

I Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics is now widely recognized, alongside consequentialism and deontology, as a major normative theory. However, the central claims of virtue ethics are frequently misunderstood. As a result, it is often rejected (or accepted) for the wrong reasons. A frequent source of misunderstanding is that the term “virtue ethicist” is sometimes used very broadly to include anyone who is interested in examining philosophical questions about the nature and role of virtues and vices (or character more generally). The problem with this usage is that a virtue ethicist might be someone who concludes, after much careful thought, that the virtues do *not* play an important role in morality. As we will see, the problem is avoided by making a distinction between *virtue theory*, which refers to the broader field of inquiry that focuses on philosophical questions about virtues and vices, and *virtue ethics*, which is a normative theory that claims that the virtues and vices play a central role in ethics. The aim of this chapter is to give an overview of virtue ethics, including the different forms it can take, and how it differs from other normative theories.

I.1 Normative Theory

To understand what virtue ethics is, it is useful to start by considering what a normative theory is. Broadly speaking, a normative theory, or what is sometimes referred to as a moral theory, is an attempt to provide a systematic and coherent account of the values, norms, ideals, and standards that we appeal to when making moral (or ethical) judgments in the course of our everyday lives. Various things can be the object of judgment, but normative theorists tend to focus on our judgments of:

- a *Actions*: We judge actions prospectively (i.e. before the fact), for instance when recommending that someone should perform a particular action or that it would be the right thing to do in the circumstances, as well as retrospectively (i.e. after the fact), when claiming that someone acted well in a given situation, or that they made the

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right decision. We might use “deontic” (or duty-based) language, for example by claiming that an action is wrong, impermissible, or contrary to duty, or that someone has a duty (or obligation) to do something. We might also (or instead) use “aretaic” (or character-based) language, for example by claiming that someone acted bravely, heroically, kindly, and so on, or that a particular action would be cowardly, dishonest, cruel, and so on.

- b *States of affairs*: We value certain states of affairs, such as a reduction in the rates of crime, poverty, or unemployment in a given community, and see them as goals worth striving for. On a more individual level, we value states such as being healthy, wealthy, powerful, educated, happy, and so on.
- c *Character*: We might describe someone as reliable, compassionate, and principled, or as arrogant, greedy, dishonest, materialistic, and so on.
- d *Motives and intentions*: We judge people’s motives – the reasons, desires, or emotions that move them to act in particular ways – as well as their intentions – what they consciously aim or plan to do or bring about. So, for example, we might criticize someone for intending to steal from their employer (regardless of whether they actually end up doing so), and yet judge their motives (say, a desire to provide for their family) as good.
- e *Lives*: We sometimes make judgments about someone’s life overall, for example when we claim, perhaps at their funeral, that they lived a good life.

It is the task of *descriptive* (or comparative) ethics to study our moral behavior and the moral judgments we actually make. By contrast, *normative* ethics is concerned with giving an account of what is involved in making *good* moral judgments. As such, it focuses on the following sorts of question: What makes an action right or good?, Are there universal standards about how we ought to act?, Do all good states of affairs or consequences have something in common?, What makes a person good or virtuous?, What is involved in being well-motivated?, What is a good life for human beings?, etc.

A normative theory need not include an account of all five kinds of judgment, but if it omits one or more category it owes us an explanation of why it is not considered important or relevant. We might think of an account of right or good action, good states of affairs, good character, good motives and intentions, and a good life as the basic building blocks of a normative theory, where the task of the theorist is to figure out the size and shape of each block, the relationships between them, and which block is to serve as the foundation of the theory. In the course of doing so

the theorist might find that what looked like a single block is actually two or more separate blocks, or that there is a gap in the theory, which means that the entire structure is unstable. In what follows, we will take a brief look at the structures of the two theories that played a dominant role during the twentieth century and continue to be popular among normative theorists and applied ethicists.

1.2 Consequentialism and Deontology

Consequentialists start with the intuition that certain states of affairs are valuable. Classical utilitarianism, which is a version of consequentialism developed by Jeremy Bentham and further refined by J. S. Mill, holds that happiness or pleasure is the only thing that is valuable in itself. All other things, such as health, wealth, employment, and so on, are considered valuable only as a means to happiness. Other consequentialists give competing accounts of what is good or valuable in itself, such as the satisfaction of desires or preferences, but what they all have in common is that an account of good states of affairs or consequences forms the foundation of their theory, lending support to their accounts of right action, good character, and good motives.

Once they have an account of good consequences in place, consequentialists tend to devote most of their attention to giving an account of right action. On the classical utilitarian view, an action is right if and only if it produces the greatest amount of happiness overall. Roughly, the idea is that if we acknowledge that happiness is good, then the right thing to do in any given situation is whatever will (or is likely to) bring about the greatest amount of happiness. Many consequentialists find this account too demanding, and have proposed alternative formulations, for example, that an action is right if and only if its consequences are good enough. But they all agree that right action can be defined in terms of good consequences.

Deontologists, by contrast, reject the claim that right action can be defined in terms of good consequences. Although they accept that certain things can be described as good or desirable, they argue that the consequences of our actions are not fully within our control, and so it is a mistake to judge actions on the basis of consequences. Morality involves choice, and we don't always choose the consequences of our actions. Further, they argue that many actions, such as telling the truth, keeping one's promises, and repaying one's debts, are right irrespective of consequences. By not acknowledging this, consequentialists are often forced to justify doing things that are intuitively wrong, such as killing and torturing innocent people, as long as doing so has good consequences.

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Deontologists give what they believe to be a more plausible account of right action, which is that an action is right if and only if it is in accordance with moral duty. (The term “deontology” is derived from the Greek *deon*, which means duty or obligation.) Morality, in this view, is a matter of obeying moral rules, such as the duty to keep our promises, to benefit others, to tell the truth, not to kill or harm others, and so on. The account of right action in terms of moral duty forms the foundation of deontology, but a major concern for deontologists is to give a convincing explanation of where these duties come from (so in a sense the foundation still needs some form of support). One view is that they are obligations that arise from God’s commands (a view known as “divine command theory”), but most contemporary deontologists base moral duty on reason (following Immanuel Kant) or intuition (following W. D. Ross).

For much of the twentieth century, the focus of normative ethics was on the question: What makes an action right? It was quite typical for courses in moral philosophy to introduce students to deontology and consequentialism, and then to present them with the question: Which of these theories captures the truth about morality? Consequentialists came up with a number of very serious objections to deontology, and deontologists returned fire with some serious objections to consequentialism. Some moral philosophers wondered whether both these positions were hopelessly flawed. A few toyed with the idea that morality is entirely relative or subjective, that there are no moral truths, but most people were dissuaded from embracing relativism by the thought that we want to be able to criticize people like Adolf Hitler for his horrific actions. That is, we want to be able to say that what he did was *in fact* wrong, and not merely that he acted wrongly according to the norms of our society. And so moral philosophers appeared to be faced with the choice between deontology and consequentialism. Since each side was asserting what the other denied, it was difficult to imagine a third alternative. Instead, most normative theorists tried to avoid the objections raised by their opponents by revising or refining their preferred theory.

This dynamic was echoed in debates in applied ethics, which became an increasingly popular field of inquiry in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Consider, for example, the debate about the morality of euthanasia. Deontologists tended to approach the matter by focusing on the duty not to intentionally kill an innocent person. This was seen as an absolute duty (i.e., one that does not allow for exceptions), which is grounded in the “sanctity” of human life. The basic idea was that a human being has a special moral status, which requires that their life not be taken by human (as opposed to Godly) hands. Accordingly, active euthanasia, which involves actively and intentionally ending a patient’s life in order to spare

them further suffering, was considered to be wrong in every case. But deontologists disagreed about whether it is ever permissible to allow a patient to die by, for instance, withholding medical treatment (e.g., not resuscitating a patient who has suffered heart failure) or withdrawing medical treatment (e.g., switching off their life support). Some argued that withholding life-preserving treatment is sometimes permissible because it doesn't constitute active killing, whereas withdrawing such treatment is wrong because it involves intentionally acting in a way that causes the patient's death. The so-called "doctrine of double effect" received a considerable amount of attention. Proponents of the doctrine argued that administering a lethal dose of morphine with the intention of ending a patient's life constitutes intentional killing (and is therefore wrong). However, administering a lethal dose with the intention of relieving suffering, even though foreseeing that this will hasten death, does not constitute intentional killing (and is therefore sometimes permissible).¹ Thus, the moral acceptability of end-of-life treatment seemed to depend on what many people regarded as mere technicalities, while an important concern – the good of the patient – was pushed to the side-lines.

Consequentialism appealed to applied ethicists who thought that the distinctions between acts and omissions, withdrawing and withholding treatment, and intending and "merely foreseeing" death were irrelevant to the morality of euthanasia. The crucial question, for them, was whether the act (or omission) in question would have good consequences.² This seemed to focus attention on where it should be: whether legally permitting active euthanasia would allow physicians to prevent or alleviate unnecessary suffering. However, the trouble with consequentialism, at least in its standard forms, was that it asked us to consider the consequences for everyone affected by the action or legislation, thus allowing for the justification of certain procedures on the grounds that they benefitted the patient's family and/or society as a whole. Some applied ethicists warned that consequentialist thinking would inevitably lead us down a "slippery slope," pointing out that Hitler justified his "euthanasia" program by appealing to the good of society.³

1.3 The Emergence of Virtue Ethics

The above sorts of objections to deontology and consequentialism motivated many normative theorists to revise and refine these theories. However, with the publication of Elizabeth Anscombe's paper, "Modern Moral philosophy" in 1958, both theories faced a far more serious objection. Anscombe argued that our moral language, in particular the concepts of moral obligation and moral duty, and of what is morally right and

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morally wrong, derives from the Judeo-Christian conception of ethics as a collection of universal laws, one that presupposes the existence of a divine lawgiver. In this framework, “morally right” means permitted or required by God, and “morally wrong” means not permitted by God. In due course, however, the idea that such a lawmaker existed was rejected, and yet people continued to use the concepts of moral duty and right and wrong action. The result, according to Anscombe, is that these moral concepts have become incoherent:

It is as if the notion “criminal” were to remain when criminal law and criminal courts had been abolished and forgotten The situation, if I am right, was the interesting one of the survival of a concept outside a framework of thought that made it a really intelligible one.

(1958, 6)

J. L. Mackie continued this line of argument in his influential book, provocatively entitled *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* and first published in 1977. He points out that normative theorists share a commitment to what has become known as “moral realism,” roughly, the view that there are objective moral values and that at least some of our moral judgments can be true or false. The aim of normative ethics is to allow us to make better judgments, and consequentialists and deontologists generally take this to mean: it should help us determine, or indeed, *discover* whether a specific action is in fact right or wrong. Mackie defends a form of anti-realism known as “error theory.” He argues that although we mean to make true judgments about whether an action is right or good, these judgments are all untrue, given that moral values do not exist. Mackie’s claim about moral statements is similar to the claim that atheists make about statements about God. Religious people often say things like “God loves me” or “God is powerful” and assume that these statements are (or at least can be) true. Atheists don’t believe in the existence of God, and so they think that the above sorts of claims about God cannot be true. In much the same way, error theorists claim that moral properties (e.g. rightness and wrongness) and entities (e.g. moral duties and values) do not exist independently of human beings, and that they are no more than conventions invented or constructed by human beings, and so it follows that we cannot discover whether a particular action is in fact right or wrong.

While arguments against moral realism persuaded some moral philosophers to give up normative theory altogether, others continued the project of refining and supporting their preferred versions of consequentialism or deontology. However, during the latter part of the twentieth century, a handful of philosophers, most notably Philippa Foot (1978b), John

McDowell (1979), Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), and Rosalind Hursthouse (1991), explored a suggestion made by Anscombe in her 1958 article, which is to reject the concepts of moral duty and morally right or wrong action, and replace them with virtue and vice terms. So instead of saying that an action is morally wrong, we can say that it is dishonest, unjust, or cowardly, and instead of saying that it is right or obligatory, we can say that it is generous, honest, or courageous (1958, 8–9). They made an appeal for a return to the ancient Greek tradition, which focused on the virtues (such as wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance) and the idea of living a good life rather than moral duty or obligation. The ancient Greek philosophers were not interested in identifying rules of right action. Instead, they considered the broader question: How can I live a good life as a human being?

One advantage of virtue and vice terms is that they are not only evaluative but also descriptive. Advising someone to do what is generous, honest, or courageous is much more informative than merely advising them to do what is right: it directs their attention to relevant features of the situation. In the case of courage, it focuses their attention on overcoming their fears for the sake of a worthy end, and in the case of generosity, it encourages them to think about the happiness of others.

Another advantage of evaluating actions as kind, honest, or courageous (or the reverse) is that we are not relying on metaphysical entities, such as a divine lawgiver or a set of moral duties. Rather, these evaluations are based in properties – character traits – that exist in the real world. We can criticize Hitler – and condemn his actions – as in fact cruel and inhumane. We don't have to appeal to a divine lawmaker or a moral duty to come to the conclusion that his actions were despicable. Similarly, we can praise our moral heroes by drawing attention to the good qualities that we see in them, and that are displayed in their actions. Consider, for example, John Major's tribute to Nelson Mandela:

The source of his magic was the sheer moral force that clung to him as a result of all he had endured throughout his years of imprisonment – and the lack of bitterness with which he had emerged from it... . This was a man of great courage and empathy, who stood up for what he believed – and won. He had an enormous personal presence, but it was not created by power or position; it was created by the sheer force of his character, which – far from being ground down during his 27 years' imprisonment – emerged untouched, even enhanced.

(2013)

Although Mandela was, by all accounts, an extraordinary human being, the character traits he possessed are ones that we recognize, at least to

some extent, in the ordinary people around us: the courage shown by parents fighting for the life of their sick child, a friend's willingness to forgive her cheating spouse, the compassion shown by bystanders after a terrorist attack. Of course, it is not always clear that these responses are appropriate or truly virtuous given particular features of the situation. It could be that the parents are refusing to see that the most compassionate and, indeed, courageous thing to do would be to stop futile treatment and allow their child to die in peace. And perhaps our friend should be less forgiving and realize that her spouse is not committed to the relationship. But although particular claims about people's character and about the virtuousness (or viciousness) of their actions are often controversial, an important advantage is that we can all get involved in these debates. We are all reasonably familiar with particular virtues and vices, from reading novels and watching films, and from observing politicians, celebrities, and the ordinary people around us. In short, virtues and vices are not invented. We discover that our friend is reliable, honest, and kind.

Foot's paper, "Euthanasia" (1978a) is useful in demonstrating some of the advantages of thinking in terms of virtues and vices rather than moral duty. Foot asks us to redirect our attention from a concern with the means of procuring death and its possible usefulness to society, to the original meaning of the term: "a death understood as a good or happy event for the one who dies" (from the Greek, *euthanatos*: a good death) (1978a, 34). Seen thus, the central ethical question is: Is the act of euthanasia⁴ for the sake of the one who dies? or, stated otherwise, Does it allow the patient to die a good death? Foot thinks there are two virtues that are important in this context, namely charity (or benevolence) and justice. Although it is by no means an easy task to determine when, if ever, an act of euthanasia is both charitable and just, the important thing to note is that it focuses our attention on the right questions. The virtue of charity "attaches us to the good of others" (Foot 1978a, 45), and asks us to consider whether the act of euthanasia will benefit the patient. And the virtue of justice asks us to consider what we owe the patient "in the way of non-interference and positive service" (Foot 1978a, 44).

Foot's paper on euthanasia inspired some ethicists to apply a virtue approach to other moral questions,⁵ and applied virtue ethics is now a well-established area of research.⁶ At the same time, many philosophers turned their attention to questions about the nature of virtue, the link between virtue and other moral concepts (such as happiness and right action), the existence of virtues, and the nature of intellectual virtue. This field of inquiry has come to be known as *virtue theory*.⁷ In what follows, I give a brief outline of some topics in virtue theory before venturing a definition of virtue ethics.

1.4 Virtue Theory

1.4.1 What Is Virtue?

Virtues and vices are relatively stable dispositions to act in certain ways. People who are honest characteristically do things like tell the truth, give the correct change, pay their taxes, and so on, whereas dishonest people characteristically lie and cheat. Virtues are good character traits, and vices are bad character traits. We praise and admire people who are honest, kind, just, generous, courageous, and so on. We encourage our children to acquire the virtues, and many of us try to become more virtuous ourselves. At the same time, we blame or criticize people for being dishonest, unkind, selfish, or arrogant. These are character defects, and a common assumption is that people can and should try to correct these flaws. We tend to think of a person's character – the collection of virtues and/or vices they possess – as somehow more important, more central to their identity than other traits they might have, such as their personality traits, aspects of their physical appearance, or their talents.

People sometimes disagree about which traits are virtues. The standard list includes traits such as honesty, courage, kindness, generosity, and justice. But what about traits such as modesty, tidiness, wittiness, competitiveness, and selflessness? Should we include any of these traits in the list of virtues? To answer this question we need to consider a more fundamental question: What makes a trait a virtue? That is, do all the virtues have something in common, something that allows us (a) to distinguish them from other character traits, and (b) to explain why they are virtues and not vices (or morally neutral traits)?

An important question that arises when trying to determine what makes a trait a virtue concerns the relevance of inner states (thoughts and feelings). A virtue is a disposition to act in certain ways, and people clearly have thoughts and feelings when they act. But does it matter what these thoughts and feelings are? And does it matter which of these thoughts and feelings motivate them to act? Some argue that as long as people act in certain ways, it doesn't really matter what they think or how they feel (provided, of course, that they keep any negative thoughts and feelings to themselves). Others think that inner states do matter in some way. One view is that we admire virtuous people because "their heart is in the right place." Generous people care about other people's happiness, and honest people care about the truth, and so it might be that caring about certain things is essential for virtue. An alternative view is that virtuous people are admirable because they act for the right *reasons*, for example, because they recognize that the good of others is worth pursuing, or because they believe

they have a duty to help others. A third, more demanding view is that truly virtuous people are motivated to act by the right reasons *and* the right feelings. In this view, a truly benevolent person is someone who knows they should help others and also cares about their welfare.

This leads us to a closely related question: Is a virtuous person wise or knowledgeable, and if so, what kind of knowledge do they possess? The claim that virtuous people do the right thing for the right reasons clearly suggests that they must know what the right reasons are. But how do they know this? One possibility is that they know a set of action-guiding rules or principles, which they apply to particular cases. Another possibility is that they have acquired certain intellectual skills that allow them to figure out what to do in a particular case, in much the same way that an experienced builder is able to find a creative solution to a new building problem.

Finally, it is useful to note the distinction between moral (or character) virtues and intellectual (or epistemic) virtues. Roughly, intellectual virtues are traits that allow us to attain knowledge, and include traits such as open-mindedness, curiosity, perseverance, intellectual humility, and imaginativeness. Moral virtues, by contrast, are traits that allow us to live and act well, and include traits like courage, kindness, and honesty. Virtue epistemology – the philosophical study of the nature and role of intellectual virtue and vice – was inspired by the interest in virtue concepts among moral philosophers, and has since become a well-established branch of epistemology. Given that our focus in this book is on virtue ethics as a normative theory, we will not discuss the intellectual virtues here, except for one notable exception: the virtue of practical wisdom or prudence (*phronesis*). Aristotelian virtue ethicists argue that practical wisdom is an intellectual virtue that is required for acting well.⁸

1.4.2 How Is Virtue Related to Other Moral Concepts?

Apart from questions about the nature of virtue, philosophers are interested in the link between virtue and other moral concepts. One set of questions concerns the link between virtue and happiness. It seems obvious that virtues like kindness, generosity, honesty, and fairness generally contribute to the happiness of others. Part of the reason we value these traits and reward people who have them is that they contribute to the good of society as a whole – things tend to go better when people are kind and generous, and when they can rely on each other to be honest and fair. But do the virtues also contribute to the happiness of their possessor? Some philosophers claim that the virtues are necessary for happiness, that for someone to live a good or happy life, they have to possess the virtues.

There is some intuitive support for this idea. It seems plausible that parents encourage their children to become kind, generous and just, not just for the sake of those around them but also for their own sakes. Being selfish, cruel, or dishonest can make one miserable. Further, many (perhaps most) virtuous people do appear to be happy. One of the things that surprised and impressed people when Nelson Mandela was released from prison is that he did not appear bitter or resentful at all. Instead, he seemed genuinely happy, and his happiness was not just a temporary feeling or mood but appeared to be a settled state, part of who he was as a human being. Could there be a link between his virtue – his capacity to forgive, his kindness and compassion, courage, and resilience – and his happiness? Does virtue allow one to be truly happy, or to live a meaningful or worthwhile life?

Another set of questions concerns the link between virtue and right action. It seems safe to say that virtuous people characteristically do what is right. But which of these concepts is primary: virtue or right action? That is, should we start with a theory of what makes an action right, and then go on to define virtue in terms of right action? (So, for example, if a right action is one that has good consequences, then a virtue might be a trait that typically has good consequences; or, if an action is right because it is in accordance with duty, then virtue might be a trait that involves respect for doing one's duty.) Or, alternatively, should we start with a theory of virtue, and then identify right action in terms of virtue (for example, as the kind of action that a virtuous person would perform, or an action that manifests or is motivated by virtue)?

1.4.3 Can People Become Virtuous? (or: Do the Virtues Exist?)

As noted earlier, part of the appeal of thinking in terms of virtues and vices is that we don't have to appeal to obscure metaphysical entities such as "moral duty," but rather to the character traits – dispositions that people actually possess. However, many social psychologists – or "situationists" – doubt whether people do in fact possess character traits, and argue that virtues, like moral duties, are fictional entities. The results of various experiments in social psychology show that people's behavior is influenced more by situational features, such as the number of people in the room, the presence of an authority figure, or even the smell of cookies, than by their personal beliefs, attitudes or feelings. What this suggests, according to situationists, is that people do not possess character traits. This is a controversial claim, and it has become the topic of an intense and ongoing debate, which we will explore later in this book.

1.5 Virtue Ethics

Virtue theory, then, is a field of inquiry that concerns itself with questions about the nature and existence of virtue as well as the link between virtue and other moral concepts. Virtue theory should be distinguished from virtue *ethics*, which is a normative theory rather than a field of inquiry. Virtue ethicists are concerned with many of the same questions as virtue theorists, but they are committed to a particular view about the relationship between virtue and other moral concepts, namely that virtue is a central moral concept, and that conceptions of “the good life” and of right and wrong action are secondary in the sense that they should be understood in terms of virtue.

The distinction between virtue theory and virtue ethics was first suggested by Julia Driver in 1996. Before this time, it was common to use the terms interchangeably. This didn’t cause much confusion given that the majority of philosophers who were interested in questions about virtue were doing so in the course of developing or defending virtue ethics as an alternative to the two dominant normative theories: deontology and consequentialism. Indeed, one of the main objections to these two normative theories was that they ignored or neglected questions about virtue and character. While this criticism was certainly justified at the time, this is no longer the case. Kant’s long-neglected doctrine of virtue, which is expounded in the second part of *The Metaphysics of Morals*, has since received a considerable amount of attention, and philosophers like Julia Driver (2001) and Thomas Hurka (2001) have developed distinctively consequentialist theories of virtue. It is now widely accepted that any normative theory should include an account of good character or virtue. For this reason, it became necessary to distinguish between the broader field of inquiry that concerns itself with questions about virtue (virtue theory) and the specific normative theory that takes virtue to be a central moral concept (virtue ethics).

If all normative theories should include an account of virtue, the question that arises is: What distinguishes virtue ethics from these other theories? One way to answer the question is to compare the structures of these theories, focusing specifically on the account of right action provided by each. As we’ve seen, *deontology* takes the notion of moral duty as primary. An action is right if it is in accordance with duty. It follows that a virtuous person is someone who acts from a sense of duty, and the moral knowledge they have is knowledge of a set of moral rules or principles that specify what is required by duty. Standard forms of *consequentialism*, in turn, take good consequences to be primary, and define right action in terms of (actual or expected) consequences. They hold that virtues and specific inner states, such as motives, feelings, and knowledge, only have instrumental value. By contrast, the central concept in *virtue ethics* is

virtue rather than duty or good consequences. Accordingly, it evaluates actions in terms of virtue, for example, by holding that an action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous person would characteristically do in the circumstances.

While this is a fairly accurate sketch of the differences between these theories, it can also be somewhat misleading, for it suggests that the three theories are all focused on answering the question, What makes an action right? Many virtue ethicists think that the concepts of right or wrong action are relatively unimportant or uninteresting. As we've seen, philosophers like Anscombe argue that we should altogether abandon these concepts and instead evaluate actions as virtuous (kind, honest, just, etc.) or vicious (unkind, dishonest, unjust, etc.).

A significant difference between virtue ethics and its rivals concerns the role of normative theory. Deontologists and consequentialists tend to view a normative theory as useful for solving the moral quandaries or dilemmas that we encounter from time to time, such as: Should I have an abortion? Should I break a promise to help a friend? Should we separate a set of conjoined twins? and so on. And this is why their focus is on giving an account of right action. Although virtue ethics can certainly help us to find answers to these questions, it is concerned with the much broader question about living well or being a good person. As such, it is concerned with our attitudes and habits, our ways of living and perceiving things. To illustrate, consider the person who has focused all her energy on advancing her career, but one day, perhaps after reading a biography of a great philanthropist, wonders whether she should try to become more generous and less focused on advancing her own interests. She is not facing a moral quandary at all. But we can all recognize that she is facing an important ethical question, namely: How can I become a better person? And her answer might be something like: "I should make an effort to care more about others, and take time off work to do volunteer work in the community. I should buy fewer luxury items, and focus on what is really important in life." When it is claimed that virtue plays a central role in virtue ethics, then, what is meant is not merely that it evaluates particular actions in terms of virtue rather than duty or consequences. Rather, as Russell (2013a, 2) notes, "[w]hat sets virtue ethics apart is that it treats ethics as concerned with one's whole life – and not just those occasions when something with a distinctly 'moral' quality is at stake."

1.6 Varieties of Virtue Ethics

The early figures in the revival of virtue ethics were all influenced by Aristotle, and so "virtue ethics" generally meant "Aristotelian virtue

ethics.” However, over the last two decades, a number of normative theorists have suggested alternative forms of virtue ethics, inspired by philosophers such as Plato, David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger. Our focus will be on three varieties of virtue ethics that have dominated current debates in the area.

1.6.1 Eudaimonistic Virtue Ethics

Eudaimonism (from the Greek *eudaimonia*, a good human life) is a tradition in ethics that is focused on the question: What is a good life for human beings? Ancient eudaimonists include Aristotle, Plato, and the Stoics. Aristotelian virtue ethics is the most popular version of eudaimonism among contemporary virtue ethicists, and is supported by Julia Annas (1993, 2011), Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), and Daniel Russell (2009, 2012).

Aristotelian virtue ethics is committed to a form of perfectionism, for it tries to answer the question, What is the *best* life for human beings? Accordingly, it conceives of virtues as *excellences*, and further, as *human excellences* – they are traits that make it possible for us to live well as the kind of beings we are, namely, human beings. Vices, in turn, are seen as *defects*, traits that make someone worse as a human being. To identify the virtues, we need to think about human nature, about what distinguishes us from plants and the other animals – what does it mean to function well as a human being (as opposed to a tree or a bear)? The answer given by Aristotelians is that the capacity for reason is the distinguishing feature of human beings. We are able to act from reason rather than mere instinct, feeling, or desire, and we are able to shape our emotions and desires so that they are aligned with reason. A virtuous person has practical wisdom (*phronesis*), which is an intellectual virtue that involves reasoning well about how to live and act virtuously. A good or happy life for human beings (*eudaimonia*) is a virtuous life, where the virtues are conceived as reliable dispositions to act and react well, that is, for the right reasons and with the right feelings and attitudes. Aristotelian virtue ethicists evaluate actions in terms of virtue and vice, claiming, for example, that an action is right if it is what a virtuous person would characteristically do in the situation (Hursthouse 1999).

In summary, Aristotelian virtue ethicists make five central claims, which we will explore in more detail in this book:

- a Virtue is a human excellence (Chapter 2).
- b What makes a trait a virtue is that it allows its possessor to live a good (happy or flourishing) life (Chapter 3).
- c A virtuous person is motivated by the right feelings and the right reasons (Chapter 4).

- d Practical wisdom is required for virtue (Chapter 5).
- e Actions are to be evaluated in terms of virtue and vice (Chapter 6).

1.6.2 Agent-based Virtue Ethics

Agent-based virtue ethics begins with the intuition that what makes a person good or admirable is the fact that they have good inner states. In this view, it doesn't really matter whether people actually accomplish the things they set out to accomplish, or whether their actions are in accordance with a set of moral rules. Rather, what matters is that they possess and are motivated by the right kind of beliefs, values, attitudes, and emotions. Hence virtue (or virtuous motivation) is not merely central but fundamental, in the sense that it is not defined with reference to any other moral concepts, such as good consequences, moral duty, right action, or *eudaimonia*. Virtuous inner states are seen as intuitively good or admirable, and no further explanation of what makes these states good is given.

The most popular form of agent-based virtue ethics is the sentimentalist view developed by Michael Slote (2001, 2010). Slote argues that what makes someone admirable is that they are motivated by "warm" inner states, such as compassion, care, and benevolence. Accordingly, actions are evaluated as right or good depending on whether they manifest virtuous motives. Slote accepts that well-motivated people will try to bring about good consequences, but he claims that the actual consequences of an action are irrelevant to its rightness. Similarly, he argues that although well-motivated people will try to get the facts right, knowledge or practical wisdom is not required for virtue.

The central claims of Slote's agent-based virtue ethics can be summarized as follows:

- a A virtue is an admirable trait (Chapter 2).
- b Virtue is not defined in terms of human flourishing or *eudaimonia* (Chapter 2).
- c A virtuous person is someone who acts from good or virtuous motives such as benevolence, care, and compassion it (Chapters 2 and 4).
- d Virtue does not require practical wisdom (Chapters 2 and 5).
- e Right action is defined in terms of virtuous motivation (Chapter 6).

1.6.3 Pluralistic Virtue Ethics

Eudaimonists define virtue as a trait needed for happiness, whereas agent-based virtue ethicists define it in terms of inner states. In this sense, both these approaches are monistic. By contrast, pluralistic virtue ethicists

reject the view that there is a single ground of virtue. Christine Swanton (2003), the leading advocate of this view, gives a broad definition of virtue as a disposition to respond well to the demands of the world (2003, 19), but argues that what makes a trait a virtue (that is, what is involved in responding well to the demands of the world) can be any of a number of things. The virtue of compassion involves responding well to a person's suffering, and this includes having certain feelings, such as care, concern, and a desire to alleviate their suffering. By contrast, the virtue of justice does not require responding with warm feelings or fine inner states, but simply honoring or adhering to rules of justice. Swanton also rejects the view that practical wisdom is required for each and every virtue. In the case of some virtues, responding well will require knowledge or intelligence, but other virtues require creativity rather than rationality. Finally, Swanton offers a pluralistic account of what makes an action right. She argues that actions are right if they are virtuous overall, and this involves hitting the targets of the relevant virtues. So, for example, when responding to the suffering of others, an action will be right if it succeeds in hitting the targets of compassion (that is, if involves an understanding of their suffering and a concern for their welfare) and benevolence (that is, if it succeeds in alleviating their suffering).

The central claims of a pluralistic virtue ethics can be summarized as follows:

- a A virtue is a disposition to respond well to the demands of the world (Chapter 2).
- b Not all virtues characteristically contribute to the happiness of their possessor (Chapter 3).
- c Some virtues require good motivation, but others do not (Chapter 4).
- d Not all virtues require wisdom or intelligence (Chapter 5).
- e Right action is defined in terms of hitting the targets of virtue (Chapter 6).

Chapter Summary

- A normative theory is an attempt to provide a systematic and coherent account of the values, norms, ideals, and standards that we appeal to when making moral judgments of actions, states of affairs, motives and intentions, character, and lives.
- During the twentieth century, the focus of normative ethics was on right action. Deontologists give an account of right action in terms of moral

duty, whereas consequentialists argue that rightness depends on consequences.

- All normative theorists share a commitment to some form of moral realism, which is the view that there are objective moral values and that at least some of our moral judgments can be true or false. This position is challenged by anti-realists, who argue that moral values are invented or constructed by human beings, which means that moral judgments cannot be objectively true or false.
- Virtue ethics is a normative theory that claims that the virtues, understood as dispositions to act and feel in certain ways, play a central role in morality. Virtue ethicists reject the claim that we have moral duties, and in this regard they agree with anti-realists. However, they presuppose a form of moral realism because they think we can make true moral judgments in terms of virtues and vices.
- Virtue theory is a field of inquiry that focuses on philosophical questions about virtue and vice, or character more generally. Virtue theorists are not necessarily committed to virtue ethics. Some virtue theorists embrace consequentialism or deontology, whereas others remain neutral.

Notes

- 1 For a discussion of these distinctions see Veatch (2000, 83–100).
- 2 James Rachels (1975) is one of the leading proponents of this view.
- 3 See, for example, Ruth Macklin (1992).
- 4 Foot makes it clear that by an “act of euthanasia” she does not mean to exclude cases where the death is the result of an omission (passive euthanasia).
- 5 See, e.g., Hursthouse (1991); Solomon (1993); Pellegrino and Thomasma (1993).
- 6 For a good overview of the field of applied virtue ethics, see Axtell and Olson (2012).
- 7 For an introduction to some of the main controversies in contemporary virtue theory, see the collection *Current Controversies in Virtue Theory*, edited by Mark Alfano (2015).
- 8 For an interesting discussion of key debates about intellectual virtue that bear directly on virtue ethics, see Battaly (2014).

Further Reading

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