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Ethics and Virtue

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For many of us, the fundamental question of ethics is, "What should I do?" or "How should I act?" Ethics is supposed to provide us with "moral principles" or universal rules that tell us what to do. Many people, for example, read passionate adherents of the moral principle of utilitarianism: "Everyone is obligated to do whatever will achieve the greatest good for the greatest number." Others are just as devoted to the basic principle of Immanuel Kant: "Everyone is obligated to act only in ways that respect the human dignity and moral rights of all persons."

Moral principles like these focus primarily on people's actions and doings. We "apply" them by asking what these principles require of us in particular circumstances, e.g., when considering whether to lie or to commit suicide. We also apply them when we ask what they require of us as professionals, e.g., lawyers, doctors, or business people, or what they require of our social policies and institutions. In the last decade, dozens of ethics centers and programs devoted to "business ethics", "legal ethics", "medical ethics", and "ethics in public policy" have sprung up. These centers are designed to examine the implications moral principles have for our lives.

But are moral principles all that ethics consists of? Critics have rightly claimed that this emphasis on moral principles smacks of a thoughtless and slavish worship of rules, as if the moral life was a matter of scrupulously checking our every action against a table of do's and don'ts. Fortunately, this obsession with principles and rules has been recently challenged by several ethicists who argue that the emphasis on principles ignores a fundamental component of ethics--virtue. These ethicists point out that by focusing on what people should do or how people should act, the "moral principles approach" neglects the more important issue--what people should be. In other words, the fundamental question of ethics is not "What should I do?" but "What kind of person should I be?"

According to "virtue ethics", there are certain ideals, such as excellence or dedication to the common good, toward which we should strive and which allow the full development

of our humanity. These ideals are discovered through thoughtful reflection on what we as human beings have the potential to become.

"Virtues" are attitudes, dispositions, or character traits that enable us to be and to act in ways that develop this potential. They enable us to pursue the ideals we have adopted. Honesty, courage, compassion, generosity, fidelity, integrity, fairness, self-control, and prudence are all examples of virtues.

How does a person develop virtues? Virtues are developed through learning and through practice. As the ancient philosopher Aristotle suggested, a person can improve his or her character by practicing self-discipline, while a good character can be corrupted by repeated self-indulgence. Just as the ability to run a marathon develops through much training and practice, so too does our capacity to be fair, to be courageous, or to be compassionate.

Virtues are habits. That is, once they are acquired, they become characteristic of a person. For example, a person who has developed the virtue of generosity is often referred to as a generous person because he or she tends to be generous in all circumstances. Moreover, a person who has developed virtues will be naturally disposed to act in ways that are consistent with moral principles. The virtuous person is the ethical person.

At the heart of the virtue approach to ethics is the idea of "community". A person's character traits are not developed in isolation, but within and by the communities to which he or she belongs, including family, church, school, and other private and public associations. As people grow and mature, their personalities are deeply affected by the values that their communities prize, by the personality traits that their communities encourage, and by the role models that their communities put forth for imitation through traditional stories, fiction, movies, television, and so on. The virtue approach urges us to pay attention to the contours of our communities and the habits of character they encourage and instill.

The moral life, then, is not simply a matter of following moral rules and of learning to apply them to specific situations. The moral life is also a matter of trying to determine the kind of people we should be and of attending to the development of character within our communities and ourselves.

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