

## Issues for Aristotle's virtue ethics

There are many issues that we may raise with Aristotle's virtue ethics, and the theory of human nature that underpins it. However, the syllabus directs us to three issues, and it is these that we will discuss here.

### **GUIDANCE ON HOW TO ACT**

A first issue is whether Aristotle's virtue ethics can provide us with any helpful guidance on how to act. Utilitarianism offers us the principle of maximising happiness and Kant offers us the test of the Categorical Imperative. Many philosophers have thought that Aristotle's doctrine of the mean should function in a similar way. But this leads to the objection that it isn't much help. First, 'too much' and 'too little' aren't quantities on a single scale. The list of 'right time, right object, right person, right motive, right way' shows that things are much more complicated than that. Second, this gives us no actual help with understanding, for example how often should we get angry, and how angry should we get. Just about anything could be 'in the mean' if the circumstances were right!

In response, we can argue that Aristotle never intended the doctrine of the mean to be helpful in this way. We can't 'figure out' what it is right to do by applying a rule like the doctrine of the mean; we must have practical wisdom. Aristotle says explicitly that what is in the mean is 'determined by the person of practical wisdom'. And life is complicated; so practical wisdom isn't about applying easy rules either. It's about 'seeing' what to do, which requires virtues of character and lots of experience.

We can press the objection. Aristotle's theory of practical wisdom doesn't provide any guidance about what to do, either. If I have practical wisdom, it seems that I simply know what to do. But if I do not have practical wisdom, what then? Knowing that the right action is what a virtuous person would do doesn't help me because I don't know what the virtuous person would do! Aristotle seems to admit as much when he says that practical wisdom requires virtue. Without a good character, I cannot understand what is truly good. But this means that knowledge of the good is not within everyone's reach. Either Aristotle's theory provides no guidance to anyone who isn't virtuous, or his theory is wrong because we are all sufficiently rational to understand what is right and wrong.

Aristotle argues that this is too simple. In discussing whether bad action can be voluntary (and therefore blameworthy) we saw that knowledge of the good can come in degrees, and we can improve or destroy our ability to know what is good by the kind of character we develop. If someone has a completely depraved character, perhaps they really don't know what is good or bad. But most people will have enough understanding of the good to make moral decisions. Furthermore,

people can improve their knowledge of what is good by becoming more virtuous people.

The objection is thinking of guidance too much in terms of *rules*. Just because practical wisdom is not a set of rules, that doesn't mean it provides no guidance at all. Aristotle's theory suggests we think about situations in terms of the virtues. Rather than ask 'could everyone do this?' (as Kant suggests) or 'what will bring about the best consequences?' (as utilitarianism suggests), we can ask a series of questions: 'would this action be kind/courageous/loyal...?' If we think of actions as expressions of virtue, this could be very helpful.

## **CONFLICTS BETWEEN VIRTUES**

A second issue for Aristotle's virtue ethics regards cases of conflict between virtues. For example, can we show justice and mercy, or do we have to choose? Here, Aristotle's theory is in a similar position to Kant's deontology. He denies that conflicts between virtues ever take place. You need practical wisdom to understand what each virtue actually requires you to do in this particular situation. With such understanding, you will be able to discover a path of action which satisfies the demands of each virtue that is relevant to the situation. If you think that mercy requires injustice, or that justice demands being merciless, then you have misunderstood what justice or mercy actually mean in this situation. For example, perhaps we are motivated towards mercy in rectifying an injustice when someone appeals to difficult circumstances or ignorance of the effects of what they did. On Aristotle's analysis, such factors are directly relevant to judging the injustice of the act (whether it is unjust, or done unjustly, or done by an unjust person). So they are relevant to what justice in rectification requires of us.

One advantage that Aristotle's theory has over Kant's is that Aristotle explicitly rejects the claim that morality involves absolute or universal rules. It is all a matter of context and judgement. This makes it easier to resolve potential conflicts.

Nevertheless, whether the theory is convincing in all cases can only be judged by looking at possible counterexamples. For example, could loyalty to a friend ever require you to be dishonest?

## **THE POSSIBILITY OF CIRCULARITY INVOLVED IN DEFINING VIRTUOUS ACTS AND VIRTUOUS PEOPLE IN TERMS OF EACH OTHER**

A third issue relates to Aristotle's accounts of virtuous action and the virtuous person. A simple reading, which causes the problem, is this:

1. an act is virtuous if it is an act that would be done by a virtuous person in this situation;
2. a virtuous person is a person who is disposed to do virtuous acts.

The difficulty with these definitions is that, taken together, we are no clearer on what a virtuous act is or what a virtuous person is. For instance, if we substitute

the definition of a virtuous person in (1), we get 'an act is virtuous if it is an act that would be done by a person who is disposed to do virtuous acts in this situation'. The definition is circular, because we have used the term 'virtuous act' to define what a virtuous act is! We get the same problem if we substitute the definition of a virtuous act in (2): 'a virtuous person is a person who is disposed to do acts that would be done by a virtuous person'.

The problem is solved by paying closer attention to Aristotle's definitions. A (fully) virtuous act is indeed an act that a virtuous person does, when they know what they are doing and choose the act for its own sake. However, a virtuous person is not simply someone who does virtuous actions. A virtuous person has the virtues, which are traits, including states of character and excellences of reason, that enable them to achieve eudaimonia. States of character relate to our choices and actions, but they are equally concerned with our passions and with what we find pleasure in. And eudaimonia is defined not in terms of virtuous actions, but in terms of many activities 'of the soul', including feeling, thinking, and choosing. So while (1) is correct, (2) is too simple.

We could press the objection a different way. We can't *tell* whether an act is virtuous without knowing whether a virtuous person would do it. And we can't tell whether someone is virtuous without seeing whether they do virtuous acts.

In reply, first, it is true that the criterion for an act being virtuous is that it is an act that a virtuous person would do. But we have a good *idea* of what a virtuous person is without being able to *name* particular individuals as virtuous or not. When considering 'what the virtuous person would do', we need not have any specific virtuous person in mind. So to judge whether an act is virtuous, we don't need to first judge that person *a* is virtuous and then figure out what *a* would do.

Second, it is true that we infer that someone is virtuous from what they do. But again, this is not the only evidence we have. Virtue is also expressed in emotional responses and pleasure, as well as the quality of someone's thinking. So there is no circularity in establishing whether an act or a person is virtuous.