

Philsoc Student Essay Prize – Michaelmas 2014: Third Prize

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

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Aristotelian virtue ethics lacks a decision-procedure of the type that can be found in deontological or consequentialist theories¹, but it does not follow that therefore it is not a good moral theory. Virtue ethics lacks a decision-procedure because to offer one would be counter to the fundamental nature of the theory itself, including the vision of the world in which it operates. This essay discusses Aristotle's conception of the moral life as described in the first two books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and offers a reason why virtue ethics is a good moral theory *because* it has no decision-procedure.

Aristotle explains in the first book that life has a *telos*, a proper end or purpose, and this is *eudaimonia*. Translated as 'happiness' or 'flourishing', *eudaimonia* is the supreme good of life. Happiness is an end, not a means toward other ends. It is worthwhile, desirable, and perfect in and of itself. As for the means to this end, Aristotle says that just as the good for a harpist is to play the harp well, because it fulfills a harpist's function, the good for man, by his unique nature, is to act in accordance with reason. Happiness cannot then be merely the experience of a transient pleasure or feeling. Aristotle defines it as an activity of the rational part of the soul in accordance with virtue (excellence), and considered over the course of an entire lifetime. Happiness is the *telos*, virtue the path.² Good fortune is essential for happiness too, but this is largely outside the scope of rational activity.

Aristotle cautions that we should not expect more precision in the treatment of any subject than its nature permits. Moral excellence cannot be prescribed in terms of specific rules of conduct. Virtuous conduct involves so many contingencies and varieties of experience that only a general outline is possible.³ There can be no universally valid decision-procedure in virtue ethics, because Aristotle does not believe the complex nature of lived experience permits of such a thing. Instead, moral goodness must be cultivated by each individual in each circumstance through rationally chosen action. Such actions then become a manifestation of character. Character, literally the 'mark' of a person, plays the central role in Aristotle's theory.

¹ Such as Kant's categorical imperative or Mill's GHP.

² Virtue is not truly virtuous however, if it is manifested *for* the *telos*.

³ This is not to say Aristotle is entirely a 'particularist'. Some actions he says are evil in themselves. Moreover, his ethics are aimed at those who have already had a fundamental moral education (see note 5).

Aristotle believes no one is born with good character, but all are born with the potential to develop such a character. If we were born with good (or bad) character, moral life might be considered pre-determined, rather than a matter of rationally chosen activity. Although intellectual virtue may be taught abstractly, moral virtue is a disposition that is developed by means of habituation, much like any craftsman learns his trade. A builder, for example, develops skill only as a result of building. It is not enough to read a book and simply understand theory. Similarly, it is only through repeated practice that virtue is internalized as character and becomes genuine moral knowledge. For example, it is the way we behave in a situation, manifesting courage or cowardice, that makes us courageous or cowardly. It is not enough to merely *feel* or *think* courageously unless we actually *act* courageously too. Courageous actions need have a certain quality to be courageous in any given situation, and in turn, the characteristics of these actions create and reinforce courageous dispositions. Aristotle does say it is possible to do virtuous things accidentally or with questionable motives. But these actions will not serve to create virtuous dispositions. Character is developed act by act, and eventually a person not only *acts* courageous, but genuinely *is* courageous. Virtue ethics are transformative.

Aristotle addresses the question of how to evaluate moral action in the second book. He reminds that ethics are a practical, not theoretical branch of philosophy, and that the truth of the subject can only be described in outline. His intent is not to define moral goodness and prescribe its rules, but rather to teach how moral qualities might be improved at any stage of development. His tool for this is the doctrine of the mean. It is the well-trained disposition of a virtuous person that determines in any case what a virtuous action is, and the teaching of the mean is an aid in acquiring just such a disposition.

Excellent behavior lies in the mean between excess and deficiency and is incompatible with either extreme. The extremes represent the two vices associated with any virtue.⁴ For example, courage is the mean between cowardice and rashness. The mean is not conceived as a fixed point. If this were the case Aristotle might well have developed a decision-procedure to reach it. But in any one circumstance the mean may be closer to a deficiency, in another, an excess. Furthermore, the mean manifests uniquely relative to each individual's capability. Not being a self-existent phenomenon, it can only be achieved with difficulty, by an action done for the right reason, in the right way, at the right time. But since as rational beings we are capable of reflection and improvement, Aristotle believes we can in fact 'drag ourselves' progressively closer to the mean. As the quality of our actions improves the quality of our dispositions, we become habituated to act more naturally in accordance with the mean. And since virtues and vices are a matter of pleasure and pain, such feelings, in addition to reason, serve as a measure of moral progress.⁵ Aristotle warns of being misled by pleasure, but nevertheless, as moral knowledge is gained, pleasure and pain become more appropriately aligned in relation to the mean. When virtue is truly achieved, a person's conduct can no longer be a source of pain.

⁴ Not every action admits of a mean as some, for example theft, are fundamentally categorized as vice.

⁵ This depends crucially on Aristotle's notion that a basic moral education consists of having been trained to feel joy and grief appropriately.

All human beings desire to be happy and not suffer. While it is not completely in our own power to achieve *eudaimonia*, since good fortune is also required, we are free to go as far as human reason takes us. Wherever we stand behaviorally in relation to the mean, we can find the proper direction in which to move and thereby improve. Moral knowledge comes only through experience. *Eudaimonia* is the work of a lifetime, but because pleasure and pain is so fundamentally associated with virtue and vice, we naturally grow progressively happier while manifesting a more virtuous way in which to live. Therefore, while over a lifetime, virtue is the means to an end, in everyday life, the mean might become its own 'reward'.

Although we might start the ethical life by imitating the virtue of others, we will not genuinely change the nature of our actions without changing ourselves. The capacity for transformation is one of our most precious human qualities. Virtue ethics understands the necessity of *acting* good before it is possible to actually *be* good. That is the brilliance of the method. We can only ever start where we are and learn by approximation. Concerned with the process of *becoming* good, virtue ethics holds no empty promise of a decision-procedure that automatically yields virtuous action. A person can follow decision-procedures and a hundred thousand other rules of conduct and yet not be virtuous. Indeed it is a pernicious effect of decision-procedures that they allow people to *think* they are being virtuous if they follow them. Who will conceive the desire to change and improve one's own moral qualities, if it is believed that simply following a decision-procedure encompasses a proper end in itself? People can cause immeasurable suffering in the name of abstract theory. We cannot possibly know what is good for others unless we understand what is good both for and in our own selves. In virtue ethics, moral knowledge is intrinsically linked to self-knowledge and self-knowledge is required for change. But while primarily concerned with the self, virtue ethics is not, in effect, a 'selfish' practice, since moral virtue, unlike intellectual virtue, can only be proven virtuous when enacted in relation to others. It is not possible to achieve *eudaimonia* in isolation.

In conclusion, Aristotle offers a practical ethics that does not suggest what to do, but how to be in the world in order that we might be happy, and this is why it is a good moral theory. It cannot accommodate a decision-procedure, not only because moral life has too many contingencies of time, place, and circumstance to support one, but also because personal transformation is fundamental to achieving *eudaimonia*. An ethical theory with a decision-procedure is not primarily concerned with virtue and the transformation of thoughts and feelings. Aristotelian ethics, on the other hand, is fundamentally concerned with both, because transformative action is necessary for virtue, and virtue is necessary for happiness. Happiness is a matter of character.

Bibliography

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