Ethics Script: Virtue Ethics

Introduction

Virtue ethics determines morality or “goodness” by a person’s interconnected judgments, decisions, motivations, and behaviors that result from their character or “second nature.” Your morality is determined by why you do what you do, not the action itself or even the consequence. This in turn reveals the strength of your character.

Aristotle & Virtue

The origins of Virtue Ethics come from ancient Greece where, from 469-399 BCE, Socrates philosophized about morality. According to Socrates, doing wrong “will harm and corrupt that part of ourselves that is improved by just actions and destroyed by unjust actions.” He was eventually executed by the Athenian state and even turned down a chance to escape, choosing death over the corruption of his character. Virtue ethics lived on through his pupil Plato but most virtue ethics theories take their inspiration from Aristotle (Plato’s pupil) who further dissected what it means to be virtuous.

Integration of Self

Aristotle defined a virtuous person as someone who has ideal character traits and that the strength of character is dependent on the integration of “non-rational self” (feelings, emotions, and desires) and “rational self” (reason and wisdom). The mean of these two components comprises moral virtue, and moral virtue is a necessity for the highest good or eudaimonia.

The Golden Mean

Moral virtue lies in a mean because it is dynamic and dependent on both the situation and the person in question. It involves using your reason and wisdom, having the appropriate amount of desire, feeling, and emotion. Your strength of character is found between an excess and a deficiency; Aristotle called this the “golden mean.”

Example: The Golden Mean

A courageous person feels and acts according to merits of a situation. If you have too much fear and too little confidence, the deficiency of courage becomes a vice—cowardice. You fear things that are not terrible as if they are terrible. Conversely, an excess of courage is also a vice. If you are a rash person you have too little fear and too much confidence and consequently exercise poor judgment. The character traits are also interrelated. For example, it takes the mean amount of courage to have self-respect or to forgive rather than ignore a situation or seek revenge.
How to Become “virtuous”

Only you can commit yourself to be virtuous. Aristotle has some suggestions—perhaps think of it as Jedi training.

1) Form habits: Model virtuous people, and always be wary of pleasure (bad influences, your own ego, or the DARK SIDE).
2) Desire the highest good: Remember, the highest good is eudaimonia, or “living well.” Because the character traits of a virtuous person are both the way to get what you desire and what you desire, there you have it... you will be guided toward the virtuous life.
3) Use your wisdom and reason: You are strengthening your rational self so it can easily control your non-rational self.

Things to Remember

To recap: Virtue ethics is concerned with why you do what you do; your strength of character. It involves the integration of the non-rational and rational self to achieve eudaimonia. One needs to seek the mean between excess and deficiency. Achieving the golden mean is specific to the situation and the person. To become virtuous one must form habits, desire what is the highest good, and use wisdom and reason.