

Assess the view that seeing morality in terms of virtues gives a better account than other theories

Virtue is moral excellence of a man or a woman. The word is derived from the Greek arete. As applied to humans, a virtue is a good character trait. The Latin word virtus literally means "manliness," from vir, "man" in the masculine sense; and referred originally to masculine, warlike virtues such as courage, but now refers to the whole scope of universally good character traits. Virtue can either have normative or moral value; i.e. the virtue of a knife is to cut, the virtue of an excellent knife is to cut well (this is its normative value) vs. the virtues of reason, prudence, chastity, etc. (which have moral value). Thus we can see, virtue accounts for things as 'good' when they fulfill their function well.

In Aristotle's ethics, the thing which has moral value for us is not pleasure¹ (utilitarianism) because there are bad pleasures, and is not duty (deontological ethics) because feelings are important, but success in life – referred to as 'eudaimonia'. He calls this the 'telos' or natural goal of a human being – to be like a well tuned musical instrument. Eudaimonia does not refer to a mental state of euphoria as 'happiness' tends to in English: to be eudaimon is to flourish and to make a success of life by exercising well the certain faculties by which life is defined. Aristotle bases this argument on the notion that each of us wants to flourish or to do well, and all our actions, in so far as they are rational, seem to be directed to this ultimate goal. Thus we can see, in virtue ethics, morality is connected to how we are, to what we do, rather than to a consideration of rules and principles.

Virtue ethics changes the kind of question we want to ask about ethics. Where deontology and consequentialism concern themselves with the right action, virtue ethics is concerned with the good life or with what kinds of people we should be. "What is the right action?" is a significantly different question to ask from "How should I live?" Where the first type of question deals with certain dilemmas, problematic instances and isolated events, the second is a question about a whole life. Instead of asking what is the right act here and now, virtue ethics asks what kind of person should I be in order to get it right all the time.

Thus, virtue ethics seems to present an inherently more appealing account of morality in that it equates the 'intended' life for a human being with the virtuous life. Aristotle also connects it with life lived according to reason, seemingly giving us a foundation for ethics. He claims that the vicious, insensitive or callous individuals we experience from day to day are failing to exercise reason, the supreme human capacity.

¹ Aristotle maintains that pleasure is a good in that it invariably makes things better when added to situations, but a dangerous one nonetheless. This led Aristotle to the belief that there are many goods, a mindset named 'pluralism'.

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Character (and thus eudaimonia) is also about doing. Aristotelian theory is a theory of action, since having the virtuous inner dispositions will also involve being moved to act in accordance with them. Realising that kindness is the appropriate response to a situation and feeling appropriately kindly disposed, will also lead to a corresponding attempt to act kindly. Indeed, actions are based on judgements.

Another appealing feature of virtue ethics is that character traits are stable, fixed and reliable dispositions. If an individual possesses the character trait of kindness, we would expect them to act kindly in all sorts of situations, even when it is difficult to do so, towards all kinds of people, and do so reliably over a long period of time. A person with a certain character then, can be relied upon to act consistently over time. According to Aristotle, a good person performs good actions, and good actions are those performed by a good person. This immediately appears circular, but Aristotle defines it as a 'benign' circle; you can become a good person by doing fine actions. The Ancient Greeks had a specific word that could describe both actions and statues as fine, beautiful or noble: 'kalon'. An action is good if it is 'kalon' and if the action fulfils your social function well.

Aristotle draws an interesting contrast between continent people, who have unruly desires but manage to control them (enkrateia), temperate people whose desires are naturally or through habit, second nature, directed toward that which is good for them (virtue), and weakness of will when individuals cannot keep their desires under control (akrasia). The virtuous person has practical wisdom, the ability to know when and how best to apply these various moral perspectives. Rather than consulting a formula or algorithm to determine the single right action, the virtuous person uses their judgment and acts on their best character traits.

Strength of character (virtue), Aristotle suggests, involves finding the proper balance between two extremes: excess – having too much of something, and deficiency – having too little. This does not mean mediocrity, but harmony and balance of all virtues, as they are unified: to have any single strength of character in full measure, a person must have the other ones as well e.g. courage without good judgement is blind, risking without knowing what is worth the risk. Courage without perseverance is short-lived. Courage without a clear sense of your own abilities is foolhardy. Virtues are those strengths of character that enable us to flourish. The virtuous person has practical wisdom, the ability to know when and how best to apply these various moral perspectives.

Moral behaviour, according to Aristotle, depends on the development of good habits or virtues. At first, children do not understand why they are saying 'please' and 'thank you' at appropriate times, aside from to avoid punishment and reap reward. Aristotle maintained that the good feelings follow if you train people to feel the right things in the right way from an early age. It can however, be taught later in life. Aristotle advises us to perform just acts as

this way we become just. The student of virtue must develop the right habits, so that he tends to perform virtuous acts. Thus, he and his behaviour are, to an extent, reliable. However, virtue is not itself habit. Habituation is an aid to the development of virtue, but true virtue requires choice, understanding and knowledge. The virtuous agent doesn't just act justly out of habit, an unreflective response, but has come to recognise the value of virtue and why it is the appropriate response. Virtue is chosen, chosen knowingly and chosen for its own sake. It is argued that in the scope of human activity, we usually understand virtuous behaviour better than what particular actions are right or what consequences are good because each situation is unique. Whilst other theories require us to exercise our intellect concerning consequences or rules, Aristotle says that you need only practical reason and common sense. He unifies these two concepts in the word 'phronesis'.

Phronesis has a lot to do with choosing the ends one should accomplish. It is practical wisdom to know what goals one should seek. Phronesis is translated to prudence, and its end is truth. It can find out what means are the right for a certain end and, According to Aristotle, when implemented correctly, leads to harmonised interaction between mind, appetite and the vegetative soul, leading to virtue and eudaimonia. This long and gradual process of moral character development may take as long as a whole lifetime, but once a person's character is firmly established and we can depend on them to act consistently and predictably in a variety of situations then that individual is the virtuous ideal – or 'phronemos'.

In conclusion, I think that whilst virtue theory appears vague, it is the closest established theory to my view of morality as entirely relative – a conspiracy of the weak. Eudaimonia, it seems, is different for each individual, and it would be foolhardy to reject that people want what's best for them. However, different people want different things for themselves some of which others would find wholly wrong and immoral. Think of all the moral problems that you might come across, e.g. should I tell my friend the truth about her lying boyfriend, should I cheat in my exams, should I have an abortion, should I save the drowning baby, should we separate the Siamese twins etc. All these problems are different from each other so how can we find the solution to all of them by applying the same rule? If the problems are different, varied, diverse and distinct, we should not expect to find their solution in one rigid and inflexible rule that does not admit to any exceptions. This is why ultimately I reject utilitarianism and deontological ethics. If the nature of the thing we are studying is diverse and changing, then the answer cannot be any good if it is inflexible and unyielding. The answer then to 'how should I live?' cannot be found in one rule and it is a mistake to look for such a rule. At best, for virtue ethics, rules can be rules of thumb, i.e. rules that are true for the most part, but one must always be sensitive to this and be prepared to reject the rule when it is not the appropriate response.