

Advantages and Shortcomings of Virtue-Based Ethics

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WHAT'S COVERED

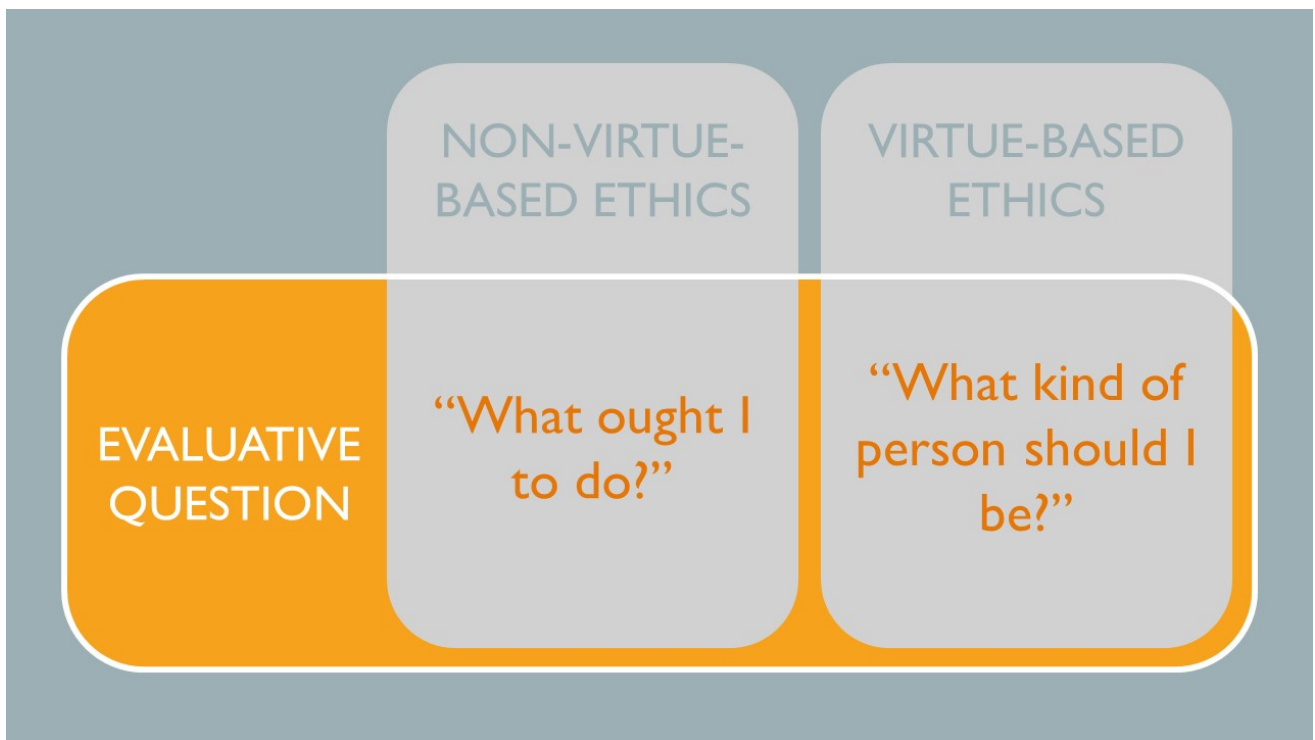
In this tutorial we will be looking at some of the strengths and weaknesses of basing ethical evaluation on character. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Review of Virtue-Based Ethics

To begin with, recall that virtue-based ethics is a theory of ethics that maintains that an action is to be evaluated based on how that action informs the aspects of the agent's character.

The character traits of an agent are seen as either morally good or bad. They are called virtues and vices, respectively. Traditionally, things such as patience, courage, generosity, and honesty are seen as virtues; and things such as impatience, cowardice, greed, and dishonesty are seen as vices.

Because of the emphasis on character, the kind of question you would ask yourself is different from the kind that you would ask if you were primarily concerned with evaluating actions.



2. Advantages

Virtue-based ethics is appealing because it fits with many of our ideas about what ethics should be about. For instance, it's intuitive to think that being ethical entails striving to be the best kind of person you can be.



DID YOU KNOW

Virtue is translated from the Greek Aretê, which can also be translated as excellence. Both Plato and Aristotle used this term to indicate that something excels at what it's made to do; for example, an eye that sees well.

One reason we feel ethics should have this focus is that we think ethics should be about more than merely doing good things. Virtue isn't something you can achieve overnight. It's something you're always striving for. For this reason, it's a lifelong project.

This means that you need to be consistent in your actions if you want to pursue virtue.



THINK ABOUT IT

If you wanted to be courageous, would it be enough to only do courageous things when there are people around to see it?

Not only do virtues need to be pursued consistently, but this pursuit should be done by everyone. That's because they are supposed to be objective. So this ethical theory also fits the ideal of systematicity.



BIG IDEA

The focus on the agent's character means we get a fuller picture of ethical life.

3. Shortcomings

There are some drawbacks to basing ethics on character though. Firstly, it means that ethical evaluation is directed more at our own development and less on how our actions affect others. This makes virtue-based ethics seem self-centered.

➔ **EXAMPLE** A virtue such as prudence may bring you various benefits, such as providing for your future. But the development of this virtue doesn't necessarily help anyone else.

Another problem is that focus on character means there isn't much guidance for action.



THINK ABOUT IT

If someone told you that you ought to strive to become wise, would you know how to go about attaining that virtue?

Maybe you start by reading wise authors or listening to wise people so that you have a role model. But even then, this is quite vague. What's more, it's not clear how we can decide upon which character traits are virtues and which are vices, in the first place.

Finally, it's difficult to evaluate actions from the perspective of virtue-based ethics.

IN CONTEXT

Imagine you're with some friends and you're introduced to someone who says something that strikes you as very insightful and appears to display a nuanced judgment of things.

They look like they're wise. But how can you be sure? Perhaps they're just repeating what they read in a book, or what they heard in the news.

As you can see, it's difficult to determine if what they said was really a manifestation of a virtue or not. Therefore, it's difficult to decide if their action is really morally praiseworthy or not.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial with a **review of virtue-based ethics**, recapping the focus on character over actions. We then saw how this focus had many **advantages** for this ethical theory. In particular, that it reflects our feeling that ethics should be about trying to *be* a good person, not just *act* like a good person. Finally, some **shortcomings** were identified, notably that making action less important meant less consideration of other people and more difficulty in moral evaluation.