

General Critique of VE

Modern moral philosophers approach the subject of morals by asking, "What is the right thing to do?"

- The emphasis is put on the act itself, not the motivation.

Virtue ethicists approach the subject of morals by asking, "What kind of person is the best person to be?"

- The emphasis is on the constant character traits behind particular acts.

Ethical theories (except for egoism) *tend* to tell you to be impartial.

- Benthamite maxim 'every one to count as one; no one to count for more than one'
- Kantian attitude to lying (under no circumstances)

Makes room for partiality

- loyalty and friendship are virtues; one is allowed - even required - to show partiality for family, friends, etc.
- to the right persons, in the right circumstances, to an appropriate degree, etc.

Verdict 1

Since the focus is more on acts rather than persons, heroes seem to be less important.

- There's still the notion of heroic acts – or acts of great altruism.
- Primitive AU theory seems to abolish even heroic acts.

Explains centrality of heroes (admired for their moral virtues).

- Jesus & the saints
- Muhammad
- Moses and the prophets
- Heroes of Old (in Greeks & other lores).

Verdict 2

Other normative ethical theories tend try to build *universalizability* into their systems. This is particularly the case in Kantian ethics and RU.

- Therefore their norms (rules) cut across different cultures.

Different cultures seem to provide different models of moral virtue, and there may be several, some conflicting, within a given culture.

- Whose virtues – Spartan or Buddhist?

Verdict 3

Other normative ethical theories may be accused of dealing in 'moral fiction'.

- Utility – is it real?
- Rights – do they exist?
- Categorical Imperatives – just a theory?

Seems to be based on something real – the idea of a virtuous human being.

- We can all envisage and admire the virtuous person.
- We can all strive to copy his or her virtues.

Verdict 4

Focus on how to decide what to do in a particular situation. K'm & U'm propose would-be procedures for deciding what to do in whatever circumstances.

- K'm focus on Categorical Imperative.
- U'm focus on consequences and their utility.

Seems not to give a precise guide for what to do in a particular situation.

- Virtue ethics ('become yourself') seems to leave you flying by the seat of your pants.

Verdict 5

Some Sample Verdicts (simply the author's off-the-cuff views)

Verdict 1

Virtue Ethics **Other Theories**

Virtue Theory recognises the importance of the family and the formative elements in the rearing of a person to adulthood. Here, a young person has the opportunity to experience and practise the central virtues – including justice, fair play and impartiality. Here, a child learns to extend its sympathies beyond itself to its siblings, friends, and, ultimately, to all humans. Some thinkers (e.g. Peter Singer) can sometimes make us feel ashamed of the local affections of friends and family, since, the argument goes, we tend to be more ready to extend our help and resources to them and less ready to do the same to strangers in greater need. We should not feel ashamed; there will always be a natural imbalance between the care we extend to our family and friends and that we extend to others. Charity really does begin at home (not merely acts of charity, but the very concept of charity). A virtuous adult will realise that while charity begins at home, it does not end there.

Verdict 2

Virtue Ethics **Other Theories**

From the dawn of humanity, story telling has been integral to cultures. Typically stories hold up heroically virtuous (and despicably vicious) characters. People seem to hunger for paradigms for what it is to live well. Whilst these stories played a larger role in cultures than simply being morality tales, they nonetheless were significant in the moral formation of people. Any modern ethical theory should at least engage with the question of heroic figures and their role in moral formation.

Verdict 3

Virtue Ethics **Other Theories**

Cultures in which virtues have been emphasised (i.e. practically all older cultures) have not been quick to embrace strangers as 'other selves'. 'Treat equals equally, unequals unequally' sums up one tenet of Aristotle, a major proponent of Virtue Theory. It may be that the rise of the metaphysical notion of all humans as 'in God's image' was needed to slowly change the 'virtue catalogues' of cultures, purging 'virtues' that seem to us unworthy (e.g. Aristotle's 'great-souled man' strikes us as like Darcy before his conversion). It's probably wrong to blame Virtue Theory because some of its catalogues were populated with 'bad virtues'. It simply needed metaphysical insight to give it completion and focus.

Verdict 5

Virtue Ethics **Other Theories**

This is an oft-repeated criticism of Virtue Theory. How can Virtue Theory be 'applied' in situations when it fails even to offer us a decision-making process as to right action? Crucial to VT is the notion of 'prudence' or 'practical wisdom'. This is an intellectual virtue, a practised ability of the mind to weigh up what's what in particular situations and act according to its insights. Even if you're steeped in Kantian or Utilitarian Ethics, ask yourself: do you ever apply one of their decision routines in an actual moral situation? Typically not. Even if you do, you'll still need to make a judgement call (i.e. use practical wisdom) as to what duty is foremost, or what consequences really matter.