

## 13. CHAPTER 13: THE ETHICS OF VIRTUE

### 13.1. The Ethics of Virtue and the Ethics of Right Action

The Christians, like the Jews, were monotheists who viewed God as a lawgiver, and for them righteous living meant obedience to the divine Commandments. The Greeks had viewed reason as the source of practical wisdom -- the virtuous life was, for them, inseparable from the life of reason.

Modern moral philosophers approached the subject by asking a fundamentally different question than the one that had been posed by the ancient's. Instead of asking what traits of character make one a good person? They began asking what is the right thing to *do*? This led them in a different direction. They went on to develop theories, not of virtue, but of rightness and obligation:

Each person ought to do what ever will best promote his or her own interests. (Ethical egoism)

We ought to do whatever will promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number. (Utilitarianism)

Our duty is to follow rules that we could consistently will to be universal laws -- that is, rules that we would be willing to have followed by all people in all circumstances. (Kant's theory)

The right thing to do is to follow the rules that rational, self interested people can agree to establish for their mutual benefit. (The social contract theory)

And these are the familiar theories that have dominated modern moral philosophy from the 17th century on.

G. E. M. Anscombe suggested that modern moral philosophy is misguided because it rests on the incoherent notion of a "law" without a lawgiver.

### 13.2. The Virtues

Aristotle: a virtue is a trait of character manifested in habitual action.

The moral virtues are the virtues of persons as such. Virtue is a trait of character, manifested in habitual action, that is good for a person to have.

According to Aristotle, virtues are means placed between extremes: a virtue is "the mean by reference to two vices: the one of excess in the other of deficiency."

Generalized beneficence is a virtue, and it may demand a great deal, but it does not require the same level of concern for strangers that it does for friends.

Aristotle believed that the virtuous person will fare better in life.

Despite their differences, the virtues all have the same general sort of value: they are all qualities needed for successful human living.

### **13.3. Some Advantages of Virtue Ethics**

*Moral Motivation.* Virtue ethics is appealing because it provides a natural and attractive account of moral motivation. The other theories seem deficient on this score.

Theories of ethics that emphasize only right action will never provide a completely satisfactory account of the moral life.

### **13.4. The Incompleteness of Virtue Ethics**

Moral problems are frequently problems about what we should *do*. It is not obvious how, according to Virtue Theory, we should go about deciding what to do. It is difficult to see how unsupplemented virtue theory could handle cases of moral conflict.

It seems best to regard the theory of virtue as part of an overall theory of ethics rather than as a complete theory in itself. The question, then, is whether such a total view can accommodate both an adequate conception of right action and a related conception of virtuous character in a way that does justice to both.