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(a) Explain Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics is a theory used to make moral decisions. It does not rely on religion, society or culture; it only depends on the individuals themselves. The main philosopher of Virtue Ethics is Aristotle. His theory was originally introduced in ancient Greek times. Aristotle was a great believer in virtues and the meaning of virtue to him meant being able to fulfil one's functions. Virtue ethics is not so much interested in the question 'What should I do?' but rather in the question 'what sort of person should I become?' It has more to do with character and the nature of what it is to be human, than with the rights and wrongs of actions. Instead of concentrating on what is the right thing to do, virtue ethics asks how you can be a better person. Aristotle says that those who do lead a virtuous life are very happy and have sense of well-being. Happiness is the ultimate goal for everyone in life. Aristotle's definition of happiness is, 'happiness is the activity of the soul in accord with perfect virtue'.

To become a better person, we must practice virtuous acts regularly. After a while, these acts will become a habit and so the virtuous acts part of our every day life and the person will be leading a virtuous life. For example, if a singer practices singing everyday, they will become better at it and used to doing it. People who practice their virtues improve their skills and therefore becoming happier. According to Aristotle the person who struggles to acquire virtues is in the long run a better person and is much happier as they feel that they deserve that happiness as they have worked very hard for it. By continuously practicing their virtues people will soon be acting in the right way. Aristotle says that virtues are something that we acquire and are not just born with; people are not intrinsically good or bad, but become good or bad according to their habits they develop throughout their lives. When a person learns how to use the virtues, they become the characteristic of the person. For example, a person who has learnt the virtue of generosity is often called a generous person because he or she is generous in all situations. Aristotle says we are most likely to acquire virtues by observing others in our society. If we experience other people being kind to us and see the happiness it creates we are more likely to practice this virtue than if we were just told to practice it. Aristotle said that the best way of becoming virtuous was to follow in the footsteps of a virtuous person, e.g. Mother Theresa.

Aristotle said that a virtue was a 'Golden Mean' in between two vices. These Vices are two extremes of the scale; one vice of excess and one vice of deficiency. For example, for the virtue 'modesty', the vice of excess would be bashfulness and the vice of deficiency would be shamelessness. Aristotle mentions 12 virtues that all fall between two vices. Some examples of these virtues are honesty, courage, compassion, generosity, fidelity, integrity, fairness, self-control, and prudence. Such virtues must be refined; we must learn when to use certain virtues and make sure that they do not fall into the vices; in other words we must use them in moderation. For example we must not ever use modesty in excess as we will become bashful, but at the same time we must also not pass into the vice of deficiency-shamelessness.

Virtue Ethics is dependent; Aristotle realised that virtues in one country or society may not be the same as virtues in another. As virtues have evolved through society it is possible that good actions may be perceived as bad actions in another society. However the virtues stay the same in every community as well as the ultimate aim which is supreme happiness. Aristotle explains that all actions are done in order to reach an aim or goal. A series of actions are also leading towards an aim, for example getting up in the morning to go to work, leads to making money, leads to feeding our families,

leads to going on holidays, etc. The utmost ultimate aim is to make people happy; everything is subordinate to the supreme good, which is happiness. This all-round well-being is known as eudaimonia. Eudaimonia involves both being happy and also living well at the same time.

(b) Moral relativist theories are too vague to be useful guides to decision making.

Relative morality is based on the theory that truth and rightness is different for different people or cultures. Moral relativism states that morality is dependent on the society. It states that there are no moral absolutes and that there is no definite right or wrong. In some societies certain behaviour is seen as morally right whereas in others the same behaviour is not acceptable. To be a relativist is to accept this principle and not to judge others for their behaviour. Moral relativists accept that whether a moral code exists because of tradition or religion, it may be needed to keep the society together. Some people may argue that any moral code is better than no moral code however the absence of moral rules would be disastrous for any society, it would not survive.

Moral Relativist theories have the idea that you are able to think, understand and believe whatever you would like to however this is not very practical; it would only bring about conflict within the society. People need set rules or moral codes to live by in order to make the right decisions and to keep society together in the long run. Without a set moral code everyone would have the opinion that their ideas and thinking is right; no one would be able to compromise. It would be much easier for everyone to be living under the same 'rules'. This way people will know what is right and wrong without any disagreements.

Joseph Fletcher's Situation Ethics is something which people would like to believe is a good theory and one that would work in practice. This theory allows people to disregard all set rules if 'love' is involved in the situation. However Fletcher does not give a proper definition of 'love' in his theory, therefore when do people know when love is involved and they can disregard all the other rules in the decision making? Everyone has their own view of what love is.

Bentham's Utilitarianism theory uses the principle of 'the greatest good for the greatest number'. However this is not a very useful theory for people when making moral decisions as the hedonic calculus which is provided to measure the pain and pleasure of the outcome of the decision, may not provide all the information that is needed. The hedonic calculus is also very impractical for the person to have to measure each and every moral choice every time. It is not possible for us to predict accurately what the outcome of our decisions will be and so unexpected results may occur.