

A Romp Through Ethics for Complete Beginners

**Session Three:
Virtue Ethics: virtue, values and character**

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Last week we looked at:

- **free will and determinism**
- **moral knowledge**
- **the comparison between the moral law and the law of the land**
- **whether and why we are obliged to obey either law**

We have now finished romping through the preliminaries...

...but we'll be revisiting many of the ideas we have come across...

...as we examine four key moral theories

The four moral theories:

- 1. virtue ethics**
- 2. non-cognitivism**
- 3. deontology**
- 4. utilitarianism**

This week we are going to look at Virtue Ethics:

- **considering man's proper function and purpose in life;**
- **deciding whether virtue is necessary for happiness;**
- **examining the metaphysics and the epistemology of virtue ethics;**
- **considering the charge that virtue ethics lacks a decision-procedure**

Virtue ethics is derived from Aristotle's ethics...

...outlined by him in the *Nicomachean Ethics*...

...which he dedicated to his son Nicomachus

Virtue ethics tells us that...

... the right action is that which...

... would be chosen by a virtuous person...

This might not seem very helpful...

...and we shall consider later whether...

... it is a black mark against virtue theory...

...that it doesn't give us an obvious 'decision-procedure'

Aristotle held a *teleological* view of nature...

...a view according to which everything that exists...

...has a 'final cause'...

...a goal, end or purpose...

**To know the final cause of a thing – its
*purpose....***

**...is to know what it is to be a good one of its
kind...**

...and to know what is good for that thing...

...what it needs to fulfil that purpose

To believe a thing is a plant, for example...

...and that it is the function of a plant to grow...

...is to know that a good plant...

...is a plant that grows successfully...

...and that anything that facilitates successful growth...

..is, for plants, good

So Aristotle believed that human beings too have a 'final cause' a purpose...

...so a good (or 'excellent') human being is one that successfully fulfils this purpose...

...and that anything that facilitates the successful attainment of this end...

... would be (part of) the good for a human being

The function of a kind, according to Aristotle...

... is whatever it is that distinguishes normal mature members of this kind...

... from normal mature members of other kinds.

**If we are looking for the function of
humankind, therefore...**

... we are looking for whatever distinguishes...

...normal mature human beings...

... from normal mature members of other kinds

What do you think this might be?

The only thing that distinguishes normal mature human beings...

.... from normal mature members of other kinds...

...according to Aristotle, is our capacity for reason

If Aristotle is right this means that...

...the purpose of a human being...

...is successfully to exercise reason...

...or as Aristotle would put it...

...to successfully exercise 'the virtues'

There are two sorts of virtue, according to Aristotle...

...there are the *virtues of the intellect*...

...and there are the *moral* virtues (or virtues of character)

Intellectual virtues include:

- **Knowledge**
- **Good judgement**
- **‘practical wisdom’**

These, according to Aristotle, can be taught

Virtues of character include:

- **Courage**
- **Generosity**
- **Fair-mindedness**
- **Self-respect**

These cannot be taught we must each acquire them for ourselves

So no human being, according to Aristotle...

... can achieve life's purpose...

...without exercising these virtues...

...and doing so 'in accordance with excellence'

But if we *do* exercise the virtues in accordance with excellence...

...we will be satisfying a condition necessary...

... for the achievement of our purpose in life...

...the achievement of '*eudaimonia*'

'Eudaimonia' is often translated as 'happiness'...

...but this implies that achieving eudaimonia is being in a certain mental state...

...whereas for Aristotle we achieve eudaimonia only if we live a successful life...

...a life of activity in accordance with reason

You are likely to be happy if you have achieved eudaimonia

...but you can be happy without achieving eudaimonia

Sadly successfully exercising the virtues...

... in accordance with excellence...

...is not a *sufficient* condition of achieving eudaimonia

Aristotle says we cannot be called 'eudaimon' until we are dead...

...this should put you off translating it as 'happy'...

...achieving eudaimonia is better thought of as...

... having achieved our human potential at the end of our lives

So for Aristotle a virtuous person...

...is a person who exercises the virtues (both intellectual and moral)...

...in accordance with excellence...

....and is on their way to achieving eudaimonia

This helps us see why he also says that the right action...

...in any given situation...

...is the action that would be chosen by a virtuous person

A virtuous person is one who:

(a) knows what is right

(b) does what is right

(c) does it for the right reason

So think back to our moral dilemma...

...a virtuous person in such a situation...

...would only need to be in the situation...

... to 'see' which action is right

Furthermore such a person, knowing which action is right....

...would always perform it...

...so if telling the truth is right he would tell the truth...

...he wouldn't give into moral cowardice

And such a person would perform the right action...

...for the right reason...

...if telling the truth is the right thing to do...

...he would tell it *because* it is the right thing to do...

...not because he gave into a moment's spite

To understand this is to see that ...

...exercising the virtues...

... cannot be seen as a *means* to eudaimonia...

**...anyone seeing it thus would be missing the
point**

Note that Aristotle believes that in every situation...

...there is an action that is right...

...but that we are only *acting rightly*...

...if we perform the right action *for the right reason*

So someone might perform the right act on an occasion...

...without being morally praiseworthy for performing it...

...such a person might, for example, tell the truth...

...without being honest

We saw earlier that Aristotle believes we must *acquire*...

...the virtues of character for ourselves...

...that they cannot be taught to us by our parents...

...who can only teach us rules

Aristotle rejects the idea that we know moral truth by knowing rules...

...'the rules' he says, 'run out'...

...to know the right action we have to exercise reason..

...in each situation

So how do we acquire these virtues of character?

To acquire the virtue of courage...

...first we must reflect on the nature of courage...

...understanding that the courageous person...

...avoids the vices of both rashness and cowardice

For each of us this might involve something different...

...if you tend to rashness...

...being courageous will be different for you...

...than for a person who tends to cowardice

The virtue lies at the 'golden mean'...

...between the two vices...

...and to know the virtue...

... you must also know yourself

To acquire the virtue of courage...

... you will also have to get into the habit...

...of acting courageously

You are not born with a virtue...

**...even if you are born with a tendency to act
courageously...**

**...this does not guarantee you will acquire the virtue
of courage...**

...any more than being born athletic...

...guarantees you will become an athlete

Someone born with a tendency to be athletic...

...might grow up lazy and fat...

...if he doesn't eat the right things, exercise and look after himself...

...in the same way we can be morally flabby...

...even if we were born with helpful tendencies

To have the virtue of courage is to...

... understand the nature of courage...

...to be consistently courageous...

**...and always to be courageous for the right
reason**

Aristotle says two things about virtue we might find odd:

- (i) The virtues are 'unified' you cannot have one without having them all**

- (ii) Possession of a virtue means you are not even tempted not to do the virtuous thing**

Aristotle also believes that our characters...

...are in our own hands...

...we *choose* to become or not to become...

...virtuous

Finally let's look at the claim that Aristotle's ethics...

... does not generate a 'decision-procedure'...

...it doesn't tell us how to act

Aristotle's only advice to us is to say that if we want to know how to act...

...we should look to the actions of a virtuous person...

...which doesn't seem very helpful

But we should note that it is what we *all* do...

...when we want to know how to act...

...we seek the advice of someone...

... whose advice we respect

So we approach someone we believe to be virtuous...

...and ask them what they would do...

...so to the extent we act on their advice...

..we are agreeing with Aristotle

Note that even the government does this when...

...faced with a controversial issue...

...it sets up a committee of the 'great and the good'

But of course we should look to these exemplars...

.... only in pursuit of our own attempts to acquire the virtues...

...and to become the sort of person to whom others look...

So Aristotle believes:

- (a) moral beliefs are true or false**
- (b) there are moral facts**
- (c) there are no moral rules**
- (d) we can acquire moral knowledge**
- (e) we are free to choose our actions**

Is Aristotle a token absolutist?

How does Aristotle explain our acquisition of moral knowledge?

Some questions to help you think about Aristotle:

Did thinking about the moral dilemma again here help you to see how lectures one and three fit together?

What is a virtue? Are there different types of virtue?

Would a virtue ethicist be likely to be a moral particularist or a moral generalist? Why?

Why does Aristotle think we can't be born virtuous?

Why is habit an important notion for virtue ethics?

What is the 'golden mean'? Why does Aristotle think it is important?

If an action is right does that mean that the one performing it is to be praised for acting morally? If not why not?

Is Aristotle's claim that our character is 'in our own hands' consistent with hard determinism?

Virtue ethics doesn't offer us a decision procedure when it comes to making moral decisions. Is this a black mark against it, or simply a reflection of the nature of morality?

Next week's reading:

Hume's 'Of the Influencing Motives of the Will' and 'Moral Distinctions not Derived from Reason' (pages 3-8 of the set text).

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-cognitivism/>

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-moral/>

<http://www.davidhume.org/>

The last website is the work of Peter Millican of Oxford University. On it you will find editions of all Hume's major works.

Here too is a YouTube broadcast of a discussion about Hume between Bryan McGee and Philosopher John Passmore :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M6v3ZYt08fY>