

## The Role of Virtue in Ethics

Laura Harrison

### Introduction

Virtue ethics is concerned with moral theories that focus on the character of the person, rather than a set of principles or actions, which one should follow. The main author of this concept, is widely considered to be Aristotle, whose *Nicomachean Ethics* focused much of its attention on the character of the virtuous person, particular virtues and a consideration of how one should live one's life morally. Virtue ethics gives virtue a dominant role in terms of morality, but is it right to do so? In order to work out what kind of a role, and how much importance, we should give to virtue, there are numerous things that must be considered: the benefits of looking at someone's character rather than their actions or principles, a comparison with rule or act-centred theories, what virtue consists of, what virtue ethics has to say about how to act in particular circumstances and whether an emphasis on virtue could work as a theory of morality, to name a few. Virtue ethics, a relatively recent revival of the ancient concept, is an agent-centred look at morality that has provided many with an alternative to the prominent theories of utilitarianism and universalizability, which have dominated the history of ethics. However, I wish to argue that one need not choose one side or the other of the agent-centred vs. act-centred<sup>1</sup> debate concerning morality, and that a compromise, or at least a borrowing of ideas from one side to the other could provide a new way forward in the study of ethics.

### I – The Focus on Character

When it is commonly believed that, like Gyges from Plato's *Republic*, most people, will act unjustly given the opportunity and freedom from repercussions, one can see why there is such a call for an ethics that pays most attention to the good of the agent. There have been many different interpretations of the relation between the good of a moral agent and morality itself, from Aristotle, who thought that the nature of human beings is perfected by the rational exercise of the virtues, to Philippa Foot, who seemed to think that human nature is often inclined towards the vices and that the virtues are required to be corrective.<sup>2</sup> So which angle should we come at this problem from – the belief that people are intrinsically inclined to be good or bad?

It seems to me that there is much evidence for arguing both sides, with examples like Gyges on the side of that bad, and Kant's sympathetic man on the side of the good. In judging this, it seems sensible to approach from a more neutral point of view, assuming that people can be inclined either way, but that human nature in general is not predisposed to either. Foot ascribes the idea of virtue to someone's will, stating that in a man of virtue it will be their will that is good.<sup>3</sup> This idea of the will primarily encompasses his intentions, the disposition of his heart, his innermost desires, his attitudes, the things he wishes for and those he seeks.

This focus on what the agent wants rather than the outcome of his actions is a promising start, because it seems to label as moral, those people who are fundamentally good people, and not just those who do the right action, or follow the right rule. A strong link can be found to Aristotle here, who believed that to do a virtuous action was not enough - it had to come from a virtuous disposition. Such a focus could work better than the focus on actions found in a

---

<sup>1</sup> Under the heading act-centered, I am including consequentialist and deontological theories as well as any rule-centered theories that provide rules to govern ones actions. By agent-centered, I mean theories that focus on the character of the agent, rather than the agent's actions.

<sup>2</sup> Foot, P. *Virtues and Vices* in Crisp, R. and Slote, M. *Virtue Ethics* (OUP 1997) p. 169-70

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* p. 165

consequentialist theory of ethics, since it also allows as moral someone who wanted to act morally but failed in some way, which is in keeping with our modern perspective that one's heart has to be in the right place. So far so good in that an agent-centred theory of ethics seems to work best. However, this kind of theory also suffers from many problems.

## II – What is Virtue?

One of the first problems that may come to mind is the question of what is virtue, and what it means to be virtuous? It's all well and good saying that we need a theory of morality based on the virtue of the agent but what does this virtue consist of? One of the suggestions has been that virtue is a kind of knowledge. McDowell proposes this view, offering suggestions as to what kind it could be. He first suggests that it is a kind of perceptual capacity, which enables him to judge the situation correctly – a kind of reliable sensitivity as to what kind of action/behaviour is required.<sup>4</sup> He suggests, however, that this idea of sensitivity will not work, because some people can judge the situation like the virtuous person but act otherwise, because of their desire.<sup>5</sup>

However I do not believe that this is the case, since a truly virtuous person, it seems to me, would have the desire to do the right action as well as the correct judgement about the situation. In this way I agree with Aristotle - that someone who had full understanding of the situation, who had fully deliberated about all of the options, is almost bound to make the decision that corresponds to the outcome of the deliberation and do the right action. Aristotle only allows that someone can desire to do the wrong action when they know the right one, if desire clouds their judgement over which line of reasoning to accept, and so a person who has the full capacity for judgement, which we consider virtue to be, could not have this clouding desire. He also relates the knowledge that is virtue to a practical syllogism, suggesting that the major premise could be the virtuous person's conception of how to live, and the minor premise, be the application to the current situation. However I feel that this explanation of the kind of knowledge that is virtue suffers from the difficulty that, unless there are some kind of rules involved in virtue ethics, which could give a general conception of how to live, one would be unable to know how apply it to specific occasions and therefore would not be able to form criteria for virtuous action.

We will see later that the idea of virtue ethics is able to accept some kind of rules, and so we can assume for now that the idea of the practical syllogism can work. In this way the kind of knowledge that virtue is takes the form of practical syllogism, and McDowell's idea of sensitivity is the perceptual capacity that one needs to translate the conception of how to live generally (the major premise of the practical syllogism) into a decision as to how to act on a specific occasion (the minor premise).

One problem that seems to remain for me in this discussion of virtue as knowledge, is that it does not seem to be enough. It seems to me that the virtuous person has to have some kind of inclination towards virtue and not just the kind that comes from the knowledge that one action is the right action in the situation. It also seems unlikely to me that someone could be naturally gifted in terms of having the perceptual capacity to evaluate the situation and a sensitivity to the situation, but instead would develop it over time. I must turn to Aristotle's doctrine of the mean at this point, since it includes not only the knowledge and consequent choice that we have considered is necessary for virtue, but also a person's habitual disposition.

---

<sup>4</sup> McDowell, J. *Virtue and Reason* in Crisp, R. and Slote, M. *Virtue Ethics* (OUP 1997), p. 142-4

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p. 145

The habitual disposition is one that is acquired after much time spent practising virtuous actions, and I think it is here that the inclination I am looking for can be found. One can only be develop such a virtuous disposition if someone is inclined towards virtue in the first place since we have to choose to do virtuous actions to gain the firm and settled disposition needed to be a virtuous person. Clearly more is needed than just knowledge for one to be virtuous, since an inclination towards it is also required. The importance of this addition lies in the fact that in order for someone to become reliably and fully virtuous, they will need a desire for virtuous action to ensure that they are inclined choose the correct action. Because, someone will not be fully virtuous until they have a perfect perceptual capacity for selecting the right action on every occasion, and a habitual disposition for it, they will need something further to ensure that they select the virtuous action on a regular basis and so are able to develop them both. So for me, virtue consists in knowledge, that is a kind of sensitivity to the situation and an inclination towards virtue which leads to a disposition for it.

## **II – How do we spot a virtuous character?**

The second problem concerns the question of, how we are meant to judge someone's character. We cannot rely on what people say their will/intentions were or what kind of character they have, because people lie, misrepresent themselves, are self-deprecating and often modest, which means we will not get a clear picture of their character. Judaeo-Christian traditions do not suffer from this problem because they have an omniscient god, who judges everyone exactly as they are, but in these times of increasing atheism we cannot rely on such a concept of an infallible judge of character. We could however suggest that morality is based on how you actually are and not how you are perceived to be, and negate the need to label people as moral or not, but we encounter the difficulty of how we are meant to know what virtue is, or provide a paradigm of virtue if we have no way of judging people's characters effectively. With a theory of ethics that is based on something so internal to the agent, it is difficult to see how it could ever be implemented or perceived in the world. By turning to an explanation of what virtue is, we may shed light on the matter.

Usually we would consider actions as good indicators of character, since actions are often considered to be the manifestations of character and will. This is an appealing characteristic of consequentialist theories of ethics, since it is easy to see which people are moral, for it is easy to judge whether their actions conform to the criteria of morality. Aristotle suggests a solution to this problem in the *Nicomachean Ethics* when, in 2.4, he tells us that that virtuous action consists of three components: knowing what you are doing, choosing it for itself only, and acting from a firm and settled disposition. In this way we could see how action could display your character, since it shows your disposition, and it shows your will, through the choice you make. However this does not account for those who have a virtuous character and try to perform virtuous actions but for some reason fail, since we can only evaluate characters in this way if virtuous actions are successfully performed. Also, if we consider only actions we are in danger of ending up back at a theory of morality that is act-centred, which we were trying to avoid in the first place. In this way virtue ethics would need to provide a method of evaluating character, independent of actions, in order to provide a feasible theory of morality.

## **III – How do we use virtue ethics to choose the right action?**

One of the most common charges that virtue ethics often faces is that it does not give us any indication of how we are meant to act in particular cases – it provides us with no criteria for right action. This is a charge that is often associated with supporters of rule-centred theories of morality, such as rule-utilitarianism, which suggest that there should be guidelines as to what are right or wrong actions, so we know how to act morally. But Aristotle would say that this is not enough – morally good action is only such if it is performed by a virtuous character,

something that rule-centred theories do not take into account. Further to this his theory does provide us with one example of how to solve the problem of how to act in particular cases, as we saw above, with his criteria of virtuous action. His theory still centres around the virtuous character, which is the firm and settled disposition that he speaks of, but he provides a way of translating this into a way of selecting virtuous action, by way of the practical syllogism, I discussed earlier.

Another view that has been suggested is that of Rosalind Hursthouse, who proposes that the reason that virtue ethics does not have a clear set of right and wrong actions - a criterion of right action - is that there is no such clear dividing line to be found.<sup>6</sup> There cannot be rules about which kinds of actions are right and which are wrong because there are no actions that are universally right or wrong. Right or wrong actions depend on the circumstances, the people involved and other such things, which makes them impossible to universalize. Anscombe also proposes a similar view. She suggests that the idea of things one ought to do is redundant now that many people no longer accept the idea of the divine law-giver, who gives us the rules that dictate which right or wrong action we must do.<sup>7</sup> If this is right then virtue ethics could be the only way forward, since it provides a criterion of morality in contrast to a criterion of right action, of which there can be no such thing. But before we commit ourselves to this view we must look at the matter more closely.

Hursthouse illustrates her point with the example of abortion, a highly discussed topic and one for which a right answer seems to be difficult to find. She discusses the idea that there are countless considerations which need to be taken into account to work out whether or not abortion is the right or wrong thing to do – and there can be no conclusion as to whether it is always the right or wrong thing, since it can be right or wrong depending on the case we are talking about. The main points that should be considered when talking about abortion can often be unclear. We talk of women's rights to their own body, but fail to acknowledge that just because we allow that women could have this moral right, does not mean that in exercising this moral right they cannot be doing something cruel or vicious.<sup>8</sup> So in fact women's rights are irrelevant to the question of whether in having an abortion a woman would be acting virtuously, viciously or neither.<sup>9</sup> The gradual development of the fetus is a relevant consideration to the morality of abortion, since it is difficult to be fully conscious of the existence of a fetus at an earlier stage in the pregnancy.<sup>10</sup> This implies that abortion in the earlier stages would be more acceptable.

However, I think that this idea needs to be pushed further, into a consideration of the cruelty or pain caused to the fetus during an abortion in the later stages of a pregnancy. For example, if someone wanted an abortion early on in their pregnancy because they did not want to raise a child, then this would be the right thing to do. If they waited until late on in their pregnancy, when the fetus has now developed pain receptors, because for some reason they did not have the abortion earlier, when they had initially made the decision that this would be the right thing for them, this would alter the status of the action, making it more vicious than an earlier abortion would have been. Other things that must be considered include how one got into such circumstances, and how one responds to or views the possibility of having a child. All the numerous considerations she suggests seem to point to the conclusion that there is no right or wrong answer as to whether abortion is morally right or wrong, it simply depends on the individual cases.

---

<sup>6</sup> Hursthouse, R. *Virtue Theory and Abortion* in Crisp, R. and Slote, M. *Virtue Ethics* (OUP 1997)

<sup>7</sup> Anscombe, G. *Modern Moral Philosophy* in Crisp, R. and Slote, M. *Virtue Ethics* (OUP 1997) , p. 30

<sup>8</sup> Hursthouse, R. *Virtue Theory and Abortion* in Crisp, R. and Slote, M. *Virtue Ethics* (OUP 1997), p. 235

<sup>9</sup> *Idem*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 239

For moral matters other than abortion it also seems that one can always find exceptions to the rule. The example of abortion indicates that these kind of moral rules may not work, since there is no such thing as a categorically right or wrong action. The idea of virtue comes in to fill this gap, because the ideally virtuous person would know what was right or wrong in that particular situation and act accordingly. Could this be a compelling reason to accept virtue ethics over rule-based ethics?

### **V – Conclusion: A Two Level Theory**

While it seems to me that virtue ethics could be the best way forward in terms of finding a theory of morality, for someone who is not already ideally virtuous it may seem hard to figure out what the right way to live should be or on particular occasions how to act. Because of this I wish to propose a two-level theory which involves both rules about how to act and the idea of virtue. The theory would work as follows: On an everyday basis most people don't have the time to deliberate fully about what to do in certain situations or think about virtue and what the virtuous person would do. So, I would suggest, that we follow the conventional rules of morality where they seem uncontested in order to habituate someone to be a virtuous or more virtuous person, which will help them to gain the kind of knowledge that we discussed above was needed for virtue.

In difficult situations, such as the abortion case mentioned above, one should take time to deliberate everything about the situation independent of any rules of morality, in order to find the right action in the situation. While this will probably not make people ideally virtuous it will give them a way to become more virtuous, and so select more of the right actions and live the right life. Even if you do not accept my way of looking at virtue ethics, I still think that without any kind of guidelines at all, no matter how well we understand the concept of virtue, we won't know how to acquire it or how to select the right action in a certain situation. Because of this and considering human nature realistically, it might be more likely that people will generally choose the virtuous action if we follow rule-based theory of morality. Having said this, I think the ideal theory of morality would be one that places much emphasis on the character of the agent, but that also, if it cannot provide a criterion of right action (which I suspect it won't be able to since I do not think we can say that one kind of action is always right), should provide a way of judging the situation to help people decide in each particular case what is the right thing to do.

