

Can virtue ethics provide us with guidance on how to act? (2000 words)

For a long time, there has been a debate around virtue ethics, specifically whether or not it can give us true guidance on how to act. Virtue ethics is a theory developed by Aristotle which aims to provide a balance of personal character traits such as courage, empathy and virtue. My claim is that virtue ethics can give us a good guidance on how to act, but it may not be the best however. I think of this because virtue ethics looks at the question 'how should i act?', and many scenarios may not exactly fit into this entirely. For example, a court case. Using virtue ethics for a court case could be beneficial as a lawyer who understands and follows virtue ethics would have empathy for the people involved but wouldn't be overly biased to either side as they have a balance of their empathy levels. But i believe more that it can give us guidance rather than it doesn't

One argument that agrees with my claim that virtue ethics can provide a guidance on how to act is Aristotle's creation and development of virtue ethics as a theory. His developed theory says that the character traits which you develop over time are part of natural tendencies and once they are established as part of your character, they become more stable and balanced. For example, someone who acts in virtuous ways across their life does so because that's their character and isn't because they want to for their own self-interest. (Nafsika Athanassoulis, Internet Encyclopedia Of Philosophy, 2021). Aristotle further developed his theory of virtue ethics away from a traditional sense of deontology in the way that it does not aim to give universal principles that can be applied to moral situations, but instead he designed it so that it instead gives questions such as 'how should i live?' and 'what is the good life?', rather than give guidelines and rules like deontology. He further expands on this by saying that virtue ethics is intentionally imprecise in the way he designed it because human behaviour is complicated and, to him, defies the set guidelines set by theories such as deontology. The modern version of the virtue ethics theory is developed by a further, deeper understanding of what is meant by Aristotelian character which is about a state of being and having an appropriate form of inner state. For example, Aristotelian character as a theory would say that kindness virtue is about having the right sort of emotions and state to respect the feelings of others. (Nafsika Athanassoulis, Internet Encyclopedia Of Philosophy, 2021). To me, I think Aristotle's development of virtue ethics defends my claim that virtue

ethics could give good guidance on how to act, because while he created the theory to be imprecise, it allows more freedom in how we act in terms of the guidance it gives rather than rigid rules like deontology. A further argument that I believe supports my idea is Rosalind Hursthouse's revival of virtue ethics with her main work being in her book 'On Virtue Ethics'. She believes that just as consequentialists can often say what is right or wrong once they have weighed up all the potential consequences to come to a conclusion, virtue ethics, to her, can also define whether or not an action is right or wrong by looking at the characteristic virtues. (Ahmad Ghadyani, *The Specter Of Relativism: A Critique Of Rosalind Hursthouse's On Virtue Ethics*, November 2016). Her ideas on virtue ethics are also very similarly linked to Aristotle's. This is because, like Aristotle, Hursthouse argues that the virtuous characteristics we can develop, such as empathy and kindness, they are all rational within humanity as humans are also rational, an argument Aristotle often used. By their very nature, Hursthouse would say that human nature will act rationally and that a characteristic that would allow us to make decisions to change our character through the virtuous ethical character we develop. (Nafsika Athanassoulis, *Internet Encyclopedia Of Philosophy*, 2021). In her book, *On Virtue Ethics*, her first chapter is centred around why virtue ethics is similar to deontological or utilitarian views in the way that they all give guidances on how to act, this obviously goes against Aristotle's theory of virtue ethics as he designed it to be away from theories such as deontology or utilitarianism. It also goes on about how she claims that virtue ethics gives us a guidance on how to act as she says that each virtue gives a prescription to follow about how to act and each vice gives us a ban on how to not act, which would be over developed or under developed characteristic virtues, but she also mentions that there is no reason to believe or expect that ethics should be organized or simple. (Margaret Urban Walker, *Review Of On Virtue Ethics By Rosalind Hursthouse*, 1st December 2001). To me, Hursthouse's revival of virtue ethics in the modern era, clearly supports my idea that virtue ethics can give guidance on how to act as she agrees with Aristotle but takes a slightly different way in the way she believes virtue ethics can be similar to deontology by telling us how to act. A further theory of debate which I believe supports my claim that virtue ethics can give guidance on how to act is eudaimonia which is intrinsically rooted within virtue ethics. Eudaimonia is a key part of Aristotelian ethics, or virtue ethics, and is the theory that human flourishing and living in a 'good' way is the best way to live as Aristotle mentions in his book *Nicomachean Ethics*. The concept of eudaimonia was thought of by Greek philosophers, namely Aristotle, who understood it as having a good life in the way to live, rather than the literal Greek translation 'happiness' which

they found disappointing as they did not see it as consisting of a state of mind or feeling of happiness or pleasure, but rather they see eudaimonia as the highest possible level of human good and is the only human good that is desirable for its own sake, being an end in itself, rather than being good for the sake of its own good, being towards some other form of an end other than itself. Aristotle further says about eudaimonia in relation to virtue ethics that every living or man-made thing has unique functions or characteristics, and that the highest good one of these things can give is based on the performance of its function and its virtue based on whatever traits or qualities allows it to perform its function well. For example, the virtue of a knife is whatever allows it to perform its function to the best performance of its cutting abilities. Aristotle links eudaimonia to virtue ethics by saying that human characteristics is the highest level of good as it gives humans the ability to reason which he believes is one of the highest levels achievable within virtue ethics. (Anselm H. Amadio, Britannica: Eudaimonia, 30th December 2025). A piece of Aristotle's is often paraphrased to 'happiness depends on ourselves' by which I believe he means that virtue ethics through eudaimonia is somewhat a journey one has to do on their own as virtuous characteristics, such as courage, as individual to each person's self. (Thomas Oppong, Aristotle's Eudaimonia: The Art Of Living Well, 17th June 2025). I believe the theory of eudaimonia supports my idea that virtue ethics can give guidance on how to act because eudaimonia aims to help an individual reach the highest possible level of human good, and I believe the way this could be done is through developing good virtues to the right levels. A further theory which supports my claim is the golden mean. The golden mean is a theory thought of by Greek philosophers but made popular by Aristotle in his book *Nicomachean Ethics* when writing about his virtue ethics theory, which aims to find the middle ground between extremes of virtues. Further in his book he goes on to talk further about how the golden mean is essential in all virtues as all virtues must lie within the boundaries of deficiency and excess by which he means deficiency is not having enough of a virtue, and excess is having too much of a virtue. Aristotle often compared excess and deficiency to something like exercise. By this he means an excess in exercise could lead to illness the same way a lack of exercise could do the same. The comparison he makes is that an excess or deficiency of a virtue can both destroy the virtue. For example, the middle ground between cowardice, deficiency, and recklessness, excess, is courage and being either cowardly or reckless destroys the virtue of courage. His golden mean is now often used within religious and spiritual faiths such as Buddhism in the way of the principle 'the middle way' which shows how the initial theory has evolved to modern ideologies. (Stephen

Eldridge, Golden Mean: Britannica, 30th December 2025). The golden mean however is reliant on the individual or the individual's situation as each scenario where the golden mean would be applied would be different for each person. This is because for situations, it varies, for example, a soldier would use courage when going into war, but a CEO would also use courage when closing a business deal. This example shows how the same virtue, courage, would be used in different ways based on the individual's scenario. Aristotle also came up with the idea of practical wisdom when talking about the golden mean which he says is consistently applied when using the golden mean with virtue ethics. Practical wisdom, to Aristotle, is about knowing what the right action is and when to use it based on virtue you've developed, but practical wisdom requires wisdom and experience to truly master it, but it's never truly finished as the more experience we get, the more we will know how to use these virtues. (Nathalie Holland, What Is The Golden Mean In Aristotle's Ethics, 26th December 2024). To me, I believe the golden mean supports my idea that virtue ethics can give guidance on how to act because its aim is to find the middle ground of virtues which is what makes the virtue a virtuous act.

However, there are obviously counter arguments not only against my idea, but against the idea that virtue ethics gives guidance as a whole. One of which is the clear lack of guidance the theory gives. Virtue ethics doesn't give clear guidance on how to act as that was the purpose of Aristotle, but the main criticism of that is that there is no guidance rather than telling a person to 'act' like a virtuous person until they eventually reach eudaimonia. Theories such as deontology or utilitarianism are often seen by many as stronger ideologies and theories as they give a more rigid set guidance on how to act. Rather than just act in virtuous ways like virtue ethics says. The philosopher Mark Timmons, a prominent modern moral philosophy author, says that a moral theory that fails to be action guided is no good as a moral theory and therefore fails to be a moral theory. (Nafsika Athanassoulis, Internet Encyclopedia Of Philosophy, 2021). Furthermore, this Aristotelian theory does not give us clear guidance because it wasn't meant to be that. Aristotle designed this theory away from the rigidness often seen with deontology, but this ended up being the criticism to his own theory. For example, virtue ethics tells us to use courage but does not tell us how to use this courage, whereas something like Kantian ethics is clear in telling us what is wrong and what is right through its rigid guidelines. Also on this, something such as ethical dilemmas make the lack of clear guidance even more confusing. The article I read used the example, would it be a good act for the USA to bomb Japan during World War two if the benefit was that it would end the war sooner? But then would that

justify killing innocent civilians for that sake. Virtue ethics wouldn't give us a clear guidance for this other than just 'act' good, but this scenario confuses that. Whereas a clear guidance such as don't kill says that while it would end the war sooner, it isn't good to kill so then the bombing wouldn't be good. (Virtue Ethics: A Level Philosophy & Religious Studies, Joe Livingstone, 2025) To me, this counters against my argument because it clearly shows that there is no clear guidance for dilemmas.

Therefore, we can see there are clear points to show that my idea that virtue ethics can give us guidance on how to act as we see in the Greek Philosophical development of the theory, Rosalind Hursthouse's revival of the theory in her book *On Virtue Ethics*, the theory of eudaimonia and the golden mean. However, I also accept that the idea that it doesn't give us guidance about moral dilemmas is also valid.

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