

# VIRTUE THEORY

Consider this situation.

A teacher is introducing herself to a new class of 11-year-olds. As is usual, she wishes to set the ground rules for acceptable behaviour – not dictatorially, rather in collaboration with the class. The idea is that they should have ownership of the rules set. In asking for ground rules, Jimmy is most vocal. He suggests:

1. *Don't shout out; raise your hand.*
2. *Listen to the teacher and to others as they contribute to class discussion.*
3. *Don't be rude to the teacher and to others.*
4. *Respect other people's things.*
5. *Take care in doing your work.*
6. *Try your best.*

The teacher is very pleased and praises Jimmy for his contributions. The lesson moves on and she introduces first topic. As the lesson proceeds, she notes with increasing distress that Jimmy is managing to break every ground rule he suggested.

What points can be taken from the situation above?

- Knowledge of 'how to behave' does not necessarily mean that a pupil behaves.
- What makes a pupil behave or not may be more to do with ingrained habits rather than following certain external codes.

## What is virtue?

Virtue is the *habit* of doing what is right. It is a 'good habit'. A life where virtues become ingrained is a *virtuous* life. By contrast, vices are 'bad habits'. A life where vices become ingrained is a *vicious* life.

Virtues and vices are *character traits*. Character traits are

- dispositions or habit-like tendencies that are deeply entrenched or ingrained. They have been referred to as second nature - first nature being tendencies with which we are born. Character traits are not innate - we were not born with them. Thus infants are neither virtuous nor vicious.
- formed as a result of more or less freely selected actions of a certain kind. We are not born honest or liars, but we become so by repeatedly telling the truth or by repeatedly lying.

## What is Virtue Ethics?

- Instead of focusing first on ‘What should I do?’, Virtue Ethics asks, ‘What sort of person should I become?’
- Virtue ethics depends on an individual developing a vision for his or her life. This vision is not centred on *externals* (having a Ferrari, triple-garaged ranch house in Santa Monica Bay, etc). It is a vision for you as a person. What kind of ‘you’ is the best ‘you’?
- Virtuous actions move ‘you-as-you-are’ towards ‘you-as-you-should-be’.
- Virtue Ethics was the ancient way of ethics – in fact, the Greek word that gives us ‘ethics’ meant ‘character’.
- There has been a modern revival of Virtue Ethics. **Elizabeth Anscombe** (an Oxford Philosopher who died recently) rejected the whole idea of moral duty for duty’s sake (Cf. Kantian approach). Duty cannot be divorced from the needs and aspirations of human beings. She recognised that ‘morality’ like ‘charity’ can be cold and dehumanising – the reverse of what it was intended to be.

### PIZZA MAN GIVES AWAY HIS MILLIONS

A self-made billionaire who created the world’s largest home-delivery pizza network has sold up to devote his time - and virtually all his money - to charity.

Tom Monaghan, the founder of Domino’s Pizza, has got rid of his helicopter, yacht, aircraft, radio stations, vintage cars, and an island resort. He said they were ‘distractions’. His change of heart came after reading a book ‘*Mere Christianity*’ by C. S. Lewis. He said, “I realised how bad a person I really am ... It was exciting because it showed I really have got some room for improvement.”

## So what sort of person should I become?

This is the big question. Until this is answered, Virtue Ethics theory is stalled on the runway. **Aristotle** (384-322BC) had a good stab at answering it.

[W]e shall find the best good if we first find the function of a human being. For just as the good, i.e. well [doing], for a flautist, a sculptor, and every craftsman, and in general anything that has a function and [characteristic] action, depends on its function, the same seems to be true for a human being, if a human being has some function.

*Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics*

The human function is to live a *human* life

- not just to feed & breed (plants do as much)
- not just to *enjoy* feeding, breeding etc. (beasts do as much)
- a life subject to rational oversight (development of moral virtues).

Aristotle’s thinking subordinates the question of right conduct to the question of good character. What did he mean by ‘good character’? He meant having certain human excellences or virtues we naturally admire in others and wish for in ourselves, for example: courage, wisdom, generosity, friendliness, honesty.

Good conduct: doing the sort of things that spring from virtues (in those that already have them)  
inculcate and perfect the virtues (in those who yet aspire)

Good deeds are just the sorts of deeds that good (rational & admirable) people do.

Aristotle goes on to state that the 'best good' is **eudaimonia** – often translated as 'happiness'. This is a bit misleading: eudaimonia doesn't just mean 'happiness=life going well'; it also means 'happiness=life lived well'. Nowadays we tend to see the route to 'happiness' by working on *externals*, e.g. your bank balance. Aristotle's eudaimonia marks out the route to happiness by working on *internals* – i.e. yourself.

**What would be virtues (positive character traits):**

- in Sparta, the Greek military state where boys were trained from their earliest youth into becoming warriors?
- in Athens, the Greek city state where democracy was founded?
- in South Central LA, where rival street gangs fight for drug territory?
- in Nepal/Tibet, where Buddhist beliefs are strong?
- in medieval Christian Europe?

You can see that 'the person-I-should-become' is answered differently in different cultural settings. This in turn leads to different and maybe conflicting character traits being valued.

**Ancient virtues**

Nevertheless, some character traits have survived to us as being more or less universally valued. These have come to be called the **cardinal** (hinge) virtues:

1. temperance (moderation in pleasures).
2. justice (giving each person their due).
3. courage (doing right in spite of fear).
4. prudence (practical wisdom).

In the middle ages, Christian philosophers (like St Thomas Aquinas) added three **theological** virtues:

1. faith.
2. hope.
3. charity.

The cardinal virtues, Aquinas believed, could be developed in any person by their own efforts and the encouragement of others. The theological virtues were all God-given. They could not be developed in a person from scratch. They could only be given by grace and *then* developed.

## Aristotle and the Passions

Aristotle believed in a three-tier soul in humans:

- **vegetative** soul – concerned with basic life and growth (possessed by all living things).
- **appetitive** soul – concerned with appetites and desires (possessed by all animals)
- **rational** soul – concerned with reason (possessed by humans only)

By ‘passion’ Aristotle means the emotions and impulses in the ‘appetitive’ soul). Happiness (Eudaimonia - living well) means *regulating* the passions by means of the reason.

It is the nature of ... things to be destroyed by defect and excess, as we see in the case of strength and health ... both excessive and defective exercise destroys the strength, and similarly drink or food that is above or below a certain amount destroys the health, while that which is proportionate both produces and increases and preserves it.

*Nicomachean Ethics*

Aristotle believed that reason dictated an intermediate approach when dealing with passions. Aristotle’s virtues are intermediates between two vicious extremes. For example, we all recognise a virtue of generosity that falls between stinginess and being completely over-the-top lavish. We all see how courage falls between cowardice and rashness. Some texts talk about a ‘mean’ or ‘golden mean’. This can confuse: Aristotle’s intermediate is not a mathematical average – it depends on the person and the situation. What counts as courage here will look like rashness there.

Not every action, Aristotle comments, can be subject to the mid-point treatment.

Not every action nor every passion admits of a mean; for some have names that already imply badness, e.g. spite, shamelessness, envy, and in the cases of actions adultery, theft, murder ...

*Nicomachean Ethics*

### What are ‘passions’?

Aristotle defined them as: ‘appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, love, hatred, longing, emulation, pity, and in general the feelings that are accompanied by pleasure or pain’  
*Nicomachean Ethics*

## Activities

- 1 Write the vicious extremes (defect and excess) either side of central virtue.

Emotion/Action	Vice: Deficiency	Virtue: Mean ("Middle")	Vice: Excess
Giving Money		Generosity	
Fear		Courage	
Anger		Mildness	
Enjoyment		Temperance	
Respecting oneself		Taking 'proper pride'	
Humour		Having 'ready wit'	
Sociability		Friendliness	

- 2 Aristotle's way: 'Train the emotions to approve what is good and hate what is bad'.

Kant's way: 'Ignore the emotions when you make moral choices.'

Whose way is the better way?

- 3 'Men are good in but one way, but bad in many.'  
What might Aristotle be getting at here?

**C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) and the Virtues**  
(taken from *Mere Christianity*)

There is one further point about the virtues that ought to be noticed. There is a difference doing some particular just or temperate action and being a just or temperate man. Someone who is not a good tennis player may now and then make a good shot. What you mean by a good player is a man whose eye and muscles and nerves have been trained by making innumerable good shots that they can now be relied on. They have a certain tone or quality which is there even when he is not playing ... In the same way a man who perseveres in doing just actions gets in the end a certain quality of character. Now it is that quality rather than the particular actions which we mean when we talk of a 'virtue'.

If we thought only of the particular actions we might encourage three wrong ideas.

- 1 We might think that, provided you did the right thing, it did not matter how or why you did it – whether you did it willingly or unwillingly ... But the truth is that right actions done for the wrong reason do not help to build the internal quality or character called a 'virtue' ... (If the bad tennis player hits very hard, not because he sees a very hard stroke is required, but because he has lost his temper, his stroke might possibly, by luck, help him to win that particular game; but it will not be helping him to become a reliable player.)
- 2 We might think that God wanted simply obedience to a set of rules: whereas He really wants people of a particular sort.
- 3 We might think that 'virtues' were necessary only for this present life – that in the other world we could stop being just because there is nothing to quarrel about or stop being brave because there is no danger. Now it is quite true that there will probably be no occasion for just or courageous acts in this next world, but there will be every occasion for being the sort of people that we can become only as a result of doing such acts here.

## Alasdair MacIntyre and Virtue Theory

Alasdair MacIntyre, a British Philosopher now based in the US, published an enormously influential book called 'After Virtue' in 1981. MacIntyre imagines a series of environmental disasters turning the public violently against the natural sciences (see box beside).

- The moral problem, as MacIntyre describes it, is that arguments about just war, abortion, capital punishment, or equality lead inevitably to shrill and sterile debate.
- Why? Because we have lost the context in which morality made sense. Some hidden catastrophe has undermined moral reasoning, so that all we have now are words like "good" and "moral" and "useful" ripped from their contexts, surviving only as relics.
- The impact of Newton and, much later, Darwin, led to a dismissal of traditional teleological ethics. When Darwin posited natural selection as the 'mechanism' for explaining an organ's functionality, the use of teleology in ethics was doomed.
- The use of moral fictions like 'rights' and 'utility' are symptoms of a breakdown in moral understanding.

### MacIntyre's Summary of Medieval Moral Thought

man-as-he-happens-to-be

**Ethics**  
Divinely commanded  
AND rational

man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realised-his-true nature

### MacIntyre's Summary of the Breakdown

man-as-he-happens-to-be

**Why be ethical?**

it's God's Will?

because you should?

good consequences?

Widespread riots occur, laboratories are burnt down, physicists are lynched, books and instruments are destroyed. Finally a Know-Nothing political movement takes power and successfully abolishes science teaching in schools and universities, imprisoning and executing the remaining scientists. Later still, there is a reaction against this destructive movement and enlightened people seek to revive science, although they have largely forgotten what it was. But all that they possess are fragments: a knowledge of experiments detached from any knowledge of the theoretical context which gave them significance; parts of theories unrelated either to the other bits and pieces of theory or to experiment; instruments whose use has been forgotten; half-chapters from books, single pages from articles, not always fully legible because torn and charred ...

Nonetheless all these fragments are re-embodied in a set of practices which go under the revived names of physics, chemistry, and biology. Adults argue with each other about the respective merits of relativity theory, evolutionary biology, and the phlogiston theory, although they possess only a very partial knowledge of each. Children learn by heart the surviving portions of the periodic table and recite as incantations some of the theorems of Euclid. Nobody, or almost nobody, realizes that what they are doing is not natural science in any proper sense at all ... those contexts which would be needed to make sense of what they are doing have been lost, perhaps irretrievably.  
*(After Virtue)*

- 1 What according to Aristotle is the 'ultimate purpose' of human beings?
  - A to live
  - B to aim for eudaimonia
  - C to breed
  - D to live in society
- 2 What is a virtue?
  - A a habit or character trait
  - B a good deed
  - C a constant series of good deeds
  - D a good habit or character trait
- 3 What does 'cardinal' literally mean?
  - A key
  - B hinge
  - C Catholic
  - D heart
- 4 Which of the following came to be recognised as a cardinal virtue?
  - A joy
  - B honesty
  - C justice
  - D wittiness
- 5 What is the vice on the defect side of courage?
  - A foolhardiness
  - B buffoonery
  - C cowardice
  - D stinginess
- 6 What is the vice on the excess side of friendliness?
  - A obsequiousness
  - B buffoonery
  - C boorishness
  - D indulgence
- 7 In what domain of action/emotion is the virtue 'temperance'?
  - A self-indulgence
  - B pleasure
  - C fear
  - D sociability
- 8 Of what virtue is buffoonery the vicious excess?
  - A patience
  - B wittiness
  - C friendliness
  - D courage
- 9 Of what virtue is irascibility the vicious excess?
  - A justice
  - B courage
  - C mildness/patience
  - D temperance

- 10 Of what virtue is insensibility the vicious defect?
  - A justice
  - B courage
  - C mildness/patience
  - D temperance
- 11 Which Christian thinker 'rediscovered Aristotle' and combined his philosophy with Christian revelation?
  - A Thomas Aquinas
  - B Augustine of Hippo
  - C Plato
  - D Martin Luther
- 12 Which of the following is a theological virtue?
  - A Patience
  - B Understanding
  - C Hope
  - D Practical Wisdom
- 13 Why are the theological virtues so called?
  - A because they are the 'hinge virtues'
  - B because they are divinely infused
  - C because they're about God
  - D because they help you to pray
- 14 Why might be thought of as the Christian equivalent to Aristotle's *Eudaimonia*?
  - A happiness
  - B flourishing
  - C beatitude
  - D fulfilment
- 15 Why is the *Natural Law* ethical theory so called?
  - A because it's got nothing added or taken away
  - B because it fits with human nature
  - C because one follows it by instinct
  - D because it's primitive
- 16 Approximately when did the two thinkers Aristotle and Aquinas live?
  - A 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD, 12<sup>th</sup> Century AD
  - B 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, 13<sup>th</sup> Century AD
  - C 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, 12<sup>th</sup> Century BC
  - D 10<sup>th</sup> Century BC, 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD
- 17 How are the thinking of Aristotle and Aquinas usually referred to?
  - A Aristotlist, Aquinese
  - B Aristotelian, Thomistic
  - C Aristotelian, Aquinan
  - D Ariston, Aquinistic
- 18 Which of these is *not* a requirement for the Principle of Double Effect to apply?
  - A two simultaneous effects
  - B one effect acceptable, the other harmful
  - C one effect is unforeseen
  - D one effect is not directly intended