Virtue Ethics, Ancient and Modern

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Virtue ethics is, in a way, both the youngest and the oldest approach to ethics. The modern tradition began in the mid-20th century with philosophers like Elizabeth Anscombe and Philippa Foot who were dissatisfied with both the consequentialist and the deontological approaches that had monopolised ethical thinking for centuries. The alternative they suggested was an ethics that was centred not on what acts we should do, but on what kind of people we should be: what virtues of character we should aim to develop. Since then, interest in virtue ethics has grown steadily, and today it is one of the three major approaches to normative ethics, and arguably the most lively and innovative. Nonetheless, most modern virtue ethicists also see themselves as reviving a much earlier tradition: in particular the ethics of Aristotle, Plato, and other ancient philosophers. These philosophers developed ethical theories within a wider project of asking what a good life is or how a person can achieve *eudaimonia* (happiness or human flourishing), and they argue that *eudaimonia* requires the possession of a set of virtues guided by practical wisdom. All modern virtue ethical theories use at least two of the three ancient concepts: virtue, practical wisdom, and *eudaimonia*.

This course will examine virtue ethics's complicated history and compare its ancient and modern traditions. We will consider whether Plato and Aristotle represent a distinctively 'Greek' approach to ethics; in what ways their theories resemble modern virtue ethical theories; and whether there are still lessons to learn from ancient ethics. Our aim will be to understand what virtue ethics is, what makes it unique, and what makes it a valuable approach to ethics. We will keep a close eye on what is attractive or unattractive about ancient and modern virtue ethical theories and how successfully they can answer the objections virtue ethics now faces.

At the end of this course, you'll be able to:

- Describe what virtue ethics is and how it differs from consequentialist and deontological approaches to ethics.
- Understand Plato's and Aristotle's theories of virtue, practical wisdom, and eudaimonia.
- Understand a variety of modern virtue ethical theories and how they use the concepts of virtue, practical wisdom, and eudaimonia.
- Critically compare and assess ancient and modern views on these topics.
- Critically assess virtue ethics in general, with knowledge of standard objections.

GENERAL READING

A good introduction to virtue ethics is:

1. Nafsika Athanassoulis, *Virtue Ethics* (Bloomsbury Academic: London, 2013)

The following are collections of essays on virtue ethics, often with very helpful introductions:

2. Daniel Statman (ed.) *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 1997)
3. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (eds.) *Virtue Ethics* (OUP: Oxford, 1997)
4. Stephen M. Gardiner (ed.) *Virtue Ethics Old and New* (Cornell University Press: Cornell, 2005)
5. Daniel C. Russell (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* (CUP: Cambridge, 2013)
6. Lorraine L Besser and Michael Slote (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics* (Routledge: NY, 2015)

The two modern defences of virtue ethics that I'll discuss are:

8. Rosalind Hursthouse *On Virtue Ethics* (OUP: Oxford, 1999)
9. Christine Swanton *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (OUP: Oxford, 2003)

And the two most important ancient texts are:

10. Plato's *Republic*
11. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

COURSE OUTLINE

The following is course outline by *topic* rather than by lecture: many topics, such as topics 2–4, will run over a number of lectures. Be sure to get the latest version of this document to keep up with reading recommendations.

1. What is virtue ethics?

1. Daniel Statman, *op. cit.*, introduction
2. Christine Swanton 'The Definition of Virtue Ethics' in Daniel C. Russell, *op. cit.*, 315–338

You might also read:

3. Gregory Trianosky 'What is Virtue Ethics All About?' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 27 (1990) 335–343

2. Ancient ethics: Socrates

1. Plato's *Meno* and *Protagoras* 351B–END
2. Rachana Kamtekar 'Ancient Virtue Ethics: An Overview With An Emphasis on Practical Wisdom' in Daniel C. Russell, *op. cit.*, 29–48

You might also read:

3. Plato's *Euthyphro*

3. Ancient ethics: Plato (Starts c. week 4)

1. Plato's *Republic*, books 1–4 and 6–7
2. Nicholas White 'Plato and the Ethics of Virtue' in Besser and Slote (eds.), *op. cit.*, 3–16

You might also read:

3. J. Annas *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford: OUP, 1981)
4. Plato's *Gorgias*
5. R. Barney 'Callicles and Thrasymachus', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
6. Dominic Scott 'Platonic Pessimism and Moral Education' *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 17 (1999) 15–36

4. Ancient ethics: Aristotle (Starts c. week 6)

1. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, books 1–6

2. J. Whiting 'Aristotle's Function Argument: A Defence' *Ancient Philosophy* 8 (1988) 33–48

3. Dorothea Frede 'Aristotle's Virtue Ethics' in Besser and Slote (eds.), *op. cit.,* 17–30

You might also read:

4. D. Bostock *Aristotle's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), chapter 1

5. R. Hursthouse 'A False Doctrine of the Mean' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 81, (1980–1) pp 57–72

5. Modern virtue ethics: early years

1. Elizabeth Anscombe 'Modern Moral Philosophy' *Philosophy* 33 (1958)

You might also read:

3. Philippa Foot, 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives' *The Philosophical Review* 81 (1972) 305–316

4. Timothy Chappell 'Virtue Ethics in the Twentieth Century' in Daniel C. Russell, *op. cit.,*

6. Moral Saints and Ethical 'Schizophrenia'

1. Susan Wolf 'Moral Saints' *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982) 419–439

2. Michael Stocker 'The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories' *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976) 453-66,

7. Varieties of virtue ethics

1. Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove 'Virtue Ethics' *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*

You might also read:

2. Christine Swanton, 'Pluralistic Virtue Ethics' in Besser and Slote (eds) *op. cit.,* 209–221

3. Liezl Van Zyl 'Eudaimonist Virtue Ethics' in Besser and Slote (eds) *op. cit.,* 183–194

4. Rosalind Hursthouse, 'Virtue Theory and Abortion' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 20 (1991) 223–236

8. Why be virtuous?

The following don't so much answer this question, as help us to pose it well, so we can then look at whether a version of virtue ethics, like eudaimonistic virtue ethics, can give a plausible answer:

1. Philippa Foot, 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives' *The Philosophical Review* 81 (1972) 305–316
2. Bernard Williams, 'The Amoralist' in *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (CUP: Cambridge, 1993)

You might also read:

3. Liezl Van Zyl, 'Eudaimonist Virtue Ethics' in Besser and Slote (eds) *op. cit.*, 183–194
4. Christine Swanton, 'Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Indirection: A Pluralistic Value-Centred Approach' *Utilitas* 9 (1997) 168–181
5. Christopher Toner 'Virtue Ethics and Egoism' in Besser and Slote (eds.), *op. cit.*, 345–358

9. Right action

1. Liezl Van Zyl 'Virtue Ethics and Right Action' in Daniel C. Russell, *op. cit.*, 172–198

You might also read:

2. Gary Watson 'The Primacy of Character' in Flanagan and Rorty (eds.) *Identity, Character and Morality* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1990), 449–470; reprinted in Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (eds.) *Virtue Ethics* (OUP: Oxford, 1997)
3. Jason Kawall 'In Defence of the Primacy of the Virtues' *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* 3 (2009) 1–21

10. Ethical naturalism

1. James Lenman 'Moral Naturalism', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
2. Rosalind Hursthouse *On Virtue Ethics, op. cit.*, chapters 9–10 (and 11 if you're feeling virtuous)

11. Virtue ethics and political philosophy

1. Daniel C. Russel, 'Virtue Ethics and Political Philosophy' in Gaus and D'Agostino (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Social and Political Philosophy* (Routledge: London, 2012), 364–374

2. Mark LeBar 'Virtue and Politics' in Russel (ed), *op. cit.,* 265–289

12. Objections to virtue ethics

1. Christopher Toner 'Virtue Ethics and Egoism' in Besser and Slote (eds.), *op. cit.,* 345–358
2. Gopal Sreenivasan 'The Situationist Critique of Virtue Ethics' in Russel (ed), *op. cit.,* 290–314

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Note that the suggested readings are mere suggestions—you might well want to take the essay in a direction other than the one they suggest and you are encouraged to show evidence of independent research in you essays.

1. In what ways, if any, is virtue ethics a distinct ethical theory, rather than a species of consequentialism or deontology?

1. Daniel Statman, *op. cit.,* introduction
2. Christine Swanton 'The Definition of Virtue Ethics' in Daniel C. Russell, *op. cit.,* 315–338
3. Gregory Trianosky 'What is Virtue Ethics All About?' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 27 (1990) 335–343

2. Is Plato a virtue ethicist?

1. Plato's *Republic*
2. Nicholas White 'Plato and the Ethics of Virtue' in Besser and Slote (eds.), *op. cit.,* 3–16
3. Rachana Kamtekar 'Ancient Virtue Ethics: An Overview With An Emphasis on Practical Wisdom' in Daniel C. Russell, *op. cit.,* 29–48
4. Richard Parry 'Platonic Virtue Ethics and the End of Virtue' *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 19 (2002) 239–254

3. Is Aristotelian naturalism a promising form of moral realism?

1. James Lenman 'Moral Naturalism', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
2. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics,* books 1–6
3. Rosalind Hursthouse *On Virtue Ethics, op. cit.,* chapters 9–11
4. Julia Annas 'Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?' in Stephen M. Gardiner (ed.) Virtue Ethics Old and New (Cornell University Press: Cornell, 2005) pp. 11–29

4. Is the virtuous person someone who consistently applies correct ethical principles?

1. Christine Swanton 'A Particularist but Codifiable Virtue Ethics' in Timmons (ed.) *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, Vol 5, (OUP: Oxford, 2015)
2. Hugh Curtler 'Can Virtue be Taught?' *Humanitas* 7 (1994) 43–50
3. Rosalind Hursthouse *On Virtue Ethics, op. cit.*, chapter 1
4. John McDowell 'Virtue and Reason' *The Monist* 62 (1979) 331–350

5. Can virtue ethics give a plausible account of what makes a right action right?

1. Liezl Van Zyl 'Virtue Ethics and Right Action' in Daniel C. Russell, *op. cit.*, 172–198
2. Ramon Das 'Virtue Ethics and Right Action: A Critique' in Besser and Slote (eds.), *op. cit.*, 331–43
3. Rosalind Hursthouse *On Virtue Ethics, op. cit.*, chapter 1
4. Gary Watson 'The Primacy of Character' in Flanagan and Rorty (eds.) *Identity, Character and Morality* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1990), 449–470; reprinted in Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (eds.) *Virtue Ethics* (OUP: Oxford, 1997)
5. Jason Kawall 'In Defence of the Primacy of the Virtues' *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* 3 (2009) 1–21

6. Explain and citically assess one objection to virtue ethics.

1. Christopher Toner 'Virtue Ethics and Egoism' in Besser and Slote (eds.), *op. cit.*, 345–358
2. Gopal Sreenivasan 'The Situationist Critique of Virtue Ethics' in Russel (ed), *op. cit.*, 290-314
3. Simon Keller 'Virtue Ethics is Self-Effacing' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 85 (2007) 221–231.

SOME ESSAY ADVICE

Please pay close attention to the following advice, especially 1 and 2. They try to cater for the most common and most easily solved problems I find in students' essays. Please take them seriously.

1. *Explain.* In short: explain *everything*. It should be possible for an intelligent peer who hasn't studied philosophy to fully understand your essay without

needing to read the authors you're writing about. So, for example: if you use a technical term or mention a concept that has particular significance for an author, make sure you clearly define/explain it. Similarly, for any argument or position you discuss, you must clearly explain it to your reader. This is partly because good academic writing should be explicit and easily understood, but this is not the only or even the main reason. Rather, your ability to explain the ideas you're discussing—clearly, precisely, and succinctly—is one of the principal things you're being assessed on. You might well know, say, what a categorical imperative is, but you need to *show* that you know it and how precisely you know it. Explaining even small, simple ideas well is a lot harder than you might think; don't underestimate how important it is, and how much work it takes.

2. *Justify*. Assume that for every claim you make, the reader is asking 'why should I believe that?' In a philosophy essay, there should always be an excellent answer to this question. You should consider this to be, above all else, your aim when writing an essay. The worst thing you can do is to make bold assertions without defending them, and the second worst is to make bold assertions and defend them weakly. Note that this includes interpretive claims: if you write 'Plato believes that p', you need to show your reader, perhaps by giving a supporting quote, that this is indeed something Plato believes.

   A bad essay: 'p!'
   A good essay: 'For reasons x, y, and z, it seems that p.'
   An excellent essay: 'Reasons x, y, and z give us good grounds for thinking that p, although someone might offer an objection along the following lines … However, I think there is a promising response to this objection …'

3. *Use headings*. Before you start writing, sketch a structure for your essay. When writing, use headings that reflect this structure. A typical essay might have 2–4 headings.

4. *First understand, then assess*. Be careful not to rush into criticisms of what you read before you've fully understood it. Approach everything you read with charity. That is, assume (since it's likely) that the author has thought intelligently and carefully about what they've written, so is unlikely to have made obvious mistakes. For example, if you notice a *prima facie* objection to something you're reading, read it again carefully to see if there's a way to understand it that avoids the objection or try to think of a plausible implicit assumption the author might have made that caters for the objection.

5. *Go from general to particular*. The topics we'll look at are broad. One could reasonably spend years writing hundreds of pages about them—you only have a few pages and a few week. This presents a challenge: on the one hand, you want to cover the whole topic, showing that you're familiar with all the

major issues that arise; on the other hand, you want to do more than simply scratch the surface, never looking at anything in detail. This can be a difficult balance to achieve, but in general it is much better to *err on the side of detail*. A good approach might be to devote about the first third or half of your essay to a more general discussion and then use the last half or two-thirds to examine one or two smaller points in much greater detail—you might, for example, focus on one argument, premise, or objection that you think is especially important or interesting.

6. *Ensure your conclusions reflect your arguments.* You might have been taught that strong, persuasive prose requires confident assertions, rather than hesitant, qualified ones. This is not the case in philosophy: your assertions should reflect the actual degree of confidence that is warranted by the evidence you've provided. Decisive arguments are rare—even rarer are decisive arguments in just a few lines of a student's essay. So be very careful not to mistake considerations that give us a good reason for believing that p for an argument that shows conclusively that p. A good essay is likely to have a large range of (appropriate) qualifying phrases: 'this shows decisively that p'; 'this is a strong reason to believe that p'; 'this suggests that p'; 'this makes it less implausible that p'; and so forth. Be especially careful with strong 'success' verbs like refute or prove.

7. *Use quotes.* Especially in historical subjects, including quotes from the relevant primary texts can be an excellent way to illustrate, justify, and give some focus to your discussion. One way (of many ways) to use a quote would be the following: make a claim; present a quote that you think backs up the claim; and then explain and interpret the text of the quote in order to show that and why it backs up your claim. Two cautions: first, quotes from secondary sources are less useful; second, avoid using a quote as a way of *saying* something—rather, a quote should be presented as evidence *about which* you have something to say.