VIRTUE ETHICS: THE PATHWAY TO A SUSTAINABLE MORAL CHARACTER

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Abstract

Every human society develops a set of ethical principles that guide the conducts of its members. In the ancient Greek society, various ethical norms were presented; popular among them were deontoloigism and teleologism. However, these two stood at extremes. This prompted Aristotle to propose an alternative. Greek philosopher Aristotle introduced the idea that ethics should focus on how we act, and less on the effects of our actions or the intentions behind them. This study undertook an analysis of the Aristotelian virtue ethics. The study was a qualitative work and so adopted the qualitative research design by relying on secondary sources for data collection. Thereafter, the expository and comparative evaluative methods were used for data analysis. The study found out that the virtue ethics of Aristotle has been conceived and interpreted differently by various philosophers and epochs. It is the conclusion of this paper that Aristotle's virtue ethics remains timeless even in the contemporary society. Its right interpretation and application can improve contemporary society which has almost gone bereft of morality.

Keywords: Virtue Ethics, Sustainability, Morality, Character

Introduction

Aristotle was a Greek philosopher who lived around 350 B.C.E. Along with studying philosophy, Aristotle was an astronomer, a writer, a biologist, and a geologist. He was a student of Plato and is known for his ideas on politics, government, and often most notably, ethics (Hursthouse 214). In Aristotle's time, most philosophers were focused on one of two dominant types of ethics. One is called deontological ethics, which judges ethics by how well a person follows the laws and rules of society. Deontologists would say, '"it doesn't matter what happens, following the rule is always the right thing to do" (Murdock 48). The second, teleological ethics, judges ethics based on the outcomes of a person's actions. Teleological ethicists would say, "If what you do leads to something good, you did the right thing" (Hursthouse 216). There are flaws in both types of thinking, so Aristotle introduced a third option. Aristotle's perspective on ethics was based on the virtue of being human; in other words, virtue ethics. There are

two important distinctions between Aristotle's approach to ethics and the other predominant perspectives at the time. First, Aristotle did not consider ethics just a theoretical or philosophical topic to study. To understand ethics, Aristotle argued, you actually have to observe how people behave. That led to the second distinction. Ethics is not about "'what if" situations for Aristotle; instead, he took a very practical approach and much of his ideas on ethics were based on what someone did and how their virtues impacted their actions.

The Notion of Virtue Ethics
Virtue ethics is a broad term for theories that emphasize the role of character and virtue in moral philosophy rather than either doing one's duty or acting in order to bring about good consequences. A virtue ethicist is likely to give you this kind of moral advice: "Act as a virtuous person would act in your situation" (Oakley 114)

Most virtue ethics theories take their inspiration from Aristotle who declared that a virtuous person is someone who has ideal character traits. These traits derive from natural internal tendencies, but need to be nurtured; however, once established, they will become stable. For example, a virtuous person is someone who is kind across many situations over a lifetime because that is her character and not because she wants to maximize utility or gain favors or simply do her duty. Unlike deontological and consequentialist theories, theories of virtue ethics do not aim primarily to identify universal principles that can be applied in any moral situation. And virtue ethics theories deal with wider questions — "How should I live?" and "What is the good life?" and "What are proper family and social values?" (Williams 91).

Since its revival in the twentieth century, virtue ethics has been developed in three main directions: Eudaimonism, agent-based theories, and the ethics of care. Eudaimonism bases virtues in human flourishing, where flourishing is equated with performing one's distinctive function well. In the case of humans, Aristotle argued that our distinctive function is reasoning, and so the life "worth living" is one which we reason well. An agent-based theory emphasizes that virtues are determined by common-sense intuitions that we as observers judge to be admirable traits in other people. The third branch of virtue ethics, the ethics of care, was proposed predominately by feminist thinkers. It challenges the idea that ethics should focus solely on justice and autonomy; it argues that more feminine traits, such as caring and nurturing, should also be considered.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

Aristotle's postulations on virtue are encapsulated in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. In these writings, he uses logic to determine a definition and the potential impacts of ethics. He starts his presentation of ethics with a simple assumption: humans think and behave in a way to achieve happiness, which Aristotle defined as the constant consideration of truth and behavior consistent with that truth (Adkins 84).

Aristotle defines virtue as the average, or 'mean,' between excess and deficiency. Basically, he says, the idea of virtue is "all things in moderation" (Trianosky 162). Humans should enjoy existence, but not be selfish. They should avoid pain and displeasure, but not expect a life completely void of them. By striving to live this virtuous life of moderation, human beings can find happiness and, therefore, be ethical. Most importantly, going back to one of the differences between virtue ethics and other theories of ethics, morality or being ethical cannot be achieved abstractly, meaning it cannot only be based on someone's beliefs. Ethical behavior requires behavior by individuals in a social environment (Adkins 90).

Aristotle is known for his study of politics and government as well as his ideas on ethics. In many ways, he didn't separate these areas of study. He believed that the role of government and politics was to create a society where individuals could live happy lives and realize their full potential. In that way, the science of politics and governance, from Aristotle's perspective, was to allow citizens to be happy by letting them search for their truth and behave in ways consistent with that truth.

Aristotle claims that "… for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function" (Bk II, 7b, 215). Aristotle's claim is essentially that in achieving its function, goal or end, an object achieves its own good. Every object has this type of a true function and so every object has a way of achieving goodness. The *telos* of a chair, for example, may be to provide a seat and a chair is a good chair when it supports the curvature of the human bottom without collapsing under the strain. Equally, says Aristotle, what makes good sculptors, artists and flautists is the successful and appropriate performance of their functions as sculptors, artists and flautists. This teleological (function and purpose) based worldview is the necessary backdrop to understanding Aristotle's ethical reasoning. For, just as a chair has a true

function or end, so *Aristotle believes human beings have a telos*. Aristotle identifies what the good for a human being is in virtue of working out what the function of a human being is, as per his Function Argument:

1. All objects have a *telos*.
2. An object is good when it properly secures its *telos*.

At this point, Aristotle directs his thinking towards human beings specifically.

3. The *telos* of a human being is to *reason*.
4. The good for a human being is, therefore, acting in accordance with reason.

In working out our true function, Aristotle looks to that feature that *separates man from other living animals*. According to Aristotle, what separates mankind from the rest of the world is our ability not only to reason but to *act on reasons*. Thus, just as the function of a chair can be derived from its *uniquely differentiating characteristic*, so the function of a human being is related to our uniquely differentiating characteristic and we achieve the good when we act in accordance with this true function or *telos*.

Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean
Blum establishes that the core of Aristotle's account of moral virtue is his doctrine of the mean (71). According to this doctrine, moral virtues are desire-regulating character traits which are at a mean between more extreme character traits (or vices). For example, in response to the natural emotion of fear, we should develop the virtuous character trait of courage. If we develop an excessive character trait by curbing fear too much, then we are said to be rash, which is a vice. If, on the other extreme, we develop a deficient character trait by curbing fear too little, then we are said to be cowardly, which is also a vice. The virtue of courage, then, lies at the mean between the excessive extreme of rashness, and the deficient extreme of cowardice. Aristotle is quick to point out that the virtuous mean is not a strict mathematical mean between two extremes. For example, if eating 100 apples is too many, and eating zero apples is too little, this does not imply that we should eat 50 apples, which is the mathematical mean. Instead, the mean is rationally determined, based on the relative merits of the situation. That is, it is "as a prudent man would determine it" (113). He concludes that it is difficult to live the virtuous life primarily because it is often difficult to find the mean between the extremes.

Most moral virtues, and not just courage, are to be understood as falling at the mean between two accompanying vices. His list may be represented by the following table:

Vice of Deficiency	Virtuous Mean	Vice of Excess
Cowardice	Courage	Rashness
Insensibility	Temperance	Intemperance
Illiberality	Liberality	Prodigality
Shamelessness	Modesty	Bashfulness
Callousness	Just Resentment	Spitefulness

Throughout the list he insists on the "autonomy of will" as indispensable to virtue: courage for instance is only really worthy of the name when done from a love of honor and duty; munificence again becomes vulgarity when it is not exercised from a love of what is right and beautiful, but for displaying wealth (Crisp and Slote 77).

This Aristotelian idea of morality is given by the faculty of moral insight. The truly good person is at the same time a person of perfect insight, and a person of perfect insight is also perfectly good. Our idea of the ultimate end of moral action is developed through habitual experience, and this gradually frames itself out of particular perceptions. It is the job of reason to apprehend and organize these particular perceptions. However, moral action is never the result of a mere act of the understanding, nor is it the result of a simple desire which views objects merely as things which produce pain or pleasure. We start with a rational conception of what is advantageous, but this conception is in itself powerless without the natural impulse which will give it strength. The will or purpose implied by morality is thus either reason stimulated to act by desire, or desire guided and controlled by understanding. These factors then motivate the willful action. Freedom of the will is a factor with both virtuous choices and vicious choices. Actions are involuntary only when another person forces our action, or if we are ignorant of important details in actions. Actions are voluntary when the originating cause of action (either virtuous or vicious) lies in ourselves (Dent 81).

For Aristotle, moral weakness of the will results when someone does what is wrong, knowing what is right, and thereby follows his or her desire rather than reason. For him, this condition is not a myth, as Socrates supposed it was. The

problem is a matter of conflicting moral principles. Moral action may be represented as a syllogism in which a general principle of morality forms the first (i.e. major) premise, while the particular application is the second (i.e. minor) premise (Foot 121). The conclusion, though, which is arrived at through speculation, is not always carried out in practice. The moral syllogism is not simply a matter of logic, but involves psychological drives and desires. Desires can lead to a minor premise being applied to one rather than another of two major premises existing in the agent's mind. Animals, on the other hand, cannot be called weak willed or incontinent since such a conflict of principles is not possible with them.

Pleasure is not to be identified with Good. Pleasure is found in the consciousness of free spontaneous action. It is an invisible experience, like vision, and is always present when a perfect organ acts upon a perfect object. Pleasures accordingly differ in kind, varying along with the different value of the functions of which they are the expression. They are determined ultimately by the judgment of "the good person" (McDowell 109). Our chief end is the perfect development of our true nature; it thus must be particularly found in the realization of our highest faculty, that is, reason. It is this in fact which constitutes our personality, and we would not be pursuing our own life, but the life of some lower being, if we followed any other aim. Self-love accordingly may be said to be the highest law of morals, because while such self-love may be understood as the selfishness which gratifies a person's lower nature, it may also be, and is rightly, the love of that higher and rational nature which constitutes each person's true self. Such a life of thought is further recommended as that which is most pleasant, most self-sufficient, most continuous, and most consonant with our purpose. It is also that which is most akin to the life of God: for God cannot be conceived as practising the ordinary moral virtues and must therefore find his happiness in contemplation (Hursthouse 59).

Friendship is an indispensable aid in framing for ourselves the higher moral life; if not itself a virtue, it is at least associated with virtue, and it proves itself of service in almost all conditions of our existence. Such results, however, are to be derived not from the worldly friendships of utility or pleasure, but only from those which are founded on virtue. The true friend is in fact a second self, and the true moral value of friendship lies in the fact that the friend presents to us a mirror of good actions, and so intensifies our consciousness and our appreciation of life (Rorty 95).

How to Develop the Virtues

The sum of the Aristotelian view on how to develop the virtues is "… we are what we repeatedly do. Excellence…is not an act but a habit" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk III, 3c, 371). It is fairly obvious that we cannot become excellent at something overnight. Making progress in any endeavour is always a journey that requires both effort and practice over time. Aristotle holds that the same is true for human beings attempting to develop their virtuous character traits in attempt to live the good life.

Cultivating a virtuous character is something that happens by practice. Aristotle compares the development of the skill of virtue to the development of other skills. He says that "… men become builders by building" and "… we become just by doing just acts" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk III, 5a, 557). We might know that a brick must go into a particular place but we are good builders only when we know how to place that brick properly. Building requires practical skill and not merely intellectual knowledge and the same applies to developing virtuous character traits. Ethical characters are developed by practical learning and habitual action and not merely by intellectual teaching.

In the end, the virtuous individual will become comfortable in responding to feelings/situations virtuously just as the good builder becomes comfortable responding to the sight of various tools and a set of plans. A skilled builder will not need abstract reflection when it comes to knowing how to build a wall properly, and nor will a skilled cyclist need abstract reflection on how to balance his speed correctly as he goes around a corner. Analogously, a person skilled in the virtues will not need abstract reflection when faced with a situation in which friendliness and generosity are possibilities; they will simply know on a more intuitive level how to act. This is not to say that builders, cyclists and virtuous people will not sometimes need to reflect specifically on what to do in abnormal or difficult situations (e.g. moral dilemmas, in the case of ethics) but in normal situations appropriate responses will be natural for those who are properly skilled (Engstrom and Whiting 217).

It is the need to become skilled when developing virtuous character traits that leads Aristotle to suggest that becoming virtuous will require a lifetime of work. Putting up a single bookshelf does not make you a skilled builder any more than

a single act of courage makes you a courageous and virtuous person. It is the repetition of skill that determines your status and the development of virtuous characters requires a lifetime of work rather than a single week at a Virtue Ethics Bootcamp.

The Relevance of Aristotle's Virtue Ethics to Rebuilding Society
> It is a truism that "human profession and practices would thrive better if they are fortified with basic general ethical knowledge background of good conduct for the citizens" (Unah X).

Moral theories are concerned with right and wrong behavior. This subject area of philosophy is unavoidably tied up with practical concerns about the right behavior. However, virtue ethics changes the kind of question we ask about ethics. Where deontology and consequentialism concern themselves with the right action, virtue ethics is concerned with the good life and what kinds of persons we should be. "What is the right action?" is a significantly different question to ask from "How should I live? What kind of person should I be?" Where the first type of question deals with specific dilemmas, the second is a question about an entire life. Instead of asking what is the right action here and now, virtue ethics asks what kind of person should one be in order to get it right all the time (Adkins 173). Whereas deontology and consequentialism are based on rules that try to give us the right action, virtue ethics makes central use of the concept of character. The answer to "How should one live?" is that one should live virtuously, that is, have a virtuous character (174).

Also, Aristotelian character is, importantly, about a state of being. It is about having the appropriate inner states. For example, the virtue of kindness involves the right sort of emotions and inner states with respect to our feelings towards others. Character 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. Realizing that kindness is the appropriate response to a situation and feeling appropriately kindly disposed will also lead to a corresponding attempt to act kindly (MacIntyre 166).

Another positive feature of virtue ethics is that character traits are stable, fixed, and reliable dispositions. If an agent possesses the character trait of kindness, we would expect him or her to act kindly in all sorts of situations, towards all kinds of people, and over a long period of time, even when it is difficult to do so. A person with a certain character can be relied upon to act consistently over a time.

It is important to recognize that moral character develops over a long period of time. People are born with all sorts of natural tendencies. Some of these natural tendencies will be positive, such as a placid and friendly nature, and some will be negative, such as an irascible and jealous nature. These natural tendencies can be encouraged and developed or discouraged and thwarted by the influences one is exposed to when growing up. There are a number of factors that may affect one's character development, such as one's parents, teachers, peer group, role-models, the degree of encouragement and attention one receives, and exposure to different situations. Our natural tendencies, the raw material we are born with, are shaped and developed through a long and gradual process of education and habituation (169).

Moral education and development are major aspects of Aristotle's virtue ethics. Moral development, at least in its early stages, relies on the availability of good role models. The virtuous agent acts as a role model and the student of virtue emulates his or her example. Initially this is a process of habituating oneself in right action. Aristotle advises us to perform just acts because this way we become just. The student of virtue must develop the right habits, so that he tends to perform virtuous acts. Virtue is not itself a habit. Habituation is merely an aid to the development of virtue, but true virtue requires choice, understanding, and knowledge. The virtuous agent doesn't act justly merely out of an unreflective response, but has come to recognize the value of virtue and why it is the appropriate response. Virtue is chosen knowingly for its own sake (Dent 107).

The development of moral character may take a whole lifetime. But once it is firmly established, one will act consistently, predictably and appropriately in a variety of situations. Aristotelian virtue is defined in Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a purposive disposition, lying in a mean and being determined by the right reason. As discussed above, virtue is a settled disposition. It is also a purposive disposition. A virtuous actor chooses virtuous action knowingly and for its own sake. It is not enough to act kindly by accident, unthinkingly, or because everyone else is doing so; you must act kindly because you recognize that this is the right way to behave. Note here that although habituation is a tool for character development it is not equivalent to virtue; virtue requires conscious choice and affirmation.

Finally, virtue is determined by the right reason. Virtue requires the right desire and the right reason. To act from the wrong reason is to act viciously. On the other hand, the agent can try to act from the right reason, but fail because he or she has the wrong desire. The virtuous agent acts effortlessly, perceives the right reason, has the harmonious right desire, and has an inner state of virtue that flows smoothly into action. The virtuous agent can act as an exemplar of virtue to others (Blum 137).

Modern Resurgence of Aristotle's Virtue Ethics: E. Anscombe
Aristotle's virtue ethics has continued to make impacts all through the epochs of philosophy. There is in modern times a call for the resurgence of Aristotelian value ethics. A typical work in this direction is that by Anscombe. In 1958 Elisabeth Anscombe published a paper titled "Modern Moral Philosophy" that changed the way we think about normative theories. She criticized modern moral philosophy's pre-occupation with a law conception of ethics, which deals exclusively with obligation and duty. Among the theories she criticized for their reliance on universally applicable principles were J. S. Mill's utilitarianism and Kant's deontology. These theories rely on rules of morality that were claimed to be applicable to any moral situation (that is, Mill's Greatest Happiness Principle and Kant's Categorical Imperative). This approach to ethics relies on universal principles and results in a rigid moral code. Further, these rigid rules are based on a notion of obligation that is meaningless in modern, secular society because they make no sense without assuming the existence of a lawgiver, an assumption we no longer make (Anscombe 91).

In its place, Anscombe called for a return to a different way of doing philosophy. Taking her inspiration from Aristotle, she called for a return to concepts such as character, virtue and flourishing. She also emphasized the importance of the emotions and understanding moral psychology. With the exception of this emphasis on moral psychology, Anscombe's recommendations that we place virtue more centrally in our understanding of morality were taken up by a number of philosophers. The resulting body of theories and ideas has come to be known as virtue ethics (Oakley 314).

Anscombe's critical and confrontational approach set the scene for how virtue ethics was to develop in its first few years. The philosophers who took up Anscombe's call for a return to virtue saw their task as being to define virtue ethics in terms of what it is not, that is, how it differs from and avoids the mistakes made by the other normative theories (315).

Objections to Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

Various scholars have raised objections and critiques to Aristotle's virtue ethics. Scholars like Rorty maintain that its theories provide a self-centered conception of ethics because human flourishing is seen as an end in itself and does not sufficiently consider the extent to which our actions affect other people (90). The point of departure here is that morality is supposed to be about other people. It deals with our actions to the extent that they affect other people. Moral praise and blame is attributed on the grounds of an evaluation of our behavior towards others and the ways in that we exhibit, or fail to exhibit, a concern for the well-being of others. Virtue ethics, according to this objection, is self-centered because its primary concern is with the agent's own character. Virtue ethics seems to be essentially interested in the acquisition of the virtues as part of the agent's own well-being and flourishing. Morality requires us to consider others for their own sake and not because they may benefit us. There seems to be something wrong with aiming to behave compassionately, kindly, and honestly merely because this will make oneself happier (McDowell 128).

Related to this objection is a more general objection against the idea that well-being is a master value and that all other things are valuable only to the extent that they contribute to it. This line of attack, exemplified in the writings of Tim Scanlon, objects to the understanding of well-being as a moral notion and sees it more like self-interest. Furthermore, well-being does not admit to comparisons with other individuals. Thus, well-being cannot play the role that eudaimonists would have it play (Dent 117).

Finally, there is a concern that virtue ethics leaves us hostage to luck. Morality is about responsibility and the appropriateness of praise and blame. However, we only praise and blame agents for actions taken under conscious choice. The road to virtue is arduous and many things outside our control can go wrong. Just as the right education, habits, influences, examples, etc. can promote the development of virtue, the wrong influencing factors can promote vice. Some people will be lucky and receive the help and encouragement they need to attain moral maturity, but others will not. If the development of virtue (and vice) is subject to luck, is it fair to praise the virtuous (and blame the vicious) for something that was outside of their control? Further, some accounts of virtue are dependent on the availability of external goods. Friendship with other virtuous agents is so central to Aristotelian virtue that a life devoid of virtuous friendship

will be lacking in eudaimonia. However, we have no control over the availability of the right friends. How can we then praise the virtuous and blame the vicious if their development and respective virtue and vice were not under their control? (McDowell 221).

Conclusion

Aristotle's virtue ethics initially emerged as a rival account to deontology and consequentialism. It developed from dissatisfaction with the notions of duty and obligation and their central roles in understanding morality. It also grew out of an objection to the use of rigid moral rules and principles and their application to diverse and different moral situations. Characteristically, virtue ethics makes a claim about the central role of virtue and character in its understanding of moral life and uses it to answer the questions "How should I live? What kind of person should I be?" Thus, while other ethical theories are outcome-based and agent-based, virtue ethics is character-based. It is holistic and could be used to revolutionise the morality of contemporary society.

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