

Philsoc Student Essay Prize - Trinity 2013: Second Prize

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

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To evaluate whether a moral theory is a good one, one must first examine what is the purpose of a moral theory and then go on to consider whether a particular theory measures up to it. This essay will argue that a decision procedure is not essential for a good moral theory and therefore one cannot evaluate whether a theory is sound based on that criteria alone. Furthermore, this essay will show that not only does virtue ethics provide a procedure that facilitates decision-making, it also has other qualities that make it a good moral theory, thus rendering the statement invalid.

What is the purpose of a moral theory? This essay will establish that a moral theory should serve the end of guiding human beings in their everyday endeavors so that they know the right thing to do, do the right thing for the right reason, and feel good about it. In another word, it is a school of thought that is used to discipline, assure and reward those who follow it. One may then ask, does a school of thought need decision-making procedures to best serve this purpose? It helps to think from a follower's perspective. Consider an infant, how does he learn? One will see that he does not need verbal step-by-step instructions. He follows the example of adults. We should not liken the human brain to that of a computer and think that we need detailed procedures programmed for everything. A human being has the ability to perceive an example, and then without turning what he sees into decision-procedures, follow the example. It is almost like our brain works in a speed so high that detailed instructions are blurred and we just do. Therefore, one can conclude that a moral theory can serve its purpose by giving detailed instructions, providing examples and many other ways such as general instructions like 'greatest happiness for the greatest number'. Judging a moral theory solely based on the decision-procedure it provides is thus not a fair method, and cannot be used to reach a sound conclusion with regard to the quality of a moral theory.

In addition, if one examines virtue ethics, one will realize that it does indeed provide decision-making instructions. For example, following the Golden Mean is a valid instruction in itself. When one is faced with choices and is required to make a decision, one can assess whether each choice leads to an excess, and avoid it accordingly. One reason why some do not consider the Golden Mean as a decision-procedure is that it is not detailed enough. They would imagine that if you tell a robot to follow it, the robot would respond with an error message. However, if you

program the robot in a way that it is able to understand the spectrum of everything a human can perceive, then he will be able to quantify each quality, choose the midpoint of everything and come to a conclusion. Fortunately, humans are already equipped with such knowledge. Even though we may not be able to verbalize it, we understand the midpoint between cowardice and recklessness, and make the right decision by choosing to follow that point. Therefore, the Golden Mean is a perfectly valid decision-making instruction. One might call it secondary one, as it does not give primary instructions like 'do this when this happens' but asks one to think in more sophisticated terms.

Moreover, virtue ethics also adopts the aforementioned alternative way of instruction – learn by example. Virtue ethics asks us to consider what a virtuous person would do. As one reflects upon the various people one has encountered, in real life or in fictions, one for sure would be able to come up with an example of a virtuous person. By putting himself in the virtuous person's shoes, one will be able to make a decision. Therefore, following the example of a virtuous person can also be considered a secondary instruction for decision-making.

What gives virtue ethics a unique advantage, as a candidate for a good moral theory, is that it is not just about following procedures but following them for the right reason. One only possesses virtue when one does the right thing for the right reason, because making the right decision is not an end in itself. According to virtue ethics, there is something more important than learning how to make a decision – the acquisition of good characters. Every time we make the right decision for the right reason, we move a step closer towards becoming a person with good characters. As we become this person, we will act out of good characters that no longer require a decision-making procedure. Therefore, virtue ethics is a good theory in a sense that it does serve the purpose of guiding a person in his everyday endeavors to do the right thing, as he ultimately becomes the guide himself with his own good characters.

In the final analysis, this essay will argue that the statement is invalid for two reasons – firstly, virtue ethics does provide secondary decision-procedures to guide people in their everyday lives; secondly, whether a moral theory is good or not does not solely depend on whether it provides a decision-procedure. In fact, one must not confuse laws with moral theories. The ultimate goal of a moral theory is not to become a law book but to make people know what is the right thing, do the right thing, and feel good about it. Anything that serves this purpose contributes to making a moral theory a good one, therefore measured against this standard, virtue ethics is, in its own way, a good moral theory.