscombe develop Aristotle's theory. It can be argued that she didn't develop Aristotle's theory at all, instead she has only explained why it is the most fitting theory for the 21st century. Anscombe does not take the theory any further than it already was back in Aristotle's writings, and although she is acclaimed to be counted as one of the modern approaches to the virtue theory, she merely puts a lens over the theory to describe it as more focused on community, yet the same criticism that was applied to Foot can be applied to MacIntyre – it cannot be assumed that virtuous people make a good and moral community; especially as in Anscombe's theory she does not criticise the problem addressed by Foot of virtues being used as Vices. The lack of explanation in Anscombe's theory may be considered by some to make the theory flexible as it gives people a chance to develop as they must. Nonetheless, it consequently does not improve on Aristotle's theory in any way.

Consequently, it may be argued that these developments carried out by modern philosophers have been most successful in modernising the theory, bringing it back to light, however not necessarily resolving the weaknesses. Out of the philosophers explored, it is undoubtable that Phillipa Foot has achieved the most in resolving weaknesses hence improving Aristotle's ethics to some extent while Macintyre was the most effective in dispensing the theory to a wider audience. No philosopher above mentioned, has however, managed to resolve the issue relativism in this theory, nor managed to adapt the theory in a way in which it would be able to answer quandary ethics. This hence shows that modern philosophers with their

virtue ethical theories have had a very limited success in improving Aristotle's theory.