

Ethics at a Glance

Virtue Ethics

Virtue-based ethics does not rely directly on ethical principles in its formulation. In **virtue ethics**, the focus is on the role of character as the source of moral action. Human character is shaped over time by a combination of natural inclinations and the influence of such factors as family, culture, education, and self-reflection. This means that some people will be more likely to choose virtuous behavior than will others.

Virtue ethics traces its roots to the ancient Greeks whose original exploration of morality did not focus on right and wrong, but rather the concepts of human excellence and human thriving (Taylor, 2002). Generally, a moral act is one that satisfies two requirements. First, the act must promote the good. DeVettere (2000) defines good in terms of seeking the good life, a life that allows us to achieve a level of personal happiness and that also serves the communal best interest. The second requirement for a moral act is that the action must be taken with the intent to do good. In other words, it is not enough to do the right thing. Virtuous behavior requires more than just meeting an obligation or performing a duty. The person of virtuous character is one who displays the proper motive as well.

Virtues are character traits that predispose a person with good or virtuous intentions to do the right thing when faced with a moral choice. Writers vary on what they include on a list of moral virtues. DeVettere (2000) emphasizes the central virtues of temperance, courage, love, justice, and dignity. Other lists might commonly include respect, honesty, sympathy, charity, kindness, loyalty, and fairness. Munson (2004) also categorizes a set of practical virtues including intelligence, patience, prudence, shrewdness, and proficiency. These virtues, while not moral in and of themselves, can enhance virtuous behavior. For example, intelligence and prudence can add depth and clarity to ethical deliberation. Finally, Christian ethics proposes the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity (Catholic Encyclopedia).

In the health care context, there is an expectation that caregivers and other professionals act with integrity and virtue. As such, this theory appeals to our intuitive belief that we can discern the difference between right and wrong action based on our own moral character and good intentions as professionals. On the other hand, a weakness of virtue ethics lies in the absence of guidance in specific situations. Because virtuous character develops over time and in response to both self-reflection and positive external influences, we may not

always be able to rely on our own incomplete base of experience and insight in making a particular decision. To complicate matters further, not everyone may agree on the basis of the good life to be sought through moral choices.

For more on virtue ethics see:

Catholic Encyclopedia. Virtue. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15472a.htm>

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Virtue Ethics.
<http://www.iep.utm.edu/v/virtue.htm>

Philosophy Pages. Aristotle. <http://www.philosophypages.com/ph/aris.htm>

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Virtue Ethics.
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>