

Virtue Ethics



Aristotle (384–322 BC)

Moral Considerations

- The Right Person
- The Right Object
- The Right Amount
- The Right Time
- The Right End
- The Right Way

Virtue Ethics

- Virtue theory is an approach to ethics which emphasizes the character of the moral agent, rather than rules or consequences, as the key element of ethical thinking.
- Being virtue is not a habit or tendency
- It is a inheritance character

Aristotle's Ethics

- Aristotle: a virtue is a state of character by which you 'stand well' in relation to your desires, emotions and choices:
 - 'to feel [desires and emotions] at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way' (W.D. Ross, Trans, p.6)
- Virtues are traits that are necessary for 'living well'.
- Virtues and virtuous actions lie between 'intermediate' between two vices of 'too much' and 'too little'
 - E.g. being good-tempered
- But this is not the same as 'moderation' on all occasions
 - E.g. not moderate anger, but anger appropriate to the situation
- Not arithmetical – corresponding vices aren't always 'too much' or 'too little'

Nichomachean Ethics

Nicomachus

- “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason, the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.”
 - (Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D Ross, Batoche Books, Kitchener, 1999: 3)

Ethics – Highest Good- *Eudaimonia*

- Aristotle possibly aimed to answer the Socratic question of the **Highest Good**
- **Happiness, Flourishing, Wellbeing**
- All human action has some end in view, this end may be the means to a higher end, this to a still higher, and so on... finally reach the supreme purpose, the ultimate good, for the sake which other good to be sought.”
 - (Frank Thilly, *A History of Philosophy*, Central Book Dept, Allahabad, 1982: 113-114)

- **Is pleasure good?**
- Pleasure accompanies virtuous activity as a secondary effect. Pleasure can be included as the highest good but not identical to it.
- Some people will pursue their interest in acquiring wealth, some for Honour, and some for wisdom and justice.
- **What kind of life do men lead?**
- Life of enjoyment
- Life of the political
- Life of the contemplative

Seeking Good: Balance of Desire, Feelings and Reason

- “Active exercise of the mind (reason/ practical wisdom/ *Phronesis*) in conformity with perfect goodness of virtue.”
- Choice one makes is important in life. The choice is a voluntary action.
- Everyone **wishes** to be healthy, is different from **choosing** to be healthy
- Virtue/Wisdom is better than honour.
- Philosophers are lovers of Wisdom
- Knowing the good itself is a worthy pursuit.

Virtue

- Intellectual virtue
- Enable us to think rationally. Example: *Phronesis*/ Practical Wisdom
 - Good intellect is mainly formed by churning out one's own reason. It can be fostered by education.
 - Quest for knowledge/ Perfection in thinking conceptually and coherently – and insight
- Moral virtue
- Virtues enable us to handle our desires and emotions rationally.
 - Example. Justice, prudence, fortitude, and temperance
 - These virtues can be acquired through practice and habitual action.

- *Virtue is a kind of moderation in that it aims at the mean – the mean between excess and deficiencies.*
 - Courage is a mean between foolhardiness and cowardice
 - Liberality/ Tolerance is a mean between extravagance and greed/ avarice
 - Modesty between bashfulness and shamelessness
- Thus, Aristotle concludes that “a master of any art avoids excess and defect, but seeks the intermediate and chooses this”
- “Actions are called just and temperate when they are such as the just or the temperate man would do, but it is not the man who does these that is just and temperate, but the man who also does them as just and temperate men do them” (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. p.244).

Virtue is a state of **Character**

- The mean is not same for every individual and under all circumstances; it is “relative” to ourselves, and determined by reason, or as a right-minded man would determine it.” (Thilly p.114)
- Moral judgement is not a subjective opinion or arbitrary choice
- Moral conduct must be decided by the right kind of man.
- Virtuous man is the standard and measure of things.
- Virtuous man must exhibit moral character and stable conduct

Self realization as highest good

- The moral dimension of self-realization does not include the selfish individualism
- Aristotle tried to be altruistic
- True self of man must be motivated by noble thoughts.
- A moral person must promote the interest of the others and service of his country/ humanity.
- Virtuous man is a character of loving goodness for its own sake.
- To a virtuous person a friend is a second self (an alter ego)

Virtue...Justice

- “Justice is virtue implying a relation to others, for it promotes the interest of another, whether he be a ruler or simply a fellow citizen.” (p.115)
- Justice -
- lawfulness and fairness
- Laws are pronounced for all subjects and interests of the community as a whole
- All the virtues are included in the justice
- Justice means giving the man his due
- A virtuous man is noble, pleasant, happy

Highest Happiness

- “The highest happiness is a speculative activity, an activity which taken the **form of contemplation.**” (p.116)
- The life of contemplation is the highest, the most continuous, the most pleasant and the most self-sufficient, the most intrinsically worthwhile way of life.” (Ibid.)
- “Such a life may seem to be exalted for a mere human being, and, indeed man will enjoy such a life not in virtue of his humanity but in virtue of some divine element in him.”
- The life which is in accord with reason will be divine
- Knowledge of the nature of virtue is sufficient to ensure virtuous action.