Virtue Ethics

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Action-based ethical theories, like utilitarianism and Kantianism, focus on what we should *do* and how to determine the morally right action in specific circumstances. They require us to follow certain rules or principles, such as "perform that act that will result in the greatest good for the greatest number of people," or "perform that act that can be universalized and that treats all people as ends in and of themselves."

In contrast, **virtue ethics** focuses on *being* rather than *just doing*. The goal of virtue ethics is to develop a good moral character. It is from this character that our actions flow. If our character is good, then our actions will demonstrate this. Actions do not stand alone, but proceed from who we are as people.

It is our duty to identify the virtues or excellent character traits that promote human well-being, and to cultivate these virtues in ourselves. We do this by practicing them. The more we practice them, the more ingrained they become, to the point that they become habits. Then, when faced with a moral decision, we will behave automatically – choosing the virtuous course of action almost by instinct.

Virtue ethics is built around the concept of the ideal virtuous person. We must ask ourselves how this person would behave and what virtues he or she would embody. We then base our own character development on this ideal standard.

Again, the focus of virtue ethics is on *becoming a virtuous person* rather than on individual actions.

Criticism of Action-Based Models

Virtue ethicists criticize action-based ethical models in a number of ways:

1. They say that action-based ethical models focus on formulating moral rules, but fail to *motivate* or inspire people to be moral.

2. Rather than only emphasizing *good rules*, ethics should help us become *good people*.

3. It's not enough to simply *do* the right thing begrudgingly or out of a sense of duty. Our actions need to come from a good heart that *takes pleasure in being and doing good*.

4. Action-based ethics establishes minimal moral standards relating to behaviors, but does not address the lifelong responsibility we have to *continually develop ourselves morally*.

5. People learn to be moral and are inspired to be moral *by observing* (or learning about) *other people* who model the virtuous life, not simply by learning rules.

Criticism of Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics can also be criticized in several areas:

1. When asked what we should do in any given situation, the virtue ethicist generally answers that we should do what a virtuous person would do. However, how do we identify this ideal virtuous person upon whom we should model ourselves? For example, the Christian Tradition would identify the "ideal virtuous person" as Jesus. However, non-Christians might disagree. Virtue ethics does not tell us how to resolve this.

2. Likewise, how are we to identify the virtues to which we should aspire? Aristotle, an advocate for virtue ethics, proposed, what he called, "the Golden Mean," which represents the middle between extremes. For example, the virtue of courage is found between the extremes of cowardice, on the one hand, and recklessness, on the other. While that sounds good, it is vague. Where exactly along that spectrum does the virtue of courage reside?

3. Virtue ethics also does little to help us determine how to behave in morally confusing situations, where virtues appear to conflict. For example, what would a virtuous woman, who is both honest and compassionate, do when faced with a murderer who is asking her where the friend she just invited into her house is hiding?

Bringing Action and Virtue Together

Contemporary ethicists have, on the whole, come to recognize the important role character development must have in any well-developed ethical theory. However, action-based ethicists and virtue ethicists still differ on its proper place.

Action-based ethicists see virtues or character development as a means to encourage moral actions that, in turn, promote "the Good" or human well-being. Character or virtue is *instrumentally* good – it's only a means to an end.

Virtue ethicists, however, believe that virtue or character is *intrinsically* good – it is an end in and of itself. Having good character and living a life of virtue is a necessary part of "the Good" and human well-being. Flourishing as human beings requires not just that we *do* good, but that we *be good*.