

# ARISTOTLE – VIRTUE ETHICS ESSAY

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## QUESTION A:

### **How does one apply virtue ethics to business ethics?**

When considering Aristotelian ethics and then placing them in the context of modern business practices, it is important to note that the Greek paradigm was very different to that of our own in the modernist age. Homer's Greek myths, imminent wars and conflicts and empires were all important issues in Greek times, society however does not place such emphasis on these in today's society. The concept of strong bonds in a community where individuals must dutifully care for one another is not integral in today's society especially in a more capitalist society upon which the western world works and flourishes. Individuals in a community can live without the obligation of duty to others and without pride if they so wish. In light of this, it is worth noting that business practice and transaction in accordance with Aristotelian ethics would not be very common in the modern age.

Aristotelian ethics centred round the concept of improving one's self – to quite literally make oneself more virtuous. To become more virtuous is to improve one's soul – the soul for Aristotle is split into two halves, - the irrational soul which focuses around the human desires and the rational soul which centres on the intellectual virtues. Aristotle argues virtue is not a quality that human beings are born with, nor is it hereditary; however Aristotle regards virtue as important as the care of the physical body.

That said however, Aristotelian ethics can well be applied to business ethics. The war and empire worldview of the Ancient Greek civilisation (because of constant threat from other empires such as the Turks and the Persians) could be compared with the 'war-like' attitude of certain corporations fuelled by the fierce competition offered by rival companies. Moreover, Aristotle's ethics could be applied to the issue of the exploitation of workers which is can be sometimes seen in less economically developed countries where locals are 'exploited' by multi national corporations and are paid minimal amounts relative to the equivalent job in the country where the company is based (usually a developed country). This would offend Aristotle's ethics because of the exploitation of humans. Aristotle's moral virtue is based upon the idea of a state of character that allows us to operate as an effective and good human being. Hence, exploitation is not choosing the good and is not choosing well and furthermore, is not being virtuous. Aristotle would argue that appropriate business conduct would be to avoid excess, an excess of money being a good example. In the same way, a deficiency of money or trade for example would be equally negative. He would believe in his Doctrine of the Mean – where through reason and trial and error, an appropriate amount of money could be brought about as to not have either a deficiency or an excess. Furthermore, those businessmen who are not 'prudent' should emulate those who are and try to emulate them. Aristotle would argue that when we speak of 'flourishing' that we should have the drive to do what will benefit oneself and

one's character. Therefore, for Aristotle, by giving to charity and not exploiting workers in a business by underpaying them or providing them with poor working conditions, would benefit one's character because the right choice has been made, and is one more step closer to virtue.

Aristotle's ethics when applied to business would result in a largely socialist society where individuals look out for others and share what they have with the surrounding community. The economy would be run by the community, for the community. There would be little self-serving business, as it would be a largely selfless economic structure. Aristotle's word, 'oikonomikos' is used to show this household trading and community-based economy. *Chrematisike* however, is trading for profit, and Aristotle did not approve of this as it promoted individualism and turned people away from the community and their path of virtue. Modern economist, Milton Friedman's article in the New York Times, "The Social Responsibility of Business Is To Increase Its Profits", exemplifies this *chrematisike*, and Aristotle regards this sort of business to be devoid of any virtue whatsoever.

#### **QUESTION B:**

***"Virtue ethics give a better guide to making moral decisions than any other ethical theory or religious standpoints ever could?"***

Many ethical theories have been put forward in times past to help individuals with the making of moral decisions. Virtue ethics is just one of many others including Kant's ethical theory, Bentham and Mill's utilitarianism, Aquinas' Natural Law and Joseph Fletcher's Situation Ethics. These theories each provide different paths to making the appropriate moral decision for the individual involved, and equally, each have their own strengths and weaknesses. Whilst some would consider virtue ethics to be a superior ethical theory – one which should be used as a guide for making moral decisions, others however, would regard it as a dated and elitist ethical theory which is now antiquated and should not be the benchmark by which an individual should make a moral decision.

Kant's ethical theory many would argue is very successful because as a theory it provides a strong moral framework centred on the obligation of human beings to do their duty. It is favourable in some ways to solving moral dilemmas because it is rational, consistent and utterly impartial because Kant does not look favourably upon the role of emotion in the making of moral decisions. Kant provides a strong moral framework for the rights of human beings and each human's intrinsic worth, and in this sense it is a superior theory to that of Aristotle's virtue ethics because Aristotle saw human beings in terms of the philosophers, politicians and the masses and so not all humans in his theory did have equal rights and opportunities, nor were they treated with the same respect. Notwithstanding these qualities however, Kant's ethical theory has some inherent flaws such as the consistency of the categorical imperative, because Kant believes lying is wrong in all circumstances, however, if we use someone else as a means to an end or allow others to use people solely as a means by not lying, this is surely morally

objectionable. Hume's criticism was that reason does not motivate moral action. Is reason sufficient to motivate us to do our duty? In the same way regarding Aristotelian ethics, is the mean found merely through pure reason and through observing prudent people? Moreover, Kant's ethical theory rules any sort of emotion when making a moral decision. This is not human nature – few people would claim to act purely through duty, and not through emotion. This is where virtue ethics is more realistic and accessible to the individual than Kantian ethics. With virtue ethics, emotion is very much involved because of the desire and want to improve oneself – emotion does not have to be a hindrance in making a moral decision – (it could potentially), but for many people, a moral decision will require some sort of emotional stigma, and to make it through reason *alone* is nonsensical.

Utilitarianism like the other ethical theories has its strengths and weaknesses as well. The strengths are undoubtedly that the best interests for the majority are accounted for. When making a moral decision, it could be argued that this is instrumental, because as many people as possible are benefiting from the decision. However, the minority are blatantly discriminated against; while the majority are benefiting from the greatest good provided by the individual making the moral decision, the minority will suffer and thus not at all benefit. Moreover, Bentham's hedonic calculus (which gives a quantitative measure of the happiness potentially generated by making a particular moral action) is not at all appropriate for making a moral decision. This consequentialist view is undermined by basing a decision upon mere happiness that may come about as a result. Happiness and pleasure (Bentham) as Mill stated, are only shallow pleasures and cannot satisfy the deeper human need. Mill's assessment of qualitative pleasures (ie – pleasures of the mind) is not dissimilar to that of the improvement of one's sense of self as shown in virtue ethics. Virtue ethics holds that the 'higher pleasures' of which Mill speaks, can be experienced by improving oneself and becoming increasingly virtuous. Notwithstanding however the faults of utilitarianism, it is a timeless ethical theory and could be applied to any period of history and is equally valid in a modern society where actions are often measured extrinsically rather than seeing the intrinsic value of the action itself. Aristotelian virtue ethics are not at all timeless, it would be considered to an individual making a moral choice in today's society far too elitist. Modern scholar Bertrand Russell states that Aristotle's ethics are "elitist and morally repugnant". He goes on to say that while Aristotle places emphasis upon 'flourishing' in his ethical theory, most people (ie the masses) will not flourish at all and so is vastly elitist. There is almost an acceptance that for those to flourish there is a need to exploit slaves, women and children. This is an inherent downfall in Aristotle's ethics because there is no sense of benevolence to the surrounding community, and no responsibility to others, just to oneself. This is a very atomistic method of looking at society, and even those who would claim to be quite isolationist and 'selfish' and not interested in society as a whole, still care about their immediate family and friends and there is some element of benevolence. To Aristotle however, as Russell indicates, inequality is seemingly acceptable. This offends the moral code of many individuals making moral choices and so they may not choose Aristotelian ethics because this.

Alistair McIntyre, a modern proponent of Aristotle's virtue ethics believes that we are in a crises of moral philosophy. McIntyre feels that as a consequence of the enlightenment, people do not take enough responsibility for their actions. He writes in his famous work, "After Virtue", that society has become too individualistic and that there is little sense of collective responsibility. He tried in 'After Virtue' to re-create a model which contains some Aristotelian strands and place it in a modern context. Macintyre places the blame of unethical on the obsession to use utterly logical ethical structures such as Utilitarianism. Macintyre claims that by moving away from the utilitarian approach, we could retreat from this 'moral dark age' in which he feels us humans are currently encompassed. The contrast between Utilitarianism and Macintyre's virtue ethics can be seen – to become virtuous is a dynamic lengthy process which requires oneself to move forward, but once achieved, processes such as Utilitarianism will not be necessary. Macintyre criticises Bentham by claiming that morality cannot be solved by pseudo-scientific moral calculations and that it is impossible to expect people to rationalise in this way in a pressurising moral dilemma. Were a person to be virtuous, such a calculation would not be necessary because the individual would internally already know what particular course of action to take in that moral situation. This said however, Macintyre's own code of ethics is not without fault – William Frankena states that Macintyre's use of history to illustrate a philosophical point can be subject to some scrutiny. Frankena says that "not distinguishing history from philosophy bothers me". However, Macintyre firmly argues his position by suggesting that Frankena is restricted by academic principle which usually places a division between history and philosophy. Virtue ethics may have its failings yet it would appear to be more applicable to an individual facing a moral dilemma than the Catholic religious ethical theory of Natural Law.

The theory of Natural Law developed by St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) but this ethical standpoint is somewhat antiquated. Most people in society, regardless of how religious they may be, do not act in terms of whether it will affect the path of existence that God has laid down for either themselves or the people or objects that they may be affecting. Natural Law may in some ways succeed as a theory, but it is not all practical *especially* in the modern age. Virtue ethics is not only so much more accessible in the modern age, but also far more applicable to individuals. That said however, Natural Law is quite a specific ethical theory and often there is less individual thought processes required when making a moral decision. For instance, if a mother were choosing whether to abort her foetus, and was following Natural Law as a religious ethical benchmark, then it clearly states in the secondary precepts, do not abort the unborn. With virtue ethics it would be far more ambiguous what course of action should be taken. The mother could become more virtuous by keeping the child because it would test her character and would make her have to think always someone else as well as her self, yet by aborting the foetus, the mother could focus her efforts fully on become more virtuous. Hence, when solving a moral situation, virtue ethics can be attractive because it appeals to the part of oneself which wants to improve. However, it can be very ambiguous to what course of action would actually develop this whilst Natural Law would seem to be more specific and 'helpful'. Moreover, passages from religious text such as the Bible would be more helpful to an individual. For

example, the tale of the suffering of Job in the Old Testament is an inspiring tale for religious believers facing a moral dilemma about belief.

It can be seen therefore that virtue ethics could be very helpful when making a moral decision – its dynamic nature especially makes it more appealing. However, to say that it provides a better ‘moral guide than any other ethical theory or religious standpoint could’ is not at all the case. Virtue ethics is too elitist, and while the concept of flourishing is integral in the theory; few will actually flourish. Moreover, it promotes a selfish desire to better oneself, (which is not at all bad idea in many cases) but it could well be seen as elitist and exploitative. Bertrand Russell is too extreme when he states that Virtue Ethics is ‘morally repugnant’ but the basis upon which he makes such a claim can be seen and understood because of dated inequality of the ethical theory.