Theories of virtue compared[[1]](#footnote-1)

(This handout follows the handout ‘Aristotle on virtue’. You should read that handout first.)

There are many recognisable similarities between Aristotle’s concept of an *arête* of character and our modern concept of virtue. Both are the grounds for calling someone good or bad, for praising or blaming them for what they feel and do. Both are clearly dispositions of feeling and closely related to the sorts of actions people do. If we start to list traits we would call virtues, we see a large overlap with Aristotle’s list. There are, however, different theories about how best to understand what a ‘virtue’ is. In this handout, we consider a number of alternatives to Aristotle’s theory, following Julia Annas’ discussion in ‘Virtue ethics’.

According to Aristotle, a virtue is a disposition to feel, desire and choose ‘well’, which is necessary if we are to live well and so achieve eudaimonia, our single final end. Eudaimonia is living a life in which one exercises the virtues by living in accordance with reason. It involves doing the right thing for the right reasons and in an appropriate way. This ‘appropriate way’ involves both affective and intellectual aspects. First, our action needs to be accompanied by the right feelings. Second, we need to understand that this action is the right thing to do, including the reasons that make it the right thing to do.

# Reason

A first alternative to Aristotle’s theory of virtue is to weaken his emphasis on the centrality of practical reason. On this view, a virtue is simply a disposition to act in a morally good way. It is not necessarily a disposition that the person endorses by thinking through the moral reasons for acting that way. For example, on a utilitarian view, a virtue is a disposition to act in a way that maximises happiness (whether or not the person is aiming to do that). On some interpretations of Kant, a virtue is simply a disposition that helps one do one’s duty.

Annas comments that this type of theory isn’t really a form of virtue ethics, because it has cut the connection between a person’s dispositions to act, their character as an expression of who they are, and their practical reasoning. Rather than thinking in terms of the person *living* a certain kind of life, being aware of what they are doing and why, it looks just at the causal connection between a particular state of affairs (maximised happiness) and a psychological trait that brings it about.

# Virtue and self-control

At least since the writings of St Paul, *strength of will* has been recognised as virtuous. When someone isn’t disposed to act morally, but manages to do so by strength of will, we think highly of them. For instance, we might be more willing than Aristotle to call someone courageous who feels fear, but faces it down after a struggle with it. Or again, we are more likely to praise someone who resists the temptation of bodily pleasures as much as someone who doesn’t feel their temptation.

Annas comments that living virtuously involves acting with appropriate feelings, which involves being whole-hearted. It is when we are not whole-hearted that we need strength of will. For Aristotle, having inappropriate desires actually shows a weakness of character; the properly virtuous person doesn’t find acting well difficult. Of course, Aristotle accepts that it is better to act well through effort than not act well at all. But ‘overcoming temptation’ is not a sign of real goodness, but a sign of a weak or unvirtuous character.

# Eudaimonia, morality and a unified life

There are a number of ways in which philosophers have disagreed with Aristotle’s theory or list of virtues as a result of disagreeing with his analysis of eudaimonia.

First, the idea of just what is involved in a ‘good life’ has changed over the centuries. Aristotle’s concept of eudaimonia is different from acting ‘morally’ as we would understand the term. And so the virtues he thinks are necessary for a good life don’t match, and sometimes even conflict, with the moral virtues that we might accept. For example, he thinks we should have ‘proper pride’ (contrast the Christian idea of humility) and that we should aim to do public works of magnificence and expense. Aristotle has a sense of the best life involving ‘cutting a figure’ in society, achieving a certain recognition and ‘honour’. Morality has since become more closely associated with self-sacrifice, and the traits we recognise as virtues more focused on securing welfare for others than recognition for ourselves.

Second, Annas notes that some philosophers have tried to define the good life for an individual independently of virtue. Their approach has been, first, define the good life, then define virtues as traits that help the individual to achieve the good life. An example might be the claim that the good life is happiness which is getting what you want (preference satisfaction). This approach leads to the objection that virtue ethics is selfish – the virtuous person is simply aiming at their *own* good life. This isn’t Aristotle’s theory. He argues that we cannot know what is involved in flourishing without considering the virtues. The virtues aren’t a means to an independently specified end, eudaimonia. Living in accordance with the virtues is constitutive of achieving eudaimonia.

A third disagreement with Aristotle has been that we don’t have a single final end, eudaimonia, that both unifies a person’s life and defines the virtues. One version of this position holds that one can live a unified life in accordance with the virtues, but this doesn’t necessarily benefit oneself. There is no unity between a good life and a virtuous life. Another holds that virtues focus on different values and can come into conflict with one another. Each virtue is accordance with reason, i.e. there are good reasons for each virtue. But reason itself isn’t unified – there is no one final end that our lives aim at.

# Tradition and aspiration

Virtue ethics always recognises the reality of human life. We don’t start thinking ethically without already living in some culture or other. Our first moral values we acquire simply from growing up around other people. Some versions of virtue ethics emphasise this embeddedness of human beings in a culture, a society, a tradition (an example is Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*). But because cultures differ in their moral practices and values, these forms of virtue ethics can lead to moral relativism, the thought that there are no objective moral truths independent of the moral standards of any particular culture.

Annas argues that the disagreement with Aristotle here is that Aristotle also emphasises aspiration, the constant reflection on the moral values one has inherited. This reflection and striving to become better is an important part of practical reason and moral development.

1. Lacewing, M. (2017) ‘Theories of virtue compared’ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)