

ARISTOTLE'S VIRTUE ETHICS

Ethical system based on defining the personal qualities that make a person moral; the focus on a person's character rather than their specific actions; Aristotle's moral virtues (based on the deficiency; the excess and the mean); Jesus' teachings on virtues (the Beatitudes).

Challenges: virtues are not a practical guide to moral behaviour; issue of cultural relativism (ideas on the good virtues are not universal); virtues can be used for immoral acts.

INTRODUCTION

“To do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not for every one nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble.”

(Aristotle, Ethics II.9)

For a brilliant introductory lecture on the meaning of practical wisdom in virtue ethics by Professor Schwartz of the University of Colorado go to:

https://www.ted.com/talks/barry_schwartz_on_our_loss_of_wisdom?language=en

For Aristotle, the good life consists in forming a good character. The goal is a flourishing life (*eudaimonia* = happiness, fulfilment or flourishing) which has both a personal and social dimension. Aristotle's Ethics should never be divorced from his Politics.

- Good actions are the fruit of good habits (in Greek, *ethos* means character). A habit is a disposition of character to act in an appropriate way in the circumstances.
- We acquire habits by developing our will and our judgement. So virtue, says Professor Barry Schwartz, is a combination of moral will plus moral skill. The word ‘conscience’ literally means to “act with knowledge to will something” (in Latin, *consciare*, “to act with knowledge”).
- Plato believed that knowledge is a form of virtue (in Greek, *arete* meaning skill or excellence; in Latin, *virtus*) while ignorance is vice. Hence, the saying “think before you act.”
- Aristotle emphasises the practical dimension of virtue and develops Plato’s emphasis on knowledge: he distinguished between two intellectual virtues that bring happiness:
 - Practical Wisdom (**phronesis**): the habit of good judgment, sometimes translated ‘prudence’. This intellectual virtue is the key to moral choice.
 - Intellectual wisdom (*sophia*): the habit of ordering all principles and conclusions into one vast body of truth (metaphysics). This intellectual virtue underpins all knowledge and wisdom in the sciences.
- We need to train our abilities to realise their fullest potential: to experience happiness (flourishing, Greek **eudaimonia**).
- Wise people are made, and not born. We become wise by constant application of good habits to daily life.

THE GOAL OF A FLOURISHING LIFE

The Greek word for happiness, *eudaimonia* is better translated “flourishing” or ‘fulfilment’. It implies a process of personal growth and development gained over a lifetime of following the virtues and using practical wisdom (*phronesis*) to apply them.

Unlike the utilitarians, Aristotle does not argue that happiness is experienced as pleasure, but in intellectual delight where the human being consciously wills to act in accordance with virtue.

The highest good is *contemplation*, reflecting the Greek emphasis on *knowledge* and *wisdom*. As virtue becomes a habit, we achieve greater perfection as a rational animal, so fulfilling our true purpose. The older we get, the wiser we become, and Aristotle believed we are happiest a minute before we die, because the process of personal growth is at its peak in old age.

Wrong actions result from our failure to be taught knowledge of the good to overcome our ignorance. Once we know what is good we can then practise it, make mistakes, learn from these mistakes, and so grow in the habit of excellence (Greek *arete* means skill, virtue or excellence).

An analogy might help to explain how virtue to Aristotle is a *skill*. Wayne Rooney is a skilful (virtuous in this sense) footballer. When he was young he watched other skilful footballers and was trained by a good coach. So by *emulating* (copying) his hero Bobby Charlton and by the skilful coaching of Sir Alec Ferguson he developed and acquired the skills of a striker. He had to practise hard: day after day he fired shots at goal and practised the tricks of beating an opponent. Gradually he made fewer and fewer mistakes, and became sharper and wiser. So by knowledge and by practice Wayne Rooney developed the virtues he needed to flourish.

VIRTUE IS THE KEY

“We are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good. Human beings do not fall under any art (technique or skill) or precept (theory) but the people must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion (practice).”

(Ethics II.2, p. 183).

Aristotle argues that good actions come “from a firm and unchangeable character” (Ethics II.4, p. 187). When, for example, I face a moral dilemma and make a decision about “what is appropriate to the occasion,” the choice comes from a virtuous character formed by thinking over all the decisions I’ve made before.

In this way, cultivating practical wisdom (*phronesis*) or **right judgement** is the key to the good life.

Aristotle’s “Golden Mean”

When we face a specific situation, how do we decide what to do?

Aristotle’s teacher, Plato, sought to direct the power of the human will towards eternal truths. Aristotle, however, argued that I need to apply seven possible excessive and defective virtues, including courage, generosity, magnificence, pride, anger, truth, and indignation.

Take the virtue of courage (*Ethics* II.7, p. 191), for example.

Aristotle reminds us that “courage” is located somewhere between a *deficiency*, fear, and an *excess*, rashness.

Fear stops us acting at all: it paralyses us. But at the opposite end, recklessness is a kind of unwise over-confidence.

During the 1982 Falklands War the British paratroopers were locked in a stalemate at the battle of Goose Green. Colonel Jones, the commanding Officer, grabbed a machine gun and sprinted along a ridge, firing wildly at the Argentinian positions before falling dead from enemy bullets. He was courageous, of course, and won the VC, but was he wise?

His second in command, Major Chris Keeble decided on another strategy. He shouted out at the Argentinian positions, 'we are the British paratroops and we call on you to surrender immediately'. His response was also courageous, but it proved wiser as the Argentinians quickly surrendered without further loss of life.

In this way **practical wisdom** decides what to do in a way that's appropriate to many different circumstances. Our supreme challenge is to cultivate wisdom. As Aristotle puts it in his own words:

"Virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean – the mean relative to us, determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the individual with practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on deficiency; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. Hence in respect of its substance and the definition which states its essence virtue is a mean".

(Aristotle, Ethics II.6, p.190)

THE KEY VIRTUES

Aristotle maintains that six other virtues are bounded by the two vices, one a vice of excess and one of deficiency.

- Generosity lies between wastefulness and meanness (Ethics II.7, pp. 191-192; IV.1, pp. 210-215);
- Magnificence (desire to display the best) lies between vulgarity and stinginess (Ethics IV.2, pp. 215-218);
- Pride is bounded by vanity and humility (Ethics II.7, p. 192; IV.3, pp. 218-223);
- Anger of a right sort lies between bad temper and indifference or apathy (Ethics II.7, p. 192; IV.1, pp. 210-214);
- Truth is destroyed through an excess, boasting, or a defect, modesty (Ethics II.7, p. 193; IV.7, p. 193);
- Indignation lies somewhere between envy and spite (Ethics II.7, pp. 193-194).

Therefore we find two extreme expressions of a particular virtue. **Phronesis** determines the judgment point of the **golden mean**.

Aristotle reminds us that it is not easy to determine the mean.

“But to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not for every one nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble”

(Aristotle, Ethics II.9, p. 195).

LEARNING VIRTUE

The intellectual virtues (for example, pure ideas like courage) are not innate to human creatures; instead, the virtues owe their birth and growth to good teaching. Moral virtue likewise is not in-born (in contrast to Aquinas' view that *synderesis*, or the desire to do good and avoid evil, is **innate**); instead good teachers enable students to learn how to act virtuously and to delight in doing good. So educating people in ethical behaviour requires both experience and time.

(Ethics II.1, p. 181).

In summary, we achieve the virtues through the three E's:

- **Emulation** as we copy our heroes and heroines.
- **Education** as we listen to our teachers.
- **Experience** as we learn the skill of phronesis or practical wisdom.

The ultimate goal is that I, and society generally, should flourish, as a tree flourishes that has strong roots grounded in good soil.

Exercise:

1. What do Aristotle's seven virtues tell us about the nature of virtue ethics (courage, generosity, magnificence, pride, anger, indignation and truth)?
2. Would your list be the same? If not, which virtue(s) would you change?
3. Are the virtues relativistic?

REFERENCES

1. Aristotle. (1958). *Nichomachean Ethics* (W. D. Ross, Trans.) In J. D. Kaplan (Ed.), *The pocket Aristotle* (pp. 158-274). New York: Washington Square Press