

Is Virtue Ethics a Fundamental Approach to Normative Ethics Comparable to Deontology and Consequentialism?

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August 19th 2016

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Introduction

In normative ethics, virtue ethics is one of the three major approaches, together with deontology and consequentialism. In the first chapter of this paper I will be investigating what exactly is virtue ethics and why it is claimed to be a privileged approach to ethical reflection. After examining virtue ethics as known in ancient Greek philosophy I will be continuing with Elisabeth Anscombe's paper 'Modern Moral Philosophy' that heralded the revival of virtue ethics halfway through the twentieth century. In the first part of chapter two, the further development of virtue ethics will be described, based on the views of Michael Slote and Rosalind Hursthouse. In the last part of chapter 2, the criteria of rightness of virtue ethics will be discussed based on papers of Robert B. Johnson and Liezl Van Zyl. The last chapter of this paper will be dedicated to the critique of the morality system, based on 'Ethics and the limits of philosophy', by Bernard Williams.

1 What is virtue ethics and why is it claimed to be a privileged approach to ethical reflection?

(a) The ancient Greek philosophers

To understand what virtue ethics is about, we have to go back to the ancient Greek philosophers. Today, almost everyone assumes that ethics has always been about what is morally right or morally wrong and about moral obligations, but the ancient Greek philosophers looked at ethics in a totally different way. For them, ethics was about human excellence, or virtue, and they derived their ideals from human nature, from an analysis of human needs and desires and from political life. The questions they asked were: 'What is human excellence and how can it be achieved? What are the virtues? What is it to be an ideal person, to distinct oneself from the common run? How can Eudaimonia (fulfilment, human flourishing, happiness) be attained?

We, on the other hand, in the modern West have derived our ideals from religion, particularly monotheistic religion and its conception of God as a "lawgiver". We believe that basic ethical questions are about actions which can be reduced to actions that are right or wrong, and permissible or forbidden. The questions we ask ourselves are whether it is morally right or wrong to do something and what is a person's duty or obligation. While Greek philosophy was humanistic, modern ethics is still basically religious even when religious assumptions are put aside. Therefore, to understand virtue ethics, one has to understand how the Greek philosophers thought about virtues.

The laws of the Greeks came from human origin. It was humans that permitted, that forbade or required those actions that came to be thought of as wrong or right or obligatory. In the case of customs, from one generation to the next, people were the rule-makers and in the case of laws, those who held the power of government which always included the power of making and enforcing laws. With the rise of Christianity, the rules and laws became an obedience to a divine law, the law of God.

The Greek idea of human excellence was replaced by the opposite. While the Greeks had an idea of excellence and nobility, which elevated a person that possessed them above the common run of humanity, the Christians introduced the idea that the common run of humanity, including the lowliest, was itself possessed of an excellence granted by God and actually surpassing anything reason could ever aspire to. It is notable, for example, that humility is not an ancient virtue. People were images of God, just by virtue of their minimal humanity. They had no greater excellence to aspire to and their purpose became one of obligation, that is, obedience to God's will. They needed only to exist and then, through the gift of faith, to learn what God expected of them.

By contrast, the major concepts that the ancient Greek philosophers thought about were Virtue, happiness and justice and how to attain them.

Virtue was associated with excellence, something that stands out as especially good. To become virtuous one had not simply to possess a capacity for reason, but to exercise it well. The virtues are, in Aristotle, closely connected to the idea of that of function, of that everything and every person have different functions which they can fulfil in good or bad ways. They asked themselves: what exactly is a good person? Here, they were no longer talking about what a good physician or a good

soldier was but what the function of a person was, just considered as a person. The Greek philosophers looked for the answer in that which distinguishes a person from other living things, the capacity for thought and reason. Aristotle's function argument looks for a function that human beings possess that is distinctive of us as a species: hence his two fold definition of eudaimonia as either a life lived in accordance with reason, or a life of god-like contemplation. (The latter, however, he also viewed as a more than human life and hence unattainable except for short periods of time.)

The word the Greeks used for happiness was 'Eudaimonia' which means 'having a good demon': "demon" here has no adequate translation in English but is close to the word "spirit". For them, it was the nature of a life that was meaningful and fulfilling. So, they were not looking for the meaning of the word "happiness" nor were they interested in knowing what the average run of people were content to consider a happy life: the life of a person of sound practical reason involves elements of happiness or pleasure, but this does not fully capture the meaning of "Eudaimonia". According to them, real happiness was rare and hard to attain. Also, it was possible for a person to get everything he wanted and nevertheless live a totally wasted life in pursuit of pleasure, honour or reputation: there is such a thing as "false pleasures" and people can make mistakes about that which they really value. For the ancient philosophers, it seemed clear that one needed to know what this happiness really was and how it would be possible to attain it.

Justice, and the distinction between right and wrong, were not generally important for the Greek philosophers. It was nothing more than the conventional practices of social life. The Greek word *ethnos* meant 'people like us'. *Ethos* meant 'habit', or the customs 'people like us'. For them, it was only the customs of a given culture, for example the Athenian culture.

According to Socrates, justice is that what is good and beautiful in its very nature. So, whatever is characterized as just, such as a person, a law, an institution, or a practice is by that same fact characterized as beautiful and is good.

In one of his dialogues, Socrates and Callicles talk about justice and Callicles explains that there are two levels of justice. One he calls natural justice and the other conventional justice. Natural justice is about things that are true, independent of any human customs or conventions, while conventional justice simply consists of the rules and customs that people adopt to enable them to get on with each other in a social

life. These rules and customs are not the same everywhere, unlike the natural principles. Virtue means for the Greek personal excellence. It did not mean for them, as it usually does for us, adherence to conventional norms.

Callicles adds that some people are born with the capacity for virtues like intelligence or strength and can develop them to a high degree. These are truly exemplary people, the ones who stand out as naturally better than the hordes of people who lack these gifts. So, virtue had no necessary connection with choice or will. That is again a Christian idea, which we have inherited. Virtue for them was 'what one is', not 'what one does'. As everything had its unique excellence or virtue, thought Callicles, human beings were no exception. Asking what the unique excellence of a person was, a person as such, would make it clear what made one person better than another and what made some few stand out as truly noble or excellent. Socrates and Callicles both thought there were true and natural principles of ethics. Both saw clearly the differences between natural principles and conventional ones. The primary ethical value was rationality, identified by Socrates with the governing part of the soul.

The Cynics, even rejected the values and customs of the Athenian people because according to them, they had no rational foundation because they were the product of human beings. Their opinion was that human beings had to live according to nature.

The motto of the stoics was to live according to nature. Nature was not only what is true, independently of human fabrication, but also what is unalterable. The stoics argued that wisdom will consist in not resisting nature or in trying to avoid the unavoidable, or in altering what exists by necessity. Also the stoics searched for personal excellence or personal perfection and were not attempting to find out any ultimate principles of right and wrong. They thought obligations were determined by role or function. A person had to perform his duty or function well. A physician's duty was to be a good one and that was something within his power. A person had to find the perfection of his inner nature, which was his rationality. Having found it, one would know genuine goodness and that would surely be the Eudaimonia that every moralist had been seeking. The perfection of your nature was the perfection of reason, since that is exactly what the nature a human being was. As Socrates taught:

the only evil that can befall a rational person is the corruption of his nature (that is, of his reason) and this is the one thing in the world that is always within our control.

According to Plato, justice is simply virtue of personal excellence, as the cultivation of reason and a just person is one who reason governs his appetites and will. In the State, justice will consist of rule by a small and elite group, the philosophers. A genuine happy individual is the individual he has described, the one who embodies justice in his soul and in his life. The happy commonwealth is the state and happiness is not a reward or virtue. One achieves justice by the perfection of human excellence. In addition, human excellence is the cultivator of reason. Having attained a fully rational life, one has thereby also attained the good life, which is precisely what the Greeks identified with happiness. Plato said: 'Do not seek in someone's words or deeds to see if a person is just. That will tell you if he or she speaks and acts in the manner prescribed by the conventional norms of justice. Seek out the qualities of the soul: ascertain the nature of the inner person. Is it harmonious? That is, are will and desires properly subordinated to the governance of reason?'

The Greek philosophers took for granted that the basic distinctions in ethics were grounded in nature just as surely as are the basic distinctions of medicine or mathematics. Of course we have to keep in mind that Plato and Aristotle had a different view of nature than we do. Plato's theory of the forms meant that every object in reality had a form; not only human beings, animals or nature, also concepts like courage and love. The phenomena were only shadows, copying the form. Aristotle's view of nature was that everything had a purpose, and that the purpose, or the goal, was to attain some good. For human beings, it was to achieve Eudaimonia.

As did Socrates and Plato, also Protagoras was convinced of the difference between natural law and conventional law and the difference between knowledge and opinion. He confirmed that nature was about all the things that were given as true, independently of human intervention, and which were unalterably true, as in knowledge. Convention was about those things that are true only because some person or persons have made them true, as in an opinion. The difference between Protagoras and the philosophers of the Socratic school is that while they tried to ascribe everything to nature, he tried to ascribe everything to convention. Nothing,

Protagoras said, is true by nature, and so there is no actual knowledge of anything, there are only opinions. "Man", he said, "is the measure of all things."

So, for the philosophers of the Socratic school, virtue was found in personal excellence, as a fulfilment of one's natural function, an exercise of reason. The good life was for them the fully rational life. Protagoras, on the other hand, thought that virtue consisted of those conventional virtues that are prized by a given culture. To speak about a virtue was for Protagoras no more than that they were regarded as such within a given culture. For him, a virtuous person was no more than one who fulfilled the ideals of character that had been imparted to him by those around him.

What Aristotle did was to incorporate both conceptions of virtue into his philosophical ethics. Conventional virtue was not dismissed by Aristotle as worthless as it had been by the Socratic schools. At the same time it was not treated as the sum and substance of virtue, as it had been by Protagoras. Aristotle distinguished two levels of virtue, one of them conventional and the other rational or intellectual.

In his description of the proud man, in his 'Nicomachean ethics', Aristotle shows that some people really are better than others and therefore count for more. He claims that If the purpose of moral philosophy is to delineate an ideal of human nature and to mark the path to attainments, then we can hardly suppose that everyone, the wise and the foolish alike, attains it in equal measure. On the contrary, it is unlikely that any but a few achieve it at all, and these are literally better than the masses of people who fall short. This is something difficult to understand for modern moralists that tend to have a low view of pride and of the superiority of some people over others. Aristotle says something (Nothing?) about right or wrong, he is only concerned with human excellence.

For Aristotle, personal excellence can be understood in two ways. One is the kind of virtue or excellence that ordinary mortals can aspire to, the virtues of conventional and unphilosophical people who are civilized rather than barbarous. What he is asking is: What is the standard that people of cultivated taste and refinement actually express in their feelings and actions? And his answer is that: with some qualifications and even with some exceptions, that standard is moderation given that every virtue is a mean between two extremes. The second virtue is the intellectual virtue, namely, the perfection of the individual excellence through the

cultivation of reason. The key to Aristotle's reflections on ethics is that the function of a human being is the perfection of rational life.

Aristotle named the conventional virtues 'moral virtue'. These were the virtues available for ordinary people that lacked the capability or drive to try to achieve the intellectual virtue (real virtue, natural virtue), a virtue that he distinguishes from moral intellectual virtue. To consider whether a certain quality is a virtue, a vice, or neither, one has only to ask how it would be regarded by the kind of person who is deemed virtuous in his own culture.

For Aristotle pride is a moral value. It is a mean between humility and vanity. Not all virtues have the character of being a mean between two values, like truth telling, but all virtues that do exhibit this characteristic of moderation are conventional. A moderate degree of any natural virtue can be nothing but a fault, for here moderation can only mean mediocrity.

Aristotle analysed with much care the moral virtues, the rules and conventions, and according to him, a proper understanding of all these things were necessary for a good life and no one could hope for a good life if he had no understanding of honour or of justice. A person would then resemble an animal or a barbarian more than a civilized person. Still the understanding of all these things would not bless one with the highest life. For this, one had to go beyond conventional values and seek what was the natural human good, not by analysing ethical ideas, but by perfecting the natural function of a human being, again the exercise of rational faculty. Its goodness was not the result of anything brought about by people. It was not a life of honour, wealth, glory, or power. All these were good, but they were good only by human standards. They were conventionally good. A life devoted to reason, that is to the increase of knowledge and exercise one's natural function, was good by nature.

This idea of one's natural function is seldom found in modern philosophy. And for example Kant's philosophy in which he supposes that by rationality all of us, including the most ignorant and stupid, can draw some presumed distinction between moral right and moral wrong, would be something that Aristotle could not have taken seriously, nor even really have comprehended.

The change of moral philosophy, away from the idea of personal excellence and towards a concept of duty, has been so complex that it has become difficult for modern philosophers to even understand the idea of human goodness in the way the Greek philosophers understood it. Today, we think of a virtue as integrity, as being loyal to moral principles. When Aristotle said 'the truly proud man must be good', we nowadays probably imagine that he refers to someone that is fair, decent and honest. 'Good' in the moral sense that we attach to the word. He is saying rather that a proud man must be in something extraordinary, far above the ordinary run who manage to be no more than fair, decent, and honest. For Aristotle it meant singular or outstanding with respect to the unique human capacity for intellectual excellence. Such goodness is reserved for the few. He does not describe what the good man does, he describes what he is.

For the Greek philosophers, the central question was always: What shall I seek to become in order to achieve the kind of life that I am meant to have as a person? And the answer was usually: a rational being. Happiness was assumed to consist of being that kind of person (not some kind of reward).

Modern philosophical moralists praise being rational but would not say that persons who are not striving to be the most rational as they can be, of not having moral goodness. They assume that reason will serve as a guide to a different end; the perception of the difference between moral right and moral wrong. This represents a complete reorientation of philosophical ethics, produced by the rise of the Christian church with its emphasis not on reason but on faith and its claim that no person can stand higher than any other in term of any inherent worth, the very least of people being every bit as good as the best.

The idea of right and wrong replaced that of personal excellence. For the Greeks right and wrong was only a man-made distinction reflecting purely human needs. Distinctions of moral right and wrong came, with the rise of Christianity, to be regarded, originally, as expressing the will of God, not human will and purpose.

In Greek philosophy, the distinctions between right and wrong were of human origin. No gods were needed, and certainly no philosophers, in order for people to see what kind of actions must be forbidden and what was required if they were to live together and flourish. Although there can be differences between one place and

another, the ethical distinctions themselves and the moral codes that embody them, are all derived from human needs and purposes.

The ancient Greeks entertained all kind of beliefs of sorts of gods but they had no priesthood and nothing like a church as we understand it. They had no thoughts of hell as a place of punishment for the wicked, nor of heaven as a place for reward for the good or the faithful. Their gods were natural beings, with human thoughts and passions. The idea of a lawgiver was as clear to the Greeks as it is to us, and while gods were sometimes thought of as commanding and forbidding, and even sometimes as tyrannical, they were not thought of as supernatural, nor as omnipotent in the theological sense, nor even, usually, as outstandingly virtuous.

In Plato's dilemma of Euthyphro, he seems to indicate that he was not thinking in terms of something like a divine will. Socrates and Euthyphro have a discussion about the nature of holiness and Euthyphro claims that holiness is equal to that what is loved by the gods. Socrates asks what happens when the gods disagree among themselves. Euthyphro answers that holiness is only that what is loved unanimously by the gods. Socrates asks if the gods love the holiness because it is holy or because it is loved by the gods. Euthyphro and Socrates both agree on the first explanation, that the gods love the holiness because it is holy. Socrates deduces that we have to reject the second reason; that the holiness is loved because the gods love it. So, the love of the gods does not clarify why the holiness is holy. If both reasons would be accepted, it would end up in a vicious circle. That way, the gods would love the holiness because it is holy and the holiness would be holy because the gods would love it. Socrates concludes that holiness is not equal to being loved by the gods.

The rise of Christianity had enormous and remaining effects upon the ethical thought of our culture. It changed the direction of philosophical ethics. It replaced the traditional idea of obligation by a new one, henceforth to be thought of as moral obligation. It erased the traditional idea of virtue, conceived as personal excellence. It nourished the idea that there is a kind of obligation higher and more demanding than the kind of obligations that arise among people, higher than one's obligation to the state or to humanity itself, namely obligation or duty to God and this came to be called moral obligation.

It destroyed the Greek ideal of personal excellence, considered as an ethic ideal. It was not, as we have seen, merely that the Greeks prized individual excellence. It was

the very foundation of their moral philosophy, the original meaning of virtue, now displaced by the idea of human worth (that every person is of immeasurable worth, a veritable image of God and that all persons are of the same worth in the eyes of God) and the replacement of reason by faith. The Greek idea of nature came to be assimilated in to the idea of the supernatural fostered by religion.

(b) The revival of virtue ethics – Anscombe

Until halfway through the twentieth century, normative ethics was dominated by two theories: deontology that focussed on duties and rules, and utilitarianism that focused on the outcome of an action.

In 1958 Elisabeth Anscombe (Anscombe, 1958) attacks those dominant moral theories in her paper 'Modern Moral Philosophy' in which she challenges the foundations of moral philosophy. She argues that moral philosophers have given up the idea of a virtue as well as the idea of happiness in the sense of fulfilment rather than pleasure.

Anscombe claims that in a secular society, concepts like moral obligation or duty or distinguishing actions that are morally wrong or morally right are irrelevant because they are only laws that can be used in a Christian tradition. Anscombe is a firm believer of God and does not dispute divine power from her own Catholic perspective, but she also argues that in a secular society one cannot use the same language of ethics. For example the word 'ought' stands for a command of a moral authority, which used to be God. Without this connection to God such words have lost their meaning. According to her, obligation had become the central concept in ethics but when that concept is detached from a religious foundation, it loses its meaning. She argues that there is no point in practising moral philosophy unless important concepts such as obligation, justice and virtue are completely understood.

Anscombe argues that there were basically no differences between the dominant British philosophers of the previous century and that there had not been a real debate between those philosophers. At that time utilitarianism dominated British ethics saying that obligation is a matter of maximizing pleasure for as many people as possible. According to Anscombe, this approach leads to calling many wicked acts obligations. She believes that acting on our obligations cannot simply be a

matter of producing good consequences. So, on one hand the philosophers rejected God and on the other hand they agreed on consequentialism (a term introduced by Anscombe) meaning that they judged the moral value of an action from its consequences, something that might lead, according to her, to defend the execution of an innocent person.

The example she gives is that if someone is threatening another person with a gun, saying he will kill twenty persons and will only refrain from doing so if the person kills an innocent person. A consequentialist could approve of the action that the person would kill an innocent person and disapprove of that person failing to do so because the outcome of killing the innocent person would be preferred over the killing of twenty persons. Anscombe argues that this is opposite to Christian morality in that considered actions as morally right or wrong regardless of their consequences. This way, we can produce good consequences by lying, cheating, stealing, breaking promises and committing murder.

Anscombe's point was that the vast majority of English moral philosophers faced a dilemma: Either there is a God who legislates morality and this is the source of our moral obligations or else, give up obligation as the central moral concept and go back to virtue theory.

Anscombe also criticizes followers of Immanuel Kant for whom moral obligation meant that each rational being legislated morality for herself. She calls that an absurd idea, that our own will is not capable of supporting moral obligation and that we cannot legislate our own behaviour. Only a divine lawgiver is capable of being the foundation of obligation. Anscombe claims that Kant's rule about universalizable maxims "is useless without stipulations as to what shall count as a relevant description of an action with a view to constructing a maxim about it" (Anscombe, 1958).

So, Anscombe attacks consequentialism as well as ethics derived from Immanuel Kant, describing them as immoral or incoherent. According to her they are both inadequate because one cannot derive a principle of utility from itself and one cannot derive support for 'divine law ought to be obeyed' from within divine law.

According to Anscombe, moral philosophy needs an alternative model based on psychology. She suggests to return to the secular concept of practical reasoning, which is virtue, and justice derived from the work of the ancient Greek philosopher

Aristotle. Actions should be valued as just or unjust actions instead of morally right or wrong actions and notions like 'morally ought' should be discarded and replaced by just 'ought'. Anscombe feels that an account of "human nature, human action, the type of characteristic a virtue is, and above all of human flourishing" (Anscombe, 1958) should be implemented in modern philosophy.

The revival of virtue-ethics had a stimulating effect on proponents of Kantian and utilitarian theories and they started to respond to the topics mentioned by Anscombe, confirming that they had neglected character and giving an account of character in terms of their theories. This is why it is necessary to distinguish 'Virtue Theory' from 'Virtue Ethics'. Virtue ethics is reserved for the new account of virtue theory, introduced by Elisabeth Anscombe. The virtue ethicists claim that ethics should be started on a new basis and that we have to recover the ancients and return to the way that they practised ethics.

Chapter Two: The Subsequent Development of Virtue Ethics

(a) Michael Slote

Michael Slote, in his book 'From morality to virtue' (Slote, 1992), constructs a systematic ethical theory, from ground upward, on a virtue-theoretic basis. Slote criticizes Kantian ethics, common-sense morality, utilitarianism and consequentialism, claiming that those ethical theories are inconsistent and incoherent and that 'a properly conceived' virtue ethics would be a better way to ground ethical thinking.

His first example is that of self-other asymmetry: an asymmetry is what the ethical theories demand from moral agents, comparing the way a moral agent treats herself in comparison with other people. Slote distinguishes agent-favouring and agent-sacrificing permissions; agent-favouring permissions that allow the agent to favour herself and that allow the substitution of an agent's good for the larger overall good, and agent sacrificing permissions, that allow the agent to deny herself the things she most wants or to cause herself unnecessary damage.

Common-sense moral thinkers seem to permit the individual to pursue her own good or wellbeing as long as she refrains from harming other people. However, common-sense and Kantian theory do not give enough weight to the interests of wellbeing of moral agents and can even downgrade a moral agent. In common-sense morality,

Slote argues, there are asymmetries in agent-favouring and agent-sacrificing permissions; It seems wrong to hurt another person or to refrain from preventing pain to another person, but for oneself it seems permitted.

In Kantian morality there is the obligation to contribute to the happiness of other people but no parallel obligation to seek our one's own well-being or happiness, there is no moral reason to make ourselves happy. Slote claims that Kantian morality downgrades the importance of moral agents and their individual concerns and that in Kantian or common-sense moral thinking, how morally good an act is, depends on whether it is directed toward the well-being of another being and not whether it is directed toward that of an agent and this means a depreciation of the interests of moral agents. He adds that a moral theory should not devalue agents by treating their happiness as irrelevant to the positive, or negative, ethical assessment of their own actions, as Kantian and common-sense ethics do.

Utilitarianism and consequentialism can also require a lot of moral agents because they demand that one produces the best overall results one can. In most individual cases, one will have to sacrifice one's interests to comply with the demands of morality since one has to do what is the best for mankind but, in that sense, there is no self-other asymmetry there because it expresses an ideal of equal concern for all people. However, the concern for the agent of a given action can be a very small part of the total concern that is expressed in the utilitarian evaluation of the action. The more people that are affected by an action, the less important are the welfare or interests of the agent in determining how that action is to be evaluated.

Common-sense morality holds that there are certain acts that are obligatory even when they do not produce the greatest good for the greatest number. For example, that it is forbidden to kill an innocent person, even if that would save the lives of five other persons. Common-sense morality treats our obligations to others as dependent on how near they stand to us in relations of affection or special commitment: Obligations to our immediate family or close friends are stronger than to people we don't know, and closer to for example compatriots than to people of other countries. People are naturally more concerned about close relatives. So, it seems that the obligation gets weaker when it gets further from the moral agent. So, it would be expected that taking care of one's self would also be an obligation but it is

just the opposite: there is no moral obligation for the agent to benefit himself and no duties to seek one's own good.

According to Slote we don't find that kind of asymmetry in Kant's categorical imperative: 'Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person, or the person of any other, never simply as a means but always the same time as an end' (Slote, 1991, p.46). Kant argues not only for the wrongness of killing other people but also for the wrongness of killing oneself. There is no self-other asymmetry there, but there is a contrast between Kant's deontological views and what he says about obligations to grant benefits. For Kant, one has an obligation to help others in their pursuit of happiness, but one has no obligation to pursue one's own happiness as a means. So, there is asymmetry between Kant's view about perfect duty (not to lie etc.) and his views about imperfect duty to grant benefits. According to Slote, Kant's failure to put weight on the distinction between the two kinds of duty, can be called an incoherence in his total ethical view.

So, for Slote, neither Kantian nor common-sense morality are suitable for a foundational role in ethical theory because they do not treat the agent's well-being as a basis to evaluate the agent's actions. Slote claims that virtue ethics can avoid the self-others asymmetry.

The second major problem that Slote mentions, is that of moral luck in common-sense morality. The first example he gives is that of someone that attempted to kill an innocent victim, but failed to do so, compared to someone who succeeded to kill an innocent victim. The latter would be blamed more. The second example he gives is that of a driver in a car that loses control and veers to the other side of the road. He was lucky because no other cars were coming in the opposite direction. But, when at that moment a truck would have been on the other side, he would have caused a major accident. Slote borrowed this example from Thomas Nagel who pointed out that the driver should be equally blamed in both examples. So, concludes Slote, accidental actions or actions we cannot foresee can have influence in determining moral judgement and can lead to inconsistencies in results or consequences.

In utilitarianism, Slote argues that one who allows acts to be wrong for unforeseeable reasons can cut the connection that is ordinarily assumed to exist between acting wrongly and acting in a blameworthy way. An act done from benevolent motivation

may have unforeseeable bad effects and count as wrong through a kind of bad luck, but it would not be an act that someone would be blamed for.

Slote agrees with Bernard Williams that the reason why we need a solid moral ethical theory is because our ordinary morality lacks any foundation, is unjustified and to some degree uncertain. He also agrees with Sidgewick about the use of a scientific and systematic approach to moral theory. So, Slote's aim is to construct ethical theory, from ground upward, on a virtue-theoretic basis.

Slote notices that in Kantian ethics character traits like moderation, perseverance, self-control or courage are only praiseworthy under a certain condition, namely that a trait is accompanied by what Kant names 'a good will'. If not, they do not count as virtues. Having a good will is understood as doing one's duty out of respect for the moral law, of doing one's duty because it is one's duty rather than from any other motivation

In Virtue ethics, Slote notices that distinguishing other-regarding, self-regarding and mixed virtues can help to qualify a given trait as a virtue that is useful or beneficial to who possesses it. Examples of other-regarding virtues are justice, kindness and generosity, of self-regarding virtues, prudence, sagacity and fortitude, and examples of mixed virtues, virtues that are admired both for what they do for their possessors as their relationships to other people, are self-control and courage. He states that there has to be a distinction between virtues and virtuous in order to avoid the connection with morality with terms like 'morally good' or 'morally wrong'. He explains that virtue ethics consists of two essential elements. Firstly, it uses aretaic notions like 'good' or 'excellent' rather instead of deontic notions like 'morally right', 'morally wrong', 'ought' and 'obligation'. Secondly, it puts emphasis on the character traits and inner motives of moral agents instead of on the evaluation of acts and choices.

Like Aristotle, Slote makes virtues and virtuous or admirable persons central to his ethical views. For Aristotle, an action would be virtuous if it was one that a virtuous person would perform. A virtuous person is a person that knows what is good and right to do in any given situation. But Aristotle also thought that with the proper instruction, people could perform good or virtuous acts even if they are not themselves virtuous or good. So, for Slote, like Aristotle, the ethical status of an act is not only derivative from that of character traits, motives, or individuals, but they are

the major focus of the ethical theory he offers. This view differs from Plato's view, who believed that whatever a virtuous person would do, the action would be right because of the kind of person it was done by.

Instead of using notions like 'moral excellence' or 'moral goodness', Slote prefers to use broader aretaic notions like those of a good or admirable character trait, an excellence of character or a virtue. He focusses on the evaluation of character traits as virtues and treats the evaluation of actions as a matter of classifying them under virtues. He adds that if we think highly of an act, we can simply say it is admirable and the opposite would be deplorable. He avoids moral criticism by using only morally neutral concepts. This way he avoids the problem of moral luck that arises when people are blamed for acts that have taken place or have not taken place because of accidental or unforeseen circumstances. Since virtue ethics will not judge the act as blameworthy, it avoids that problem.

Slote claims that a virtue ethic that avoids moral judgements is capable of avoiding the inconsistency and incoherence that can be found in Kantian and common-sense morality, utilitarianism and consequentialism.

(b) Rosalind Hursthouse's "Aristotelian" Naturalism

In her book, 'On Virtue ethics', Rosalind Hursthouse (Hursthouse, 1999), reacts on the critique that virtue ethics might not be able to specify adequately what a right action is in ethical theory. She claims that virtue ethics surely can specify a right action as an action that a virtuous agent would normally do in the circumstances. This way of specifying a right action can be seen as bringing about an amount of moral principles as every virtue can be seen as an instruction, an advice. For example: 'be honest' or 'be charitable'. Also every vice can be seen the same way: 'do not be dishonest' or 'do not be uncharitable'.

Hursthouse critically reviews the account of a right action in utilitarianism and deontology. In respect of utilitarian a right action would be an action that brings about the best consequences but this does not give an instruction of how to act because one still will have to know what counts as the best consequences. According to Hursthouse, there is a second premise needed to specify what 'best consequences' are. An example of the second premise is: 'that best consequences are those consequences in which happiness is maximized' (Hursthouse, 1999). In

deontology the first premise is that an action is a right action if it obeys a moral principle or a moral rule. Hursthouse points out that this premise neither gives an instruction of how to act because one has to know what would count as a correct moral rule. Again a second premise is needed for example that a correct moral rule is universalizable.

In showing that utilitarianism and deontology need second premises, she rejects the critique on virtue ethics that says that it is not able to specify which action is right because it is not clear what exactly a virtuous agent is. Just like deontology and utilitarianism, it needs an extra premise, an extra specification to clarify what a virtuous agent is.

Hursthouse comes up with following premises: (Hursthouse, 1999)

1. A virtuous agent is one who has, and exercises, certain character traits, namely, the virtues.
2. A virtue is a character trait that

This second premise can be finished by adding a list of character traits. Also it can be finished in the way Hume interpreted virtues, as a trait of character that is of useful or agreeable to the one that possesses it or to others. The third way the second premise could be finished the neo-Aristotelian way of specifying a virtue as a character trait that a human being needs for Eudimonia, to flourish and live well. Hursthouse concludes that although virtue ethics is agent-centered, it can give an answer to how we should act.

Another critique on virtue ethics is that it, unlike deontology and utilitarianism, still does not give clear guidance about what is a right action because one cannot know, unless one is a virtuous agent herself, what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances. First Hursthouse rejects this in two ways. First, she says that one can always ask someone else what to do, someone that is admired and respected. Second, even if one is not a perfect virtuous person, one can have a very good idea of what a virtuous person would do or would not do.

According to Hursthouse virtue ethics do come up with a set of virtue- rules that give positive guidance for virtuous actions like honesty or fidelity and gives prohibitions for vices like dishonesty or infidelity. Answering on critiques that virtue-rules cannot tell us what we should do, Hursthouse insists that neither utilitarianism nor deontology can

do that. In utilitarianism one has to decide between higher and lower pleasures or in defining happiness. Deontology usually relies on principles of doing no harm to others or principles to benefit others and they have corresponding rules like 'to others' or 'don't harm others'. These rules again, do not tell us exactly what to do.

According to Hursthouse virtue-rules are no more difficult to learn. She gives a clear example in which she makes clear what the distinction between deontology and virtue ethics is; a deontologist would say: 'I will not lie because of the rule 'do not lie', 'lying is forbidden'. A virtue-ethicist would say: 'I will not lie because I would be dishonest and dishonesty is a vice.'

Sometimes virtue-rules can be conflicting. For example a virtue of honesty directs one to telling the truth but when telling the truth is going to hurt the other person a lot, the virtue of honesty conflicts with that of kindness and compassion and one would not know how to act, dilemmas that in certain philosophical literature are called 'irresolvable moral dilemmas'. Along with that concept of irresolvable dilemmas goes the idea of 'remainder'. This is what follows when a person decides to choose how to act violating one of the two moral requirements and will feel guilt, regret or remorse. Hursthouse notes that in other philosophical literature of applied ethics no such irresolvable dilemmas are found. The examples she gives are those of abortion in the case of rape or to lie to person who is in intensive care about his whole family being killed in a car accident. Also in these examples there is no discussion about 'remainder'. Hursthouse argues that that is deplorable, that many philosophers overlook the possibility to conclude that both acts are awful but that one of them is not so bad as the other and that it is not so that one act has to be totally morally right and the other act totally morally wrong. She concludes that action guidance and action assessment many times go apart.

Hursthouse distinguishes between action guidance and action assessment. Action guidance answers to the question 'what shall I do' while action assessment answers to the question 'what is the morally right action'. Most of the time the guidance that is provided for the action will assure the assessment of the action. So, that one decides to do a certain action is morally right and the action is the morally right action. In the above mentioned dilemmas with a remainder, one can see that guidance and assessment can be separated. When one has to choose between

two evils and chooses to do the less evil action, guidance leads me to the 'right decision' but it saying that it would be the right action would be untrue.

To explain guidance and assessment of actions in virtue ethics, Hursthouse gives the example of a man who convinced two women that he wanted to marry them and induced them to bear a child of his. She wants us to imagine that, because of her particular situation, it would be worse to abandon woman A than woman B. In virtue ethics the man would not be doing the right thing when marrying woman A because he would not be doing what a virtuous agent would do in the same circumstances. A virtuous agent would not have ended up in these circumstances at all. So, virtue ethics gives guidance and assessment of actions. It tells what one has to decide and it provides the assessment of the action. In the mentioned case, it would tell that there is no morally right thing to do.

In the so-called irresolvable dilemmas, when the moral choice of virtuous agent is between actions X or Y and there are no moral grounds to favour one of the actions, virtue ethics gives no guidance, nor should it, according to Hursthouse. When assessing this action, it would not be called the correct decision' but it could for example be called a courageous or a responsible decision. In tragic dilemmas, when the agent has to choose between two terrible alternatives, according to virtue ethics, one cannot emerge from them with clean hands because whatever one does is wrong. It will not be possible to say that the virtuous agent has acted well and cannot emerge without her life being marred or even ruined.

Returning to Aristotle, according to whom a virtue is a character trait that human beings need for 'Eudaimonia', a trait that human beings need to flourish and to live well. Hursthouse wonders if virtues are really benefitting those who possess them. She says that when people raise their children or when they are reflecting their lives, they do believe that virtues benefit their possessors but she wonders if that is not precisely to the degree that people believe that they are virtuous, as far as they have special conceptions of Eudaimonia, benefit, harm and loss, which guarantees its truth.

Hursthouse tries to find other rational support for Aristotle's view and finds that in understanding it as a form of naturalism. In naturalism the virtues are character traits that make a human being a good human being. This means that they are character traits that human beings need to live a good human life, as good or bad specimens of their kind comparing them with other animals and plants. Hursthouse adds that

ethics is not biology and that attempting to ground ethical evaluation in a scientific account of human nature has failed.

She returns to Aristotle; 'Virtue is a character trait that a human being needs for Eudaimonia, to flourish and live well', and she argues that they are in fact two claims. The first claim is that virtues benefit their possessor and the second claim is that virtues make the possessor a good human being, that human beings need virtues in order to live a characteristically good human life. Each of the claims rely on the idea that human nature is such that virtues suit human beings. This fact, if it is a fact, is a very contingent one in two ways. First it is contingent in the sense that we can individually flourish or achieve Eudaimonia, and second, it is contingent in the sense that we can all do it together and not at each other's expense. If things would have been otherwise, than morality would not have existed or would be unimaginably different.

(c) The "Problem" of Criteria for Rightness.

Robert N. Johnson in his paper 'Virtue and right' (Johnson, 2003), argues that the virtue ethics account of right action, that a right action is an action that a virtuous person would characteristically perform, is a false account because it is inconsistent with the idea that non-virtuous or not completely virtuous people have to do to become better people by e.g. improving themselves, asking for guidance, etc. He argues that in a virtue ethical theory there has to be room for the moral obligation to improve oneself, to make oneself a better person, and that this is not the case in a virtue ethics account of right action.

Johnson first turns to Rosalind Hursthouse's account of right action and critiques it in various ways. Hursthouse's account is: 'An action A is right for S in circumstances C if and only if a completely virtuous agent would characteristically A in' (Johnson, 2003). He concludes from this that right actions are only those actions that the fully virtuous agent will perform and he argues that such a completely virtuous agent will be very exceptional, that it will be rare to find all the virtues in one person and therefore it is better to talk about actions that are characteristic of someone who is better or at least a bit better than the actual agent than of a completely virtuous agent. He adds that the concept of 'a virtuous person' is vague and that it is also vague which action in which circumstances would be characteristic for such a virtuous person. That way, only a complete virtuous action, an action the completely virtuous agent would perform, would be a right action. This would mean that a

person that would perform an action exactly like the virtuous agent but for a wrong motive, could perform a right action. If so, the character of the agent and the rightness of the action can be disconnected.

Johnson offers several examples to prove that virtue ethics cannot give action guidance; a habitual liar who wants to improve his behaviour, a person that did not have an adequate moral upbringing and therefore has to control herself in respect of being unfaithful to her partner and a person who lacks moral sensibility because of his upbringing and culture and seeks guidance.

Johnson turns to Aristotle who wrote that if a person wants to cultivate virtues in herself, and make herself better, she ought to perform the actions that a virtuous person would perform. This would mean that virtues can be cultivated by performing similar actions, e.g. becoming just by performing just actions, and that they can be cultivated over time. The question arises if there are actions that a fully virtuous person would never perform but that would still be actions that develop the virtues. According to Aristotle, the non-virtuous should take 'the lesser evil', drag themselves in a direction that is contrary to their natural tendencies and beware of pleasure and its sources. And since these actions of self-improvement are all actions that a virtuous agent would never have to perform, acting like the virtuous persons would not always be the best way to acquire virtue. Johnson's argument is that there is an inconsistency in Aristotle's argument. On one hand, Aristotle says that we have to act like the virtuous, the virtuous that take pleasure in doing what is the best, it is their second nature. On the other hand, he advises the mentioned actions of self-improvement like taking the lesser evil, etc., which are actions that are not characteristic of the virtuous.

Johnson agrees that it is sensible to ask guidance from people that know better and that a virtuous person is often a good source of guidance, but he argues that the expertise of virtuous people is to be compared to that of native speakers when one wants to learn a foreign language. Such a native speaker will have little idea of how to learn a language although he is speaking it very well. In a similar way, a virtuous person will act in a virtuous way and will know how to respond and what to do in certain circumstances but according to Johnson it does not follow that they are in a position to tell the non-virtuous how to behave, that they have anything helpful to say about how other people should deal with their shortcomings in their situations.

Maybe a completely informed virtuous person could give good guidance but not because he is virtuous but because he is fully informed about the situation and the shortcomings of the person that needs guidance.

What the persons mentioned in the three examples should do is self-monitoring, trying to change a way of thinking, asking for guidance, etc., all kind of actions to improve themselves, actions that are all very uncharacteristic of the virtuous although, according to Johnson, those actions that improve character don't have to be morally permissible. Again Johnson returns to Aristotle who said that ethics are not for young people, that it is achieved through experience and only when one has enough experience of the world, like having done something and having felt remorse, like having a friendship ruined, etc., one is prepared to think seriously about ethics. So, improving one's character by learning from mistakes is one of the ways to become virtuous.

Johnson continues with Michael Slote's agent-based view that: 'an action can be evaluated as a right or as a wrong action evaluating the inner states, like motives or dispositions, of the agent that gave rise to the action.' If the motives are admirable, the action is right and if the motive is deplorable, the action is wrong. The evaluation of an action is that way not detachable from the motives of the agent who performs it. So, says Johnson, only if a self-improvement action is brought about by a virtuous, a morally right, motive, it would be evaluated as a right action. Johnson criticizes this view by asking how a person that lacks these virtuous motives is ever able to acquire them and he argues that self-improving actions can be morally excellent or morally best, even though they are not the actions that are characteristic of a completely virtuous character. He claims that, if self-improvement actions are morally right, an ethical theory should take account of the fact that a lot of actions that have to be done are morally required of us only because one does not yet possess all the character traits or motives that we ought to possess. Johnson thus argues that virtue ethics cannot offer a proper theory of action guidance, it cannot answer the question; 'what should I do under this circumstances?'

Liezl van Zyl, in her paper 'Agent-based virtue ethics and the problem of action guidance' (Van Zyl, 2009) develops a response to Michael Slote's view that one ought to base the rightness of action in the motive from which it proceeds:

An action is right if (and because) it exhibits or expresses a virtuous motive, or at least, does not exhibit or express a vicious motive' (Van Zyl, 2009)

She defends Slote's agent-based view against the objection that it is impossible to draw the distinction between performing a right action and performing it for the right reason and she notices the apparent failure of Slote's account to be able to give action guidance and shows how this problem can be solved. To investigate if in deciding if an action is right or wrong, the motives of an agent are relevant, she offers two examples:

'A dives into a swimming pool to save a child, but is motivated exclusively by a desire to impress the mother as a means to sleeping with her.' (Van Zyl, 2009)

'B gives a person suffering from extreme thirst a drink of liquid she takes to be water but s in fact poison.' (Van Zyl, 2009)

Many deontologists and consequentialists say that the motive does not affect the deontic status of the act and that A is right and B is wrong. Van Zyl turns to Michael Slote who argues that 'an action would only be right if the motive to perform the action is virtuous or at least does not exhibit a vicious motive', which allows to tell the difference between doing one's duty for a right motive and act in a right way, and doing one's duty for the wrong reasons and act wrongly. So, that an agent can do what she ought to do but still acts wrongly.

Van Zyl examines how it would be possible for an agent to act wrongly although she does what ought to be done, despite making the right decision? She formulates an action guidance principle:

AG1: A decision is right if and only it will exhibit a virtuous motive or at least will not exhibit or express a vicious motive. (Van Zyl, 2009)

She adds that when an act demonstrates a virtuous or a wicked motive it usually says something about the sort of act under considerations of the motives it characteristically expresses and not about the actual motives of the agent but a hypothetical agent and what that agent would do or not do in certain circumstances. She formulates this as follows:

AG2; A decision is right if and only if it is what a virtuous person would characteristically choose in the circumstances. (Van Zyl, 2009)

According to Van Zyl, in most cases the differences between AG 1 and AG2 are not important but that they are in a case like that of the drowning child when an agent's motives are not virtuous but when the action she performs is the one that ought to be performed. Also the difference is important when one wants to distinguish between someone acting out of duty or out of benevolence.

She notices an inconsistency in Slote's criterion of right action, namely that he sometimes seems to connect rightness to the actual motive of the actual agent and sometimes to the motive that is typically expressed in the act regardless of the agent's actual motives. This suggests a hypothetical agent.

Van Zyl claims that a solution for this inconsistency can be found in making a separation between action guidance and action assessment. That way, a hypothetical account of action guidance can be used while also connecting rightness to the actual motives of an agent to perform an act. This also explains how it is possible to act wrongly but still do his duty or making a morally right decision.

Van Zyl adds an agent-based criterion of right action (AA) to a hypothetical-agent criterion of action guidance (AG2):

Action assessment (AA): An action is right if (and because) it exhibits or expresses a virtuous motive, or at least, does not exhibit or express a vicious motive.

Action Guiding (AG2): A decision is right if and only if it is what a virtuous person would characteristically choose in the circumstances. (Van Zyl, 2009)

This example shows how action guidance and action assessment come apart; a father tells his daughter to apologize to her brother for breaking his toys out of anger. The girl apologizes to get approval from her parents but does not genuinely feel sorry about it. In the case of the parents it would not be appropriate of the parents to say that she did a good thing although her motives were bad.

According to Van Zyl, Hursthouse employs a hypothetical-agent account of right action that is also meant to provide action guidance: 'An action is right if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances'. Van Zyl argues that this does not answer the question what makes an action right while her account on the other hand, does provide an account of right action that is based on the actual motives from which the act is carried out. It is an instrument to assess the action,

namely when it expresses a virtuous motive or at least does not express a vicious motive (AA).

Her second account is not a criterion for right action but an instrument that can advise us what is the best thing to do, namely what virtuous people characteristically do, what a hypothetical agent, under the same circumstances, would choose to do or ought to do (AG2). Just copying the behaviour of the virtuous is not sufficient, one has to possess virtuous motives.

In her paper 'Right action and the non-virtuous' (Van Zyl, 2011), again Van Zyl argues that action guidance can be provided by virtue ethical moral theory and she opposes the objections as given by Robert Johnson to Hursthouse's view which is that virtue ethics can give an account of right action in terms of what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances.

As we have seen in the first chapter, Hursthouse's premises are:

V1: An action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances

V1a: A virtuous agent is one who has, and exercises, certain character traits, namely the virtues.

V2: A virtue is a character trait that human being needs for Eudaimonia, to flourish or live well. (Van Zyl, 2011)

Two major objections to Hursthouse's premises are the error objection and the failure objection. The error objection means that non-virtuous people often have to do things that are not at all characteristic of virtuous people like self-control, avoid certain circumstances or asking for guidance. A well-known example is that of a squash player who after losing a game feels like hitting her opponent. What a virtuous person would do is shake the hand of her opponent but the squash player, who has such a bad temper, is better to leave without approaching her opponent. In this case virtue ethics would not give the right advice. The failure objection is that virtue ethics fails to guide and evaluate actions whenever an agent finds himself in circumstances that a virtuous agent just cannot be in. To be able to determine if an action is right or wrong in certain circumstances, a virtuous person has to be able to be in that circumstances. Often non-virtuous agents are in situations that virtuous people cannot be in.

Van Zyl argues that it is a mistake to assume that Hursthouse means by a 'right action' 'an action that one ought to performed'. Instead Hursthouse's meaning of 'a right action' is 'a good deed', 'an act that gets a tick of approval'. When this is clear, it will be obvious, according to Van Zyl, that Hursthouse does give an accurate account of right action assessment to non-virtuous agents, but that it is difficult to determine action guidance in Hursthouse's account. Van Zyl argues that the distinction between right action as a good act and right action as what ought to be done, allows a qualified-agent account to avoid the error objection as well as the failure objection.

Van Zyl adds an extra premise: (W1) 'An action is wrong (bad) if and only if it is what a vicious agent would characteristically do in the circumstances' (Van Zyl, 2011, p. 84)and she adds that if right and wrong are understood as good and bad rather than what ought to be done or what ought not to be done, there will be a lot of actions that are neither right; characteristic of what the virtuous would do, nor wrong; characteristic of what the vicious would do.

Van Zyl mentions Hursthouse's example of the two-time lover and if that situation is this vulnerable to failure objection. According to Van Zyl this is not the case because it does answer the question if it is the moral right thing to do, marrying woman B, because there is in that situation, no morally right thing to do. The two-time lover cannot, in that situation, do 'a good act'. This is not about what he ought to have done but what would be a morally right action, in which right has the meaning of praiseworthy.

Van Zyl argues that when it comes to action assessment, V1 allows us to assess in a correct way self-improving and self-controlling actions performed by a non-virtuous agent. It does this by telling us that they just do not to perform actions that are right (virtuous). It are not actions a virtuous agent would perform.

The same response can be given to the failure objection, namely that V1 makes it possible to assess the actions of a non-virtuous person who finds himself in circumstances that a virtuous person would never be in. It is simply not possible to perform a good deed in those circumstances. It won't be the actions that a virtuous agent would do. In accepting that Hursthouse uses 'right' meaning 'a good deed' it is no longer counter intuitive that the two-time lover, the women that is tempted to be unfaithful or the squash player, fail to perform a right action.

Van Zyl investigates whether virtue ethics can, besides the account of action assessment, also give an account of right action when, as some writers did, V1 is reformulated in: (AG+) 'S ought to do what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances.' Some writers have argued that this cannot provide action guidance for agents that are not fully virtuous because they will have no idea what a virtuous agent would do. Hursthouse answers to his objection that a non-virtuous agent may well have a good idea of what a virtuous agent might do or that she can ask for advice. Also she argues that each virtue goes with a description; one has to do what is honest, what is charitable, what is just, etc., the so-called virtue rules.

As per Robert Johnson, there are some philosophers that claim that AG+ has an error problem and a failure problem because a non-virtuous agent can be in circumstances that a virtuous agent would never be in and in those circumstances the non-virtuous agent has to perform actions a virtuous person would never perform, like taking steps to improve her character. When that happens AG+ will give a too demanding answer and we might fail what we ought to do.

Van Zyl resolves these problems by noticing that in V1 the part of 'the virtuous agent' is the vaguest part because it raises the question of what exactly counts as a virtuous person and what counts as a virtuous act. According to her it is the connection between virtues and human flourishing that tells us to obtain virtues like courage, honesty, temperance, etc. which means that, as Aristotle said: we become just by performing just acts.' We have to focus on efforts instead of on the acts of the virtuous. Not only each virtue generates a prescription, e.g. to do what is just, but also the vices generate a prohibition, e.g. to not do what is unjust. Hursthouse suggests an additional action-guiding principle there, accompanied by a list of more specific virtue rules: (AG-) 'S ought not to do what wicked (dishonest, uncharitable, mean, etc.) agent would characteristically do.'

Aristotle himself already gave three rules for good conduct because he realized how difficult it was to hit the mean between two vices. His advice was to choose the lesser evil, to be aware of one's own weaknesses and to guard against pleasure and pleasant things. This advice, according to Van Zyl, aims at demonstrating how non-virtuous people can go wrong.

As we have seen, according to Johnson there is something truly admirable about those who overcome their character flaws and improve themselves but, applying V1

appears to give us an intuitively incorrect result, namely that self-improving actions, while not wrong or bad, are not right (good or admirable). Van Zyl shares this intuition but argues that virtue ethics is able to take account of it when keeping in mind that 'right' is used in the meaning of good and excellent and that failing to perform a right act does not mean that one performs a wrong (bad) act, it just will not be a virtuous act. The action will only be wrong if it one that a vicious agent would perform in the circumstances. A lot of actions will be somewhere in between right and wrong like for example not completely honest, lacking temperance, motivated by generosity be fairly virtuous or be described as a bit greedy. For most people, to possess a virtue is a matter of degree.

According to Van Zyl, V1 is not always able to provide action guidance to the non-virtuous and she advises to give up the claim that V1 alone is supposed to give action guidance and action assessment. She advises that for action guidance, we turn to AG+ and AG-, together with more specific virtue rules for action.

When we return to the example of the hot tempered squash player, the player should turn to AG- for action guidance. When he forces himself to grin and leave the court, at least he avoids hitting the other player. At that moment he takes the right decision, but his action will not be right in the sense of 'good'.

Van Zyl, (Van Zyl, 2011) also notices that the habitual liar finds himself in a situation that can be compared to that of a virtuous person. She gives an example of a person who suffers a serious injury and has to choose between working very hard to regain mobility and resigning himself to the state she is in. In the same way that the liar can work on improving his character or, on the other hand do nothing and accept that he just is that way, the liar, improving his character, does at that moment what a virtuous person would do; working very hard to improve himself.

Chapter Three: the Critique of the Morality System

In his book 'Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy' (Williams, 1985), Bernard Williams critiques what he calls 'the morality system'. According to him, the most important questions in morality are not those that concern the signification of ethical terms or the logic of ethical discussions about obligations and duties, but more the kind of questions about what sort of life a person should lead. This idea is in the line of virtue ethics.

Williams critiques, like Elisabeth Anscombe, the use of words like 'right', 'good' or 'ought' in a special moral sense and argues that this could only be done against a religious background, believing that God is a law-giver and that since that background is nowadays missing, it is an illusion that morality can just go on just like before. He adds that that reflects a lack of historical knowledge. According to Williams: 'the various features of the moral judgement system support each other, and collectively they are modelled on the prerogatives of a Pelagian God'. (Williams, 1985) The 'Pelagian heresy' was a minority Christian sect that wanted salvation connected to personal merit.

Williams distinguishes morality and ethics. Ethics is for him a broad subject trying to answer the question: how should I live? It is about what kind of a person one should be and what one needs to do in order to be such a person. Morality, on the other hand, is just a part of ethics, a product of modern moral philosophy, of deontology and utilitarianism, and exclusively concerned with how one should act in different situations.

He critiques and rejects this 'morality system' of modern philosophy claiming that it contains various philosophical mistakes and that 'we would be better off without it'.

His first critique is about the significance morality gives to 'obligation' as 'a moral obligation', understood as one especially important kind of deliberative conclusion, governed by moral reasons, that is directed toward what to do. But, as Williams explains, not every conclusion of a particular moral deliberation, even within the moral system, expresses an obligation and thinking about what to do or how to live involves many more concepts than just moral obligations. Also, conclusions of practical deliberation do not always express moral obligations. Williams also critiques the view in morality that obligations cannot conflict. He argues that human life is very much about conflict and difficult choices and that therefore those conflicts and choices have to be taken as central in understanding human values. Emotions should not be neglected because admirable acts are, according to Williams, more determined by emotions than by reasoning about obligation. Williams rejects the alleged inescapability of a moral obligation; that a valid moral obligation should be an obligation that supersedes all other deliberations, claiming that ethical life is about much more than moral obligation and concluding that moral obligations cannot be inescapable. According to Williams obligations and inclinations aren't

opposites but obligations come into being by inclinations. An agent will only obligate herself to do something when she has a desire to do so. If it is important to her, she will give it priority.

Another critique is about the misunderstanding of practical necessity. A declaration of practical necessity expresses a 'must' in an absolute sense, stating that the agent must do a certain thing. It is a deliberative conclusion that the agent draws after an overall deliberation that she must do a certain thing, no matter what. Williams argues that practical necessity is in no way peculiar to ethics, that it are practical necessities that determine the force of obligations because obligations are never final practical conclusions but are an input into practical decision among many other kinds of ethical considerations. Williams claims that the conclusions of practical necessity have to do with what a person finds important, it is about a person's priorities.

Practical necessities determine the force of obligations for obligations are never final practical conclusions but are merely an input into practical decision, among many other input and even when those considerations are guided by ethical considerations, they still do not necessarily indicate an obligation. One can ethically feel that one has to do something, without being under a moral obligation. The example he gives is that of a person that has promised a friend to visit him in the hospital but just before receives a phone call to join a demonstration to protest the lack of health benefits and be one of the speakers. In that case, it can be that the person ethically feels he has to go to the demonstration although he does not feel a moral obligation to attend.

Williams argues that another illusion of the morality system is that there has to be a total voluntariness that overrides character and social or psychological determination, a free choice for which the agent is responsible. The morality system presumes the notion of free will, that moral character and the choices that issue from it are not mere products of psychology or social determination. Williams disagrees strongly claiming that the choices of an agent are always surrounded and held up and partly shaped by forces beyond the control of the agent. The moral choices that an agent makes are, according to Williams, are always embedded in a web of considerations, moral and non-moral considerations, influenced by forces out of the control of the agent, even in cases of voluntary action.

Williams notices that for people that are within the morality system, morality usually is important but the level of that importance can differ, it is personal. In utilitarianism the importance is to be found in the amount of welfare, to maximize the overall good. It is not clear to what amount moral considerations have to occur in their deliberations about what to do. On the other hand, in deontology, the priority of moral motivation is very important, people should give priority to moral considerations in their deliberation, against mere inclinations. According to Williams, neither utilitarianism nor deontology have an adequate view. He confirms that ethical motivations are important and that they can have a high priority but argues that they exist among many other considerations.

Williams criticizes 'the purity of morality', the ideal that human life can be ultimately just, that it can be abstracted from other kinds of emotional reaction or social influence. According to him, most advantages and admired characteristics are distributed in ways that are not just at all. Purity of morality gives the illusion that agents can, through their own efforts, develop and sustain a moral world, transcend luck and the innumerable lotteries of life. Williams argues that the purity of morality protects us from these contingencies of luck and misfortune and that behind this protection, a domain of freedom is created, where moral agents are viewed as more than mere parts of biology, history and social force. According to Williams we should reject purity: 'The idea of value that lies beyond all luck is an illusion' (Williams, 1985)

According to Williams, natural sciences can offer objective truth but he does not believe that natural science can provide us with an absolute conception of the world. We'd better have social knowledge and historical knowledge to understand ourselves.

Conclusion

From this thesis it can be concluded that virtue ethics is certainly a fundamental approach to normative ethics, comparable to deontology and consequentialism.

In chapter 1 we have seen that the approach of virtue ethics is very different from that of modern philosophy. While virtue ethics in the ancient Greek society derived their philosophical approaches to ethics from human nature, asking how to live well and how to achieve Eudaimonia, modern philosophy has derived its approaches

from religion and asks questions about what is a morally right or wrong action and what is a person's duty or obligation. It is this shift from agent-based ethics to action-based ethics, provoked by the rise of Christianity that in 1958 is criticized by Elisabeth Anscombe arguing that modern philosophy should give up obligation as a central moral concept, a concept that according to her cannot hold when deprived of a divine lawgiver. She advises to turn to virtue ethics and to take psychology as a base.

Michael Slote also criticizes deontology and consequentialism and demonstrates with many examples that they are inconsistent. He constructs a virtue ethics theory which, according to him, avoids the inconsistencies that have been found in deontology and consequentialism by using notions that focus on the character or disposition of the agent instead of notions like 'morally right', 'morally wrong' or 'ought'. Rosalind Hursthouse investigates the possibilities of agent-based action guidance in virtue ethics and argues that a morally right action would be an action that a virtuous agent would normally do in the circumstances. According to her, in virtue ethics, it is possible to distinguish action guidance and action assessment and distinguish a right action from a morally right action, depending on the dispositions of the agent. She argues that this is an advantage over deontology and consequentialism.

Robert N. Johnson claims that virtue ethics cannot provide action guidance. He states it is inconsistent with the idea of self-improvement actions of an agent because those actions would not be characteristic for a virtuous person. Liezl van Zyl argues against those arguments, demonstrating, while adapting Hursthouse's premises, that it could be possible to provide action guidance.

In chapter 3, Bernard Williams offers even stronger arguments against the morality system of modern philosophy. Williams argues that we would better be off without it as it is only concerned with how we should act instead of how we should live. He strongly criticizes the idea that a moral obligation would supersede all other considerations while for Williams it is just one of many considerations that the agent has, considerations that are influenced by forces out of her control. He accuses the morality system of offering the illusion that an agent has free will and is totally responsible for his actions while Williams argues that an agent's choices are largely

determined. In addition he rejects that morality could be seen apart from emotional or social influences, luck and misfortune.

Virtue ethics is certainly a fundamental approach to normative ethics because it avoids the inconsistencies that exist in deontology and consequentialism and because it offers an approach that focusses on the character traits of an agent accepting that moral obligations are not inescapable and are not absolute.

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