

Key concepts:

- Virtue theory is associated with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Virtue is a Greek word - **arete** (ἀρετή) - the theory is sometimes called aretaic ethics.
- The focus is on developing one's moral character and not blind obedience to ethical codes. To develop one's **moral character** one develops virtuous habits.
- The goal is to achieve competence (moral excellence) in two types of virtues: **moral** (e.g. temperance, generosity etc.) and **intellectual** (wisdom etc.).
- Virtuous behaviour is developed by applying wisdom to attain the highest human good, eudaimonia, meaning human flourishing or human well-being.
- Intellectual virtues bring the knowledge required for being educated and applying the reason (often referred to as practical reason) – phronesis – to ensure moral virtues are developed. Virtuous **habits** are learned to perfection so that they become second nature as a result of reasoned reflection on habits and by contemplating the failures and successes human action.
- For Aristotle virtuous behaviour is the '**mean**' between extremes of excesses; however, he states 'in everything it is no easy task to find the middle'.
- Aristotle's doctrine of the mean produces three types of person: (1) the **sophron** who naturally lives in the mean without effort; (2) the **enkrates** who is tempted but strong enough will power to live in the mean; and, (3) the **akrates** who is weak and cannot live in the mean by overcoming temptation of the vices. Such a character according to Aristotle is said to be incontinent (akrasia).
- Many commentators on Aristotle identify four key virtues that are of most importance: temperance (moderation); courage; together with justice; and, wisdom. These virtues were seen to be the most important for a character to develop, with wisdom being the virtue that manages and drives them all.

- Some see Jesus' teachings known as the **Beatitudes**, found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-12), as promoting Virtue theory.
- They are different and less comprehensive than Aristotle's list.
- Jesus announces that those with these virtues are 'blessed' because they will receive a reward.
- Amongst others he highlights the meek, pure in heart, merciful and peacemakers as virtuous characters to be blessed.

There are several challenges to Virtue Theory, including:

- It is not a **precise** science – the idea of virtues is vague. It does not provide specific ethical norms for concrete ethical dilemmas such as abortion and war. This makes it difficult to apply.
- The notion of a specific virtue is relative to individuals and **cultures**, making the theory arbitrary.
- Aristotle admitted himself it was difficult to define the mean; how can this be a suitable moral guide for society?
- As an **arbitrary** system it is open to abuse. For instance, one can be virtuous but commit acts which others would find immoral.

Key quotes:

Useful Aristotle quotes:

"Happiness, then, is something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action."

"It is no easy task to find the middle...wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble."

"Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean..."

"Moral virtue comes about as a result of habit."

Issues for analysis and evaluation:

Key arguments/debates

Some philosophers argue that dependence on virtue alone is dangerous or misleading.

Others would argue that Virtue theory puts ethical rules and norms in their rightful place.

Key questions

Does Virtue Theory define or muddle the notion of good?

Does Virtue Theory make rules redundant?

Key words:

Virtue	arete	habit	character	excellence
moral	intellectual	phronesis	mean	extremes
sophron	enkrates	akrates	akrasia	wisdom
Jesus	Beatitudes	'blessed'	meek	merciful