
UNIT 6 VIRTUE ETHICS: ARISTOTLE*

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the present chapter include:

- Understanding the importance of virtues in Human conduct.
- Re - looking on Human values.
- Understanding the difference between 'just', 'unjust', 'moral' and 'immoral', 'virtuous' and 'non-virtuous' behavior.
- Virtue leading to Eudaimonia.
- Justice, Temperance, Courage and its essentialities to human existence.
- Virtue Ethics developed mainly by Aristotle.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Ethics can also be understood as a 'study of conduct' of human beings. It can also be understood as one that studies virtue or moral character. So someone (if need arises) should be helped because it is kind and generous to help people. This is what 'Virtue Ethics' aims to do. In the present world, there is a necessity to understand and analyze human conduct/ behavior. This is a philosophical branch developed by Aristotle and Other Ancient Greeks. This philosophy looks for a 'Virtue based Ethics', i.e., we acquire virtue through practice. Largely this unit will try to look into what is Virtue Ethics, how can we understand the historicity behind it? Here, we will first begin with Aristotle (to know the beginning of

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Virtue Ethics) and in order to understand Virtue Ethics in relation to changes in Modern Philosophy; we will later refer to G.E.M. Anscombe.

The purpose of this unit is to make us re-think how essential and important are virtues like Justice, Courage, and Temperance, as said by Plato. It is important to re-visit and re-think along with these concepts in the contemporary world. These still act as one of the founding stones in any society, and democracy. Comparing them and seeing them in the light of virtue is something which Plato did as it was his way in which he wanted the mass to understand the importance of these qualities as virtues. It was his appeal to make people understand that how important it is to know yourself as well as act after contemplating. Virtue Ethics acts as a 'tool' in the contemporary world which can be used to understand the 'wrongness' in human conduct/ behavior.

It would be wrong (misleading) to say that Plato and Aristotle are the only thinkers/ philosophers to read and engage with, while understanding Virtue Ethics. If Aristotle is important to read in the realm of Virtue Ethics in the West, so is Confucius (Chinese Philosopher) in the East. Virtue stands for a perfect trait or character which one possesses. Most of the philosophers of Virtue Ethics agree in perceiving 'virtue' as the highest and practical wisdom essential in order to obtain it, though they do differ in how they do conjunction (combination) of them. There are different ways of doing it. The first could be called that Virtue Ethics based on Eudaimonism. They understand and define virtues in relation to Eudaimonia. The term Eudaimonia flourishes in Greek Philosophy where it stands for Well-being and happiness. So according to them virtues enable a human being to lead a eudemonia life.

6.2 HOW CAN ONE LEAD/ LIVE ONE'S LIFE?

How do we differentiate between 'Right' and 'wrong'? How do we differentiate between rightful and wrongful behavior? For a detailed understanding of questions and dilemmas like these, one looks up to Ethical Theories. Virtue Ethics makes us contemplate on questions like 'What makes an action as Right'? 'Am I a Right Person'? Virtue Ethics deals not only with moments, events, and stages, but whole life, i.e. throughout my life what should I do to do Right and to look Right? So here actions aren't judged because of one abstract moral theory but rather how they portray virtue. The larger question is how should one lead his/ her life? The answer which virtue ethicists give lies in living with virtues, a society becomes a good society when you have people living a virtuous life.

For instance, a woman is broke (she doesn't have money) to pay her debts. She visits her friend's place and she sees lots of cash in the wardrobe, knowing the fact that her friend comes from a very rich family. She knows that even if she takes some cash it would hardly make a difference in her friend's life. Virtue Ethics works in moments like these, where she is in the dilemma to what to do? How she should live her life? From beginning we have been told that stealing is bad but here stealing would help her in paying off her debts. So what does she do here? How does she know that living a life like this would be better? In instances like these we look up to Virtue Ethics. As it talks about how life should be lived. They say that the purpose of life is Eudemonia and virtue acts as a medium to attain it. Here Virtue stands for those qualities which can help an individual attain Eudemonia or fulfillment or well-being.

What is trait of a character? While we admire someone why do we admire them? Virtues reveal what a person is like which we admire. Virtue is something which we admire, we look up to. There is also a possibility that we might admire something which isn't good. We admire honesty, beauty, intellect, courage and many others. If someone has courage we admire her, if they don't we might look down to them. Virtue, therefore, also stands for excellence and perfection. It can stand for excellent and perfect behavior. For instance people admire Mother Teresa, Mahatama Gandhi because of certain behavioral traits they have, which we also like to have. Whether it is compassion, love, care or servitude we like to have them in our behavior that is why when we see these qualities in other person's behavior we admire them, like them. So these can be treated as virtues according to Greek Philosophers which help us in achieving Eudeamonia which is the ultimate happiness, well-being or fulfillment.

Check your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is virtue Ethics?

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2. Is there a difference between de-ontological ethics and Virtue Ethics? Explain.

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3. Does Virtue Ethics believe in living a virtuous life? Explain.

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4. What is the relevance of virtues in the contemporary world? Explain.

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6.3 PLATO AND VIRTUE ETHICS

Plato (428- 437) was one of the finest philosopher of the Greek tradition. He was also the teacher of Aristotle and the founder of the academy in Athens. His notable works include *Apology*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *The laws*, *The Meno* and *The Symposium*. One of the important ways of philosophizing for Plato was dialogue. Dialogue acts as an important method for philosophizing. Even one of his most important works called *Republic* has all the discussions happening in the form of dialogue. Republic contains very important dialogues on Virtue Ethics.

6.3.1 Virtue Ethics

Plato advocated a ‘virtue based’ ethics based on Eudaimonia. If happiness is the highest attainment of moral conduct then virtue acts as a key/ mode to achieve Eudaimonia. In *Republic* Plato has mentioned ethics which is based on Eudaimonia. The four virtues are:

- Wisdom
- Temperance
- Courage
- Justice

The purpose of his ethics was to help people achieve Eudaemonia which is also known as fulfillment or well-being. Plato argued for “Knowing yourself”. Socrates said “An unexamined life is not worth living”. Both of them were dwelling and contemplating on ‘How life should be lived’? While many understand Republic as a political text which deals with state and justice alone while it has a lot to offer to Virtue Ethics. Precisely that’s the reason that Plato has considered Justice as the last and the most important virtue which a human being should possess.

In a dialogue on virtue, Plato says that state, community and philosophy can play an important role in helping the person to live a ‘virtuous life’. It has many dialogues which he had with his students on Virtue. A just person is someone who is in control of himself and he doesn’t get driven by his desires.

Table I: Tripartite nature of soul, state and virtue

Soul	State	Virtue
Reason (Rational)	Ruler	Wisdom/ Knowledge
Spirit	Guardians (Soldiers)	Bravery/ Courage/ Loyalty
Appetite	Citizens	Temperance

The three parts of the soul and state has a counterpart of virtues. Reason has the wisdom of knowledge as their virtues. The Rulers/ Warrior/ Soldiers who protect the State, they accord the Spirit and share the virtue of Bravery and Loyalty

together. Here both of these virtues shouldn't be seen as equivalent rather they stand in relation to each other. Soldiers who have also been seen as the guardians of the state should be brave enough to be called fearless and they should be loyal to the state, its society. The Citizens have Appetite and they have Temperance as their virtue, they should have Self Control.

These would be the root/ core virtues which a human being should have in his life. All other virtues stem from it. The first virtue is Courage; it's the most important virtue, Patience, Generosity is rooted in Courage. Temperance stands for balance, it stands for maintaining a balance, equilibrium. The Soul should know how to balance. Chastity, contentment, trustworthiness comes from this virtue. From Wisdom comes understanding. The last virtue is called Justice which stands for fairness and justice. Justice comes with mercy; there is more to virtue than these qualities alone.

The idea of justice in Republic begins with a dialogue with an old man where he says, 'justice means no harm'. It discusses goodness, morality. Justice is good because it has good consequences. Justice is good because it prevents us from harming each other. Republic consists of 'lived dialogues' and conversations (Which the Indian Philosopher Daya Krishna calls as *Samvad.*). He asks one of the fundamental questions, 'Why should we be good'? Justice is a virtue that concerns everybody, it concerns the society. A society remains incomplete as long as it cannot promise justice to its people and countrymen. Justice stands for harmony, it's one of the most fundamental, ethical and social necessity of any society.

6.4 ARISTOTLE AND VIRTUE ETHICS

Aristotle (384- 322 B.C.E.) can be called one of the pioneering figures in Greek Philosophy. He philosophized on Logic, Epistemology, Metaphysics, Ethics and Theology. He was one of the students of Plato. He critiqued Plato's Theory of forms. He is also called as 'Father in the field of Logic'. He was the first to develop systematic way of arguing which includes arguments and propositions. Most of his works are written in the form of lectures and notes.

6.4.1 Ethics

How can we best live our lives? Aristotle said that we should keep on asking ourselves this question more often. In order to answer this question he propounded the branch of philosophy called Virtue Ethics. In *Nichomachean Ethics*, one of the biggest questions for Aristotle stands as 'What is Good'? The good for humanity is to attain virtue, to become a virtuous person. In pursue of this question he dwelled into the realm of virtue and practical wisdom. Practical wisdom (phronesis) is an intellectual virtue, a virtue necessary and important for the acquirement of moral virtues. There is also one more kind of wisdom, i.e. Theoretical Wisdom (Sophia) which can be called as a *summum bonum* of all the eternal truths. There are different kinds of virtues like Courage, Loyalty, Honesty, Temperament and Integrity. Aristotle talked about *Moral Virtues* which are as follows:

Courage

Temperance

Liberality
 Magnificence
 Magnanimity
 Ambition
 Truthfulness
 Wittiness
 Righteous
 Modesty
 Friendliness

He divided Plato's Cardinal Virtues into the above written Moral virtues. He also added the concept to Intellectual Virtues which includes:

Intelligence
 Theoretical Wisdom

Aristotle said 'you become what you repeatedly do', so in order to lead a happy life a person should lead as well as live her life with virtue. For instance, Aristotle says that you don't become a liar because you just lied once; you became a liar because you repeatedly started lying. Hence it became a habit for you. Therefore virtue can be practiced by repeatedly doing it.

6.4.2 Eudaimonia

This Greek term can be translated as happiness, well-being or human flourishing. Virtue leads to happiness or a good life. The opposite of virtue is vice. One can have two extremes in this, for instance one can have the vice of deficiency on the one hand and vice of excess on the other. For instance seeing someone getting mugged, if you run away in order to save yourself that would be the deficiency of your virtue of courage. Or if a person has gun and you are trying to stop him unarmed would be excess of vice or courage (in this case). The best thing to do here would be to get the help of the local police authorities so that you can save him as well as yourself. Virtue also acts as a golden mean between two extremes.

The biggest happiness (Eudaimonia) one can have or possess is by developing intellectual virtues. The virtue of courage occupies the middle path between being coward on the one hand and being overly rash on the other. Acquiring intellectual virtues as well as virtue of character makes the *highest good* according to Aristotle which also stands for Eudaimonia.

6.5 G. E. M. ANSCOMBE AND VIRTUE ETHICS

Elizabeth Anscombe or Miss Anscombe as she was popularly known was one of the important women philosophers of the twentieth century. She was a religious believer and a virtue ethicist. She is known for her works on ethics and philosophy of action. Her one of the important works includes her papers titled '*Modern Moral Philosophy*' and '*Intentions*'. She is also known for translating some of important works of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

6.5.1 Virtue Ethics

Anscombe in her paper titled, ‘*Modern Moral Philosophy*’ critiqued the way in which English moral philosophers were propounding theories which till that time had resulted in the culmination of a law concept of ethics. She critiqued philosophers like J.S. Mill and Immanuel Kant because of their reliance on ‘universal principles’ which ends up giving a universal moral code of conduct. English moral philosophers did not differ with each other in any manner. ‘Obligation’ has become the central concept in their ethics. Her submission was to re-assess and re-understand how we have been dealing with ethics and virtue. According to her, our own will is incapable in itself to support moral obligation.

She critiqued Kant’s account as well as Utilitarian’s. The response which she gave to English Moral Philosophers was that they accept that there is a God who sees morality and is the source of our moral obligations. Moral obligation only makes sense in relation to divine authority. If not this, then they should give up the concept of obligation as an important element of their ethical theories. Moral philosophers needs to re-assess the concepts of Intention, Desire, Pleasure, Motive, Action and Emotion which they have ignored so far. She rejected de-ontological ethical theories as well as consequentialist theories.

Check your Progress II

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer
b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. Does Virtue Ethics tells us what to do?

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2. What are different types of Virtues according to Aristotle?

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3. Is there a difference between Aristotelian account and Anscombe’s account of Virtue Ethics? Explain.

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4. Can justice be seen as one of the important virtues? If yes, Explain.

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6.6 LET US SUM UP

So far there have been broadly two to three different ways in which one can understand/ theorize Ethics. Eudaimonism being one of the important ones and on the other hand there is Anscombe’s version of reviving Virtue Ethics. In the contemporary world, one can see lots of violations in relation to speech/ acts/ morality. Few believe that we live in a post-modernist world and therefore value no longer holds any significance. But in whatever world we live, would a life be significant enough if we live value less and virtue less. Seeing the discourses in philosophy/ of philosophy which has been male centered to a great extent. It was a women philosopher who revived Virtue Ethics in late Modern Philosophy. There are many contemporary philosophers who have been working on Ethical theories. Few among them are Alasdair Macintyre, J. Cottingham and J. Driver.

6.7 KEY WORDS

Eudaimonia: This Greek term can be translated to happiness, well-being or human flourishing.

Phronesis: (Greek Term) Intellectual Wisdom.

6.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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Pod casts/ Web sources

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<https://thevirtueblog.com/virtue-talk-2/>

<https://philosophybites.com/2014/12/julia-annas-on-what-is-virtue-ethics-for.html>

6.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. Virtue Ethics is a branch in philosophy which deals with virtue as a central concept while trying to understand how a life should be lived. It is not concerned with duties or obligations but traits or virtues which one should possess in order to live a good life. It doesn't try to understand human life from the dialectic between deontology and consequentialism. The highest happiness is eudaimonia. Practical wisdom is necessary in order to achieve eudaimonia.
2. Yes, there is a difference between deontological ethics and virtue ethics. The term deontology is derived from the Greek word 'deon' and 'logos', While the former are ethical theories which lays emphasis on duties and morality as central to human life. According to it, few acts need to be performed as they fall under the realm of obligation, for instance 'duty for duty's sake'. One of the important philosophers of deontology ethics is Immanuel Kant.
3. Yes, virtue ethics believes in living a virtuous life. Greek philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle tried to define 'Good', and 'Supreme Good', they started philosophizing on a life which will be governed by virtues. All these philosophers made different distinctions between virtues. Few include courage, temperance, generosity, friendship, patience etc.
4. Yes, virtues do help us in the contemporary world. Whether it's about our conduct, behavior or the way we want to live our life virtues cat as an indicator for these. It has a lot of relevance in the present world as there is injustice, cowardliness, selfishness and crudeness in the present world. In order to contemplate on ourselves, on our conduct, we need to go back to Virtue Ethics. The basis of it is to know ourselves, examine our actions, and contemplate on our mistakes and not vice versa. Contemplations and examining is missing when it comes to analyzing our acts, and behavior in the present world and that's why Virtue Ethics are important as well as relevant.

Answers to check your progress II

1. No, virtue ethics is all about an ethical theory which focuses on an individual's character and conduct rather than centering itself on a set of rules. You become a virtuous person because of Eudemonia. According to Aristotle, nature has built in us the idea of virtue, the nature of being virtuous. Virtue would lead to good behavior in a human being.
2. According to Aristotle, courage is the golden mean between cowardice and recklessness. While cowardice is a deficiency of courage, and recklessness is an excess of courage, both are extremes and both are bad. In the words of Aristotle, "courage is finding the right way to act". A 'Right Action' is always a mid-point between two extremes. Like, honesty is the mean between brutal honesty and incapable of saying things which should be said. The same goes for generosity as well. One becomes virtuous while learning it, acting on it.

3. Theoretically both the theories belong to the realm of virtue ethics. Anscombe begins to theorize as a religious believer and as a virtue ethicist. She brought a re-assessment to the field of virtue ethics. She argued that either we get back to Virtue Ethics or define and understand the existence of God which was absent in the moral philosophy.
4. Yes, Justice has been perceived and conceptualized as one of the important virtues by Plato. The best aspect of this virtue is that it affects from the individual to the collective. Plato was wise enough to treat it as an end in itself and not as a means to achieve anything. Yes he did hold the position that for any society to be harmonious and virtuous these virtues are very important. And in them the most important is Justice. He perceives it as something which is so essential to a democracy as well as to any society. It clearly shows how Plato was a head of his times and that's why he philosophized so much on justice and tried to make it as adaptable as he can.



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