

A BRIEF CURSORY ON VIRTUE ETHICS

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Virtue-ethics is one of the dominating approaches in normative ethics, besides utilitarianism and deontological. Aristotelian ethics is virtue-based ethics. His ethical thought is closely associated with self-realization of the individuals and is concerned with the fundamental character and motivation of the individual. Aristotle believed that the attainment of high ethical goals lies in realizing one's inherent potentialities and capacities. Aristotle pays strong emphasis on the importance of certain generally accepted virtues of character and it is through continuous perfecting these virtues that an individual becomes ethical.

For Aristotle, the way to discover moral guidance for one's actions was not to look for moral laws to coerce the behavior which is to be chosen. Rather, one should look to the behaviors of virtuous persons and emulate what they would do in a given set of circumstances. Virtuous individuals have had the benefit of a lifetime of learning in making moral decisions. They have reflected carefully on what is proper and have developed a character that makes right decisions about actions with considerable ease. They have been able to accomplish this goal through their experiences.

For Aristotle, everything aims at some end or purpose and ethics requires that we need to discover what the purpose or end of human life is. There are lots of things people pursue in order to attain what they really aim for. But then the question here is: what is that end for which people endeavor to arrive at? And all our actions are goal oriented or purposeful because they are pursued for the sake of something else beyond them. What is that something? Aristotle writes: "Every art and every enquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, seem to aim at some good; the good, therefore, has been well defined as that at which all things aim."¹ He contends that happiness is the summum bonum or the greatest good, and hence happiness is the best, noblest and most pleasant thing in the world.² Everything in the world is sought and pursued but only as an instrument to one's goal or aim and that is the happiness. Happiness alone

¹ Aristotle (1915) *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans., by W. D. Ross, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.1-3

² *Ibid.*, p. 24-25

is the end in itself and all other things are only means to it, says Aristotle. His ethics focuses on the good or ‘self-sufficient’³ virtues. His system of ethics is, thus, teleological. In other words, his ethics is value and virtue based ethics.

The good in virtue-ethics involves having both good motivations and good reasons and in combination of such act produce moral goods, like truthfulness, generosity, or kindness. The combination of motivation and reason in specific situation distinguishes virtue ethics from utilitarianism and deontology. Both motives and reasons matter; it is the process connecting the two that counts most according to Aristotle.

In the moral life one cannot just merely depends on the rules and guidelines laid down. The ability to exercise the inherent potentialities and capacities is also required. Aristotle approach focuses on the good person, with virtues understood as characteristics of the good person. Virtue-ethics regards people as social beings who can function only in relation to others. Hence, virtue-ethics is expressed in terms of interpersonal relationships; morality is concerned with concrete social life instead of abstract moral rules.⁴

In virtue-ethics the nature of our character is of fundamental importance. Aristotle says that moral virtues are not innate they are acquired through continuous efforts and perfecting virtues such as, courage, temperance, wisdom, justice, liberality, magnificence, magnanimity, friendliness, truthfulness, etc., Only then an individual becomes truly ethical. No one becomes the virtuous person in a day or two. It requires continuous efforts and inculcation of good attitudes. According to MacIntyre “A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal...”⁵ To him, one cannot be practically rational without being just or indeed without the other central virtues.⁶

³ Aristotle (1980) *Nicomachean Ethics*, Trans. D. Ross and rev. J.L. Ackrill & J.O. Urnson, Oxford, oxford University Press, p. 12

⁴ Staveren, V. I., (January 2007) ‘Beyond Utilitarianism and Deontology: Ethics in Economics’, *Review of Political Economy*, Volume 19, Number 1, p. 21–35

⁵ Alasdair, M., (1984) *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, p. 191

⁶ Alasdair, M., (1988) *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, p. 137

Aristotle's virtue-ethics is also concerned with pursuing a certain kind of morally inclusive excellence. It emphasizes on the existence of an active communities that nurtures those virtual. According to Aristotle, there are basically two kinds of virtues: intellectual and moral. Moral virtues, for Aristotle, are to be distinguished from intellectual virtues. Moral virtue has to do with feeling, choosing, and acting well and is formed by habit. Intellectual virtue, on the other hand, is identified as a kind of wisdom gained by teaching and contemplation. Our concern here is to focus only on moral virtue. Moral virtue is not something implanted in us by nature. Moral virtues are earned by efforts. By inculcating and perfecting moral virtues an individual becomes ethical. Moral virtue is, thus, the outcome from habit. In holding that moral virtues are states of character, Aristotle gives us a view of what sorts of things virtues are. Virtues are states of character but all states of character not are virtues because many more states of character are vices too. According to Aristotle, virtues lie at the mean between two extremes: excess and deficiency. The morally virtuous person always chooses to act according to the "golden mean," but Aristotle points out, the mean is not the same for all individuals.

Aristotle claims that virtues cannot be passions since we are not praised or blamed for the way we feel, but rather we are praised or blamed for our virtues. We are not praised or blamed for our feelings because they arise more or less involuntarily in response to circumstances. Aristotle's reason for denying that virtues are faculties is similar. Part of a person's faculties consists of his or her ability to feel anger. But we do not praise or blame people for having the ability to feel sad. Rather, we praise people for tending to manifest their ability to feel sad when, and only when, the circumstances call for it. So virtues are not to be identified with our capacities either. Virtues must, therefore, be states of character.

According to Aristotle, not all states of character are virtuous. Selfishness, for instance, is a state of character. It is a tendency to feel greedy desire too much and seek individual pleasures too much. But this state of character is not a virtuous one. Having said that virtues are states of character, Aristotle's account of moral virtue remains incomplete until he tells us something about which states of character are the virtues. Here, Aristotle appeals to his doctrine of the mean in order to state which states of character are virtue. In his view, the virtues are those states of

character that lie at the mean between excess and deficiency. He states: “Moral virtue is a mean between two vices, one which is marked by excess and the other by deficiency and that it is a mean in the sense that it aims at the median in the emotions and in actions.”⁷ The virtuous state of character will be a tendency to feel and react to circumstances in the appropriate way and to the appropriate degree. These extremes provide the clearest measure that the full purpose of his virtues is achieving the ultimate good, eudemonia, a flourishing life.

Aristotle’s virtue-ethics makes significantly clear that one cannot merely depend on rules and guidelines in perfecting one’s moral life. Morality is not an innate inheritance but it has to be cultivated by continuously perfecting the potentialities and capacities. Practice makes a man/woman perfect which goes well with virtue-ethics, virtue is a state of character which is built upon by habit and a virtuous habit as such is a result of consistent rational deliberation accompanied by consistent and persistent effort. A virtuous person does a virtuous act not because he/she is being told or directed to do so nor does perform in fear of the consequences of not performing it in accordance with the rules laid down but simply because he/she chooses to do it in such manner as doing in such manner has been the habitual way of doing it. It is a voluntary action in the sense that he/she has the power to do or not to do certain things and choosing of doing such and such is a voluntarily chosen choice resulting from practical wisdom. It is the character trait that manifests itself in habitual action. Virtue, according to Aristotle is integrally related to what he calls practical wisdom which may be describes as the whole of what a person need in order to do well. To have a virtue is to have a praiseworthy character trait appropriate to pursuing the particular kind of good with respect to which the trait counts as a virtue and the possession of such a good grounding of conduct comes from the agent’s having a sufficiently strong disposition to act on the understanding and motivation that are the basis appropriate to manifesting the virtue. Virtues render their possessors in both with good reasons and with motivation to do them. Virtue is not a mere

⁷ Aristotle (1915) *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans., by W. D. Ross, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 20

capacity for good deeds, but a settled, internally rooted tendency to do them for an appropriate reason.

Many ethical approaches while trying to understand what consists of a morally good person have solely emphasized on the kinds of action an agent ought to perform and neglected the significance of how a person ought to be. Virtue-ethics which is also known as agent-based approach gives ample emphasize at the agent's moral character. It looks at moral issues from the perspective of agent's moral character. From the virtue-ethics perspective, an individual has a moral virtue if and only if an individual is disposed to behave habitually in a way and with the reason that are characteristic of a morally good person. Aristotle argues that a moral virtue is a habit that enables a person to act in accordance with the specific purpose of human beings and hence the distinguishing purpose of human being is to make use of the potentiality, that is, reason in all their activities. In short, moral virtues are habits that enable a person to live according to the dictate of reason.

Though virtue-ethics as an ethical theory has been widely accepted as one of the most important normative approaches, but it is not entirely free from problems. Different thinkers have posed crucial questions the answers to which are not readily available. One of the most severe criticisms posed against virtue ethics is that it fails to provide us with befitting guidance on how we are to act. When a person is trying to make a decision whether to commit suicide, for example, a person may ask to a colleague 'what should I do?' The question here is not of a kind of character one should possess but rather it is a question of what kind of actions are appropriate in such situation. The answer to this question the virtue-ethics fails to provide the befitting guidance as the theory deliberately turns away from action and focuses on the kinds of moral character. In our day to day life situation human beings encounter different kinds of situations and each particular situation needs a particular guidance. The kind of moral guidance which is quite relevant and befitting for some case may not be equally appropriate for other case. If so, then a comprehensive measure needs to be framed and inculcated in order that appropriate guidance may be provided.