
Virtue Ethics

Julia Driver

Julia Driver is Professor of Philosophy at Washington University in St. Louis. In the next selection she explains the difference between an ethical theory, like Aristotle's, that focuses on the development of a person's character, and an ethical theory, like that of Kant or Mill, that concentrates on the formulation of rules for right action.

Sometimes, in deciding on what we ought to do, we first consider how we ought to be. For example, if faced with a situation that involves social injustice, we might pick someone whom we admired and wanted to be like—Gandhi, let's say, or Mother Teresa—and then ask “What would Gandhi do?” This doesn't give us a rigid formula or decision procedure to employ. Instead, it asks us to consider a virtuous person, to consider his or her virtues, and then ask what behavior people with these good traits and dispositions exemplify. Some writers have thought that a picture like this better reflects how people should go about making their moral decisions. They should do so on the basis of concrete virtue judgments instead of abstract principles, such as “Maximize the good” or “Never treat another person merely as a means,” and so forth.

... [V]irtue ethics has actually been around in one form or another for thousands of years. Current virtue ethicists, in fact, tend to take their inspiration from Aristotle, who was a student of Plato, and certainly one of the greatest philosophers in the history of philosophy. Aristotle wrote the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which—as an aid to his

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son—spelled out the steps to a good life. Of course, “good” is a bit ambiguous—Is that morally good, or prudentially good, or intellectually good, or all of the above? Well, for Aristotle, the good human life had all these ingredients. A good human being was virtuous in the sense that he embodied all the excellences of human character. So, Aristotle is often held up as a paradigmatic virtue ethicist. Again, . . . virtue ethics maintains that character, human excellence, *virtues*, are the basic modes of evaluation in the theory, as opposed to act evaluations such as “right” and “wrong.” . . . [A]ct evaluation is to be understood in terms of character evaluation. Virtue is the primary mode of evaluation, and all other modes are understood and defined *in terms of* virtue. . . . Most of the theoretical weight is therefore borne by the account of virtue provided in the theory. . . .

Aristotle famously believed in the claim that virtue is a mean state, that it lies between two opposed vices. This is referred to as the doctrine of the mean. The basic idea is that virtue will tend to lie between two extremes, each of which is a vice. So, bravery lies between cowardice and foolhardiness; temperance lies between gluttony and abstinence; and so forth. Some virtues can be hard to model on this view. Take honesty. Of course, failure to tell the truth—telling a lie—would be one extreme, but is there a vice of telling too much truth? Maybe . . . though I suspect there might be some disagreement over this. Part of the mean state concerned our emotions, however, and not just our actions. The virtuous person not only does the right thing, but he does the right thing in the right way—in the right sort of emotional or psychological state. Our emotions can be excessive or deficient as well. The person who runs into the battle to fight, but who is excessively fearful, is not fully virtuous. The truly well-functioning person is able to control and regulate his feelings and emotions, as well as act rightly.

Aristotle’s picture, then, of the virtuous person is the person who functions harmoniously—his desires and emotions do not conflict with what he knows to be right. They go together. This leads him to view a person who acts rightly, but who feels badly about it, as not being virtuous. This person is merely “continent”—this person can control his actions, but needs to work on bringing his emotions in line with what reason tells him is the right and appropriate thing to do. So the excellent human being is not conflicted; he does not suffer inner turmoil and the struggle between reason and passion. . . .

Many challenges have been posed to virtue ethics. . . . One *general* criticism of the whole approach is that it fails to conform to what we know about how best to explain human behavior . . .

For example, John Doris proposes that the globalism of traditional virtue ethics be rejected.¹ There is no one “honesty” trait, for example. Instead, we may have 50 or more “honesties”; that is, narrowly circumscribed traits or dispositions to tell the truth. So, Joe might not have honesty 1, which is the disposition to tell the truth about how well he does on exams, but he might have honesty 34, the disposition to tell the truth about how tall he is. So, Doris thinks that . . . the experimental evidence supports the view that there are no robust traits; that is, traits to tell the truth over all or even most contexts or situations. And this is a problem for a virtue ethics that understands virtue as a “stable” or “reliable” character trait.

Another challenge has been that virtue ethics doesn’t provide a guide to action. “Be nice, dear”—Well, what is nice, and what are the circumstances under which I should be nice? That’s what we really want to know. This shows that it is these other reasons that actually justify our behavior. This has been raised as a very standard problem for the theory, but virtue ethicists have spent a good deal of time trying to show how their theories could be applied. . . .

This challenge can be expanded by noting that virtue ethics has trouble telling us the right thing to do in conflict situations, where two virtues may conflict, and thus the corresponding rules—such as “Be honest” or “Be kind”—may conflict. But some virtue ethicists think that this is simply the way morality is—it is messy, and for any situation there may be more than one right answer. Insisting that morality is neat and tidy is simply to impose a misleading clarity on moral decision-making.

. . . Virtue ethics remains an interesting alternative approach to moral evaluation and moral guidance.

Note

1. John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 31.

Study Questions

1. When you make a moral judgment, which question should you ask yourself: “What should I do?” or “What sort of person should I be?”
2. Should moral decisions always be based on rules?
3. Can findings in psychology be relevant to assessing moral theories?
4. Might a moral question have more than one right answer?