
A Reflection on the Philosophical Ethical Theories of Utilitarianism, Duty Ethics, and Virtue Ethics

The Roman Soldier Marcus Aurelius once stated, "Very little is needed to make a happy life; it is all within yourself, in your way of thinking." How one should act may seem like a very obvious answer: to be nice to others and to make yourself happy. However, there are many differing opinions on how exactly this should be done, or how it is to be accomplished. It is from this discrepancy that three philosophical ethical theories arose: Utilitarianism, Duty Ethics, and Virtue Ethics each with their own set of guidelines of how one should act during times of moral significance. With so much confliction, it can be said that Virtue Ethics is a good philosophical ethical theory, but not perfect. While it is more successful than other theories in many ways, it can still seek guidance from them as well.

Before understanding why the theory that I am about to present is the most logical, one should understand the basis of the aforementioned three ethical theories first, as they will provide the groundwork. Virtue ethics is characterized by the development of character virtues in order to make one a good person, with the end goal being able to live a good life.

A virtue is defined by the philosopher Aristotle as "a trait of character manifested in habitual action." They are actions that are not just committed once, but actions and values that are followed in every aspect of life. Virtues, in comparison to vices, are actions that one would deem as good and commendable. If one leads a life of acting virtuously, then they will undoubtedly be happy with their life the highest of goods.

Utilitarianism is different from Virtue Ethics in that focuses more on how one should act rather than their personality. This theory strives to do the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of sentient beings. With this, actions are considered good if they increase happiness, and bad if they decrease it. With this, happiness is defined as pleasure. Followers believe that the quality of life of not only one person, but of all, will increase if we strive for the maximum quality and quantity of happiness for all.

Just like Utilitarianism, Duty Ethics focuses more on one's actions. Founded by Immanuel Kant, this moral theory prefers reasoning and rationality rather than merely striving for the greatest amount of happiness; this way of thinking, according to followers, serve as ends of themselves. Moral conduct should be guided by categorical imperatives: that we should only act on principles that we would desire to become universal laws, and that humanity should be treated not as a means, but as an end.

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The theory that I would wish people to practice is centered primarily around the theory of Virtue Ethics. However, like everything, this theory can be improved upon; it is because of this that my theory draws from both Utilitarianism and Virtue Ethics as well, making it a well-rounded theory that should not only create happiness, but serve as a guideline of principles of how one should lead their lives. Each of the three theories listed above have faults, and my theory should work to counteract them.

The proper way that one should lead their life, when faced with moral situations, should be to develop good character. Since a young age, many people have been instructed to become diligent citizens of good character. They are told that if they want to develop good character, they should develop good qualities, such as honor and intelligence. This is true in every case it is no wonder that this thought process is constantly reinforced, from childhood to adulthood. Not only should we choose good qualities just for this fact, but for the fact that they will also work to promote our own happiness as well. These qualities will work to be important in developing this happiness.

Following the development of good qualities, Virtue Ethics focuses more on developing that personality rather than just the actions required to do good. If one has the suitable, outstanding personality, then they will be more likely to do good deeds just in the fact that it is in their nature rather than just monotonously doing actions because they feel inclined. Upon labeling certain actions, such as doing something courageous, not only are we sanctioning the action, but the person committing it as well. It creates a kind of label for them.

It is because of this that Utilitarianism and Duty Ethics have difficulty explaining motives, as they do not consider the virtues of one's personality. These two theories focus more on the actions of the individual rather than their personality one of their major shortcomings. With Utilitarianism, one must act in a way that creates the most happiness. With Duty Ethics, one must act in a way that is both rational and promotable. Rather than focusing on how the action was courageous, Virtue Ethics just says that it was courageous and befitting of that character outlet.

My moral theory will encompass all sentient beings, a point strongly emphasized by Utilitarianism and trivialized by other theories. Not only does this encompass human beings, but nonhuman animals as well. While many animals are not rational beings, as some would argue, they are still capable of feeling happiness and unhappiness, making them equally entitled to fair treatment and moral concern. They can suffer. To deny animals the respect they deserve would be to decrease the happiness in the world.

In adopting a theory primarily based on Aristotle's Virtue Ethics, a black-and-white equation of how exactly to act is not implemented. Instead, the theory is able to adapt depending on the situation and circumstances. By being prepared with a set of virtues, one is able to use their

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best judgement in a situation and be confident that they are doing the right thing. There are no set rules for what to do in Virtue Ethics, only to use one's virtues when deciding.

Utilitarianism and Duty Ethics both encourage its participants to follow a specific equation. It is by these equations that, apparently, people will know what to do in every scenario. However, this frame of mind creates some problems. With Utilitarianism, you must act in a way that creates the greatest happiness for the greatest amount of people. Personal feelings and rationality do not play an overly large role in this. For example, if told that murdering an innocent young woman would bring a large group of psychopaths pleasure, and no one would ever find out about the deed, then you would be entitled by Utilitarianism to commit the crime. Logic could not play a part in your decision, or hesitation, as you must follow the equation of creating happiness.

The same can be said with Duty Ethics. With this theory, the groundwork of how you should do x no matter what, as long as rational will is being used. If the intention is a good ends, and it could be made into a universal law, then you must follow the unconditional universal truth. This theory brushes aside such feelings as kindness and sympathy. The intention of dropping an atomic bomb might have been good, but the feelings of those being bombarded are hardly considered. Knowing exactly what to do or how to act in a specific situation may be tricky, but several different ideas may help alleviate this problem. The main thing that you should do, as proposed by Virtue Ethics, is to simply strive for overall excellence in their virtues. Overall excellence encompasses two aspects: excellence of the intellect and excellence of character both of which serve as incentives to be noble on their own..

Excellence of intellect is the constant improvement of one's intellect and rationality. According to many philosophers, a human's rationality is their greatest gift, as it separates them from other animals. Having a strong intellect only improves your chances of being able to decide on what the right thing is in each situation. Not only does it allow us to use rational thought, but it also allows us to contemplate on the matter further, rather than making rash decisions like the fool.

Excellence of character covers emotions. It is the constant cultivation of righteous character virtues, such as honesty, civility, and loyalty. It is through this excellence that humans are able to further their own nature, and thus have a wider variety of tools at their disposal when faced with knowing what the right thing is. A man that expresses these aforementioned character values will undoubtedly exhibit them in every action of his.

In each situation, it is usually a good rule of thumb to strive for the moderate option. Following Virtue Ethics, one should always strive for the mean of two vices. What this entails is trying to hit the middle point, without going too far over into the extremes of deficiency or excess. For

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example, in a situation where you might be put into a dangerous situation, there are three basic options. You may be too cowardly, and not face your fears, or you may also be foolhardy and risk your life. Obviously, these two vices are extreme and may not always result in the best scenario. But being brave in the matter showing the mean virtue you can properly face the danger in a logical manner. Moral virtue is the mean.

It should be noted that with this theory, you are not inclined to be impartial. Both Utilitarianism and Duty Ethics exhibit impartiality in their guidelines, that all should be treated the same. There is nothing wrong with being partial, just as there is nothing wrong with a mother caring for her child over others. She is exhibiting virtues--the virtues of compassion and dependability. Loving relationships create happiness, and as such should not be avoided for the sake of impartiality.

There is a lot of dispute over exactly what a virtue is, one of the shortcomings of Virtue Ethics, With my moral theory, I seek to rectify this by creating a basis of what qualifies as a respectable virtue by using Kant's Duty Ethics and categorical imperatives

Just like how Duty Ethics states that an action should only be done if you would wish it to become a universal law, a virtue should only be a virtue if you would wish everyone to have this trait. A virtue such as honesty would be supported as it is rational, and self-sustaining. In fact, a world in which everyone is honest would arguably be a better world. However, a vice such as selfishness would not be an ideal one to have; if everyone were to have a trait of selfishness, then people would hardly support others, thus decreasing happiness.

Closely related to the above point, the vices should be rational. They must be reasonable, something that could be expected of other people. While sexual abstinence, for example, may be a trait that has its arguable points, such as to reduce affairs, it is not a realistic virtue. You cannot expect everyone to abstain from sexual activities for the rest of their lives; it is a human need, one that creates offspring.

The question may arise: what do I do when two virtues conflict? Some may argue that there is not a clear answer for this. For instance, honesty and kindness two virtues may conflict at times. Virtue Ethics does not have a clear plan for when this happens. When this is the case, and the two virtues are both equally rational and sustainable, you should turn to Utilitarianism.

An easy way to solve this dilemma would be to follow the greatest happiness principle, or to do whatever would create the most happiness in the greatest number of people. Following one virtue may create more happiness than the other. Say a child is showing you something they drew; would you be honest and admit how horrible it is, or be kind and compliment the child's hard work? In this case, paying the compliment would create the greatest amount of happiness of the two virtues, and should thus be the one followed.

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The end goal of all of this, the end goal of being virtuous and being rational, would be the good life. The good life, or Eudaimonia, is living well and doing well. Achieving this would be the ultimate goal.

Aristotle explains that we have achieved the good life when we are able to consistently make good decisions in life at the right time. This creates happiness, as when we deviate from the wrong decisions and away from our nature, we become unhappy. We will have followed through with obtaining excellence, and would then be leading a life full on intellect and excellent character rewards of their own.

Striving for the good life is a reward on its own in that provides moral motivation. With the other theories, a certain act may be done because they feel that it is their duty, something that may be deemed as a wrong reason. Instead, we want people to do things because they care about us, because they value our friendship. We want a world of virtues rather than a world of inclinations.

By striving towards this ultimate goal, you no longer have to worry about how subjective happiness is, a problem presented by Universalism. What may make some people happy may make others miserable; and what may bring some joy may be universally identified as an offense, such as murder. With this, the problem of subjectivity is no longer faced. The only goal is to live and do well.

Some people may oppose this theory, claiming that it is never exactly defined what a virtue is, They may argue that there is no specific reason a virtue is a virtue. The specifics of a virtue may be hard for many to grasp. I understand this objection, as it is difficult to explain why a virtue solely through Virtue Ethics. To properly respond, Utilitarianism can be drawn from, as it may provide proper feedback to such a controversial statement.

Following Utilitarianism, it can be explained that being virtuous is to one's own benefit. Being friendly towards others will allow one to make friends, undoubtedly improving their life. Being honest may lead to others lending their trust to you in the future. This improves the general welfare of all, as a society of more virtuous people is created. Not only does this benefit one's happiness, but of that of the society, when their enjoyment increases as well.

Above, I have presented a theory that should govern all actions, one of reason, rationality, and happiness. Through the primary usage of Virtue Ethics, with guidance from Utilitarianism and Duty Ethics, it serves as a guide of one's attitudes and the way in which they conduct themselves. When it comes down to it, Marcus Aurelius had the idea down: "Waste no more time arguing about what a good man should be. Be one."

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