

Virtue Ethics

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The virtue ethicist argues that what matters morally is not what we *do at a time*, but what we *become over time*.

To the virtue ethicist it is the acquisition of a good character that is – or should be – our moral aim

Importantly the virtue ethicist rejects the idea that we should:

(a) follow rules

(b) try to produce certain consequences

Here are some considerations that may prompt you to accept Virtue Ethics...

Despite his fear a fireman judges that running again into the burning house might enable him to save a child. He springs into action. Sadly he fails to save the child and injures himself in the attempt.

A poverty-stricken scientist is offered money by a rival company to share details of her work. The scientist knows these details will soon be in the public domain, so no harm would be done by accepting. Nevertheless she rejects the offer, unable to betray her company.

An unemployed biologist is interviewed for his dream job. The interview goes well until he discovers the company is funded by a Christian organisation that expects employees to be Christian. Although he could get away with claiming to be a Christian, the biologist doesn't want to lie and so loses the job.

**Importantly we can't be *born* virtuous,
virtue is something that must be acquired**

**Being virtuous is a matter of acquiring
the right habits.**

An athlete must acquire the right habits so his natural strength will flourish.

Similarly, human beings must habitually act in accordance with virtue to avoid becoming morally flabby.

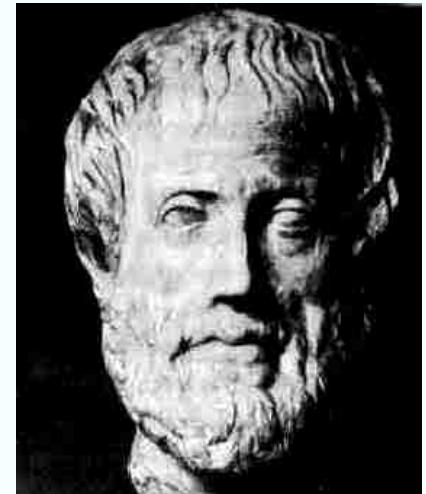
If you acquire the right habits you will, over time, become a person with the disposition to do certain things in certain circumstances.

Once you have become virtuous you will:

- know what the right action is;
- perform the right action;
- perform the right action *because* it is the right action.

Aristotle, the founder of virtue ethics, believed that human beings are unique in having a potential they can fulfil by their own efforts.

The only way to fulfil this potential, and achieve happiness, he argued, is to acquire the virtues.



Of course no-one whose child is killed in an accident will be happy however virtuous he is.

Luck and money are also required for happiness.

For Aristotle virtue was *necessary* for happiness, but not sufficient.

Importantly acquiring the virtues cannot be understood as a *means* to happiness.

Anyone who attempts to be virtuous because they want their own happiness has missed the point.

Virtue is its own reward

Some argue that virtue ethics is circular and gives us no guidance on what to do

A virtue theorist insists there is no such thing as a manual that will tell us how to act morally.

The only way we can learn how to act morally is by emulating those who already act morally.

The only guidance virtue theory offers us when it comes to our own actions is to tell us to seek out virtuous people and emulate them.

Moral knowledge is *practical*, not theoretical, knowledge.

Problems for Virtue Ethics

- **How do we know who is virtuous?**
- **Are there any virtuous people?**
- **Is an act virtuous because a virtuous person performs it, or does the virtuous person perform it because it is a virtuous act?**

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