'Virtue ethics lacks a decision-procedure to help us make moral decisions. It is not, therefore a good moral theory.' Discuss.

THE HABIT OF VIRTUE:

The Fundamental Development of Character

by Tricia Baldwin

Although far from a complete theory of ethics and indeed a flawed one, virtue ethics is a good moral theory as per its area of focus. The concentration of virtue ethics is on the development of character and in managing the intersection of reason and passion through practice. Its focus on character and moral virtues demonstrated by consistent moral action contributes significantly to our ethical understanding and formation of ethical principles. It attempts to answer a fundamental question in ethics: what sort of person should I be?

The argument that virtue ethics has no decision procedure is a fallacious one. Virtue ethics has three decision-making procedures: 1) *virtues are demonstrated by consistent virtuous action over a lifetime* - moral virtues such as honesty, generosity and knowledge are demonstrated by a lifetime habit of consistent action to achieve these virtues, and this provides a decision guide in any given situation by taking actions founded on virtues (e.g. achieve honesty by not lying in a given situation and series of situations); 2) *the golden mean* - choose a moderate stance between excess and deficiency (e.g. choose courage as the mean between rashness and cowardice in a situation); and 3) *virtuous exemplars* - choose an action that would be chosen by a virtuous person (e.g. choose Jean Vanier as a virtuous exemplar for decisions about inclusivity).

These decision-procedures may at times be vague in comparison to a rules-based morality, but this does not make them insignificant. Unlike a moral hypocrite who lives by double standards spouting off moral rules and scripture but doing otherwise, Aristotle is saying that, as an individual, what you actually *do* and the habits of virtuous actions you consistently undertake are more morally significant than that of verbalizing moral principles and/or rules without the accompanying habit of virtuous behaviour.

Ethical theories can be divided into theories of conduct and theories of character, and virtue ethics focuses on the latter. Virtue ethics focuses on the bettering of agent of the action, and not just the rule or action itself, to create an ethical society vis-à-vis the development of more virtuous citizens as demonstrated by their virtuous actions.

Virtue ethics is not necessarily a completely rival approach to deontology and consequentialism but part of the ecology of the exploration and understanding of ethics. All of these ethical theories deal with virtue, and provide a variety of routes to achieve it. Each of these three theories is also incomplete and flawed. Deontology focuses on compliance with moral rules (e.g. the Ten Commandments), virtue ethics focuses on ethical character development through the habit of virtuous behaviour (e.g. honesty), and consequentialism and utilitarianism focus the achievement of the greatest happiness for the greatest number (e.g. ensuring provision of primary goods to all citizens). With all these ethical theories, we come to a fuller understanding of ethical decision-making.

Aristotle was an insightful moral realist and worldly empiricist. His theory was based on two assumptions: a) intrinsic ethical motivation cultivated over a lifetime is much stronger than that of

shorter-term extrinsic motivation, and b) we can only gain knowledge from our worldly experience versus having it revealed through a higher, unattainable source. He saw the life-long struggle to achieve harmony between reason and passion as the path to virtue. Aristotle's virtue ethics theory is founded upon Plato's explanation of virtue as the excellence of the soul, with excellence of its three components (reason, passion, and spirit) being achieved through wisdom, courage, and temperance.

Aristotle believed that the final end of a human being, a purpose that cannot successfully be achieved without virtue, is eudaimonia (i.e. happiness, flourishing). Eudaimonia is a rational and purposeful process of self-actualization manifesting intellectual and moral virtues attained through a live-long habit of consistent action embracing virtues.

From a teleological perspective, Aristotle believed that humanity has, unlike its animal counterparts, the capacity for rationality and this provides humankind with both function and potential. We will achieve happiness only if we fulfill the function appropriate to a human being which is to act in accordance with reason with virtuous intellectual and moral actions.

Aristotle's virtue ethics is broken down into two categories: a) intellectual virtues (good habits of excellence of the mind) that can be taught through instruction (e.g. intelligence, scientific understanding, wisdom, art, prudence, empathy and a practical knowledge of how to live), and b) moral virtues (good habits of excellence of the soul: courage, temperance, liberality, honesty, generosity, high-mindedness, tempered ambition, good temper, friendly civility, sincerity, wittiness, modesty, righteous indignation) that are attained through practice and consistent right actions for the right reasons, that result in habit over one's lifetime. These moral virtues are not inborn but acquired through practice.

Aristotle sought to develop the thinking part of individuals who have the moral and rational capacity to deal with the voracious appetitive part of the soul that drives people to temptation and excess. Unlike attaining intellectual virtues that can be taught, the achievement of moral virtues a lifetime of hard work and practice to achieve the harmony between reason and passion, and like Buddhism, this approach is to take a person to a higher plane that is beyond temptation to consistently achieve virtue. A society made up of citizens with strong moral character achieved with practice is intrinsically stronger than a society extrinsically motivated by rules alone.

Unlike Hume and Schopenhauer, he did not view reason as a slave to passion, but his virtue ethics philosophy was in accordance with these two philosophers in the view that humanity is not motivated by reason or rational rules alone. Perhaps eudaimonia should not be the ultimate ethical goal for humanity, but for our realist in Aristotle, he saw happiness as the ultimate motivator of and potential for humanity. He wanted to ensure that happiness had moral depth to maximize the potential of humanity's capability of rational thought, and that this was achieved through a life time of rigorous work to establish the habit of virtue through moral acts.

A Critique of Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics is far from a complete theory, and like all ethical theories, has its flaws. Is the pursuit of happiness an unalienable right of citizenship or is it garnered through a lifetime of moral cultivation? There is truth in the pursuit of happiness leading Western society down the path of self-entitled gratification and hedonism instead of establishing a priority of a just society for all. Part of this is an issue is due to contemporary mores with which modern society must grapple, however this metamorphosis is in part due to Aristotle's overconfidence in reason being in the driver's seat and able to

completely oppose the formidable impetus of our appetitive passions. Another problem with virtue ethics is the difficulty of establishing the nature and hierarchy of virtues among diverse people who have vastly different opinions on what constitutes a virtue.

There is no solid definition of a virtuous exemplar, and following one who is perceived such could lead to bad moral decisions and horrific consequences. Virtue ethics does not deal with the consequences of actions, and in theory would condone virtuous actions done by virtuous people even if these actions are to have disastrous consequences. For example, a person could choose to do what a 'virtuous person' of their religion would do. They would naïvely base their own actions of proselytization on the disdainful 'enlightenment' ideals of the virtuous exemplar, but with dreadful consequences. An example of such was the massive spiritual and cultural genocide by Christian workers in the residential school system that was forced upon North American indigenous children and their families for generations. The process of choosing moral exemplars is not a consistently good means of creating a just society with human rights, and this is where the rules-based deontology and the consequence-based utilitarianism fare better. However, the whistleblower who defies the rules driven by his or her conscience makes the case for virtue ethics' focus on the need for strong moral character. Furthermore, true moral exemplars and trailblazers such as Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Jean Vanier, Louis Riel, Stephen Lewis, Helen Keller, Rosa Parks and Raoul Wallenberg have inspired millions to take similar virtuous actions to change the world for good.

Conclusion

Virtue ethics provides guidance in ethical decision-making by its focus on the central role of character, judgment and integrity deliberately developed over a lifetime.   It is holistic in its view of human nature incorporating both reason and passion, and relies on a foundation of worldly moral knowledge and experience rather on that from a higher, unknowable power. Moral character building produces individual moral responsibility for actions and helps individuals to intrinsically determine how to ethically respond in many situations in life. Even with its flaws and limited scope, it is a valid ethical theory that focuses on answering a core ethical question: what kind of person should I be?

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