Virtue Theory

Two general approaches to the study of ethics can be identified:

1. **The Ethics of Right Action.** This approach is most familiar to us, since we have concentrated almost exclusively on the rightness of actions. This approach involves asking: *What principles tell what is the right thing to do, and why are they correct?*
   
   a. Utilitarianism, Deontology and the Social Contract theory are theories in the ethics of right action.
   
   b. Theories of rights focus on right action also, since actions are wrong if they violate anyone’s rights.

2. **The Ethics of Virtue.** This approach to ethics concentrates on moral principles about character traits, which support moral judgments about good or bad people, and their actions.

Modern approaches to the study of ethics have been dominated by questions about principles for right and wrong action. But in ancient times, the study of ethics was concerned primarily with virtue. Ancient philosophers attempted to explain how to be a good person, and live a good life.

**Virtues and Vices**

“Virtue,” in ethics, refers generally to the quality of being a good person. “Vice” refers to evil, or to personal corruption. When we speak of “a virtue,” or of “virtues,” we refer to particular character traits tending to make a person virtuous, or good.

Obvious examples of virtues are: honesty, kindness, generosity, justice (righteousness), etc.

Vices are perhaps most often associated with bad habits. Vices are traits opposite to virtues, such as dishonesty, meanness, stinginess, unfairness (cheater), and so on.

**Good Character**

As far as the ethics of virtue is concerned, a good person is not merely someone who has often done the right thing, or has seldom done anything wrong. Being virtuous is not just having a “good record,” morally.

Being virtuous is having something in the makeup of one’s character that *explains* having a good record with right and wrong. What we are “like,” according to virtue theory, explains what we do. We do the right thing, reliably, because of our good characters: because of our virtues.
Radical Virtue Ethics

Some recent philosophers have favored the approach of the ethics of virtue over the ethics of right action. They have reasoned as follows:

1. Good character traits explain the right actions of good people, rather than the other way around—their right actions do not explain the goodness of their characters.

2. Therefore, if people have good character, their actions will typically be right.

3. For this reason, ethics should concentrate on explaining and developing good character; right actions are like “side effects” of good character, as wrong actions are of bad character.

“Radical Virtue Ethics” is the name recently given to approaches to ethics that focus primarily on principles related to virtues and vices. What is important for ethics, this approach says, is what a person is “like,” not what a person does. “Being” is more important than “doing.”

The challenge for radical virtue ethics is twofold: to develop a set of character traits of the good person; and to explain why these traits make a person good.

Once we are confident about what makes a person good, and why, we can determine that right actions are simply what a good person would do. We can then also determine that the actions a good person would not want to do are wrong.

Some Advantages of Virtue Ethics

1. Moral Development, Education. If we think of the ethics of right action as focusing on the rules of a game, then the ethics of virtue focuses on developing skills for playing game. This analogy is not exact, but it does suggest that virtue, and the cultivation of virtue, has more to do with moral practice, and improvement, than with how we know the right thing to do.

2. Moral Motivation. Psychologically, human actions depend on motives: usually the motive of self-interest. But the right thing to do is usually not the action that best serves self-interest. So there is a puzzle about how ordinarily self-interested people can be expected to act morally. The ethics of right action has not explained the motivation for moral action very well. The ethics of virtue suggests that virtuous character traits supply us with motives to be moral. If someone is honest, for example, this means that she typically tells the truth, without thinking about herself.

3. Variety in Moral Character. Virtue ethics is at least open to the idea that the lives of different people may exhibit different virtues. For example, feminist scholars have pointed to differences between the lives of typical men and typical women, and to different sets of virtues for each.

4. Conservative Social Theorists Favor Virtues. Liberal social theorists tend to emphasize freedom to choose one’s own lifestyle and character, so long as everyone else’s equal rights are respected. Conservatives tend to emphasize character and the development of virtues, which make better citizens and better societies. If everyone were fully virtuous, there may be no need for rights.