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4.4 Virtue Theory

Learning Objectives

1. Define virtue ethics.
2. Elaborate basic virtues and show how they work in business.
3. Indicate how virtue is acquired.
4. Note an advantage and drawback of the theory.

What Is Virtue Ethics?

Contemporary virtue ethics is an updated version of a theory first proposed in ancient Greece. Today's proponents acknowledge that it's very difficult to set up a list of moral rules that are going to solve ethical dilemmas across cultural lines. Typically, they don't go quite so far as the culturalists; they don't believe that basic regulations of right and wrong are *completely* independent from one community to another. In practical terms, however, there's agreement that the world is too diverse and changing to be controlled by lists of recommendations and prohibitions. So proponents of virtue suggest that we change the focus of our moral investigations. Instead of trying to form specific rules for everyone to follow—*don't bribe, don't exploit the deceased on TV*—they propose that we build virtuous character. The idea is that people who *are* good will do the good and right thing, regardless of the circumstances: whether they're at home or abroad, whether they're trying to win new clients or making a decision about what kind of images are appropriate for public TV.

In a vague sense, we all know what it means to have a virtuous character; we all know people who can be counted upon to do the right thing. Think of a business situation where true character shines through. A local TV station has seen advertising revenue plummet and layoffs have to be made. Who should go? Should Jim get to stay because his wife just had their first child? Should Jane get to stay because she's fifty-seven and probably won't be able to find another job? Should John—who's a

tireless worker and the station's best film editor—be laid off because he was hired only two months ago? It's a hard choice and there's no way to know for sure what's right. It is certain, however, that there are better and worse ways of handling the situation.

One strategy is to not think too much about it, to just know that two employees have to go, so you take the names that happen to come to mind, you send them an e-mail, and you instruct security to make sure they're escorted from the building. Then you go hide in the bathroom until they're gone. In other words, you weasel out. In the same situation, another person will draw up criteria for making the decision and will stand up and inform those who are being let go why the decision was made. The thoughts (complaints, regrets, excuses) of those being released will be honored and heard attentively, but the decision will stand. From the person in charge of deciding, there'll be honesty, respect, and firmness. This is virtue. You can't read it in a book, you can't memorize principles, and you can't just follow some precooked decision-making process. You have to have certain qualities as a person to do the right thing in a hard situation.

Virtue ethics is the idea that we can and should instill those qualities in people and then let them go out into the complex business world confident that they'll face dilemmas well. What decisions will they make? What will they do when faced with questions about who should be laid off or, in another case, whether to hand over a bribe in a place where everyone is bribing? We don't know. But we rely on their good character to be confident they'll do right.

Under this conception, these are the primary tasks of ethics:

- Delineate what the virtues are.
- Provide experience using the virtues.

The experience is especially important because virtue isn't so much a natural characteristic like height or hair color; it's more of an acquired skill: something you need to work at, practice, and hone. Also, like many acquired skills, doing it—once a certain level of mastery has been reached—is rewarding or satisfying. Typically, a person driven by virtue has nurtured a moral instinct for acting in consonance with the virtues. Doing right feels right. Conversely, *not* acting in consonance with the

virtues is discomforting; it leaves a bad taste in the mouth. At the risk of trivializing the subject, there's a very limited comparison that can be made between learning virtue and learning more rudimentary activities like golf or dancing. When someone has acquired the skill, hitting a good shot or taking the right steps in perfect time feels good. Conversely, missing a putt or stepping on your partner's foot leaves you consternated.

What Are the Virtues and Vices?

Every advocate of virtue ethics will present a constellation of virtues that they believe captures the essence of what needs to be acquired to *be* virtuous. Typically, there'll also be a set of antivirtues or vices to be avoided to fill out the picture. Here's a set of virtues overlapping with what most proponents will offer:

- Wisdom (both theoretical and practical)
- Fairness
- Courage
- Temperance
- Prudence
- Sincerity
- Civility

On the outer edges, here's a common pair of vices to be avoided. Notice that what counts as a vice here isn't synonymous with the common use of the word, which implies a weakness of the physical body manifested as the inability to resist drunkenness, drugs, and similar:

- Cowardice
- Insensibility

How Do the Virtues and Vices Work in a Business Environment?

Wisdom as a virtue is frequently divided into theoretical and practical variations. Theoretical wisdom is what you get reading books and hearing college lectures. It's the acquired ability to concentrate

and understand sentences like the one you're reading now, even though it's not very exciting and allows almost no cheap thrills—words like *sex* and *drugs* don't come up much. Those possessing theoretical wisdom know the scholarly rules of the world in the abstract but not necessarily in practice. In the world of business, for example, someone may be able to explain the fine points of Immanuel Kant's complicated and dense ethical ideas, but that doesn't mean they'll be able to apply the lessons when sitting in someone's office in a foreign country.

Practical wisdom (sometimes called prudence) is the learned ability to take a deep breath and respond to situations thoughtfully. For example, everyone feels like exploding sometimes, especially at work after you've had too much coffee and you didn't get the raise you wanted. After that, some guy in a meeting takes a cheap shot and jokes about how you didn't win an overseas account because you didn't bribe the right person. What do you do? Scream the guy's head off? Talk about it quietly after the meeting? Let it pass like nothing happened? Practical wisdom doesn't give an answer, but in the heat of the moment, it's the virtue of making the decision coolly, of doing something you won't regret later. Frequently, an association is set between practical wisdom and finding a spot between extremes. In this case, perhaps it would be excessive to go off right there in the meeting room (because the outburst would tend to confirm that you're not real smart), but it might also be excessive to let the jab go as though nothing had happened (because the same guy may feel emboldened to keep poking at you). So practical wisdom would be the ability to navigate a middle, prudent, route—perhaps one leading to the decision to discuss the matter quietly but sternly after the meeting.

Fairness is the virtue of judging people's acts dispassionately, evenhandedly, and from all points of view. When forming judgments about a potential client who seems to be asking for a bribe, the verdict is going to partially depend on where the client is. If he's in the United States, that's one thing; if he's in a country where clients customarily get cash under the table, that's another. No one is saying the first is wrong and the second right, but the different contexts need to be considered, and fairness is the ability to consider them, to make evenhanded judgments even in very different situations.

Courage is the virtue of moderate boldness. If you're an action crime reporter, you won't hide in a bush while pushing your cameraman out into the open to try to get some exciting footage. You won't, in other words, be a coward. At the same time, you won't be rash either, you'll know that sometimes you need to take a risk to get a good story, but it doesn't make a lot of sense to stand up and film from the middle of a gunfight.

Temperance is the virtue of self-control with respect to pleasure, especially the pleasures of the body and the senses. Curiously, Wallace Souza stands as an embodiment of this skill. As a major league drug dealer, he no doubt had constant access to good, cheap, feel-good substances. Even so, he managed to control his intake, not letting it interfere with his day job as a TV reporter, and his other day job as a legislator.

More generally in the workplace, temperance mixes well with the learned ability to delay gratification. For example, doing good work is frequently rewarded with a better job, but it's hard to find someone who feels as though they get everything they deserve every time. Temperance enters here as the ability to bear down and keep trying. It's also, on the other side, the ability to know when a larger change (perhaps looking for work at another company) may be necessary to get ahead.

Sincerity is the ability to reveal yourself to others with confidence that you'll be respected. It fits between the extremes of frigidity and emoting. Souza or any TV reporter has to do more than just give cold facts; some human, emotional component must be added to the mix. On the other hand, no one's going to watch a reporter who arrives at a crime scene, reports that he feels sad, and breaks down in tears. Similarly in international business negotiations, to establish good contact across cultures, there has to be some sharing of humanity. You need to reveal what kind of food you like or something similar to the people on the other side. You don't want to go too far, though, and talk about how Japanese food reminds you of a childhood vomiting episode (especially when doing business in Tokyo).

Civility is the virtue of showing consideration for others without humiliating yourself. As a virtue it doesn't mean eating with the right fork or remembering to say "thank you" to clients. Instead, it's the

disposition to show others that you take them seriously while also respecting yourself. This means establishing ground rules for behavior that are independent and neutral. In essence, the idea is, when having lunch with your boss, you don't eat like you're sitting in front of the TV in your family room; you respect her, and you expect the same from her. Civility is the virtue of habitually being and expressing yourself in a way that establishes your presence solidly without threatening or impinging on others.

Vices

On the outside of the virtues, there are vices. Just as the accomplishment of a virtue—acting in harmony with it—yields a sense of satisfaction and confidence that you're living well, living a good life, so too the vices produce a sensation of unease. It's not exactly a sting of conscience (like a child feels when caught stealing); it's more a sense of weakness, deflation, and failure. *Cowardice*, for example, is a vice. It may save your job if you mess up and don't confess to the problem being your fault; but for the person trained in virtue, the job will have lost its dignity. *Insensibility* is another vice. Had Souza understood that, he may have thought twice about those people's dead bodies he rolled out for television. He may have thought of their living parents, their children. And even if he hadn't, after he'd presented the images he would've felt that he'd lapsed, that he hadn't done as well as he could.

How Do I Become Virtuous?

Virtues aren't a list of actions you can write on the back of your hand and refer to; they're ways of living, and the only route to becoming virtuous is to actually live those ways. Every society will have its own institutions for instilling virtue, and within societies different institutions will seem more apt for some than for others. In the United States, the kinds of groups that are sought out as instillers of virtue include the family, churches, schools, sports teams, Boy and Girl Scouts, volunteer and community organizations, the armed forces, AmeriCorps, and similar.

Companies play a role, too. The virtuous organization will be led by individuals who *are* virtuous, and it will reward workers—at least partially—based on their progress toward being good people.

This kind of organization won't rely on employee handbooks and compliance rules to dictate behavior; instead, it will devise strategies for nurturing the skills of a good life. They may include mentor programs, carefully calibrated increases in responsibility and independence for employees, and job performance assessments that not only measure numerical results but also try to gauge an individual's moral contributions to the organization's undertaking.

Finally, when confronted with moral questions—"What kind of images should I broadcast on my TV report?" or "Should I hand money under the table?"—the answer won't be *yes* or *no*. It's never a yes or no; it's always to do what my good character dictates.

An Advantage and Drawback of Virtue Ethics

The principal advantage of virtue ethics is its flexibility, the confidence that those who *are* virtuous will be equipped to manage unforeseeable moral dilemmas in unfamiliar circumstances. The principal drawback is the lack of specificity: the theory doesn't allow clear, yes-or-no responses to specific problems like whether I should offer a bribe.

Key Takeaways

- Virtue ethics concentrates on forming good character and then trusting people to do the right thing. At the heart of ethics, the formation of good character replaces the defining of specific guidelines for action.
- A society's institutions play a key role in instilling virtue.
- The basic virtues tend to stress moderation, the ability to avoid taking extreme action in the face of dilemmas.
- Virtue ethics grants flexibility insofar as those who are virtuous should manage any situation well.

Review Questions

1. Would you call Souza's colorful professional life a profile of the virtue of courage? Why or why not?

2. How might the virtue of civility come forward in the case of international bribery, in the case that you've gone abroad in pursuit of a contract and the prospective client demands some cash under the table?
3. What are some societal institutions you've come in contact with that could be understood as teaching virtue? What virtue(s) do they instill, and how?