

Apply Virtue-Based Ethics

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WHAT'S COVERED

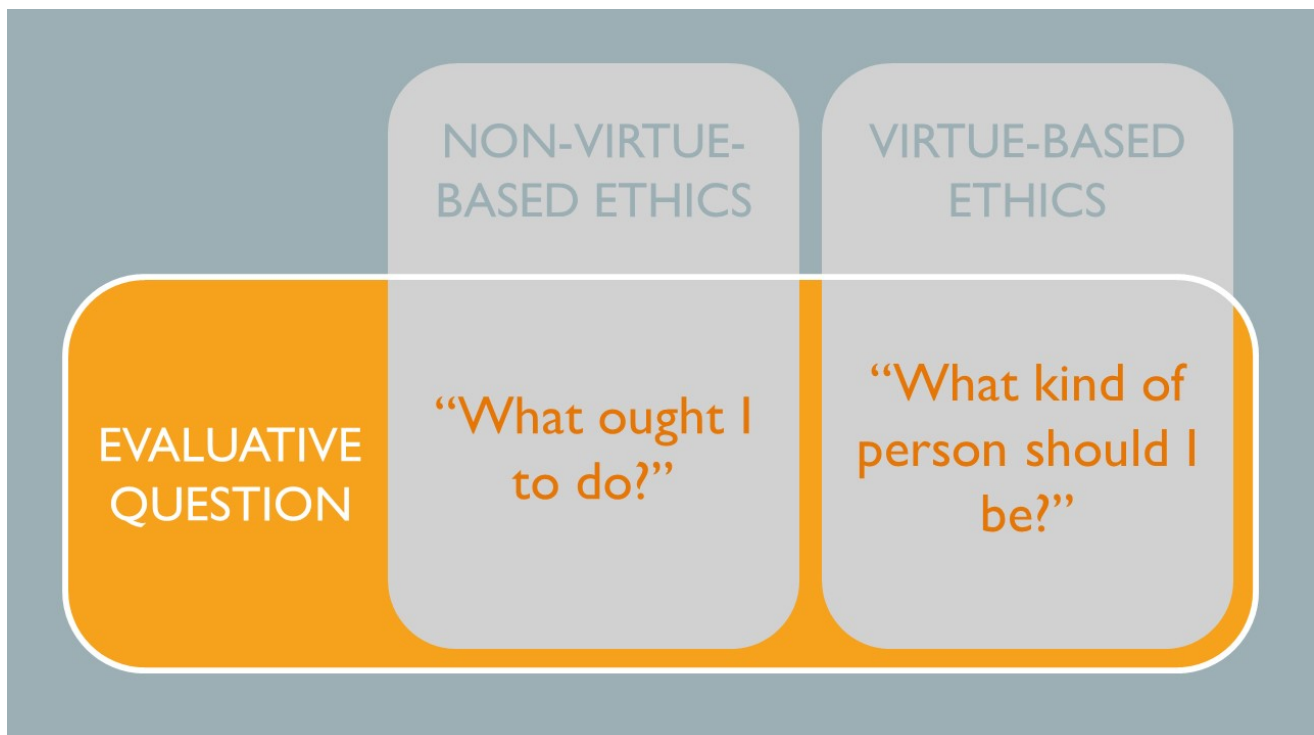
In this tutorial we will be thinking about how virtue-based ethics fits with our everyday views about what's right and wrong, before considering how virtue-based ethics evaluates certain issues in applied ethics. Our discussion will break down like this:

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 to the kind that you would ask if you were primarily concerned with evaluating actions.



2. Agreement and Disagreement with Everyday Morality

Sometimes our everyday understanding of what is right and wrong agrees with virtue-based ethics. For instance, most of us think we should be friendly to people, rather than rude or dismissive. Friendliness is a virtue and therefore being friendly to people is obligatory.

Helping out your friends is generally seen as a good thing. Virtue-based ethics agrees with this when it's a manifestation of the virtue of friendship or generosity.

But there are other examples where we would normally disagree with virtue-based ethics. This can perhaps be seen most clearly in cases where there are virtues that we normally consider outside the scope of ethics.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Sometimes wit or good humor is listed as a virtue. Being a good conversationalist entails neither being a buffoon nor austere, but knowing how to share a joke and listen well to other people.

Most of us appreciate a witty person, but we don't usually think that it's a moral obligation to be like this. Something similar can be said of virtues such as confidence. Again, you might think this is a good trait to have for many reasons, but you probably don't see it as a morally obligatory trait.

3. Some Uncertain Cases

Sometimes it's not clear if your everyday views about right and wrong agree with virtue-based ethics. One reason is that it's difficult to discern someone's character from their actions.



THINK ABOUT IT

If you saw someone giving to a homeless person, could you be sure that's because they're a charitable person? Couldn't it be because of any number of things, such as social pressure?

As you can see, if you don't know the reason for the action, it's difficult to know if it really does indicate a certain character trait. In relation to the above case, it isn't clear if virtue-based ethics agrees with our everyday views. We certainly tend to think charity is good. But if we can't be sure that it expresses a virtue, then it can't be said to be good from the perspective of virtue-based ethics.

There are many other similar cases where this kind of ambiguity comes up.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Let's say you see a politician exposing the corruption within her party. You might think that this is someone being honest, but she could equally have had an ulterior motive—perhaps she advanced her career by telling the truth.

We generally think telling the truth is a good thing. But in this case the virtue-based ethical theorist wouldn't necessarily agree. They would need to know what kind of person was being truthful and for what reasons.

4. Topics in Applied Ethics

Philosophers working in ethics often try to apply ethical theories to specific situations. Let's consider how the

following issues would be evaluated from the perspective of virtue-based ethics.

1. the moral permissibility of suicide
2. the moral permissibility of war
3. the moral permissibility of torture

Here are the positions that virtue-based ethics theorists take on these issues.

Virtue-Based Ethics and Applied Ethics	
Issue	Position
Suicide	If done out of cowardice it is impermissible. If done out of sacrifice (e.g. to save other lives), it could express courage.
War	If done out of desire for glory it is impermissible. If done to liberate people, then it might be due to honor and would be permissible.
Torture	It could make the torturer develop various vices; for example, cruelty, malice, or indifference. Therefore it is impermissible.

If you disagree with these ethical judgments, then you may not think virtue-based ethics is the best ethical framework for judging which actions are right and wrong.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial with a **review of virtue-based ethics**, focusing on the primacy of character over actions in ethical evaluations. Then we looked at the ways virtue-based ethics can be in **agreement and disagreement with everyday morality**. We saw how evaluating actions in terms of how they manifest or reinforce virtues or vices made sense in some situations, but not in others.

Then we looked at **some uncertain cases** where it was not clear whether there was complete agreement between the judgments of virtue-based ethics and our common ethical judgments. Finally, some **topics in applied ethics** were considered from the perspective of virtue-based ethics.