

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF VIRTUE ETHICS<sup>\*</sup>

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### **Introduction:**

The concept of virtue is one of the central concepts of moral philosophy. Moral philosophy deals with the questions of morality that discusses how one should live. Here we will make an attempt to elaborate a brief survey of concept of ‘virtue’ from its etymological meaning and historical development to its journey across the century. Virtue ethics gained its popularity in Ancient Greece from the writings of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, though it can be found even before these writings. But it has again become popular in the last part of the twentieth century with the writings of the thinkers like Elizabeth Anscombe, Phillipa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre and Benjamin Franklin. The word ‘virtue’ is used as an equivalent of the Greek word ‘*arête*’ means ‘moral excellence’. Though ‘*arête*’ in its basic sense designates the “the excellence of any kind, virtue is generally regarded as a quality which is morally good, and thus it is used as a foundation of the principle of good moral being.

The term ‘*arête*’ or virtue has a long history and it is used with many meanings. In the ancient Greece, the notion of excellence was bound with the act of living up to one’s full potential. Homer used the term for both the Greeks as well as Trojan heroes and also for the female figures, such as Penelope, the wife of Greek hero Odysseus. For the Greek and Trojan heroes it is used for their bravery but in the case of Penelope it is known for her faithfulness towards Odysseus. Though *arête* is frequently used to designate bravery and faithfulness, it is more often associated with the effectiveness. When *arête* is used as a quality of man and woman it signifies that the man or woman is having the quality of highest effectiveness. It means that the man or the woman having *arête* use all their faculties - strength, bravery, and wit - to achieve their goal. In regards to the *Iliad* the way Homer describes Achilles is an example of *arête*. Here *arête* is used as the goodness and strength of a warrior. Though Homer used the word to describe the fighting spirit of warriors; many authors applied the term to animals and even to lifeless objects, such as tools and instruments.

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### **Sophists' View of Virtue:**

By the end of the fifth century B.C., one important meaning of *arête* was popularized by the Greek thinkers. This meaning of virtue or *arête* represents as becoming a good citizen and achieving success in daily life, especially in politics and society. Taking advantage of this, the Sophists claimed that, they possessed the secret knowledge of achieving success in public life. Thus, they were able to attract the young people who were struggling to achieve success in Athenian life. However, the leading Sophists did not practise what they taught to others, because they did not belong to the society of Athens; they were foreigners.

There were few Sophists who were very popular in their time. Protagoras, Prodicus and Gorgias were among them. Protagoras of Abdera came from Thrace; he travelled around Greece as a teacher and lived in Athens for several years, where he got associated with Pericles and other rich and powerful Athenians. Pericles invited him to write the constitution of the newly founded Athenian colony, Thruui, in 444 B.C. Prodicus came from an island of Ceos. His countrymen sent him as an ambassador to Athens but later he is known as a great speaker and a teacher. Gorgias came to Greece from Leontini in Sicily. They all were first generation Sophists. These foreigners became very popular and successful not by becoming good citizens and succeeding in public life, since foreigners could not do such things. They were popular for their teaching. They could convince the Athenian young people that their teachings would help them to develop excellence for success in Athenian life.

### **Pre-philosophical conceptions of virtue:**

As the teachings of the Sophists gained in popularity in Athens, the sophists also became controversial figures. Their way of making money from teaching virtue also bothered their rival men. The controversies regarding their teaching raised sufficient discussion about excellence or virtue among the Athenian people. At the end of the fifth century Socrates became a major person in these ongoing debates. Socrates and his contemporary philosophers began to discuss about virtue with the prevailing notions of virtues. They pointed out their difficulties and ultimately modified them. The quote from Plato's *Protagoras*, "the Sophist Protagoras describes virtue as deliberating well (*euboulia*) about one's own affairs and... as one plays a

role in public life (*Protagoras* 318E – 319A).<sup>75</sup> As the discussion started, Socrates asked whether virtue can be taught by teachers and about whether virtue is one or many. He further asked whether there are many virtues and if there are too many virtues then are they separated from one another? From Plato's dialogue we come to know that there are many types of virtues. Plato discusses the virtue of Temperance or *Sophrosyne* in his *Charmides*, his *Laches* deals with Courage, *Euthyphro* with Piety and Justice and the *Crito* is about Justice.<sup>76</sup> The concept of justice has an important role in Plato's writings; the main question of Plato's *Republic* is 'what is Justice?' Let us consider the six major characteristics that perhaps proposed by Sophist philosophers. Though, later on these characteristic were modified by Socrates.

***Virtues are admirable and praiseworthy:*** It is very difficult for us to determine whether virtues are truly admirable. For example, Odysseus is a more admirable character in Homer, than he as appears in Sophocles. In Sophocles' play *Philoctetes*, Odysseus is described as clever and deceitful. But in Homeric epics he is an admirable character. Sophocles describes how Odysseus planned to kidnap Philoctetes and steal his weapon by cheating. By any standard, this act of Odysseus is injustice and shameful.

***Virtues are related to actions:*** This behavioral view of virtue was presented by Homer. He talked of great warriors whose actions were admirable because their actions were heroic and excellent. From the Socratic days it was very clear to the Athenian people that virtue was about deeds, deeds that are admirable and not shameful.

***Virtues are based on one's role in life:*** In Plato's dialogue *Meno*, Meno (a person) begins his discussion of virtue with Socrates by saying that virtue varies with one's role in social life (*Meno* 71E – 72A).<sup>77</sup> Virtuous behaviors are not same for the all people of a society; they vary from person to person. The virtue of a warrior differs significantly from that of a poet, a musician, a politician, an ordinary citizen, a head

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<sup>75</sup> Devettere, Raymond J., *Introduction to Virtue Ethics: Insights of the Ancient Greeks*, p. 61 , Georgetown University Press, Washington, 2002

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, p. 61

<sup>77</sup> Devettere, Raymond J., *Introduction to Virtue Ethics: Insights of the Ancient Greeks*, p. 61 , Georgetown University Press, Washington, 2002, p. 62

of household, and so on. Virtuous behavior is one thing for a woman living as a wife, another for a man acting as a citizen, another for warriors, and another for children and still very different for slaves. In other words, virtuous behavior is relative to persons' role in life in the society.

***Different virtues are not interconnected:*** Each virtue has its own uniqueness with no connection to any other virtue. Being a virtuous person in a particular field does not entail to be virtuous in other areas of life. For example, a warrior might have great courage in battle but have no temperance to take wine or having sex.

***Virtues can do harm to themselves:*** Virtues can also do harm to the person who is performing virtuous behavior. One courageous soldier could lose his health; even lose his life when he is performing courageously in battle. Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, put his life in danger when he challenged Odysseus by returning to Philoctetes the awesome bow that the Greek desperately needed at Troy.

***Wisdom or knowledge is just a kind of virtue:*** Wisdom or knowledge has no special role. It is just an important form of excellence, such as justice, temperance and courage. These popular conceptions of virtue began to be changed when Socrates and other Philosophers started examining them and criticizing the Sophists account of virtue.<sup>78</sup> What we know today as virtue ethics is the result of radical modification of the concept by the philosophers.

### **Socratic conception of virtue:**

Socrates and other philosophers show their dissatisfaction to the popular conception of virtue at that time. Though their theory of virtue considerably differ from the popular conception of virtue yet they both agreed on the first characteristic that virtue is admirable and praiseworthy. Socrates modified the second characteristic and thoroughly revised the rest four. For them, virtues are not only actions but psychological states; they are connected with each other. And the last one, practical wisdom is not just a virtue; rather it is a foundational virtue of every other virtue. Let us discuss the seven cardinal characteristics of virtues by Socrates.

***Virtues are admirable and praiseworthy:***

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<sup>78</sup> Devettere, Raymond J., *Introduction to Virtue Ethics: Insights of the Ancient Greeks*, p. 61 , Georgetown University Press, Washington, 2002, p. 63

As we have already mentioned earlier that this is the only characteristic of virtue that Socrates and his other fellow philosophers had agreed. They both agreed that virtue should have the quality of admirability and praiseworthiness and are in argument with the popular conception of virtue.

***Most virtues are psychological states:*** According to the Socrates virtues are mainly related with the character, habits and dispositions of persons. They explain their views by determining the kind of person one is, and not his actions. Because actions follows from virtuous character, but do not determine a virtuous character.

***Virtues are not based on our social roles:*** The Greek philosophers believe that virtues are rooted in our soul; they are not based on the roles played by a man in the society. Socrates in his *Meno*, explained that virtues such as justice and temperance are not dependent upon the role that a person played in life. Being a good human being one is just needed to have a set of virtues independent of what role he plays in the society (*Meno* 72C -73C).

***Virtues are connected:*** All virtues are internally connected with each other. If a man has one type of virtue, it means that he can have them all. Ancient philosophers believed that all virtues are united or integrated in the character of person, and so are in responsible for each other. For them virtues cannot be separated. If a person does not have the virtue of temperance it follows that he does not have the virtues of justice, love, and so on. Though this theory looks like counterintuitive yet it is clear that, with wisdom as a virtue unity of the moral virtues seems to be inevitable.

***Virtues are not contrary to the person's self-interest:*** Virtues are never in conflict with person's self-interest. Many people think that this theory is counterintuitive. Most of the modern moral philosophers react against it by saying that ethics is about social life, but the interest of the society need not necessarily contradict personal or self-interest. Live and let live is the principle of social living.

***Wisdom or knowledge is the foundation of all virtues:*** All of our virtues require wisdom to move us towards the goal. For Socrates wisdom or knowledge is the only virtue, and for Aristotle and Plato, it is the foundational virtue that creates the others.

***Virtue requires freedom:*** A person is called virtuous only by freely choosing his or her actions. So virtue requires personal freedom, the freedom of choosing actions. A person becomes just only by choosing just actions repeatedly, he became honest by choosing honest actions repeatedly, temperance by choosing temperate actions

repeatedly, and so on. Without the freedom of personal choice authentic virtuous character cannot be constituted. However, it is also true that freedom does not alone guarantee virtue. Choosing to do something does not necessarily mean that what is chosen is good.

**Plato's notion of virtue:**

Plato's account of virtue can be found mainly in his two different works, one is *Protagoras* and the other one is *Republic*. In Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*, Protagoras (a person) claimed that virtue is some kind of a whole with different parts, such as a human face is a whole with different parts (nose, eyes and so on). He says that a person could have some virtues but not all, just as a person could be missing a part of his face, an eye, for example. Like this a person could be courageous but might not be temperate or just.<sup>79</sup>

The other account of virtue was expressed by Plato in his famous dialogue *Republic*. But there is no common view in the *Republic* and in the *Protagoras* regarding the notion of virtue. Plato begins his statement concerning the human soul. He divides the human soul into three parts: appetite, spirit and reason. Each part has its own desires. Appetite (*epithumetikon*) is the part of the soul which is predominant in animals; it is lusting for bodily pleasures. Appetite is desires whatever gives pleasure and such as food, sex, power and wealth. Spirited (*thumoeides*) part originates in the emotions; it intends to find whatever is appearing good in a particular situation. When I am attacked or victimized it may appear good to charge against in anger, when faced with a danger it may appear good to back down in fear, when a family member dies it may appear good to downfall with grief, and so on. The third part, rational, (*logistikon*) desires whatever is truly good. The rational part relies on reasoning to decide in each situation whatever activities that are good or bad for my life considered as a whole.

For Plato, virtue lies in the proper relation between the components of the soul. Reason should guide the soul and help us to determine what is right and what is wrong, spirit must follow the reason and appetite should obey both spirit and reason.

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<sup>79</sup> Devettere, Raymond J., *Introduction to Virtue Ethics: Insights of the Ancient Greeks*, p. 61 , Georgetown University Press, Washington, 2002 p. 79

According to this view virtue is nothing but a magical or accurate ratio of the components of the soul. considering the conception of virtue, Plato suggests that only by the state of the soul, in which reason governs and both appetite and spirit are following reason can knowledge of the good and hence virtue be acquired. Though Socrates and Plato both give an importance to desire for ethical-decision making, they also differ in regarding to some other points. Socrates thinks that all our desires are rational. But Plato acknowledges the existence of non-rational desires which are appetitive and spiritative. For Socrates, all the things which go wrong are due to ignorance. But in the case of Plato it may be due to ignorance and in some cases it also may be due to non-rational desires. For Socrates, our ethics is totally rational but Plato says that though ethics is rational we also need knowledge to shape and form our desires, educate and cultivate good habits.

#### **Aristotle's analysis of virtue ethics:**

Though Aristotle is treated as the protagonist of virtue ethics, it does not mean that he was the first person to deal with this topic. He was the first philosopher who discussed ethics as a separate part of philosophy and the different kinds of virtues that form our good life. *Nicomachean Ethics* is the name normally given to Aristotle's best known work and central text for the study of ancient virtue ethics. It is commonly believed that *Eudemian Ethics* is written before the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is not easy reading for the new comer students, it was meant for the audience of advance students who were sufficiently familiar with Aristotle's philosophy and terminology. Both the works of Aristotle are important to grasp the inner implications of Greek virtue ethics.

According to Aristotle, virtue is neither a passion nor a faculty; it is a state of character. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle offers a definition of virtue thus - "Virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, i.e. by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it."<sup>80</sup> Aristotle's definition proposes to adopt a middle path which has been much discussed. Virtue is considered as if it lies between two vices which are two extremes. For example, courage is the middle path between the extremes of rashness and cowardice. Such a middle course

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<sup>80</sup> Ross, David (Trans.), *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p. ix, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009

will be relative to vices of the extremes depending upon the actual circumstances of the individual.

Bertrand Russell claims that “there are two kinds of virtues, intellectual and moral, corresponding to the two parts of the soul. Intellectual virtues result from teaching, moral virtues from habit.”<sup>81</sup> Aristotle says that Plato has divided the soul into two parts, one is rational and the other is irrational. The irrational part is divided into the vegetative (such as plants) and the appetitive (such as animals). The expression “character virtue” is used for the original Greek Word “*ethike arête*”. Though some of the translators translate “*ethike arête*” as “moral virtue” or “ethical virtue”, these translations do not signify the actual meaning of “*ethike arête*”. Firstly, the English word “moral” and “ethical” do not serve the same purpose as the notion of “character” serve. Secondly, the expressions “moral virtue” and “ethical virtue” are commonly used to denote the virtue only that is relevant to what we call today morality or ethics, though the master virtue or fundamental virtue is not “moral virtue” or “ethical virtue” but is another kind of virtue namely intellectual virtue (*dianoetike arête*).<sup>82</sup>

### **The revival of virtue ethics:**

In the second half of the twentieth century, some highly significant changes in the moral philosophy has been happen. Before these changes, moral philosophy was divided between two traditions. These traditions were Kantianism or deontological moral theory and utilitarianism or consequentialist moral theory. Kantianism is based on the work of the eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant while on the other utilitarianism is based upon the writings of the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham, J. S. Mill and Henry Sidgwick. Kantian moral theory proposes that morality must be universal and based on impartial law of rationality. We all know that Categorical Imperative is the foundation of Kant’s moral theory. For him, do not make false promises to get your desires. Because no one can will that, if someone will that, that would be a law of nature and everyone who wants to get their desires should make false promise. And if anyone further asks that why I

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<sup>81</sup> Russell, Bertrand, *A History of Western philosophy*, p. 185, Unwin Hyman Ltd., London, 1979

<sup>82</sup> Devettere, Raymond J., *Introduction to Virtue Ethics: Insights of the Ancient Greeks*, p. 66 , Georgetown University Press, Washington, 2002

could not will this, then Kant may reply that if this happens then promising could not survive, making false promises is not in accordance with laws of rationality.

Utilitarianism is a moral theory to which Kant implacably disagreed because this theory evaluates value of a particular moral theory only by comparing the well-being of human beings. Here moral action aims at the good of human well-beings and what is rational also. This theory does not aim solely at one's own well-being. It is again an impartial theory because it obliges us to produce greater amount of overall well-being as possible. However, in 1958 Elizabeth Anscombe attacked on both of these ethical traditions. For her, both of them speaks for a foundation of morality, such as obligation but these notions are nonsensical when there is no such law-giver (God) is assumed. As many of us do not believes in God, Annscombe suggests a foundation for ethics and this foundation is the notion of virtue as a part of human flourishing.

To explain the notion of human flourishing, Anscombe refers the great Greek philosopher Aristotle who was the main inspiration for modern virtue ethics. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argued that “the best life for human being... consists in the exercise of the virtues (or the ‘excellences’)”<sup>83</sup> Aristotle talks about the necessity of *eudaimonia* and he was perhaps the most radical virtue ethicist ever. His radicalist view on virtue can be traced when he says that “there is nothing worth having in life except the exercise of the virtues.”<sup>84</sup> To discuss the notion of virtue, few questions that frequently comes in our mind which are as follows:

- What is virtue ethics? Someone may reply in a positive way that suggests us to act virtuously. According to this theory we should live a virtuous life. But this is not enough to explain this theory, for example, Mill may probably agree with this line. His reason would be – one should act virtuously because it helps him/her to produce greater amount of overall well-being. And similarly one Kantian may agree that one should be virtuous because it is an act which is in accordance with moral law.

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<sup>83</sup> Crisp, R. & Slote M. (Ed.), *Virtue Ethics*, Oxford University Press, UK, 2013, p. 2

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2

- But, how then, a virtue ethicist reacts to it? It must provide some ultimate moral reasons that are neither utilitarian nor Kantian, yet it makes some essential rationality of virtue itself. Here, virtue ethicist's straight-forward answer – I should not tell lie because it is dishonest, not because it is against the moral law, nor because it produces greater amount of overall well-being. So, the notions of virtue are mere basic than that of utilitarian or Kantian moral theory. It may also replace the notion of obligation, that utilitarians or Kantians are based on and moreover at least they do not need such language. Another feature of virtue ethics that makes it alienated from those two is its focus on moral agents and their lives, rather than focusing on one's discrete actions (telling a lie, making false promise, giving alms to beggar).<sup>85</sup>

So far we have seen, Anscombe's article '*Modern Moral Philosophy*', which was published in 1958, is considered as the inauguration of present revival of virtue ethics. Anscombe, in her article discusses few topics which are in some way or other related to the idea of a revived virtue ethics. But, the main reason that attracted its importance to all is its strong criticism of modern and contemporary moral philosophers and their theories. Though the entire criticism has not been univocally made by the modern virtue ethicist, Kantianism and religious ethicist would also criticize this point. The revival of virtue ethics inaugurated by Anscombe based on two further factors in her thinking –

- i. She claims that notions such as “‘moral obligation’ require a legislative model of morality in order to make sense.”<sup>86</sup>
- ii. She also claims that “‘Kantian ‘self-legalisation’ is not a sensible notion.”<sup>87</sup>

With both of these assumptions, Anscombe argues that secular moral philosophy that has no law-giver cannot make sensible use of moral obligation and rightness or wrongness of an action become tied to moral obligation. But the problem is, how can we do ethical statements? Anscombe simply answers that ethics can be done or based on the idea of virtue and human flourishing. To explain the ideal model of ethics that everyone should follows, Anscombe lead us back to fourth century B.C.

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<sup>85</sup> Crisp, R. & Slote M. (Ed.) , *Virtue Ethics*, Oxford University Press, UK, 2013, p. 3

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4

ancient Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. Yet, she warns us that we do not have actual understandings of the notion of virtue because Plato and Aristotle both of them do not clarify that notion and before we say what virtue is, we must have clear conception about the terms like – ‘intention’, ‘pleasure’ and action. Hence, according to Anscombe, we must have a clear idea about philosophical psychology otherwise it is better to stop moral philosophy.

Virtue ethics differentiates itself by its *aretaic* notions, such as, ‘virtue’, ‘admirability’ and ‘excellence’, which are basic than deontic notions for Anscombe and even it can replace the deontic notions, such as rightness, wrongness or moral obligations. Anscombe’s argument against the emptiness and attributions of moral obligation, clearly favours the virtue ethics and probably this is the most rigorous attack that have been made in the contemporary history of ethics. Thus, after criticizing those popular ethical theories and showing the inappropriateness of the recent moral theory, we should encourage our self to do an ethics Plato and Aristotle does. In other words, once we have an idea of philosophical psychology, then, we must do an ethics, which have virtue ethical commitment to make virtuous character or an ethical theory that primarily concern the character traits.

Anscombe made an extensive research and discussion on the recent development of contemporary moral theory, criticizes them and done an extraordinary achievement to the revival of virtue ethics. Yet, there are many present day ethicist, both defenders and opponents of her theory, do not agree with the assumptions she had made in her article ‘*Modern Moral Philosophy*’. According to many contemporary Kantians, they “can make more sense of self-legalisation than Anscombe supposes”, and there are few virtue ethicists who think that “deontic notions of right and wrong need to be tied to typical, familiar assumptions about moral obligation”, rather they naturally emerges from *aretaic* notions, such as excellence and evil.