

Commitments of Virtue-Based Ethics

by John Lumsden



WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will focus on the types of evaluations of actions that are made from the perspective of virtue-based ethics. You will also have a go at using this ethical theory by evaluating a situation yourself. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Review of Virtue-Based Ethics

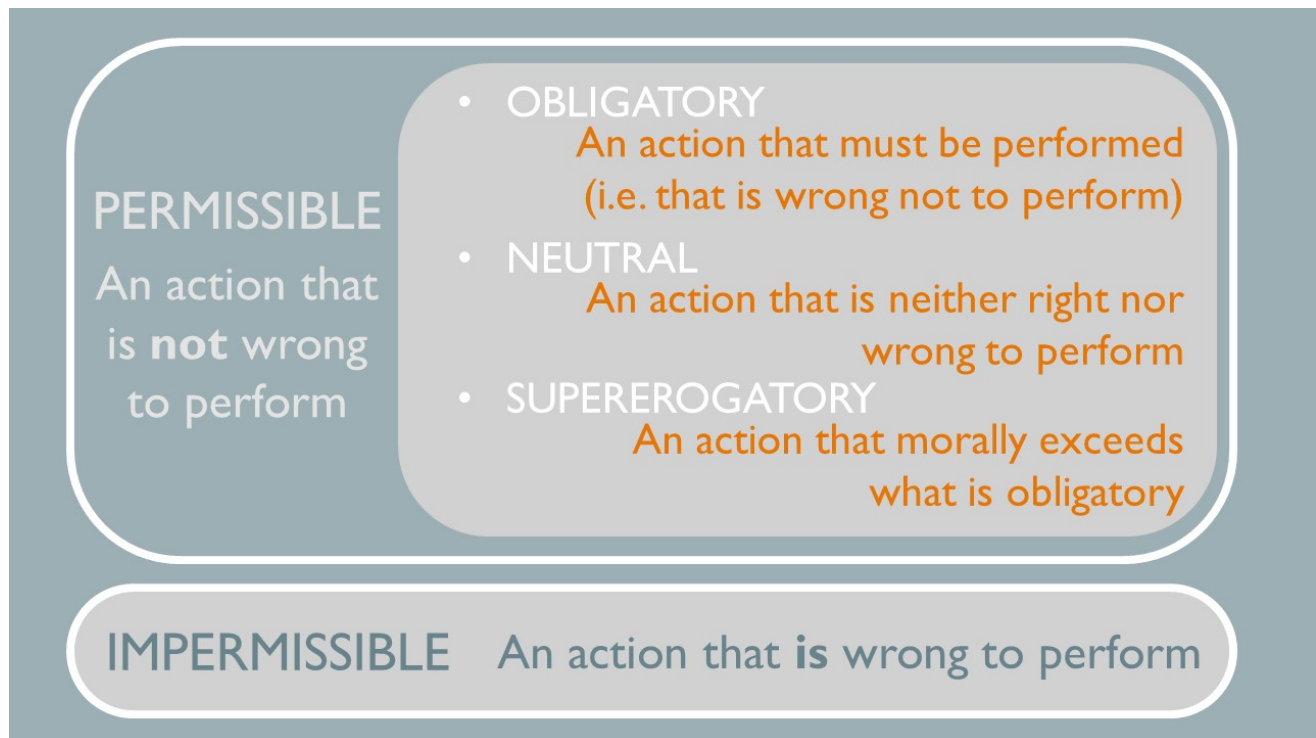
To begin with, recall that virtue-based ethics is a theory of ethics that maintains that an action is to be evaluated based on how that action informs the aspects of the agent's character.

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.



In the next section we will look at the various ways virtue-based ethics can evaluate actions. But before doing so, let's remind ourselves of the terms that ethical theorists use to evaluate actions.



Make sure you're thinking about these evaluative terms when we go onto see virtue-based ethics in action in the next section.

2. Permissibility and Impermissibility

For virtue-based ethics, an action is permissible if it isn't a sign of vice in the agent. For instance, eating your dinner is an action that doesn't indicate any particular vice on your part. But if it was your fifth dinner of the evening, then this would indicate a vice, namely gluttony or intemperance. Since this action now indicates vice, it would be considered impermissible by virtue-based ethics.

Now let's look at the different types of permissibility. First, an action is obligatory if failing to do it would encourage a vice in yourself or discourage a virtue.

IN CONTEXT

Imagine that you work in a government department that deals with people's requests for help in times of hardship. You have targets to meet, otherwise you could lose your job. So you have to deal with people as quick as possible.

In order to do this, you need to detach yourself from sympathizing with their struggles. Treating people like obstacles to your targets every day could make you cold or callous. Since it's obligatory for you to avoid fostering these vices, you would need to either treat people better (and risk missing your targets) or quit your job.

For virtue-based ethics, a neutral action is one that indicates neither virtue nor vice in the agent. This would

cover many of your daily activities such as having a cup of coffee or watching a film. On their own, actions such as these aren't signs of virtue or vice.

It's a bit more difficult to think of supererogatory actions in this account of ethics. That's because virtues are generally about having the correct measure of a trait, neither in excess nor in deficiency.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Think back to the vice of gluttony or intemperance. It's virtuous to satisfy your needs in a moderate fashion (i.e. eating the amount that's enough for you). But starving yourself wouldn't be even more virtuous. Rather, this would be the vice of self-denial.

Despite this difficulty, there are some examples that seem to show an exceptional degree of virtue without it falling back into a vice.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A soldier that jumps onto a hand grenade to save her fellow soldiers seems like an exceptional degree of bravery, without it becoming mere rashness.

3. Application of Virtue-Based Ethics

Now that you have seen how ethical evaluations can be based on the way actions indicate or impact upon character, you can think about using this in a specific situation. Consider the example below and think about how you would evaluate each action from the perspective of virtue-based ethics.



TRY IT

Imagine your family are in town and you invite them over for dinner. It's nice weather and you know they like Mexican food, so you make ceviche. One of your family member turns up a bit late and you get angry and refuse to serve them any food.

The actions would have been evaluated in the following way:

1. The act of offering to host a meal for your whole family is obligatory since it is a sign of generosity, and also encourages this virtue in yourself.
2. The act of serving ceviche is neutral since the specific food you give to your family is a sign of neither virtue nor vice.
3. The act of getting angry at one of your guests for being a bit late is impermissible since it shows the vice of irritability or uneven temper.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial with a **review of virtue-based ethics** and the terms for evaluating actions. Then we saw some examples of **permissibility and impermissibility**, including examples of obligatory, neutral, and supererogatory actions. Finally, an **application of virtue-based ethics** in a specific situation was considered, and the evaluation of the various actions given.