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# Virtue Ethics

# Origins of Virtue Ethics

- The theory of virtue ethics originates in Ancient Greece, though some connections can be drawn as far back as Ancient China.
- In Greek, virtue (*arête*) means ‘excellence’.
- *Socrates* once claimed: “it’s the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue all day ... on the grounds that the unexamined life is not worth living” (*The Apology*).

# Socrates/Plato's theory of virtue

- Virtue is supposed to be a kind of knowledge;
- It is identified with wisdom (*sophia*);
- Wisdom is both necessary and sufficient for virtue;
- Knowledge about virtue is somehow analogous to mathematical knowledge;
- Both kinds of knowledge are the result of a self-reflective process called 'recollection'.

# A Problem of Knowledge

- Since virtue concerns action, it is possible to act well without *knowing* how to act well;
- As long as someone has the right *belief* about which actions are good, he or she will act virtuously;
- But belief without knowledge is unstable and fleeting;
- This is why it is necessary to have, not just true belief, but knowledge, which is *justified* true belief.

# Practical Wisdom or Prudence

- With Aristotle, we distinguish the kind of wisdom necessary for ethical action from wisdom in the sciences.
- The wisdom necessary for action is “practical wisdom” (*phronêsis*) or good moral judgment. Aquinas calls this “prudence” (*prudentia*).
- Judgment applies to a range of different situations, which is why it requires experience to acquire.
- Good judgment enables a person to make the right sort of decision in the right kind of circumstances at the right time.

# Virtue and Character

- To be virtuous is to have a virtuous character.
- Character is an ingrained habit or disposition to act in certain ways.
- Virtuous action must come from a virtuous character (as opposed to some external force).
- The virtuous person *wants* to act virtuously and does so for that reason alone.

# Character continued

- Dispositions or character traits are to be understood broadly, so that a virtuous person is virtuous in many different situations.
- For example, an honest person not only tells the truth, but doesn't cheat, respects contracts, obeys the laws, and doesn't misrepresent him/herself.
- And the honest person does this because he or she prefers to be honest, not because he/she wants to avoid some bad consequence.
- For this reason, it is unwise to attribute a virtue to someone on the basis of one or a few actions.

# Habit: how to acquire virtue

- With respect to the moral virtues, Aristotle thinks we “learn by doing”.
- Virtue requires discipline and practice.
- Repeated virtuous actions help to ingrain the character traits or dispositions that make a person virtuous.
- Making virtuous decisions requires good moral judgment (reason), so there is an essential, rational component as well.



# An analogy

- One of the easiest ways to think of how to acquire moral character is by comparing it to skills like the ability to play a sport or a musical instrument.
- A person who practices hard and trains her body acquires the skills to be able to do that skill well.
- The skilled athlete or musician is also the one who is better able to practice, reinforcing her skill.
- The skilled athlete or musician actually physically changes his or her body through repetitious actions.
- In the same way, the virtuous person finds it easier to act virtuously; she actually changes her physical and emotional characteristics.

# Review

- Virtue ethics is the theory that moral goods involve acquiring a virtuous character.
- Virtues are either moral or intellectual.
- Moral virtues involve acquiring a character through practice, by ingraining habits or dispositions to act well.
- Making good choices, practicing good habits, and acting well all involve good moral judgment (the application of reason to changing, practical situations).
- Good moral judgment, good actions, and a good character ultimately make a person happy.



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# Thank You