

## **Virtue Ethics**

### **a) Explain the theory of Virtue Ethics.**

Virtue ethics is one of the three most popular approaches in normative ethics, the other two being deontological and teleological. Virtue Ethics dates right back to Plato and Aristotle (Aristotle in particular), who was a student of Plato whom went on to be a teacher of Alexander the Great.

Virtue ethics rejects ideas such as moral relativism and situation ethics, as virtue ethics asks how you can be a better person. Not what the right thing to do is. Virtue ethics first started with Aristotle and his ideas of 'Eudaimonia' and the 'Golden Mean'.

Eudaimonia is Aristotle's idea that everybody's aim in life is for a full and happy one. It is happiness, contentment, and fulfilment; it is the highest of good and the best kind of life, because we desire it for its own sake. The idea of this eudaimonistic ethics is that it reverses the relationship between virtue and rightness.

Jeremy Bentham's ideas of utilitarianism would accept the virtue of kindness but only because it is likely to create consequences that would gain him utility. Therefore the virtue is only justified because of its consequence. But in eudaimonist virtue ethics these virtues are acceptable and justified because they create the elements of eudaimonia; such as wellbeing happiness etc. Alasdair MacIntyre looked at writings of the ancient Greeks, and saw the stories of Achilles and Odyessus; which show morality that 'you are what you do'. You don't judge someone on who they are; you judge them on their actions. He argued that other ethical ideas and terminology are too farfetched from ordinary peoples' lives.

Aristotle argued that when we do something, we do it to gain an end and the ultimate end is good. Therefore if practice our virtues we can become happy and live fulfilled lives. There are twelve moral virtues which fall between to vices. Vices are two extremes, for example there is a vice of deficiency for something and a vice of excess. The virtuous mean or 'Golden Mean' is the mid-way point or balance between each vice. Therefore the between Shamelessness (a vice of deficiency) and Bashfulness (a vice of excess), the mid-point of 'Golden Mean' would be Modesty. Therefore if you don't have enough modesty you would become shameful, and if you have an extreme of modesty, you become bashful. Hence his ideas of the virtues lay between to vices. However, Alasdair MacIntyre explained that many virtues are not a mid-point, as they are good in themselves like; faithfulness, loyalty and compassion. Aristotle believed in two types of virtue, one being intellectual virtue; in which you developed by training and education. Secondly moral virtue; where you acquire them by habit; Rosalind Hursthouse argued that we are not born with moral virtues we have to gain them through habit. Virtuous people are most common amongst adults, as throughout life we learn and pick up habits. Either way we know how virtuous we are depending on how we respond to situations, by acting virtuously and doing virtuous things, we become virtuous.

However, not all accounts of virtue ethics are eudaimonist. Michael Slote developed an idea of virtues based on common sense. Agent-focused theories understand the moral life, in terms of what it is like to be a virtuous person, where the virtues are common sense. The opposite is an agent-based theory; they are more drastic in that their actions are dependent on their ethical judgements about the life of the person who performs these actions. There are many different human traits that people find worthy, such as kindness, courage, compassion, generosity, etc. We can find these traits by aspiring to be like the people we admire, such as Jesus and Mother Teresa.

Elizabeth Anscombe wrote in 'Modern Moral Philosophy', that modern moral philosophy was misguided, and that the mistake has been to associate good with actions rather than people. She argued that responsibility to follow rules made absolutely no sense without faith in God. She thought that a person's character is the key to eudaimonia, and believed we should return to Aristotle. MacIntyre agreed with her.

James F. Keenan shows the virtue theory in three questions. Who am I? Who ought I to become? How do I get there? It suggests a way in how we should live our lives to become a better person. Virtue theory is focused on our growth, being virtuous needs practice to control our behaviour as we can be deficient and excessive in our actions. This is our spontaneous behaviour or automatic behaviour, we need to train it, so our spontaneous behaviour goes straight to the golden mean. By understanding ourselves we can learn this easier. Keenan shows an example of good parenting, "good parenting is knowing how to help children to grow according to their own strengths and weaknesses".

Philippa Foot changed people's thoughts on Virtue Ethics when she wrote about how the concept of virtues were in the writings of Aquinas and Kant. However, she argued that although the theory of virtue ethics doesn't guarantee eudaimonia, it can be a part in accomplishing it.

Richard Taylor argued that people shouldn't try to form themselves on Jesus, as a virtue it is damaged. He insisted that Christianity teaches people to think of everybody as an equal, therefore inferring that Christ is an equal, making the Western ethics useless. However, as Christianity teaches that because everyone is made in God's image, it doesn't mean that everyone has the same moral worth.

There are advantages and criticisms to Virtue ethics. An advantage is that it is an ethical alternative that looks beyond religious ethics and fits Christian ethics. It looks at a key issue of what it means to be human, rather than looking simply for rules. It also is pragmatic as it can be understood very easily, and doesn't have any hidden meanings. It is the basic theory of being virtuous to achieve something people genuinely want, which is eudaimonia. Another advantage is that it provides a different viewpoint on moral philosophy that avoids support for moral absolutes and the hardship of their consequences.

However, there are also criticisms. One being a flaw in the ideas of the golden mean, there is not a golden mean for everything which MacIntyre pointed out, such as compassion and loyalty. Others would argue that people who follow virtue ethics are selfish, as it puts oneself before others. For example if a murderer came to your front door and said "I'm going

to murder your brother, is he in please?" a person who follows virtue ethics would feel its wrong to lie, would therefore tell the murderer where he was. Whereas most people would feel that is selfish and lie and say he wasn't in. Another criticism is that in a realistic situation virtue ethics doesn't help. As if a women finds out she is pregnant and that the baby will be born with severe disabilities; how is she to know what a virtues person would do with these contradictory virtues? However, Rosalind Hursthouse said in response to this; that in a difficult in all theories in what to do when faced with real situation. Virtue ethics requires wisdom and knowledge; you have to respond to a situation with all of yourself.

**b) 'Virtue Ethics is of little practical use to someone faced with a moral problem'.  
Discuss**

On the surface, it appears that virtue ethics is a plausible theory; however, when analysed this is not the case. Virtue ethics only concentrates on what a person should be and what is that makes a person good, rather than determining what is good. This, as expressed by Robert Louden, does not help someone faced with a moral dilemma.

For example, a woman has four children, her house is burning down. She has already saved three of the four children but the remaining child is still in the house. Should she go into the burning building to attempt to save the fourth child, and risk losing her life and leave her three children behind with no mother? Which would be the moral thing to do? Louden writes that "We ought, of course, to do what a virtuous person would do but it is not always as easy to fathom what the hypothetical moral exemplar would do were he in our shoes".

Virtue ethics at first glance is seen to be a good ethical theory but really it is too rigid. When it comes down to it, it has only one principle. An argument against this is that it may be 'rigid' but this should not be regarded as a weakness but a strength, because it is a clear rule on how to live your life, it doesn't branch off to a number of different rules, it is simple and straight to the point. As long as the person practicing virtue ethics knows the main principle, they can apply them to practical situations and be guided by them.

Many people object to the virtue theory as when it comes down to real-life situations it fails to give us an answer on how to behave without being selfish, it seems itself to have no morals. The main response to this criticism is to stress the role of the virtuous as a moral role model. It stresses that the theory isn't rigid, but in fact flexible and situation-sensitive. And can also be helpful by observing an example of a virtuous agent. A virtuous agent is a fully developed moral person, who has grown up living and practicing virtue ethics and now completely one hundred percent lives by it. The virtuous agent possesses the virtues and acts in accordance with them; therefore we would learn what to do by following their example. Virtue ethics puts a lot of pressure on the development of moral judgement. You cannot learn what to do by simply studying virtue ethics, as it cannot give us a simple easy answer. This is because these answers do not exist. Nonetheless, it can be action-guiding if we can learn to understand the role of the virtuous agent. If the virtue consists of the right reason and right desire, virtue ethics will be action-guiding when we recognize the right explanation and have come to terms with our desires and our commands.

On this basis, we couldn't possibly comment or attempt answering is virtue ethics of little practical use when facing a moral problem, as we simply could not know as we have not lived or live by virtue ethics. If we briefly looked at the situation without studying the facts of virtue ethics you could say that no, it is totally impractical and therefore I have no use for it. But as by going over the whole argument I would say if you included views on utilitarianism, that yes it would be of good use. Utilitarianism is about the consequences, the greater good for the majority. By taking aspects of utilitarianism in the example of the mother with the four children, she would let the other child die as she is safe (virtue ethics) and the majority of the children are safe (utilitarianism).