Notes on Virtue – by Jos Burton (with help from ChatGPT)

[the comments in italics are my additional notes taken from the In Our Time podcast by BBC Radio4 – all the rest was generated by A.I.]

The concept of virtue, which refers to the quality of being morally good, has been a central topic in philosophy for thousands of years, from ancient Greece to modern times. Throughout history, various philosophers have offered their own definitions and perspectives on what it means to live a virtuous life, and how we can cultivate virtuous character traits.

[the word 'virtue' is one of two possible translations of the original term 'arete' which can also be taken to mean 'excellence']

In ancient Greece, virtue was a key concept in the philosophical schools of Plato and Aristotle. Plato believed that the ultimate goal of human life was to achieve the "good life," which could only be attained through the pursuit of virtue. He argued that virtues such as wisdom, courage, and justice were essential for individuals to live fulfilling lives and contribute to the well-being of their communities. Aristotle, on the other hand, believed that virtue was not simply a matter of following moral rules, but rather a habit or disposition that enabled individuals to act in accordance with reason and the common good.

[Plato referred to the 4 'cardinal' virtues: justice, wisdom, temperance, and courage. The word 'cardinal' from the Latin: cardo = hinge – therefore cardinal virtues were those from which all the others hinge/stem. Socrates thought the most important of the cardinal virtues was wisdom which he believed encompassed all the rest. Aristotle referred to the 'golden mean' of each virtue: on a spectrum between extremes e.g. courage lies at the golden mean between recklessness and timidity]

In the Middle Ages, thinkers such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas built upon the ideas of the ancient Greeks, incorporating Christian theology into their understanding of virtue. They believed that virtues were gifts from God and that a virtuous person was someone who acted in accordance with God's will.

[Aquinas attempts to synthesise Greek and Christian ideas of virtue by adding: faith, hope and charity (love) to Plato's cardinal virtues – and that these latter three were primarily attained through 'grace' rather than through study and habituation]

During the Enlightenment period in the 17th and 18th centuries, thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill offered their own perspectives on virtue. Kant argued that true virtue was based on moral duty rather than mere inclination, and that individuals should act out of a sense of duty to the moral law. Mill, on the other hand, believed that virtue was based on the pursuit of happiness, and that actions that led to the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people were morally right.

[Hume proposed two types of virtue: natural and artificial – natural virtues would include empathy and kindness to others whereas artificial virtues were more socially constructed such as respect for promises and respect for others' property etc. Kant suggested the highest form of virtue came from reason and 'duty' (the Categorical Imperative) rather than those 'natural' virtues arising from human feelings/passions e.g. empathy etc.]

More recent philosophers, such as Martha Nussbaum and Alasdair MacIntyre, have also contributed to our understanding of virtue. Nussbaum has emphasized the importance of emotions in developing virtue, while MacIntyre has argued that virtues are tied to specific social practices and traditions.

[Elizabeth Anscombe (c.f. notes from earlier meeting) is credited with reviving contemporary interest in the virtues after the revelations of the Holocaust at the end of WW2 – along with Mary Midgley they explored what was needed for human beings (like any other animal) to flourish = eudaimonia, which brings us nicely back to the Greeks…]

[in a podcast by the philosopher Jennifer Frey speaking about Anscombe and the revised interest in the classic virtues – she spoke about something called: radical virtue ethics…]

Radical virtue ethics is a moral theory that emphasizes the importance of developing and cultivating virtuous character traits. It holds that the best way to live a good life is to become a virtuous person, and that the virtues are the most important things in life. *[more important than wisdom?]*

Radical virtue ethics is often contrasted with other moral theories, such as deontology and consequentialism. Deontology focuses on following rules and principles, while consequentialism focuses on the consequences of actions. Radical virtue ethics, on the other hand, focuses on the development of the individual.

Radical virtue ethics is a relatively new moral theory, and it has been criticized for being too abstract and for not providing enough guidance in practical situations. However, it has also been praised for its emphasis on the importance of character and for its potential to provide a more holistic view of morality.

Here are some of the key concepts of radical virtue ethics:

Virtue: A virtue is a morally good character trait, such as courage, honesty, or compassion.

Eudaimonia: Eudaimonia is the Greek word for happiness or flourishing. It is the goal of life for radical virtue ethicists. *[long term approach as opposed to Epicureanism/hedonism = doing stuff simply because it makes us happy in the moment/short-term?]*

Moral development: The goal of radical virtue ethics is to help people develop and cultivate virtuous character traits. This is done through a process of education, reflection, and practice.

The good life: The good life is a life that is lived in accordance with the virtues. It is a life of happiness, fulfilment, and meaning. *[is this in danger of becoming tautological?]*

Radical virtue ethics is a complex and challenging moral theory. However, it has the potential to provide a more holistic and fulfilling view of morality than other moral theories.

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