

## Introduction

How should I live? How should I act? What kind of person should I try to be? These and other questions are central to the field of ethics. The questions of how to live and what kind of person to be have an ancient pedigree, going back to the philosophers Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. They thought that these questions and others are best approached by thinking in terms of virtues – the kinds of characteristics a person should have in order to live a good life – qualities like courage, honesty, and generosity, to name but a few. In addition to being the key concept in the ethical theories of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, virtue continued to be of interest to medieval philosophers such as St. Thomas Aquinas. It fell into abeyance, however, with the rise of modern philosophy and the emergence of deontology and consequentialism.

The past decades have seen a dramatic resurgence of interest in the ancient idea of virtue and of approaches to ethics in which the concept of virtue plays a central role. Any attempt to provide an overview of contemporary virtue ethics needs to be selective, since there is so much work being done in the field. Consequently, there is much that will of necessity be omitted from this account (such as religious virtue ethics and virtue ethics in non-Western traditions), but I will attempt to select topics from within contemporary Anglo-American virtue ethics, and its roots in Aristotle, that give a flavor of the ongoing interest and dynamism of the field, including its relevance to how we live our lives today.<sup>1</sup>

The origin of the present renewed interest in virtue is typically traced to a seminal article by Elizabeth Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy” (1958). In this paper, Anscombe, who spent substantial periods of time at both Oxford and Cambridge, laments that neither deontology nor consequentialism provides an adequate philosophical psychology, and urges a return to Aristotle to fill this gap. Anscombe’s general line of thought was continued in Oxford in the 1970s, by Peter Geach in *The Virtues* (1977) and Philippa Foot in a collection of essays, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (1978). Foot’s thinking evolved and continued into the twenty-first century, with the publication of *Natural Goodness* (2001). Other philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic continued work on virtue, most notably Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1984; originally published in 1981), *Dependent*

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<sup>1</sup> Readers interested in religious virtue ethics are invited to consult the essays by Wood (2018), Vogler (2018), and Bucar (2018) for topical overviews of Christian and Islamic ethics; those by Sim (2018) and Tiwald (2018) for similar treatments of Confucianism, and by MacKenzie (2018) for Buddhism. Those who wish to delve more deeply should consult Nolan (2014), Austin (2018), and Dunnington (2019) for religious virtue ethics. Flanagan (2011) offers a naturalistic interpretation of Buddhism, and Stalnaker (2020), Slingerland (2011), Olberding (2012), Angle (2009), and Sim (2007) all furnish interesting perspectives on Confucianism.

*Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (1999), and *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (2016). Several papers by John McDowell have also contributed importantly to the literature on virtue, as have papers by Martha Nussbaum (1988), David Solomon (1988), Gary Watson (1990), and Bernard Williams' book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985).<sup>2</sup> Linda Zagzebski's work, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (1996), unified a virtue-oriented approach to ethics with a similar approach to epistemology,<sup>3</sup> and was influential in developing what is known as 'responsibilist' virtue epistemology – a form of epistemology according to which knowledge is achieved through the possession of intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness, curiosity, perseverance, carefulness in inquiry, and so on. Thinking on virtue has also been buttressed by important works by scholars of ancient philosophy, such as Julia Annas' magisterial book on ancient ethics, *The Morality of Happiness* (1993).

The event that triggered the present deluge of books and articles on virtue, however, was the publication in 1999 of Rosalind Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics*. This was the first comprehensive attempt to put virtue ethics on the same theoretical footing as deontology and consequentialism. *On Virtue Ethics* is wide-ranging in scope, seeking, among other things, to show structural similarities among the three theory types; to answer the challenge that virtue ethics is incapable of giving action guidance by articulating a virtue ethical criterion for right action; to address the question of appropriate motivation; and to provide a foundation for virtue ethics in ethical naturalism. Hursthouse's book paved the way for the subsequent articulation of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, which is currently the most well-developed theoretical approach on offer.

I discuss central features of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics in the first section of this *Element*. After giving a brief overview of key elements of Aristotle's theory, I pose a series of questions to focus and motivate the discussion. I then turn to alternative theoretical perspectives in Section 2. In Section 3, I focus on two central challenges to virtue ethics: the charge that virtue ethics is egoistic or self-centered, and situationist critiques, which apply mainly to neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. I end this volume with brief concluding comments.

<sup>2</sup> Due to space constraints, I mention Nussbaum, Solomon, and Watson only in passing in later sections, and do not discuss Williams' or McDowell's contributions at all. Two seminal papers by the latter are McDowell (1979) and McDowell (1998).

<sup>3</sup> Epistemology is the area of philosophy that is concerned with questions such as how knowledge can be achieved, how to justify beliefs, whether skepticism (doubt about whether we can attain knowledge) is warranted, and so on.

## 1 Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

As the name suggests, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics has been inspired by Aristotle's ethical theory. It has been developed most extensively by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1984; originally published in 1981), *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (1999), and *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (2016); Rosalind Hursthouse in *On Virtue Ethics* (1999) and several papers; and Daniel C. Russell in *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (2009) and other work. After an overview of the central tenets of Aristotle's theory, I turn to central issues treated in the emergence and development of contemporary neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, and conclude with ethical naturalism, the meta-ethical position which grounds many versions of it.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.1 Aristotle's Ethics in Brief

Aristotle is centrally concerned with what makes a life good – with what he calls *eudaimonia*.<sup>5</sup> This term is difficult to translate, but 'flourishing' seems to capture a good deal of Aristotle's meaning. We flourish when we live well, and we live well when our lives are infused with virtues. In other words, we live well when we live honestly, courageously, generously, and so on. To understand in more depth what this means for Aristotle, let's begin with the 'big picture.'

Aristotle believes that humans are part and parcel of a larger cosmos, and as such, we are members of one biological species among many others. Thus, he takes what is called a 'naturalistic' perspective by situating human beings as part of a larger physical and biological universe. We are distinguished from other animals by our capacity for reason. Aristotle's perspective is also teleological – as rational beings by nature, we are capable of thinking and of directing ourselves to our natural end, which is *eudaimonia*. Virtues, in the proper sense, are rational excellences that both contribute to and partially constitute human flourishing (see also Russell 2009). (Though Aristotle acknowledges virtues of thought as well as virtues of character or moral virtues, our discussion is confined to the latter.) To say that virtues are rational excellences is to say

<sup>4</sup> 'Meta-ethics' is the term used to refer to the theories that ground normative ethical positions, such as deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics. We will not encounter many meta-ethical positions in this Element – only neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism (later in this section) and the sentimentalist meta-ethics proposed by Michael Slote (in Section 2).

<sup>5</sup> Eudaimonism, or efforts to understand the nature of the good life, is present in both ancient philosophy and, now, in contemporary virtue ethics. For an authoritative treatment of ancient eudaimonism, see Annas (1993). Contemporary accounts informed by ancient views include Russell (2012) and LeBar (2013). Baril (2014) and LeBar (2018) provide informative overviews. For contemporary non-Aristotelian accounts, see Besser-Jones (2014) and McMullin (2019). As with other topics of interest in virtue ethics, lack of space prevents me from exploring these views.

that they are informed by *phronēsis*, or practical wisdom. To get clearer on virtues as rational excellences, we should note that Aristotle contrasts them with what he calls ‘natural virtues.’ Natural virtues are not informed by practical wisdom. They are attributable to children whose rational capacities are not fully developed, and even to animals, as when we say, for example, ‘the lion is courageous,’ or ‘the dog is loyal.’ Lacking practical wisdom, natural virtues do not have the reliability that Aristotle ascribes to virtues as rational excellences. Without this reliability, natural virtues can contribute to human flourishing only by luck or chance. By contrast, virtues as rational excellences are the stable and controlling element in human flourishing. Flourishing, however, consists not only of virtue, but also of external goods, such as wealth, noble birth, friends, good children who have not died, and good looks. Today we might add food, shelter, clean water and air, and other goods that help us both during our formative years and later. Virtues as rational excellences cannot indemnify us against the possible misfortune of losing external goods, and thus cannot guarantee that we will flourish. However, virtues as rational excellences are our best bet for living a *eudaimon* life, for practical wisdom gives them stability, and thus, reliability (see Hursthouse 1999). They are entrenched dispositions of character that can see us through difficult times when we lose external goods or when they are at risk. Examples of Aristotelian moral virtues include some that are familiar to us and have already been mentioned, such as courage and generosity, and some that are less familiar or seemingly alien, such as wit, magnificence – the virtue that guides large expenditures for civic purposes – and magnanimity – the virtue of being, and knowing oneself to be, worthy of great honors.

Aristotle’s definition of virtue, provided in Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is this: “Virtue is a state that decides, consisting in a mean, the mean relative to us, which is defined by reference to reason, i.e., to the reason by reference to which the intelligent person would define it. It is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107a). To understand it fully, we need to refer to Aristotle’s sparse remarks, also offered in Book II, on how virtue is developed.<sup>6</sup> We are not by nature virtuous or vicious, according to Aristotle, but instead, we have the capacity to become virtuous. We become virtuous through habituated action. If we have a proper upbringing, we will become habituated to perform virtuous action, and to take pleasure in doing virtuous things. Eventually, we will act virtuously not for the sake of the pleasure involved, but for the sake of doing the right thing; that is, we

<sup>6</sup> See also the *Nicomachean Ethics* on the role of the family and the state in cultivating virtue. Brief comments on habits and habituation can also be found in Aristotle’s *Eudemian Ethics*, 201; 247.

will act virtuously because we see the value of virtuous action in its own right. How this is supposed to happen is a bit mysterious, but we can imagine a young person doing virtuous acts only because she has been told to do so or because she thinks they will bring her some material benefit or advantage. Consider that a college student might initially volunteer with the elderly at a nursing home only to get an entry on her resumé. Over the course of time, we can hope that she would become engaged by the activity, and would come to see the value of volunteering for its own sake. In doing so, she would be developing virtues such as compassion, benevolence, and generosity. She would be developing these traits through her repeated performance of actions, which though not truly virtuous at the beginning of her volunteer work, become so over the course of time.

Returning now to the definition, we can note that to be virtuous, our actions must be, at least initially, based on a choice or decision, which is in turn guided by reason, that is, *phronēsis*. Practical wisdom must guide virtuous action to ensure a measure of reliability in hitting the target of virtue. That is, practical wisdom enables us to be mostly successful in virtuous action, to hit the mark when we try to act compassionately or generously. We can hit the mark when we aim for the mean between two extremes, one of excess and one of deficiency. So, for example, courageous action is the mean between the excess of rashness and the deficiency of cowardice, and generosity, between the excess of profligacy and the deficiency of stinginess. Actions express and reinforce the character states from which they arise. Thus, it is important to be correct in our actions, and Aristotle gives practical advice in Book II on how to achieve the mean relative to us.

But humans are notoriously fallible in their capacities, and reason is no exception. Thus, the reasoning that guides virtuous action to a mean that is relative to us is set against the standard of the intelligent person – the *phronimos*. The concept of the *phronimos* is notoriously vague, but the idea to be taken from Aristotle's discussion is that we hit the targets of virtue in our actions, thereby achieving the mean, and, through repeated virtuous actions, develop entrenched virtuous character states, by fine-tuning our own capacities with reference to a higher standard. Thus, to use an idea from the work of Philippa Foot (1978), virtue functions as a kind of corrective to our own flawed tendencies. This is true both with respect to reason and to our motivational tendencies. Consider that, for Aristotle, virtue is the character state in which we know what the good is, desire to do the good, and act virtuously. Continence, by contrast, is the character state in which we know what the good is, do not desire to do it, but fight our desire, and do it anyway. Incontinence, or weakness of will, is the character state in which we know the good, do not want to do it, give in to our

desire, and act viciously. Vice is the character state in which we do not know the real good, perhaps because we have mistaken an apparent good for the real good, do not desire to act in accordance with the real good but to act in accordance with an apparent good, and act viciously. To illustrate, if we are truly generous, we will give in the right way at the right time for the right reason. Our giving will be guided by practical wisdom, and done for the right reason – because it will benefit the other, or is the right thing to do in the circumstances. It will be appropriate in the circumstances, and will hit the target of virtue, being neither profligate nor stingy. Importantly, our giving will be done with the right emotion – wholeheartedly and open-handedly. By contrast, if we are continent, we could know that the right thing to do is to give generously, but not want to do it, or not want to do it for the right reasons. In such a case, we might give grudgingly, or only out of a desire to ingratiate ourselves with another. If we are weak of will, we will not give at all. If we are vicious, we might give because we are mistaken about what makes giving good – we might think, for example, that giving is good only because it is a tool to be used to try to gain control over others, and that is why we give.<sup>7</sup>

Before leaving Aristotle, two further points merit mention. First, like many other ancient ethicists, Aristotle holds a version of the ‘unity of virtues’ thesis. Plato holds this thesis in its strongest form: all virtues are forms of wisdom or knowledge – the knowledge of good and evil – and all form a unity. Aristotle does not hold the thesis in this strong form, but instead, maintains that virtues are unified in a weaker way: one cannot have any virtue unless one has them all. This thesis is related to our second point, namely, Aristotle’s views on practical wisdom. Practical wisdom unifies the virtues. One cannot have practical wisdom without virtue, and one cannot have virtue without practical wisdom. Moreover, practical wisdom itself is unified: there is not a separate form of practical wisdom intrinsic to generosity and another to courage, for example (see Russell 2009). Practical wisdom has two roles: to guide specific virtues in the performance of right action, and to balance virtues among themselves, including adjudicating between them in cases of conflict. As we will see, contemporary neo-Aristotelians grapple with these themes: how to explain virtue ethical right action, how to think about conflicting virtues, and how to understand the unity of the virtues. Before turning to these topics, we must address the question, “Why virtue ethics in the first place?”

<sup>7</sup> Another interpretation of vice should be mentioned. According to this interpretation, the choice of vice is analogous to the choice of virtue. Since virtue is knowing the good and choosing it for its own sake, vice must be knowing the evil and choosing it for its own sake. Those who choose evil must also desire to act viciously, just as those who choose the good must desire to act virtuously. Thanks to a reviewer for making this point.

## 1.2 Why Virtue Ethics?

Virtue ethics, as conceived by Aristotle and continued in Christianized form by medieval philosophers such as St. Thomas Aquinas, sat comfortably within a world view that has been called ‘Aristotelian-Thomistic.’ A central aspect of this perspective is that it is strongly teleological – every element in the universe is directed toward attaining an end or *telos*. For Aristotle, the end for rational human beings is flourishing or *eudaimonia*, which is achieved through living a life of virtue supplemented by external goods. For Aquinas, the end of rational beings is the *summum bonum*, which consists both of earthly good and of unification with God at the end of time. The rise of science and the Enlightenment during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries upset the Aristotelian-Thomistic worldview, causing philosophers to abandon the strong sense of teleology at its core. Two new approaches to ethics were developed: deontology, championed by Immanuel Kant, and utilitarianism, defended by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. These theory types, though very different in many respects, have a common structure: both take a moral principle as central, and attempt to derive guidance on how we should act by applying the principle to certain situations. For Kant, the central moral principle is the Categorical Imperative. Though it has many different forms, its most intuitively accessible version is the Means–Ends Formula: Always act so that you treat rational humanity, in yourself or in the person of another, always as an end and never as a means only. Applying that principle to situations allows us to discern our duties, and thus, how we should act. Should I lie to my parents about my grades? In lying, Kant would say, I treat my parents as a means to my end of hiding the truth, and thereby disrespect their rational humanity. Consequently, I have a duty to not lie. For Kant, the motive is what gives the action its moral worth: I must act from respect for the Moral Law (Categorical Imperative). Though utilitarianism has the same basic structure as Kantianism, the application of its central principle to situations can yield very different results from Kantian deontology. That central principle is the Principle of Utility. One familiar formulation is this: Always act so as to produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people. On this view, the consequences of an act (whether it brings about more happiness than available alternatives) determines its moral value. If lying to my parents about my grades would lead to the greatest good for the greatest number (would make me and my parents happy), then lying is morally permissible. There are many versions of both deontology and utilitarianism, but my central point is that they are similar in structure and furnish a decision procedure for deciding how I should act. That is, if I don’t know what to do in any given situation, I can apply the Categorical

Imperative or the Principle of Utility, and generate an answer. Thus, both theories are well suited to providing action guidance. So why ask for more? Why turn, in the latter half of the twentieth century, back to virtue?

### 1.3 Initial Turns to Virtue

Of course, not all moral philosophers made the turn to virtue at this time. Deontology and utilitarianism are still alive and well. But others were not happy with these two theory types. As mentioned in the introduction of this Element, a seminal paper by Elizabeth Anscombe (1958) spurred the turn back to virtue by criticizing shortfalls of deontology and utilitarianism. Anscombe's concerns were quite serious. She argued that the moral concepts used in modern moral philosophy, such as 'ought' and 'obligation,' had become detached from earlier frameworks, such as Jewish, Christian, and Stoic ethics, that had made them intelligible. Unmoored from these frameworks, they become unintelligible and possibly, harmful (Anscombe 1958, 1, 6; see also van Hooft 2014, 2). Others in Oxford developed her line of thinking, but here I would like to note the pivotal role played by Alasdair MacIntyre's book, *After Virtue* (1981), in elaborating Anscombe's insights. Now in its third edition, on its publication the book stimulated tremendous interest in virtue as an alternative to modern ethical theories including deontology and utilitarianism. Though MacIntyre did not take the tack of developing virtue ethics as a comprehensive alternative theory type paralleling key aspects of deontology and utilitarianism – that did not occur until Hursthouse (1999) – his critiques of modern ethical theories arguably paved the way for that development.

His hypothesis in *After Virtue* is that the language of morality in the contemporary age is in grave disorder. He writes:

What we possess, if this view is true, are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance is derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have – very largely, if not entirely – lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, or [*sic*] morality. (MacIntyre 1984, 2)<sup>8</sup>

A way out of this malaise is available, and that is to return to the insights of the ancient Greeks and medievals about virtue. MacIntyre takes this path, arguing at length that virtues are the dispositions that sustain practices that are part and parcel of living traditions.<sup>9</sup> These practices occur in individual lives over time, which are lived in the context of families and communities. Individual lives

<sup>8</sup> All quotes from *After Virtue* are from the second (1984) edition.

<sup>9</sup> See MacIntyre (1984, chapter 15, especially 218ff) for an extensive discussion of these points.

possess narrative unity, that is, we can tell coherent stories about the lives of individuals, the virtues they possess, and how they exercise those virtues in ways that bring goods to their lives. Living traditions are those in which stories are passed on through generations. The goods that virtues bring are internal to the practices in which they are exercised and for which they are necessary; they should be contrasted with external goods, such as money. To illustrate, a certain kind of knowledge is an intrinsic good that is internal to academic practices, which are parts of academic traditions, and it is achieved through virtues such as curiosity, perseverance, the love of learning, a commitment to scholarship, and academic integrity. Someone who is not part of the practices and traditions of academia cannot achieve the good of knowledge in the same way as someone whose life is embedded in academic practices and communities. Most academics now receive salaries and stipends for speaking, reviewing manuscripts, and so on. But these payments are external to the practices of seeking and transmitting knowledge, and are not part of what makes the good achieved through practices intrinsically valuable. The virtues not only help us to sustain these practices, but also to ward off the temptations and dangers that might derail our efforts to live a good life. The good life for humans, MacIntyre (1984, 219) contends, is the life spent in seeking the good life; having and exercising the virtues help us to grow in knowledge of what the good truly is.

Despite the popularity of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre's and other efforts to revive interest in virtue encountered questions and criticisms. For example, doesn't the embeddedness of virtue in specific traditions and cultures entail moral relativism – the idea that there are no universal moral truths, but only moral truths that are specific to cultures and societies? Does the focus on the virtuous person imply a form of self-centeredness or egoism – that I should be concerned about *my* virtue, and not so much about the well-being of others? Finally, as already noted, given the main principles of deontology and utilitarianism and their ability to give clear action guidance, why turn to a view that seems to focus on individual character and away from the regulation of action?

Subsequent efforts to develop an ethics of virtue are found in important papers by Nussbaum (1988), who looks to Aristotle to develop a view of virtues as regulating spheres of human life and choice that are present in every culture or society, thereby countering the charge of moral relativism. Solomon (1988) describes versions of what an ethics of virtue might look like and tackles the self-centeredness objection. We will address another response to the relativism objection subsequently in this section, and revisit the self-centeredness objection in Section 3. For now, let us turn to the development of virtue ethical theory and the problem of virtue ethical right action.

### 1.4 Virtue Ethical Theory and Virtue Ethical Right Action

Some have complained that virtue ethics is incapable of giving action guidance – a central function of ethical theories that critics claim is easily handled by deontology and utilitarianism (see Loudon 1984). By contrast, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics can supply only vague guidance, such as, “Do as the *phronimos* would do.” But this, critics say, does not tell us much.<sup>10</sup>

Enter Rosalind Hursthouse. In *On Virtue Ethics* (1999), Hursthouse aims to put virtue ethics on the same theoretical footing as deontology and utilitarianism, including regarding its ability to give action guidance. She does this by arguing that all three theory types share structural similarities. As with deontology and utilitarianism, she maintains that virtue ethics incorporates a criterion of right action. That is, just as deontology and utilitarianism provide principles, which, when applied to situations, give us guidance about how to act, so, too, does virtue ethics.

Hursthouse’s (1999, 28) criterion of virtue ethical right action is this: “An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e., acting in character) do in the circumstances.” Crucial to her case that all three theory types are structurally similar is that the central principles of deontology and utilitarianism are, by themselves, incapable of providing action guidance. Each requires explanation and supplementation. For example, utilitarians need to explain what happiness is. Several accounts are on offer – happiness is pleasure and the absence of pain, the maximization of the satisfaction of subjective preferences, or some conception that combines objective and subjective elements of well-being. Deontological principles too, require explanation. Similarly, Hursthouse believes that additional content is required if we look to the virtuous person for action guidance, and we find it by looking to specific virtues. Conceptions of bravery, honesty, and compassion give content to our ideas of what the virtuous person would do in given situations. Additionally, central principles are supplemented by ‘rules of thumb,’ such as ‘Do not lie,’ ‘Do not break promises,’ and so on. Virtue ethics, Hursthouse claims, provides ‘v-rules,’ which refer to the specific virtues to generate lists of prescriptions and prohibitions to guide right action. Would the truthful person lie if doing so is to her advantage? Would she tell a hurtful truth with cruelty or compassion? Would the generous person be stingy with her resources or give wholeheartedly and openhandedly, and so on? Hursthouse admits that the v-rules often do not tell us

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that some virtue ethicists do not think that virtue ethics has a problem with right action (see, for example, Annas 2014; Chappell 2017). Yet, many others do, and the problem has loomed large in the work of virtue ethicists who seek to develop virtue ethics as a comprehensive theoretical alternative to deontology and utilitarianism. Consequently, I include discussion of it here.