

Virtue Ethics

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Abstract

Is ethics all about rights and duties, or is it about living a happy, flourishing life? For millennia in the West, ethics was about the way to flourish as an individual and a community. The qualities that enable people to live that way are the virtues, and that style of ethics is called Virtue Ethics. In the early modern period, Virtue Ethics went out of fashion and ethics began to focus on right and duties, where rights and duties are demands made against others. In this article I argue that the language of rights and duties has made it almost impossible for people on opposing sides of public policy issues to come to agreement. I defend the return of Virtue Ethics in philosophy, and propose that if it can be adopted by ordinary people, we will have a better chance at overcoming our deep divisions.

Ethics is about the way we should live. Some ways are good, others are not so good. Some end in disaster. Some ways are so admirable, it is ennobling to witness them or even to just read about them or see them depicted in film. We probably hesitate to say how good a particular person's life is because we can never be sure what a life is like on the inside. We might not know what alternatives a person has, and we don't know how a certain life will be viewed by wise persons in the distant future. Still, we probably agree that some ways of living are better than others. But talking about lives in the abstract is one thing; it is much harder to apply this knowledge to ourselves and our own decisions about how to live. Aristotle attempted to do that in the first systematic treatment of ethics in human history. Aristotle's moral philosophy was and still is the most important version of virtue ethics.

Virtue ethics focuses on good lives. Aristotle proclaims at the beginning of the *Nicomachean*

Ethics that every person desires *eudaimonia*, which is translated 'happiness' or 'flourishing'. We agree about that, he says. What we disagree about is what kind of life is the one we want. Is it a life of pleasure, a life of honour, a life of virtue, a life of thought, or something else? Some people these days would say that it is a life of power.

To resolve the disagreement, Aristotle asks an interesting question. What is the *ergon* (function) of a human being *as a human being*? He is not asking what is one's function in society, or in one's family or business or community, but what is one's function by nature as a human being. You can ask this question whether you are a mother or a son, a student or a shopkeeper or a farmer, or a modern worker in a large urban corporation. Everybody can ask this question, and everybody expects the same answer as long as human beings are part of nature.



Aristotle says that the function of a thing is determined by the kind of thing that it is, and to see that, we need to look at how it differs from other kinds of things. To use one of Plato's examples, the function of a knife is to be a tool of a specific kind – one that cuts. Similarly, in the biological realm, the function of each kind of animal is connected with what makes that kind of animal different from other kinds. Fish and dogs and pigs and humans all have different functions that we can determine by looking at what makes them different from each other. For humans, Aristotle says that what makes us different is our power of reason. We are the only species that has rational powers as well as powers shared with other creatures, such as perception, physical and social activity, and feeling. Recent research on animal intelligence reveals the reasoning abilities of many animals, including primates, dolphins and birds. They are smarter than Aristotle thought, but presumably there is

something interestingly different about us, and it is located in our higher cognitive processes.

A good life for an animal of a certain kind is a life of performing its function well. When it does so, it is fulfilled in the potentialities of its nature. A good dog does canine activities well. A good human does human activities well under the guidance of reason. A virtue or excellence is a quality that enables an animal to perform its function well. In the case of humans, those qualities are traits that allow us to perform human physical, social and intellectual activities in a way that controls and directs the emotions and keeps the activities under the guidance of reason. Temperance, courage, justice, wisdom, communicative and social virtues, virtues of friendship, virtues that enable us to handle honour and shame properly, virtues that enable us to handle money properly – all of these traits are virtues because they are what humans need to live a life of well-being, a life of happiness.

So, Aristotle closely connects the ideas of nature, function, well-being and virtue:

‘Aristotle’s moral philosophy was and still is the most important version of virtue ethics.’

1. The end by **nature** of any kind of animal is to **live well**.
2. To **live well** is to perform well the **function** of that kind of animal.
3. The **function** of a kind of animal is the performance of distinctive activities of that kind of animal.
4. A **virtue** is a quality that enables an animal to perform its function well.
5. What is distinctive of humans is the power of **reason**.
6. So a human virtue is a quality that enables humans to perform characteristic human activities under the governance of reason.
7. A life of human well-being, or happiness, is a life of characteristic human activities lived virtuously.

Is happiness up to us? If virtue is up to us, it is not by chance that we are happy because the major part of happiness is living virtuously. However, Aristotle admits that chance can deprive us of complete happiness. If all our friends die, or we are poor, or we live in an unjust city state, we will not be able to flourish fully, to live a life of complete well-being. So, there are things we cannot control, but for the most part, our happiness is in our own hands.

Aristotle had some interesting things to say about pleasure. It might be obvious that a life dominated by pleasure misses what is most fulfilling of our nature, but Aristotle also says that, paradoxically, *aiming* for pleasure tends to make it slip away. Pleasure naturally accompanies fulfilling human activities. We enjoy many

kinds of interactions with other people, playing games and sports, hobbies of various kinds, and intellectual and aesthetic pursuits, but the enjoyment does not come from purposefully aiming at pleasure. If you do something for the sake of the pleasure you think it will give you, you will get less pleasure than if you pursue each kind of human activity for its own sake. Pleasure comes most when it is unbidden. When you play the game as well as you can, you will get a lot of enjoyment. Doing well at the game gives you pleasure. But if you play the game for the sake of the pleasure you anticipate, you will not play the game as well and you will not get as much pleasure.

The virtues are the qualities that enable us to live a good and fulfilling life. Each virtue regulates some domain of human activity or feeling. Aristotle is famous for arguing that each virtue is a mean between two extremes – one of excess, and one of deficiency. Both extremes are vices. Courage is a mean between cowardice and foolhardiness. It is the virtue that regulates fear when facing danger. Liberality is the virtue that regulates giving wealth. It is a mean between prodigality and stinginess. You can give too much or too little. Temperance is the virtue that regulates the desire for pleasure. It is a mean between self-indulgence and something that might not have a name – perhaps insensibility. Good temper regulates anger. It is in between irascibility and meekness. Friendliness is also a virtue. People can be too friendly or not friendly enough. It is a virtue to be truthful about oneself. Boastfulness is a vice, but so is unjustified modesty. Justice in one of its senses is a mean between taking advantage of others and letting them take advantage of you.

You will notice that there are some differences between Aristotle’s list of virtues and those most of us would recognize. For one thing, Aristotle’s list is broader than ours. He puts traits like wittiness, sociability and knowing how to handle your finances in the category of ethical virtues, or virtues of character. Most people these days would find that odd, but I think that there are connections between these virtues and traits that are indisputably moral like generosity. If you do not know how to handle your money, you will have a harder time being

generous to others. You might also find it hard to be just. That happened to Thomas Jefferson. There is good evidence that he wanted to free his slaves before his death, but he was always in such great debt, he was not able to do it.

Another difference between Aristotle and us is that he had an attitude we would now call aristocratic. He does not mention the virtue of compassion for the poor. He had no idea of racism or sexism or nationalism. He took it for granted that Greeks were superior to the 'barbarians', and men are superior to women. Some modern readers of Aristotle become so angry when they read a line that is racist or sexist or chauvinistic that they say that virtue ethics should be rejected. I believe that that is a serious mistake. It is not difficult to modify Aristotle's type of theory to expand it in some ways and limit it in others. Numerous philosophers have done that in the 2,400 years since he lived.

Virtue ethics was the dominant form of ethics from ancient Greece up to the beginning of the modern period. After Aristotle, the Stoics and medieval Christian philosophers like Aquinas adopted a view of the good life and human virtue that connected it with their belief in a natural order. The social environment and each person's role in that environment was assumed to be part of that order. There were differences of opinion about the structure of nature, the social order and some of the virtues that lead to being a thriving person, and Christian philosophers added the idea that human beings have a supernatural end. Still, there was no doubt in anybody's mind that there is such a thing as nature and such a thing as virtue, and that even though human happiness is elusive, we know that it is closely connected with being a morally good person.

But what happens when the social order begins to break apart, and the leading minds of the age begin to doubt what had always been the bedrock of the moral life? In the space of a few hundred years, people stopped talking about virtue. Many doubted that there is any human nature to guide a moral framework and determine the kind of life that would be fulfilling for each person. Virtue ethics faded away, and eventually the word 'virtue' became antiquated.

The reasons for the disappearance of virtue lie in early modern history. The Protestant Reformation led to controversy about whether Christian ethics could adopt the ethics of Aristotle without detriment to the faith. The scientific revolution unseated Aristotle's dominance in beliefs about nature. In the minds of many, if Aristotle was wrong about nature, he must have been wrong about human nature and, therefore, human virtue. Disease and war broke down the social order. The Black Death of the fourteenth century led to a catastrophic reduction in population that hastened social and economic disorder and led to peasant rebellions. There was a sense that life was broken.

This was also the era of global trade. With improvements in mapping and ship design, trade flowed between Europe and China, India, south-east Asia and the colonial lands of the New World. People started to move around much more than in previous centuries as commerce grew. Once people were interacting with people very different from themselves, they had to figure out how to get along without agreeing about human nature, the virtues, or what a good life is like. That led to the development of a new way of doing ethics that put aside questions about the best human life, and focused instead on the minimal conditions for getting along with other people. The Social Contract theories of Hobbes and Locke proposed a basis for morality in shared self-interest that did not refer to anything about the potential of human nature and how to reach it.

The new basis for morality in the Enlightenment was the idea of autonomy. Rather than thinking that morality is grounded in harmony with nature, the new idea was that the ground of morality is the self – in particular, the power of self-governance. Each self has a natural right to govern itself as it sees fit. That meant that political society needs to be arranged on the basis of agreement among self-governing selves. It cannot be denied that in practice that idea led to much more freedom and much less oppression than pre-modern political arrangements. The new way of thinking about morality meant that society needed to be arranged around the rights of the self. A right is protective of the self. It is a

claim against others. Rights impose duties on other persons because the requirements they impose are mandatory. Once the idea of an individual right became the focus of moral discourse, morality became both stronger in force and narrower in scope. The violation of a right is a serious violation of justice, requiring the intervention of the law, unlike acts that are wrong because they violate classical virtues like kindness, generosity, loyalty, temperance, courage, truth-telling and practical wisdom. Vices that Aquinas called capital sins, like pride and greed, also do not pertain to anybody's rights. The virtues are the qualities that persons need to live harmoniously in well-functioning communities; they are not public demands. Virtues and vices faded from theoretical ethics at the same time as ethics began to focus on rights. We entered an era focused on the demands of the self rather than the well-being of persons and their communities.

‘The new basis for morality in the Enlightenment was the idea of autonomy.’

The idea of basic human rights was one of the great moral advances in human history. Once it was adopted, it clarified the inexcusability of the worst kind of acts, and it is responsible for the decline of many forms of oppression. Basic rights proposed during the Enlightenment included the right to life, basic freedoms of speech and religion, and protection from enslavement or torture – rights that exist independently of whether they are found in the laws of a particular country, and which are so important that they ought to be protected by law. If they are not protected by law, there is something wrong with the law. But the focus on rights and the decline of virtue concepts gradually led to the idea that all of morality is a matter of rights and the duties to respect them. Over time the scope of rights claims expanded to include anything that could be put into the category of treating people and

animals well, while retaining the strong force of a duty and its correlative right. Recently, the scope of rights claims has included such things as the right to stimulus spending, the right to information held by public authorities, the right to be addressed by one's preferred pronoun, the right to keep one's movements secret, and the right to die, among many others. Acts against virtues such as kindness, generosity, courage, temperance and trustworthiness are ignored in public debates unless they can be reframed in the language of rights. Think about the mistreatment of animals. In virtue language, such mistreatment is at least insensitive, and sometimes brutal, but when the only moral language recognized is the language of rights, people aiming to protect animals must say that all such acts are a violation of an animal's rights. We must say animals have rights. Otherwise, we don't know how to say that it is wrong to treat them in certain ways.

Reducing all of morality to the category of rights and ignoring virtue in public discussion has had several unfortunate consequences. First, the proliferation of putative rights has diluted the importance of the basic rights. The right to life and the right not to be tortured or deprived of one's property and the right not to be imprisoned unjustly are put in the same category as the right to internet access. Second, there is increasing tolerance of vicious behaviour that does not violate the law. Lying, cowardice, untrustworthiness, unkindness and lack of compassion have become more tolerated at the same time as violating minor 'rights' is not. Third, public discourse conducted only in the language of rights threatens the ability of democracies to function well because rights cannot be balanced in the way we can balance priorities grounded in commonly accepted values. We can debate about when a given kind of act crosses a line from virtue to vice, but the point of a right is that it is the sort of thing that does not need to be balanced because it is an immunity. It is meant to protect the morally fundamental category of the self. There is very little, if any, room for compromise or a softening of positions because the language of rights is inherently combative.

An example of the way the language of rights can distort a moral issue and make agreement more difficult is the current conflict over racist or degrading speech. The virtue of civility had almost no public presence until recently. Without it, there is just the right of free speech versus the right not to be offended. Civility is a virtue that governs the expression of respect for the dignity of other persons in speech and behaviour. Civility is a virtue, and incivility is a vice. Incivility detracts from the flourishing of both the uncivil person and others in the community. From the virtue perspective, to observe that someone has a 'right' to be nasty, offensive or racist is beside the point. We do not want to live in a community of uncivil people, and we are harming ourselves if we are uncivil. But when the virtue of civility is not part of public consciousness, there is nothing to do but fight over rights. People have noticed this problem and civility is now getting attention, but unfortunately it has sometimes been interpreted as a political position, and that does not help resolve the conflict. Civility should not be divisive.

Another example of the way that rights language has affected a public policy issue is abortion. Before the 1960s in the US, laws against abortion protected foetal life, but generally without explicit mention of a foetus's right to life. The laws expressed a set of values, but it would not have been natural to express those values in the language of rights, which are demands. Rather, abortion was perceived as antithetical to a way of looking at human nature and the place of parents and children in the social world that made parental responsibilities vital. When this view weakened, there was a move to liberalize abortion laws in a number of states in the US. The pro-life movement arose from the perception that abortion is a civil rights matter in which they were defending the inalienable right to life of a defenceless minority – the unborn foetus. The other side called themselves 'pro-choice', focusing on protecting a woman's autonomy in making decisions that directly affect her body. So, from the beginning, the abortion debate took the form of a claim to a right and a denial of the claim. It is significant that the labelling eventually changed when the pro-choice side took the

offensive, becoming advocates for 'abortion rights'. At first the pro-life movement claimed a right to life of the foetus and abortion advocates denied it. Now abortion advocates claim a right to abortion and those against abortion deny it. In both cases, the impassioned, adversarial nature of rights language makes it very difficult for people to come to agreement about abortion and the many other public policy issues that have become so divisive.

Many virtues ought to be common ground for persons of all political viewpoints, and attention to them can bring people closer together in their views, or at least willing to engage rationally. Compassion, generosity, tolerance, trustworthiness, honesty, sympathy, open-mindedness are all virtues critical for a well-functioning society and should not be controversial, but they are not enforceable in law. Their importance lies in their potential for increasing social harmony and getting agreement. Other virtues have entered public consciousness that Aristotle could not have appreciated. An important one is a love of nature and desire to preserve it. If our natural environment does not flourish, we cannot flourish. If love of nature is a virtue, that means that Aristotle was right about something important: we are a part of nature, and what makes us flourish is the same kind of thing that makes other biological organisms flourish. Aristotle thought we have a function as human beings, which is probably an overstatement, but it is also an overstatement to say that the ultimate authority over ourselves is our own will.

I believe that our only hope to get past the extreme polarization we see in the contemporary West is to bring back a public focus on virtue. In my work I have argued for the importance of the intellectual virtues – virtues like open-mindedness, curiosity, intellectual courage, perseverance, carefulness, honesty and autonomy. Moral and intellectual virtues have become incorporated in school curricula in the past couple of decades and they have been investigated by empirical psychologists, but it is unusual for a political commentator to refer to these virtues as a framework for public discussion. Perhaps people like the language of rights because it is combative, and so it gets lots of attention.

In philosophy, virtue theories of ethics and epistemology are becoming increasingly prominent. It is not necessary to be an Aristotelian to develop a virtue theory, and I have proposed a novel version myself that I call *exemplarist* virtue theory. This theory derives concepts of virtue, a good life, and right and wrong ways to

act by direct observation of the most admirable persons in life and fiction. Other philosophers now and in the future will use their creative imagination to systematize the ways in which the theory and practice of virtue can help us grow in understanding what a good life is like, and hopefully, help to heal the deep divisions among us.

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