

Virtue Ethics

Strengths	Weaknesses
Happiness – Virtue Ethics brings happiness for individuals and society. Ben Franklin was a Utilitarian, but thought that the way to achieve the greater good was virtue	Laws – You can legislate against doing harm, or make laws based on reason. There is no way to make laws that talk about ‘courage’ and ‘patience’.
Flourishing – Maslow’s hierarchy of needs puts self actualisation at the top – the fulfilment of our potential is our ultimate goal. This ties in with Aristotle’s concept of Eudaimonia as ‘human flourishing’.	Virtues conflict – Virtues can come into conflict with each other – sometimes we have to choose to be kind or be honest, but can’t be both. Virtue Ethics doesn’t tell us how to choose which virtue should prevail.
Harmony – Kant is too cerebral, and hedonistic Utilitarianism too base. Aristotle’s theory gives harmony between our intellect – that tells us what is the right course of action, and our desire – which is trained by repetition and harmoniously follows by habit	Dull – Susan Wolf claims “moral saints” are bland, “dull-witted or humourless”. Virtues can be unattractive. “The moral virtues... are apt to crowd out the non-moral virtues... that we generally think contribute to a healthy, well-rounded, richly developed character.”
Community – Virtue Ethics avoids the problems of consequentialism, but holds on to the benefit of bringing about a better society.	Religious Objections – Virtue Ethics is criticised for relying too much on the individual, and ignoring the authority of Biblical rules and Church teaching.
Integrity – Consequentialism demands an unacceptable compromise when we have to do bad actions to get good consequences, whilst absolutism requires us to hold to principles even when this causes harm. Virtue Ethics allows us to maintain our integrity, be true to our values.	Motives – For Virtue Ethics, the person is what matters. My motive has to be right. However, Utilitarians would say consequences really matter, and Natural Law claims that certain actions are wrong regardless of the intentions or motives of the agent.
Optimistic and Realistic – Virtue Ethics gives the highest expectations – e.g. fidelity is far more than just not having an affair (ten commandments) but not even looking at someone else with desire (Jesus). However, it is also realistic, we sometimes get it wrong, and may need to try again (allowing Christians to accept divorce and remarriage whilst staying true to Jesus’ ideals)	Pompous and Bourgeois – Aristotle’s virtues fit his life perfectly, ideal for an Athenian gentleman. They are very privileged and masculine, and don’t encourage charity. People we look up to, Gandhi, Mother Teresa etc. were selfless individuals who made sacrifices for others. Next to them, Aristotle’s high-minded virtues seem like self-serving snobbery, not human excellence.
Flexible – The golden mean allows for extreme courage in some situations and restraint in others. Each virtue to the right degree depending on the circumstances.	Relativist – Values vary from one culture to another. When two belief systems conflict, there is no way to decide which set of virtues are right.
Holistic – The theory covers all aspects of personality, including practical skills, intelligence and qualities of character. It considers the full person.	Rules – Virtue Ethics is deontology in disguise. “Generosity is a virtue” just means “Be generous”. It’s just a set of rules like Kant or Natural Law.
Reliable – When moral virtues are established by habit, human reactions are dependable, firm and fixed. Utilitarianism is easily undone when a person chooses to be selfish rather than think of the greater good, and Kant’s theory gives no motivation for doing what’s right.	Variable – Sometimes you need to be honest, but not always. Patience is a virtue, but not in the extreme. Virtue Ethics is too variable. You wouldn’t know where you stood with someone who changed their behaviour in this way, at times generous, but sometimes miserly.
Person-centred – Rather than an obsession with ‘quandary ethics’, it focuses on the person, valuing human relationships	Anthropocentric – Just like Natural Law, humans are the top of the hierarchy, and animals have instrumental value. Animal Rights supporters would disagree.
Broad – There isn’t just a single criteria for goodness, like a hedonic calculation or universalisation. Virtue Ethics has grown and developed, taking on board what we know about human development from many disciplines. It has become broader and wiser over the years.	Vague – Ethics ought to give us a clear system for making moral choices. It is useful to have a single, overarching principle to guide our decisions. At least Kant’s theory is easy to follow, and the Hedonic Calculus gives a straightforward calculation.
Objective – Nussbaum interprets Aristotle’s virtues as absolute – a definition of human flourishing for all people, giving an objective standard for humanity. MacIntyre sees context as important, but this gives his relative values an empirical objectivity. MacIntyre can make factual statements about the values people hold.	Subjective – Virtue Ethics gives no specific guidance about how we are to act. We have to decide for ourselves whether to genetically modify animals, clone humans, go to war, abort etc. Ethics loses its objectivity and becomes entirely relative.