

Virtue Ethics explained

Aristotle

Teleology - everything has an end or purpose or 'good'	<i>Virtue ethics brings about a better world, unlike Kantian ethics. However, it is not a slave to consequences as utilitarianism is.</i>
Eudaimonia - supreme good or 'Happiness' is the fundamental goal of life. Everything we do is done to achieve this.	<i>There is a 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</i>
People who love pleasure (live for themselves); people who love honour (living for others); people who love contemplation (living for knowledge)	<i>Takes account of differences between people. This is a theory about our characters, but we are clearly not all the same. To claim that we should all try to become the same sort of person would be wrong.</i>
As reason is the distinguishing mark of humanity, happiness involves using reason to work out what the good life is.	<i>Not over-reliant on reason as Kant was, to the detriment of any incentive for acting correctly, but recognises that tendencies towards virtuous behaviour are not enough. (Being kind-hearted won't tell us which course of action is kindest)</i>
"It is clearly a greater and more perfect thing to achieve [the good] of a community ."	<i>A holistic theory that puts the individual in a context. Virtue ethics provides a plan for creating a better society without the utilitarian's problematic claim that we need to calculate how every action we take will affect everyone else.</i>
Doctrine of the mean - midway between excess and deficiency	<i>The right act varies in each situation and with respect to each person. Allows flexibility rather than a rigid, unbending rule.</i>
Not numerical - the 'golden mean' involves generosity at the right time, not just right amount	<i>Allows for heroic feats of bravery at the appropriate time without a Quixotic 'tilting at windmills' (sometimes it is better to run away).</i>
Moral virtues (eg courage, temperance, modesty, patience, honesty, nobility) - Qualities of character attained by habit or cultivation	<i>Stable, fixed and reliable dispositions; the right sort of emotions and internal states accompany our actions</i>
Intellectual virtues (Skill, knowledge, common-sense, intuition, wisdom; resourcefulness, understanding, judgement, cleverness) - Qualities of the mind developed through instruction	<i>Virtue is chosen, chosen knowingly and chosen for its own sake. Also, because of the range of intellectual skills, a virtuous person will have the common sense and practical skill to be of positive use to others. The theory has a refreshing breadth, rather than focusing on reason and logic.</i>
Friendship is a key aspect of a eudaimon life.	<i>Our relationships define us as people and affect how we behave, yet moral theories often leave out friendship.</i>

MacIntyre

Historical (narrative) context - you need to understand the story behind how ethical thinking developed	<i>Allows us to understand where our morality has come from – you can follow the development of ideas.</i>
Focus on character , not 'quandary ethics' (ethics that focuses on moral issues)	<i>Quandry ethics says little about how we live most of our lives, and who we are as people.</i>
List of virtues changes - in village societies, strength and cunning were valued in fighting off invaders; when democracy developed, people valued political thinking and intellectual virtues more	<i>Virtue ethics is a broad theory, linked to our religious beliefs and social context. Understanding different examples of virtues helps us appreciate our own context. Homer focused more on physical strength. Aristotle's concept of an 'Athenian gentleman' and the idea that only the rich can be completely virtuous may now seem out of place, and 'friendship' seems an unusual virtue. Jane</i>

	<i>Austen said 'agreeableness' was not a real virtue, and Aristotle claimed military courage was an apparent virtue. Christianity brought us faith, hope, love and obedience.</i>
Morality relative to society (contextual) - in US, people boast, in UK people are self-deprecating	<i>Gives a meaningful account of moral rules. You can only understand moral behaviour by putting it in context.</i>
Internal and external goods (internal - qualities of character eg. being generous; external - eg. becoming rich) - these are both part of the 'good life'	<i>External goods are competitive, as there is a limited supply of wealth, fame etc. Internal goods or virtues are for the benefit of society</i>
Practices - things you do for their own sake, such as play music. They are good not merely because of the external goods they bring.	<i>Moves away from utilitarianism which would claim that a musician like Bach is good if he makes people happy. MacIntyre recognises that some people learn music simply for itself. Being virtuos is good in and of itself.</i>
Modern society - manager, aesthete, therapist. By understanding different types of people, we can understand how to achieve the 'good life'	<i>Similar to Aristotle, but updated to a modern setting. This is not prescriptive, it is an account of how people are, not what they should be like</i>
In summary, you should always ask how to form and mould character instead of questions about rules or principles in order to achieve 'the good' for individuals and as a community	<i>A moral theory for the 21st century. Rules don't work (as we don't agree on a rule-giver), and consequentialism demands that we perform evil acts merely to bring about pleasure. Rather than rigid and inflexible prescriptions, it allows different responses in different contexts.</i>

Other virtue theorists

Homer - virtues apply to specific roles and vary according to your function in society	<i>This seems to make sense – we wouldn't employ an honest lawyer or a generous accountant etc. However, virtue theory should tell us what we should aim to be like as humans, not within specific roles.</i>
Plato - the four 'cardinal' virtues are courage, justice, temperance and wisdom	<i>These seem common to a variety of virtue theories. Most people would agree that they were desirable virtues and a good thing to aim towards.</i>
Benjamin Franklin - the end of virtue theory is external (utilitarianism), not internal (being a virtuous person).	<i>This gives a reason to be virtuous – it leads to happiness. However, this makes these virtues seem false – being generous to make oneself happy doesn't seem like generosity at all.</i>
Phillipa Foot - wise people place 'value' in certain goals.	<i>MacIntyre, Foot, Anscombe and Williams lean towards relativism. They think that it is important to remember what is valuable or good in our ethical thinking, but they would not agree with any principles or norms that might come out of virtue ethics to be applied to all societies. In some cultures, the man is head of the family and female obedience to men would be a virtue. It would be wrong, they would say, to impose our culture's views on that culture.</i>
Elisabeth Anscombe - criticised 'a law conception of ethics': relying on universal principles leads to inflexibility, and an obligation to follow rules is meaningless without a rule-giver. We need to understand emotions and moral psychology.	
Bernard Williams - our emotions and relationships are important	
Martha Nussbaum - virtues are part of our common humanity and should be universal	<i>Relativism is at odds with Aristotle, who believed that the virtues emerge from a study of what it is to be human, and therefore apply across all cultures. This may seem a much more satisfactory position when considering the evils permitted by different cultures around the world.</i>