UNIT 2   HUMAN VIRTUES

Contents

2.0   OBJECTIVES

The Theory of morality which makes virtues the central concern is called virtue ethics. We shall explore the chief ideas of virtue ethics especially in the philosophy of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle and the contemporary western philosopher MacIntrye. We shall also engage in discussion with regard to virtues from the point of the view of the Asian religious traditions, notably Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. In this unit, we seek to specify some major criticisms against virtue ethics.

2.1   INTRODUCTION

Among the major currents that now dominate moral philosophy, virtue ethics counterbalances the influence of Kantianism. While the Kantian ethics attempts to relativize the ethical importance of happiness, virtue ethics rejects the Enlightenment project that founds morality on reason and brings to the forefront the question of happiness and that of nature. By what logic is this shift made possible and how does it reconcile altruism inherent in Kant's ethics of duty with more personal research of our own happiness?

In the legacy of Kant, one cannot define morality from within the framework of happiness because that would make desire to be the foundation of the moral will and desire by definition varies from individual to individual. If everyone is in search of one's own happiness, the very content of one's happiness is strictly personal: This would sacrifice any attempt to conceive a universal moral law. In order to prevent moral conscience from relativism in the pursuit of goals, Kant opposed the pursuit of happiness by consciousness of duty enabled through the categorical imperative, as a universal obligation. Yet in recent decades we are witnessing in ethics, a resurgence of the need for happiness, not as the maximization of pleasure as in the case of utilitarianism, but as the perfection of

one's own existence. This idea through reinstated by some contemporary writers such as Alasdair MacIntyre (*After Virtue*) or as Elizabeth Anscombe (*The Modern Moral Philosophy*), is as old as the Greek thinkers like Aristotle. Virtue – in the Aristotelian sense of the term – is a form of excellence in the realization of one's being.

Thus virtue ethics as one of the major approaches in normative ethics is in contrast both to the approach which emphasizes duties (deontology) and to that which emphasizes the consequences of actions (consequentialism). Suppose someone in need should be helped, an utilitarian will point to the fact that the consequences of doing so will maximize one's well-being, a deontologist will emphasize the fact that, in doing so the agent will be acting in accordance with a moral rule such as "Do unto others as you would like others do to you" and a virtue ethicist will underscore that helping that person would be benevolent and therefore virtuous.

2.2 ARISTOTLE AND HIS CONCEPT OF *EUDAIMONIA*

Aristotle is one of the founders of the Virtue Ethics in Greece. He says that the human person is a rational animal. Human person has got the ability to reason out which serves as the essential characteristics and functions of the human being. This essential characteristic of being rational leads to achieve a particular goal or end which Aristotle calls virtue. This position is called as the 'Teleological Position'. Action oriented life is based on an assumption what do you want to do? But virtuous life presupposes the question 'what do you want to be?' or 'what kind of person you are aspiring to be. For example, a good carpenter aims at the virtue that is a good sense of aesthetics.

"*Eudaimonia*" is an Aristotelian term loosely and inadequately translated as happiness. It is not what we think of in an ordinary way. *Eudaimonia* means the flourishing of human life. Aristotle recognizes that actions are not pointless because they have a purpose. Every action aims at some good. For example, the doctor's vaccination of the baby aims at the baby's health. Furthermore, some actions are done for their own sake (*ends* in themselves) and some other actions are done for the sake of some other end (*means* to other ends). Aristotle claims that all actions that are ends in themselves also contribute to a wider end, an end that is the greatest good of all. That good is *eudaimonia*. In other words, *eudaimonia* is happiness, contentment, and fulfilment; it's the name of the best kind of life, which is an end in itself and a means to live and fare well. In his opinion virtuous thinking of human being leads to a good action that further cultivates good habits. These habits develop virtuous characters that lead to the final goal that is *eudaimonia* (happiness).

Virtues are of two types. They are intellectual virtues and moral virtues. Intellectual virtues are that which can be taught and learnt. Prudence is one such virtue. We can easily learn from others as to how to be prudent. Moral virtues can be achieved by repeatedly doing an action that becomes a habit. These cultivated habits lead to achieve the ultimate happiness. Aristotle also says that virtue is a golden mean, that which lies in the middle of the two extremes. For example, courage as a moral virtue lies between the two extremes namely cowardice and fool-hardiness.

Four important virtues, according to Aristotle, are Wisdom, Prudence, Temperance and Fortitude (courage).

All virtue ethicists are indebted to Aristotle in some way. Almost all of them give importance to the character of a person rather than compliance with certain norms of right behaviour. This does not mean that they ignore moral obligations; rather they affirm the primacy of virtues because according to them moral obligations can only be derived from virtues. Hence the virtue ethicists do not primarily concern themselves with questions like if lying is wrong; they would rather seek to address if lying in a particular situation is detrimental to the honesty of the person. It becomes clear then that the virtue ethicists consider that mere adherence to moral precepts does not satisfactorily respond to challenges in leading a moral life. A full-blown ethics should take into account many factors such as motives and intentions, which are largely neglected by the duty-based ethics. Kant's 'duty for duty's sake' offers no place for motives. In other words, we do not act out of loyalty or honesty. It may be the duty of a son to take care of his ailing mother, but if he does without being motivated by love, his moral life seems incomplete. Hence moral virtues alone can ensure human flourishing.

2.3 VIRTUES AND ACTIONS

How virtues are related to actions? Are they related at all? How does an adherent of virtue ethics judge his/her own actions and those of others to be right or wrong? If someone tells a lie to avoid paying a debt, an adherent of virtue ethics instead of taking recourse to the moral norm "do not lie," would judge the action of lying as wrong based on the virtue of honesty, for lying lacks the virtue of honesty. And honesty for a virtue ethicist is integral to human flourishing. The virtue ethicist has been cultivating the virtue of honest over the years, not only in the case of lying but also in other actions. Thus acting honestly is part of his/her very person and his/her actions reflect his/her virtuous character. In other words, his/her actions naturally flow from what kind of person he/she is rather than from adhering to specific moral norms.

Virtue ethicists develop virtues not only because it leads them to happiness but also it enables human flourishing in general. Hence they evaluate their actions not only in the light of results they produce for them but also for others. Similarly they judge not only their actions but also those of others to see if those actions lead to human flourishing. Thus the guidance they seek in living out a moral life is not so much from the clearly laid out norms as from virtues that promote human flourishing. Not moral norms but persons who lead virtuous life become moral ideal. As the philosopher Louis Pojman says, they look for moral ideals in persons without focusing on abstract reasons.

2.4 EVALUATING VIRTUE ETHICS

As we have noted earlier, virtue ethics offers a better motive for the action one does than the duty-based ethics. Saving a life of someone only out of the sense of duty seems to lack a better motivation like compassion and kindness, which can be expected only from a person who has developed these virtues in him/her. It is also important to note that duty-based ethics somehow neglects some of the essential aspects of moral life, namely the emphasis of being a good person leading a virtuous life.

While there are such positive aspects in virtue ethics, which is not accounted by duty ethics, there are also some limitations in virtue ethics. The critics of Virtue Ethics specify at least three difficulties with regard to this ethical approach. First of all, they lack moral principles and ethics without specific principles cannot guide us in deciding the moral choice of an action. For example, when someone steals money, what would be a morally right act in dealing with that person? Virtue Ethics at best can tell us that we have to follow the model of virtuous persons. It does not specify or give guiding principles as to what virtuous persons would do exactly in that situation. The problem with virtue ethics, as is pointed by many philosophers is that it presents its argument in a circular way: the action if a virtuous person is right and the right action is the one done by virtuous person. If we need to avoid this circularity, we need other guiding principles which go beyond virtue ethics.

Secondly, there is a lack of moral judgment in virtue ethics. A person may be virtuous but he/she may still not be able to distinguish right action from wrong action especially if he/she is not knowledgeable in a particular field. For example a virtuous person who is a neophyte as far as scientific developments are concerned will not be able to say if stem cell research can be permitted or forbidden. In other words, the rightness or wrongness of an action does not fully depend on the virtuous character of a person. There are moral standards that are independent of the character of a person to judge the moral rightness or wrongness of an action.

Thirdly, there can be situations in which virtues enter into conflict with one another. For example if a person comes across a dilemma situation of his/her friend brought to trial and he/she is a witness. If the person tells the truth, which means he/she is dishonest, his/her friend will end up in prison for a few years. If the person wants to save his/her friend to show loyalty to his/her friendship, he/she will necessarily tell lie which implies that he/she is dishonest. Which of these two virtues honesty and loyalty, is to be pursued in this situation? Virtue ethics does not seem to provide us a satisfactory answer. This is true of all such dilemma situations. What does virtue ethics have to say about dilemmas – cases in which different virtues conflict? Justice prompts us to kill the person who is a reckless murderer, but love forbids it. Honesty demands that truth be told even if hurts, while compassion might suggest lying. What shall we do? Of course, the same kinds of dilemmas are generated by conflicts between the rules of the duty-based ethics. Deontology and virtue ethics share the conflict problem. The proponents of the duty-based ethics suggest that such conflicts between norms of duty can be resolved by determining the prominence of one norm over another. This, however, does not seem to be possible in virtue ethics unless otherwise there are other guiding principles to ascertain as to which virtues are more important than other virtues.

2.5   DEONTOLOGY VERSUS VIRTUE ETHICS

Virtue ethics is "concerned with Being rather than Doing," It is "agent-centred rather than act-centred." Critics maintained that it was unable to provide action-guidance and hence, rather than being a normative rival to utilitarian and deontological ethics, it could claim to be no more than a valuable supplement to them.

Immanuel Kant, in his duty-based ethics emphasizes on doing the duty for the sake of duty, which is also the stand of all other deontologists in general. For example, if a wife falls sick, it is obviously the duty of her husband to take care of her. Duty-based ethics does not give any motivation other than duty. Virtue ethics offer us virtues like loyalty, compassion, love and the like as motivations to do one's duty in an effective way. Good virtues motivate us to do our duties.

Sometimes this duty-based ethics goes against common sense. For example, during the war time thousands and thousands of innocents like women and children are brutally killed by the army. But army men follow the duty-based ethics, so they simply kill the innocent in order to execute their plan that which is part of duty as army men. Virtue ethics, however, has inspired many thinkers to give the right place to principles without making them absolute. As William Frankena notes rightly, "principles without traits [virtues] are impotent and traits without principles are blind."

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) State the process by which the teleological position achieved from the view of Aristotle.

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2) What does the virtue ethics emphasize: action or person? Give reasons.

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3) Explain in brief what is meant by the term *'Eudaimonia'*?

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4) What are the types of virtues?

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5) Give valuable explanations to the following statement- 'Virtue lies in the middle' or State what is meant by 'Golden Mean'.

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7) What are the disadvantages of Virtue Ethics?

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2.6 ETHICS OF CARE

Ethics of Care is a very powerful and influential version of virtue ethics though some might consider it to be an independent moral theory in its own right. Developed mainly by feminist thinkers like the woman psychologist Carol Gilligan, this account of virtue ethics dwells chiefly on the different ways in which men and women think of moral problems. According to Gilligan, men make moral decisions on the basis of rights and justice while women make moral decision on the basis of caring and feeling for others and their view-points. According the approach of men towards moral issues can be termed 'ethics of justice' while that of women can be called 'ethics of care.' Thus the ethics of care emphasizes close personal relationships and moral virtues such as compassion and sympathy. It calls for a change in our perception of morality and of virtues, laying greater emphasis on virtues exemplified by women, such as taking care of others, patience, the ability to nurture, self-sacrifice, etc. It is not clear if we can maintain that women and men adopt different approaches to virtues. Be that as it may, there must be place for care in virtue ethics along with other virtues such as justice and honesty.

2.7   MACINTYRE: RELATIVITY OF VIRTUES

In the contemporary era, Alasdair MacIntyre is a major figure in the recent revival of interest in virtue ethics and also the ethics of care, which gives importance to the body with regard to the conduct of human beings. In his *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues?* (1999), he affirms that morality cannot be thought outside of biology in so far as human person is an embodied being and not just pure rational mind as is presented within the framework of dualistic philosophy. He says that virtues change according to the context. In the period of Homer, physical strength was considered to be the virtue. In the period of Athens (Socrates and Aristotle), moral integrity was considered as a virtue, whereas during the Middle Ages when Christianity thrived, spiritual strength was considered to be the virtue. MacIntyre took a relativist stand that virtues are relative that is to say that the virtues differ in different contexts. He concludes that these differences can be attributed to different practices that generate different conceptions of virtues. Each account of virtue requires a prior account of social and moral features in order to be understood. Thus, in order to understand Homeric virtue we need to look its social role in Greek society. Virtues, then, are exercised within practices and social forms of activity that are coherent and seek to realize goods internal to the activity. Virtues enable us to achieve these goods. There is an end (*telos*) that transcends all particular practices and it constitutes the good of a whole human life.

Thus MacIntyre's approach to ethics is more in terms of understanding moral decisions than finding an absolute rule for choosing how to behave in any similar case. It is relativistic in terms of morality, and believes it useless to try to determine absolute rules of conduct, either through Kantian categorical imperative or utilitarian calculus of utility maximization and welfare.

2.8   VIRTUES IN ASIAN RELIGIONS

Confucianism: While Aristotle emphasises nurturing virtues through habitual ways of behaviour by individuals, Confucius holds that the humaneness (*jen* or *ren* which can also be translated as kind-heartedness or benevolence) is derived from the web of social relationship. Hence leading a virtuous life does not consist so much in living accordance to one's inner nature, as was thought by Aristotle, but meeting the requirement of relationship in which we find ourselves. We are not isolated individuals but part of the social network. Hence the most basic of all virtues is "humaneness." All other virtues such as righteousness and faithfulness flow naturally from humaneness. For example, in the relationship of citizen and ruler, the prime virtue is righteousness and in friendship, it is faithfulness. Be it righteousness or faithfulness, all virtues are associated to the greatest virtue of humanity, that is, humaneness. Thus Confucius brings in the social character of human person which allows for a harmonious society.

Buddhism: Both Aristotle and Confucius give importance to the human person, be it individually or collectively in their frame of virtue ethics, Buddhism adopts completely a different approach, for the concept of 'self' as a substance does not fall in line with the main teachings of Buddhism. Human is made up of five *skandas* which are on changing. There is no permanent 'self.' The imagined entity called self only leads to desire and attachment, which in turn further lead

to suffering. So virtues are neither self-actualizing as in the case of Aristotle, not society-centred as in the case of Confucius. Instead it consists in freeing 'oneself' and 'others' from suffering. If desire is the cause of suffering, then the virtues that would free us from suffering would be tranquillity and non-attachment. In order to arrive at these virtues, we should be truthful both in thought and speech.

Taoism: Taoism takes its inspiration from Buddhism with regard to the idea of flux and non-permanence. To be virtuous would then mean that going with the flow just like water in a stream, analogy given by Tao Te Ching. The flow of water is not an image of the week but of the strong because its flow cannot be resisted. A true Taoist most let him/her go along the currents, taking control of one's senses, body and mind. This is possible only through selfless, spontaneous, simple and serene life.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What are the virtues that men and women possess according to Carol Gilligan?

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2) State MacIntyre's Relativist position on virtue and cultural contexts.

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3) Explain the basic difference of Confucians, Buddhists and Taoists from the stand of Aristotle on Virtues.

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2.9   LET US SUM UP

The basic contention of virtue ethics is that moral actions are derived from virtues. Aristotle, the main proponent of virtue ethics from the western tradition hold that the greatest good of human life is *eudaimonia*, human flourishing and to achieve this, we should cultivate virtues. And a virtue is a golden mean between two extremes. The resurgence of virtue ethics in the contemporary era through eminent thinkers like MacIntyre points out to the lack in duty-based ethics, thus insisting that ethics involves not merely actions impelled by duty but also motives and intentions. While Aristotle's virtue ethics rests on human individual, virtue ethics as developed by some Asian religions emphasize social relationship and non-attachment. Whatever be the pitfalls of virtue ethics, it remains relevant and forms part of ethical theories.

2.10 KEY WORDS

Eudaimonia   :   term introduced by Aristotle that is translated as happiness. The term means to flourish is the aim of human person.

Deontology   :   a school of thought which holds on to the view that rules/ norms are more important than values.

Teleology   :   the theory that events and developments are meant to achieve a purpose and happen because of that. *Telos* means end.

2.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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