

Background Reading: More on Virtues

Virtue ethics has several roots, but the most commonly cited is Aristotle's *Ethics*. Based on his writing, we get a theory of ethics that is both embodied in actions and situated in particular contexts. Specifically, ethics for Aristotle is *enacted* in the sense that our actions communicate our values; our behaviors reflect our core beliefs. If I say that honesty is important to me, but you find out later I have been withholding information from you, my actions have not been consistent with my stated core beliefs. Lying is wrong, not because there are rules or principles that advise against it, or because of the consequences (I'll get caught), but because lying isn't consistent with other values and practices I value (integrity, honesty). From a virtue ethics perspective, inconsistency would be unethical; it may also mean that a different ethical framework was guiding my decision making (e.g. consequences or duties).

According to Aristotle, we also develop our character through our actions. So, by practicing kindness or compassion, I become a kind or compassionate person. Character and core values emerge through our actions and daily choices as our lives continue, rather than being something we are born with, or something that is instilled at an early age. The developmental aspect of becoming virtuous is important for ethics education. It means that sometimes we must practice the actions before they are second nature, but through practicing (enacting) we form habits of mind; in turn, habits of mind shape our character.

As described above, virtue ethics is grounded in the way we are in the world. It is also responsive to particular contexts. For Aristotle, there were no hard and fast rules about what behaviors or actions were ethical or unethical. The nature of the action must be contextually judged. Virtue ethics requires individuals be responsive to the situation and consider how their actions in this particular context will reflect their core purpose. Because context matters, the idea of what counts as consistency may be more difficult to sort out. That is, what may look like withholding information (and therefore, potentially lying) is actually done as an act of compassion. One core value (compassion) might hold primacy over another (honesty) in a given situation. How do we know which should trump? It comes back to which enacts your core purpose. More on that next...

Defining Characteristics

We have already been introduced to the idea that for Aristotle, ethics is embodied in actions and situated in particular contexts. To press this further, a key characteristic of virtue ethics is that the answer to the question, "What is the right thing to do?" comes in response to considering, "What is my core purpose, and which option reflects that core purpose?" For example, consider your role as a teacher preparing future scientists and researchers. You can

help promote ethical development by asking the following kinds of questions of your students imagining themselves in that future role: if I am a researcher faced with a dilemma – I have conflicting findings in 2 of the 3 experiments I have run. Can I just throw out the third experiment that does not confirm my hypothesis, or do I have to run another experiment to try and understand the findings? – I need to ask myself: what kind of researcher am I? What do I value in science? What kind of contributions will I be able to stand behind when I am publishing in the scientific literature and advancing science?

The question of core purpose is tied to both personal and professional roles and responsibilities. Personally, we all have roles as citizens of the world and have ideas about what kind of world we want to live in. Professionally, we are part of a larger group of teachers and scientists with core beliefs and commitments. For Aristotle, we could ask even the most basic question: what is our core purpose as human beings? The answer for him was: flourishing. Therefore, any right action was the action that promoted human flourishing. Asking which course of action enacts our core purpose as a citizen, or as a teacher, reminds us that our actions are part of a larger whole and have implications beyond ourselves. Thinking about virtue ethics this way is important for helping move beyond what can be narrowly introspective (my character, the virtues I possess) to considerations of how we are interconnected. This is particularly evident in the work of teaching, where the virtues you enact on a daily basis in the classroom go a long way toward role modeling for students the kinds of behaviors and choices that are ethically desirable.

Challenges

Since the crux of Virtue Ethics turns on how we each define our core purpose, disagreements can be difficult to resolve if we face competing roles and purposes. If, for example, one researcher thinks that his core purpose is to solve unanswered scientific questions and another believes her core purpose is to ameliorate public health disease, they may initially disagree about which grants to pursue, which research agenda to focus on, which methods to employ, and so forth. We can see that neither person is wrong, as they are both enacting their core purposes. However, they will not find middle ground unless they shift the conversation to a different focus. Because virtue ethics asks us to move from core purposes, these two researchers could talk explicitly about their own commitments and could explore possible projects that would focus on interesting scientific questions that had public health implications.

A further challenge arises within virtue ethics as all of us embody more than one role and therefore, must enact more than one set of core purposes at any one time. Someone may be a citizen, a sibling, a member of an institution, teacher, and researcher. Ideally, all of those core commitments will be in alignment. However, situations arise where they do not and you will be asked to put one role and core