

Virtue theory and Aristotle

There are many theories about what is the right thing to do, and how to live a good life:

Last month we looked at consequentialism, which defines “good” as whatever brings the greatest total happiness. We looked at Bentham and Mill’s ideas here.

This month we explored Virtue theory, based on Aristotle's ideas, formulated over 2300 years ago. Unlike the duty based theories and utilitarianism, which typically concentrate on the rightness or wrongness of particular *actions* or *results*, virtue theorists focus on *character*

The central question for Virtue Theorists is, "*How should I live?*"

The answer they give to this question is to *cultivate the virtues*. Aristotle claims that cultivating the virtues is the way to flourish, but the big question was - what is a virtue? One definition is that it is a *pattern of behaviour and feeling*: a tendency to act, desire and feel in particular ways, in appropriate situations. It *isn't* an unthinking habit but rather involves an *intelligent judgement* about the appropriate response to the situation you are in.

Virtue theorists believe that virtues such as generosity and courage are traits which any human being will need in order to live well.

But you can't pick and choose the virtues. Aristotle felt a virtuous person is someone who has harmonised *all* the virtues. They must be woven into the fabric of that person's life. He believed we couldn't just learn moral principles at home or in the philosophy group because virtue is something we can only learn by *doing*, like learning a flute or cooking.

We discussed criticisms of the Virtue Theory

First of all did we agree on *which* patterns of behaviour and feeling would count as virtues?

Virtue theorists produce a list, such as:

- benevolence
- honesty
- courage
- generosity
- loyalty

We asked, would those still be a list of virtues in the 21st-century Western society? Would there be any others? We came up with a number of other virtues including empathy, discernment, truthfulness, self-awareness

Secondly, does someone always display a particular virtue across a range of circumstances?

Aristotle found a way round this: he proposed the doctrine of "*The Golden Mean*." Virtue is the midway point between the two extremes, each of which is a vice, e.g. generosity is the mean between profligacy and meanness. the aim is a balanced personality, moderation in all things.

We then considered how Aristotle's virtue theory has developed throughout the ages, including looking at stoicism, Thomas Aquinas and Christianity.

Our final discussion looked at the virtues of loyalty, truth and the principles of justice. Can loyalty compete with universal laws and principles of justice? For instance if you see a friend cheating, would you turn him in? Should you be truthful or loyal?

What's the right thing to do?

What would Aristotle, Kant, Mill and Bentham say?

What would we do?

Have you a duty to tell the truth, or be loyal to a friend?

A very thought-provoking session!

The next Zoom meeting will be held on Tuesday, April 26. All welcome.