

Can virtue ethics provide us with guidance on how to act?

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To determine whether virtue ethics can provide guidance depends largely on how “guidance” is understood in ethical theory and if this requires clear decision procedures to follow or if it allows for flexible context-driven judgement. Although some ethical theories offer clear decision-making procedures, others focus on the learnt development of moral character and judgement as the basis of moral guidance. Aristotle developed the foundations of virtue ethics and argued that the cultivation of virtues and practices of good moral habits is essential to sound judgment and ethical living. Aristotle did not ground morality purely in rules such as Kantian deontology does, or consequences such as utilitarianism theory. Instead, Aristotle emphasizes the role of practical wisdom (phronesis) in guidance, as opposed to fixed decision procedures. However, this does not mean that virtue ethics provides no structure, since it still offers guidance through concepts such as virtue and the doctrine of the mean, which all shape moral judgement over time.

In this essay I will argue that although virtue ethics lacks decision procedures, it still offers a form of moral guidance through the development of practical wisdom and virtuous character. This offers a form of moral guidance that differs from stricter rule-based frameworks and better reflects the importance of individual judgment and complexity of morality

When compared with Kantian deontology and utilitarianism, Aristotle's focus on the cultivation of virtues that guide individuals to live well can be seen to provide an alternative, more context-driven form of moral guidance. Unlike Kantian ethics, which is based on universal moral laws and utilitarianism, evaluates actions in terms of consequences and maximizing happiness, virtue ethics focuses on character development rather than fixed decision procedures. Critics have argued that this may make it harder to apply in specific time sensitive moral dilemmas since virtue ethics does not provide explicit rules or procedures to understand the correct action for a situation. Instead, it relies on the individual's moral judgement through experience and learnt behavior. However, Kantian ethics allows the individual to test their actions against a universal rule, and utilitarianism allows the individual to evaluate outcomes to find guidance in terms of happiness. These approaches therefore reflect different concepts of moral guidance, rather than absences of it, as virtue ethics aims to shape the individual to reliably make good judgements across different situations.

Eudaimonia, often translated as flourishing, is at the core of virtue ethics theory as characterized as the ultimate goal of human life. Aristotle described flourishing as the rational activity in accordance with virtue.¹ Key virtues include temperance, courage, generosity, justice, and practical wisdom (phronesis). Aristotle argues that if an individual lives in accordance with these virtues as guidance, then these virtues will contribute to eudaimonia, although he also recognizes that external factors such as luck and personal circumstances can contribute to the

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

individual fully achieving flourishing. These virtues are developed through habituation and experience and provide guidance that enables individuals to respond appropriately to situations. This practice of virtues emphasizes that there are no set universal rules within virtue ethics, but instead a focus on practical wisdom (phronesis) which allows the individual to ask “what would a person of virtue do” in a given situation, rather than applying a fixed rule, of “what should I do?”. The form of Aristotelian guidance is therefore indirect, derived from the character of the individual, and allows for greater individual flexibility in moral decision-making. Rosalind Hursthouse argues that virtue ethics can provide action-guidance through “v-rules”, such as “act honestly” or “avoid cruelty”.² Although these are less absolute than Kantian duties, they still offer practical moral direction grounded in the virtues³.

When comparing virtue ethics to utilitarianism, there are criticisms to be argued, as utilitarianism provides a clear systematic method for determining the morality of an action. Utilitarianism was developed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill as is grounded in hedonism⁴, with the core argument that pleasure is the only intrinsic good and that pain is the only intrinsic evil. The theory argues between different measures of pleasure and theorizes that intellectual and moral pleasure are superior to physical pleasure. John Stuart Mill noted that “*It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.*”⁵ Suggesting intellectual and moral pleasure are superior to purely physical ones, Bentham’s earlier formulation, that “nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure” highlights the systematic method of moral calculation found in utilitarianism ethics. Bentham argued that actions should be evaluated based on the outcome of which they maximize or minimize pain. He created a hedonic calculus to formalize this, which calculated intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity and extent.⁶

A utilitarian using Jeremy Bentham’s hedonic calculus would assess the balance of pleasure and pain produced considering these factors to find moral guidance. The key strength of utilitarianism lies in its clarity and process; it offers decision procedures that in principle can be applied to any more dilemma or situation.

Critics have argued that although this approach is structured, utilitarianism could still justify morally problematic outcomes if the overall happiness outcome is increased. This applies especially when an individual’s human rights are not considered. This makes real-world application unreliable and leads to utilitarianism often being criticized for permitting intuitively unjust outcomes in pursuit of overall utility.

Bernard Williams presents a further criticism of utilitarianism which strengthens the case for virtue ethics in *Utilitarianism: for and Against*. Bernard Williams argues that utilitarianism fails to consider personal integrity as it requires individuals to act against their morals to maximize

² Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*

³ Hursthouse, R. (1999). *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, esp. pp. 36–45.

⁴ Jeremy Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*

⁵ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*

⁶ Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*

overall happiness. This can lead to the individual being disconnected from their own values. Williams' critical view of utilitarianism highlights the consequence of its emphasis on consequence. This is in contrast to virtue ethics whereby the emphasis is on moral character, even if it lacks a decision-making framework.

Whilst utilitarianism provides a structured decision-making framework based on the calculation of consequences, it can also risk oversimplification of moral decision-making by reducing it to a measured outcome and not considering the complexity of moral life. In contrast, virtue ethics can provide greater individual flexibility and depth due to its central focus on character and practical wisdom, but it lacks a strict decision procedure comparable with utilitarian calculation.

Aristotle's ethics does not align with utilitarianism and its identification of happiness (eudaimonia) with pleasure, as it argues that flourishing requires cultivation of virtue and the exercise of reason throughout a complete life. This focuses on core differences between the theories, where utilitarianism's foundations align moral-decision making with consequence, Aristotle argues that they are aligned in terms of whether they express virtuous character.

A similar contract by example can be found with Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics, as Kant argues that morality is rooted in duty which requires an individual to act on maxims that can be universalized. This offers a clear framework for moral guidance and is illustrated by his claim that lying is always wrong. In Kant's writing *On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy* (1797) he says "*To be truthful (honest) in all declarations is therefore a sacred and absolutely commanding decree of reason.*" And also, comments "*A lie always harms another; if not some other human being, then it harms humanity in general.*"⁷ In these quotes, Kant is suggesting that lying is always wrong because a world in which everyone lied would undermine the possibility of trust. It also highlights Kant's belief that lying is always wrong as it cannot be universalized and provides a rule that can be applied across different moral dilemmas. Kantian ethics provides more detailed and structured guidance than Aristotle's virtue ethics, which relies on practical wisdom and moral character, instead of fixed rules.

Kant's categorical imperative is often summarized as the requirement to act only on maxims that can become universal laws⁸, this provides a clear rule-based framework for moral decision-making and often contrasted with consequentialist approaches such as utilitarianism. In *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, Williams discusses Kantian ethics and refers to Kant's principle that one should act only on maxims that can be willed as universal law. He paraphrases this idea as acting only on maxims which one could consistently do become a universal law (FN). In this, Williams argues that these strict moral theories such as Kantian ethics and utilitarianism can be too demanding and disconnected from individual moral integrity and real human behavior. Williams assesses that individuals are not simply "moral rule-rule followers" and that moral decision-making must reflect individual character and commitments.

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy*

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*

By insisting over overall universal rules, Kantian ethics is often criticized as rigid and can be seen to fail in accounting for the complexities of human life and real-world situations and circumstances. Kantian ethics offers little room for exemption, for example with his views on lying, it can be argued that telling the truth in all circumstances can lead to negative outcomes, but Kantian ethics doesn't allow for any individual or circumstantial flexibility within its guidance. In this reflection, it can be argued that virtue ethics allows for a more flexible approach in moral guidance as an alternative as it allows for context, judgment and flexible individual approaches to morality.

Whether virtue ethics provides sufficient guidance depends primarily on the criteria used to evaluate the moral theories. If clarity, universality and decision procedures are the principles, then utilitarianism and Kantian ethics may appear superior. Whereas, if we allow one to consider that moral life involves context, complexities and the development of character, then virtue ethics provides a preferred alternative with its focus on practical wisdom and experience, as ethical decision-making cannot always be reduced to rules or calculations.

The diction highlights that ethical theories should not be judged by a single standard, but by the moral guidance it aims to provide. Kantian ethics offers structured decision-making through universal moral laws, while utilitarianism provides systematic methods that focus on consequences and overall happiness. Both focus on clarity and consistency in moral guidance and judgement. Virtue ethics as a contract focuses on the development of moral character and the cultivation of practical wisdom (phronesis), allowing individuals to respond to complex and changing circumstances based on experience and judgement instead of relying on rigid or fixed rules. This reflects the view that moral life is too full of complexities to be fully supported by Kantian or utilitarianism and that virtue ethics is a more flexible and individual form of moral guidance.

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