



UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL THEORY

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Cite This Article: Prof. L. Udayakumar & V. V. Sunder Singh Babu, "Understanding the Contemporary Ethical Theory", International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Arts and Humanities, Volume 7, Issue 2, Page Number 32-38, 2022.

Abstract:

The importance of human life is that it may excel in achieving public and private goods, but in order to reach these goals it needs the plan or skilled knowledge. The original meaning of virtue is excellence in performing specific function, that is, competence in making and obtaining goods and realizing purposes within this world. The idea of classical virtue was reoriented. The public goods as well as personal objectives were subordinated to the purpose of happiness. In ancient Greek world virtue had a much wider and more neutral scope. It was applied to socially beneficial and heroic performance, but was also used to indicate a non-moral excellence in various skills like management. Even tools and commodities might be called virtuous whenever they fulfill their specific purpose. The tools and commodities as virtue was an excellent tool for the good business in the professional field, particularly in management field. The ancient Greeks thus applied the idea of virtue to moral, natural and instrumental sectors as well as to the functioning of organization sector. For instance Plato and Aristotle thought that virtue was a moral neutral notion. In the ancient Greece the virtue stood equal to excellence, it referred to highly functional performances in respect to a specific purpose in our business

Key Words: Greek Philosophy, Virtues, Morality, Organization, Development, Aristotle, Plato...etc.

1. The Nature of Virtue Theory:

In contemporary ethics, the development of the virtues is one of the most noteworthy developments in ethical theory. Aristotle's virtue theory is easily understood by the modern society. The central concept of goodness, character, and happiness is the important notion according to Aristotle's virtue theory. The concept of virtue since its scope is very vast. There is a great variety of different views which can be included within virtue ethics. The questions that we pose here are what exactly virtue theory is? what is its central purpose? What is the difference between virtue ethics and other theories and how it is useful in the current developing organization?. As per virtue theory, there are two things that are wrong in approaching the morality of choice in complex situation. Firstly, the nature of the agent is assumed to be not important, or at least, to be determined by the outcome of the choice. The agent while making his choice is solely guided by the expectation of others and also the normativity of various social institutions. The second wrong move that the virtue theory is criticising the implicit assumption that is found in other ethical tradition. The implicit assumption is that what we are looking for a rule is a mechanistic decision procedure, something to which we can appeal to resolve our moral complication or difficulties. This cannot work because life and people are much too complicated for a general rule to give a clear and determinant answer. We have to approach moral problems through proper systems of rules, that is, 'do not tell lies, treat people with great respect and love', and 'practice what you preach or say, and so on. When rules are followed then problems will be solved and opportunity and specialties will be opened for all. For example, if we take the service of someone we are expected to pay. Failure to pay will make us dishonest. Thus, following of rule is very much connected with our moral character. Generally there is no specific faculty we could call moral judgment. It is just our judgment applied to moral problems and dilemmas. Moral virtues are not rules but personal characterization. They form in us the, tendencies to behave in one kind of way rather than the other. Initially they are acquired by training and education. Human beings will learn to scrutinize and adjust his or her behavior on the basis of experience of the world and exercise of reason. Here, I would like to discuss the basic features of virtue ethics. In this connection I will also discuss some other important theories of ethics in relation to virtue ethics and try to show different approaches of others. While analyzing I will elaborate some of the claims that are relevant in management or business organization are the places where the important of virtue ethics can be easily seen.

2. Classical idea of Virtues:

The importance of classical idea of virtues is the excellent performance which implies a moral ideal. Instead of setting deontological guidelines aimed at some airy omni partial optimum, this approach identifies objectives that are important in community and personal life. The importance of human life is that it may excel in achieving public and private goods, but in order to reach these goals it needs the plan or skilled knowledge. The original meaning of virtue is excellence in performing specific function, that is, competence in making and obtaining goods and realizing purposes within this world. The idea of classical virtue was reoriented. The public

goods as well as personal objectives were subordinated to the purpose of happiness. In ancient Greek world virtue had a much wider and more neutral scope. It was applied to socially beneficial and heroic performance, but was also used to indicate a non-moral excellence in various skills like management. Even tools and commodities might be called virtuous whenever they fulfill their specific purpose. The tools and commodities as virtue was an excellent tool for the good business in the professional field, particularly in management field. The ancient Greeks thus applied the idea of virtue to moral, natural and instrumental sectors as well as to the functioning of organization sector. For instance Plato and Aristotle thought that virtue was a moral neutral notion. In the ancient Greece the virtue stood equal to excellence, it referred to highly functional performances in respect to a specific purpose in our business. Both the objects and living beings are good or virtuous when they excel with respect to their specific function in the development of management and organization.

3. Moral Virtues:

The term moral virtue implies excellence of character. This meaning more closely represents the meaning of the Greek's idea of virtue. Aristotle's list includes the qualities that we should have for our character cannot be called moralistic. Intellectual virtues can't be properly called virtue as such. Aristotle offers a definition of virtue, 'his doctrine of the mean'.² Virtue is a state of character laying in a mean (a mean is determined by reason or by rational principles). The right thing to do any occasion will be to consider him as moderate. "I ought never to give anything and ought never to give all I have."³ Rational principles of a man of practical wisdom determine the means. Aristotle's accounts of particular virtues embody a particular moral outlook. Men who are practically wise possess the idea of virtue. Aristotle recognizes, we are prepared to call a man generous or brave though he is less than perfect. Praise and blame are directed to those who are significantly above or below. Moreover Aristotle discusses individual virtues and vice as through they were logically independent so that a man could be brave but not mean or cowardly.

4. The Important Features of Virtue Ethics:

There are two claims which seem to be essential features of virtue ethics. Among these two, the first one is the central to any form of virtue ethics.

"An action is right if and only if it is what an agent with a virtuous character would do in the circumstances." This definition states the primacy of character in the justification of right action of the agent. The virtues person's performance in the circumstances is measured. The action of virtuous person defines the character. As Philippa Foot argues, "It is right to save another life, where life is still a good to that person because this is what someone with the virtue benevolence would do."⁴

"The concept of benevolence is virtue, which is directed at the good of other and have the virtue of benevolence" as Rosalind Hursthouse argues. The virtue of honesty would tell the truth of virtue. The virtue of justice would function like the virtue of honesty. For examples, I ought to repay the money which I have borrowed, even if you plan to waste it, repaying the money and being unfaithful to person is a matter of honesty and justice. The concept of character is influenced by Kantianism, on sequestinalism, and utilitarianism. These theories give an appropriate account of a virtuous person. Barbara Herman argues that the Kantian categorical imperative, which provides the standard of rightness of actions, is best understood as a normative disposition of the character of good agent to rule out certain course of conduct as impermissible. Peter Railton argues that the consequentiality requirement to maximize agent-neutral value can be understood as a normative disposition of the character of the good agent. R. M. Hare suggests that the utilitarian requirement to maximize utility can be thought of in the same way.⁵ Virtue ethics gives primacy to character which is essential in the correct account of right and wrong action. Virtue ethics operates as a standard for determining the rightness of action and providing a purely external criterion of right action which a person may meet no matter what kinds of motives, dispositions, or character may influence him in performing the action. The criterion that matters is the criteria of action that directs these to do. Acting rightly would not require modeling oneself on a virtuous person's character but possessing good idea in various circumstances. The criteria of right action carries certain internal requirements, that is, a person can act rightly only if he himself acts out of certain of motives, dispositions, or character-traits in certain circumstances. Virtue ethics makes character essential to right action at least in the sense that its criterion of rightness ensures an essential reference to the character of a hypothetical figure, namely a virtuous agent.

The essential reference in virtue ethics is the criterion of rightness attached to the character of a hypothetical figure might be seen as insufficient to distinguish the approach from the version of consequentialism. Acting rightly requires acting out of this appropriate disposition. To act as a person with the virtue of benevolence, I must not only help another, but show a genuine concern for welfare. Virtue ethics holds that acting out of the appropriate disposition is necessary for right action. It does not claim that acting out of such dispositions is sufficient for right action.

Utilitarianism, consequentialism, and Kantianism do give importance to the character for its essential role in the justification of right action. They hold that right action must be guided by a certain sort of character and that such action is justified because they flow from agent's having the requisite kind of character. The character of such a person would be governed by just one disposition, that is, the virtue of universal

benevolence, and rightness of their actions would be judged according to whether they conformed to such a disposition or not while doing action.⁶ The important way of distinguishing virtue ethics from Kantian and utilitarian forms of character-based ethics by bringing out the differences in how each theory grounds the relevant normative conception which would govern the character of a good agent. Kantian claim that the goodness of an agent's character is determined by how well he has internalized the capacity to test the universal ability of his maxims. Utilitarian claims that a person with a good character is one who is disposed to maximize utility. Virtue ethicists, however, reject both Kantian universal ability and the maximization of utility as the appropriate ground of good character.

We can approach the two main kinds of virtue ethicists in grounding the character of the good agent. As per Aristotle's view, content of virtuous character is determined by what we need. Many virtue ethicists develop one particular version of this approach taking the eudemonistic view that the virtues are character-traits. Benevolence, honesty and justice are virtues because they feature importantly among an interlocking intrinsic goodness, as courage, integrity, friendship, and knowledge. The virtues are intrinsically good components of a good human life. Aristotle thought that humans flourish by living virtuous lives because it is only in doing so that our rational capacity to guide our lives is expressed in an excellent way. As per Aristotelian approach the virtues are character-traits which we need in order to live. However, the central idea of these character-traits is to live a flourishing human life.

Goodness is Prior to Rightness:

The notion of goodness is primary while the notion of rightness can be defined only in relation to goodness. The action is right until one has established what is valuable or good. Virtue ethics thus seeks to find out what is good from human point of view prior to determine what is right for us to do in any given situation. This claim is a teleological rather than a deontological. Virtue ethics belongs to the same family as utilitarianism and standard forms of consequentialism. However, there are important differences between conceptions, good as held by virtue ethics and utilitarian consequentialism. At the same times, the virtue ethics has important similarities with non-consequentialism and deontological ethical theories. For example, rightness is not derived from notion of goodness or accounts of human good, well being or virtue. A Kantian notion of a morally worthy action is derived from prior deontic notions of rightness and right action. A good Kantian agent, as contemporary Kantians explain, is one who is disposed to act in accordance with certain moral rules or requirements. By contrast, virtue ethics derives its account of rightness and right action from prior notion of goodness and good character which are themselves grounded in an independent account of human flourishing that values our emotional as well as rational capacity. Our goodness is recognized and affected for the better or worse by empirical contingencies.

In the light of the above feature virtues ethic may be shown to be important of in the relevant situation. The various forms of virtue ethics and the different varieties of the theory can be distinguished according to the claims and the emphasis they make. However, all these claims are to show how virtue ethics constitutes a distinct alternative to familiar forms of Kantianism, utilitarianism, and consequentialism.

5. Virtues and Principles:

It is important there is no single simple relationship between the virtues and morals based on principles. Some virtues enable people to do what moral principles require to do. Courage, for example, enables us to stick to our moral principle even when fear of the consequences tempts us to do otherwise. Some virtue ethics consists of a readiness to act on moral principles. Justice, for example, is the virtue of being disposed to follow principles of justice. Some virtues are dispositions that moral principles require us to develop. Utilitarianism, for example, requires us to develop dispositions such as kindness and generosity that will lead us to enhance the happiness of people.⁷

There are no conflicts between theories of ethics which are based on principles and theories of ethics which are based on virtues. Ethics of values do not advocate actions that differ from those advocated by any ethics of principles. For example, utilitarian principles may require actions that differ from those required by principles of justice. Ethics of principles advocate different moral disposition than does an ethics of virtues. Instead of saying a theory of virtue differs from ethics of principles, it is late to say that the former differ latter from the perspectives of how it approaches moral evaluation. A theory of virtues judges action, for example, in terms of the disposition that are associated with those dispositions. For ethics of principles, action is primary whereas ethics of virtues identifies what the moral life is about. The ethics of principle looks at the moral life in terms of the action that morality obliges us to be. Viewed from the very different stand point the ethics of virtues and ethics of principles cover much of the same ground.

According to the principles of utilitarianism, right, justice, and caring are not necessarily associated with action people are required to perform. But they are required for the character. The virtues that are associated with utilitarianism are right, justice, and caring. In addition, it also emphasizes virtues like, for example, people need to stick to their moral principles when their feelings, desires, and passion tempt them to do otherwise. There are many other virtues that the principles of utilitarianism, require a person to cultivate. The

ethics of virtues is having the same landscape of issue that an ethics of principle has. In addition the ethics of virtues addresses certain fundamental issues which are largely ignored by an ethics of principle.

6. Pleasures and Desires:

Aristotle treated that the nature of pleasure or enjoyment and its values are important in human life. Pleasure is the process of change or replacement. Not all pleasures involve as bodily pleasure. What is enjoyment? Aristotle suggests that it is “unimpeded activity of the natural state”⁸, that is, it completes or ‘perfect activity as a supervening end! Pleasure is good, yet it is usually thought that some pleasures are bad. Here, Aristotle indicates three possible ways of handling this problem:

- The so called bad pleasures are not really pleasures; they only seem so to bad men,
- The feeling of pleasure is always good in itself but if it is derived from what is bad, then the total situation may be bad and to be avoided.
- Pleasure is really of different kinds and it is good or bad is according to whether the activities being enjoyed are good or bad.

Aristotle’s recognition that pleasure is not the name of the single feeling capable of accompanying or being caused by diverse experience, etc. It is certainly strong if one feels obliged to offer a proof that the good man’s life is necessarily pleasurable than the bad man’s. The rational principle that determines the mean cannot be reduced to moral rules or general. Principles always treat others as ends or maximize the good. The right decisions depend on perfection of individual circumstances. Right does not mean absolutely forbidden one’s action in absolute terms, namely, murder or adultery. We do not become virtuous (happy) by learning rules forbidding these actions. We gain virtues while learning, to make right decisions by cultivating certain disposition and desires.

Aristotle lucidly explains desires and appetites as irrational elements in the soul, but this is interestingly qualified. Moral virtue is a state of character that is acquired by mounding one’s desires or trying to ignore it. Virtue is fundamentally a matter of having the right desires towards the right objects and in the right degree. Aristotle makes a distinction between acting virtuously and acting in conformity with virtue. Action is just and temperate when they are such that the just or the temperate man would do. Agent must be in the right condition when they do the action in particular, and action must spring from a firm character of the proper kind. Virtues and deeds must have firm dispositions to the right kind of choices and these dispositions are expressed in the desires.

Reason and desires will be in the harmony and in the inner conflict. Pleasure in right action contributes in no way to its moral worth and no action with genuine moral worth can be explained solely by reference to the desires of the agent. Aristotle explains that we can muster some admiration for those who act solely out of a sense of duty and take no pleasure in doing their duty. We tend to think better agents who like to do what they ought, because their good deeds express their real character. Loyalty is an indispensable part of friendship, for it is the virtue that makes friendship possible. The question would be what could a loyal person do? A person would already have acquired certain desires and dispositions that would totally rule out breaking trust, at least for this sort of reason. We can’t acquire such a reasonable service; we cannot immediately acquire the requisite desires. Given our actual desires, we lack a reason to be loyal. But Aristotle would still insist on disposition and desires, because without them we can’t attain complete happiness, the human good. We do not function as rational beings if our desire is not molded in the right of rational principles.

7. Understanding Worthy Living After Rightful Doing:

Formally, ethics has been conceived of as the study of what constitutes the right or virtuous conduct for a better living. The idea of a worthwhile human life has generally been explained in terms of a teleos of human life. However, the practical concern of ethics in its contemporary formulations unhinged from its traditional or formal moving. The traditional question: “What would be the right things for me to do? is to be answered in terms of a conception of an ideal life, which in turn articulated in terms of certain virtues? We may treat this question with the idea of a morally good life. There are so many reasons, autonomy, and independence of any conception of an ideal life. The ethical concern is with life taken as consisting in bits and pieces of individual decision on the bases of their situation and action.

In the traditional or classical moral philosophy of virtues they occupy the central place and they become subsidiary to the universal principles of conduct. The centrality of virtues sharply brings into moral focus the unity and quality of human life in the contemporary busy society. Virtues are conceived as human Excellencies. Therefore, the good life is the life of excellence. That is to say, to be a human being is to be capable of manifesting virtues. All virtues, qualities, dispositions and virtuous actions are organized around some conceptions of life as a whole with a view to fit together to different ends. I live coherently mean that I have found a conception of life around which different ends fit together in some rational structure.

Ethical theory usually makes a twofold classification of actions, that is, ethically right or wrong actions on one hand and ethically indifferent actions on the other hand. This is associated with a distinction between ethical and non-ethical situation. But from the point of view of the classical ethics this is a spurious distinction. Nothing in human experience is viewed to be without ethical significance. Ethical situation is pervasive of the

entire life of a person. Therefore, individuals afford no nonethical domain of refuge, and no human institution, practice, and discipline can claim exemption from the ultimate ethical concern, that is, the good life for human beings.

For Greeks, in general and Aristotle in particular, the attainment of the good life is the teleos or purpose of human existence. It is 'eudemonia' which is usually translated as human flourishing or happiness. However, happiness or human flourishing is not a subjective feeling or satisfaction. Rather it is an objective achievement of excellence.

This goal of happiness means that happiness or eudemonia is to be evaluated with a complete life and not with regard to discrete acts or episodes in one's life. The pursuit of happiness or eudemonia or human flourishing in effect, coincides with the practice of virtues. Thus, Alasdair MacIntyre observes that: "What constitutes the good for man is a complete human life lived at its best and the exercise of the virtues is a necessary and central part of such a life, not a mere preparatory exercise to secure such a life. We cannot characterize the good for man adequately without already having made reference to the virtues" 9.

There is intrinsic connection between human nature and human flourishing. It requires the knowledge of the general capacities and characteristics of human beings to discover how a good man will act. Human nature provides the basis and the directive to human flourishing. Human flourishing consists in man's striving to attain virtuous or good human life. The main concern of morality is how a person engages in qualities self-transformation so as to become a worthy human being.

The central contention is that the life of a person, that consists of an intermittent series of right doings, punctuated by many non-moral doings, never amounts to a worthy life. A worthy life involves seamless striving for moral development. This moral personhood involves those constitute conditions that make a person a fit subject to moral life.

On being a Good Human Being:

In this point of view we need to understand a crucial difference between the liberal ethical theory and its classical counterpart. According to the liberal ethical theory, classical ethical theory does not distinguish between the human life as such and human ethical life. Human life as a whole, do not, embody moral meaning. According to the classical view, the moral aspect of life cannot be constructed because it is constantly disrupted by the non-moral aspects. The moral meaning can be ascribed to the life as a whole where life conceived of as a certain kind of narrative unity. It is precisely this feature of classical moral theory which finds its neo-classical reformulation in the ethical theory of MacIntyre. MacIntyre says that the unity of a life "resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life as narrative beginning from middle to end" 10.

In contrast, the liberal moral theory construes human morality as a separate, autonomous sphere to sharply demarcate from the non-moral sphere. Consequently, the moral agent cannot be seen here as capable of adjusting his moral commitments with the rest of life in order to yield a unitary human life. The non-moral would always disrupt the moral dimension and would, there by the cause of disunity.

One significant question may be asked: "What I ought to do? "as against the disunity of life explicated above?. This moral question is inevitably addressed to a specific situation of life discreetly circumscribed as a moral situation, whereby the situation is pulled apart, so to speak, in the so called non-moral contexts of the agent's overall life. The key moral question: "In this connection we must emphasize there close relationship between morality and life. Morality will help us to stand independently, that is, we can decide on or our own what is right and what is wrong. Morality in this sense will create the foundation of a good human life" 11.

The last serious moral question is: How should I live? However, that does not imply an exclusive distinction between the two questions. The alternative outlook on morality is holistic in character. This implied holism signifies the point that being moral is not so much a matter of being an agent of right doing as it is a matter of being a person of worthy living. It is the appropriate pursuit of a worthy living; appropriate pursuit of a worthy life, characterized by the values incorporated within a conception of what is a worthy life that becomes the center stage of morality.

On Acting as a Righteous Being:

To understand and act as a righteous being of this corrupted society, we first of all try to understand the notion of morality which treats the question, what ought I to do, as a central moral question. The very important trust of moral thinking in the liberal individualist tradition is that individual moral being himself shoulders the final burden of making a moral decision—a decision that issues from his pure will after it goes through the rational procedures of thought, after the individual being is found to exercise its decision making power in independence of any qualitative criteria. The liberal individual is primarily detached from the encumbrances of tradition and socially transmitted criteria of moral evaluation. Evaluations of practical rationality, officially, at least, get divorced from any conception of the good or invocation of values. One of the striking expressions of this approach to human life is a twofold classification of human actions—ethically right or wrong actions and ethically indifferent actions. What underlies this two fold classification of actions is a basic dichotomy, and a pervasive one, that liberal ethical theories accept, namely the division of human life into situation that are either ethical or non-ethical.

Hence, the person faces the question, “what ought I to do” in a typical moral situation. In the modern standards, I may find various examples of situation where human beings make non-ethical choices like, what profession to pursue, what business we can do, what relation we maintain and so forth.

Bentham’s universal principles of conduct, namely “greatest happiness of the greatest number,” exhort a person to follow it on all occasions. But unlike this strong version of utilitarianism a large number of modern ethical theories, be that of Mill or of Rawls, maintain the distinction on various grounds. Mill explicitly states: “It is the business of ethics to tell us that are our duties, or by what test we may know them; but no system of ethics requires that the sole motive of all we do shall be a feeling of duty; on the contrary, ninety nine hundredths of all our actions are done from other. Motives, and rightly so done, if the rule of duty does not condemn them”¹².

Mill clearly intends to restrain the workings of the utilitarian principle so that it may not infringe upon individual autonomy. For it is not possible at all to attend to the principle on all occasions, that is to seek to produce maximum happiness for maximum number and also to seek to diminish pain. Kant’s categorical imperative has been reformulated in such a manner that its area of operation gets reduced to the maximum.

The distinction between moral and non-moral leads to the question: “what ought I to do?” does not afford the moral life a full-blown space for aspiration. The narrow domain of a moral life of an agent depends heavily upon the following of a simple method of rule application of it which in turn does not leave much scope for self development of moral character. The liberal ethicist expects the agent while dealing with the question to identify the moral contest of the situation first and subsequently to look for the relevant rule or principle for application that directly or indirectly promotes a universal principle of conduct. An agent finds himself caught in a situation, whether he ought to tell the truth that committed a mistake. He is obligated by morality to follow the rule, “always tell the truth.”¹³.

Conclusion:

Certain problems will be solved through of rules. These rules get support by a universal principle of conduct. And this is what liberal ethicists do formulating a universal principle of conduct. Examples are such as, Hobbes natural right of self- preservation, Kant’s categorical imperative, Bentham’s greatest happiness for the greatest number, and Hare’s Universalisability principles of preference.¹⁴ We can say that morality is seen as a law-like-set of principles that govern our actions whether I perform my action with respect to the moral ideal or acting in accordance with a universal principle of conduct.¹⁵ The universal principle of conduct then becomes the beaconing light for generating answers to the key moral question: what ought I to do? The practical rationality of the agent is procedural and not substantive in nature and that is why he is not in a position to work continually for a conception of a good life. Thus, the liberal morality is reflective of an atomistic relation between morality and life. It is the morality of discrete particular act of life rather than of life as a whole. Moral acts which are the logical outcome of a moral choice appear so disparately that the agent finds it hard to comprehend the shape of his moral life in respect of its unity, depth and coherence.¹⁶ There are many non-moral acts in the life of such an agent which intercept between moral acts and thereby affect the possibility of an ethical narrative structure in that life¹⁷. The holistic ethical theory must resort to a detailed examination of the structure of moral agency.

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