

# *Can Virtue Ethics Derived from Neo-Aristotelianism be Perfectly Self-Explanatory*

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**Abstract:** As a result of the rise of neo-Aristotelianism in recent times, the discussion of 'virtue' has led to the question of whether virtue ethics can exist as a sound system. Prior to this, there was no normative standard for 'virtue', deontology ignored human nature, and utilitarianism focused more on instrumental reason, ignoring the plurality of the 'good'. Anscombe defined 'virtue ethics' in his *Modern Moral Philosophy*, and Nussbaum built on this by arguing that goodness does not depend only on the rationality of the actor, but also on morality and institutions, and Hesterhaus provided a normative interpretation of virtue ethics from an Aristotelian standpoint. However, as virtue ethics defines and regulates virtue ethics, it is difficult to form a logically coherent system, as either virtue ethics is more or less connected to other ethics, and there are even contradictions between specific claims.

**Keywords:** virtue ethics, neo-aristotelianism, hursthouse, modern moral philosophy

## 1. Introduction

This paper starts from the background of the emergence of virtue ethics, that is, the doctrine was developed as a revisiting of Aristotle's "virtue" in the post-metaphysical era in the context of empirical life, and that the efforts of Anscombe and Nussbaum gradually defined "virtue ethics", instead of staying on deontology and utilitarianism. Hursthouse expounds virtue ethics from neo-Aristotelianism, yet her reduction of virtue, constructed by human society in the course of history, to simple factual objectivity is problematic. The social and historical dimensions of the objectivity of virtue ethics cannot be ignored. After synthesizing all aspects of virtue ethics, this paper will draw a conclusion: Although virtue ethics has made normative contribution to virtue in the wave of neo-Aristotelianism, it is still difficult to be self-contained.

## 2. The Background to Virtue Ethics

The concept of virtue was already introduced in Aristotle's theory of virtue, in which he considered the practice of virtue to be a necessary and central part of the good life of man. In the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle pointed out: "All arts and studies, and likewise every practice and choice of man, have as their aim some good. Therefore it has been said that all things have the good as their end [1]. "Also in the ancient Greek and Roman periods, the Stoics, although they sought to completely incorporate anger, sorrow and all that they called 'emotions', did introduce certain emotional motives of the actor, such as fraternity and even a certain sexuality, into moral choices. In the post-metaphysical period, in order to oppose and subvert the prevailing cultural, technological

and social models, an understanding of virtue led to a renewed development of ethics and the birth of virtue ethics on the basis of Aristotle.

In the revival of contemporary virtue ethics, there has always been an argument between ethical theory and anti-theory. By ethical theorizing it is meant that ethics should have a universal form or structure, and that universal rules and interpretations should be considered. Anti-theorizing, on the other hand, argues that universal norms or rules do not register the wide and varied demands of different situations, but instead rely on sensitivity - which some have likened to discernment, the ability of virtuous people to discern significant and subtle distinctions in morality that are particular. Before the introduction of virtue ethics, moral psychology tried to evaluate the individual's morality empirically, but related scholars did not know the individual's mental representation of morality and tried to quantify a person's moral level. Annette Baier argues that ethical theory often ignores the importance of moral psychology and emotion, denying that Hume had any 'normative theory' and drawing on the similarities between Aristotle and Hume to deny that Aristotle was an 'ethical theorist'. She denies that Aristotle had a normative theory and argues that we must choose between a 'rational' normative theory and a moral psychology that is more descriptive than normative. Adam Smith's ethical theory focuses on emotions. Hume and Mill also did important work on emotions. Moreover, most theories affirm the positive value of emotions in moral choices.

In Modern Moral Philosophy, Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe(1919-2001) argues that “if a procedure is one of judicially punishing a man for what he is clearly understood not to have done, there can be absolutely no argument about the description of this as unjust”[2]. It may be morally right or permissible to do something that marks us as bad as human beings, such as an act of injustice. Modern moral philosophy deals with the moral sense of 'ought'. Anscombe sees this 'ought' as having an obligatory. It is equivalent to being "compelled", "obligated" and "required", just as if a person could obey a law or the requirements of a law. The virtue of virtue ethics is, in Anscombe's view, the ability to derive the 'ought' from the 'is'. In the concept of virtue, the fact of action, the flourishing of human qualities and the 'good' of function are unified. In the concept of virtue, the fact of action, the flourishing of human qualities and the "good" of function are unified, and because of this, the "is" from which action is described is unified. In the concept of virtue, the fact of action, the flourishing of human qualities and the 'good' of function are unified, and it is for this reason that the 'good' and thus the 'ought' can be derived from the 'is' that describes action. It is for this reason that the 'good' and therefore the 'ought' can be derived from the 'is' that describes action.

### **3. Doctrines and Factors Contributing to the Development of Virtue Ethics**

In later developments, deontological and utilitarian readings gradually developed. Deontology, for example in Kant's Deontology, states that moral philosophy should be concerned with its own motives and intentions, emotions and desires, and that virtue, as the moral disposition, powers and capacities possessed by human beings, is the central expression of their inner character traits. The exercise of virtue needs to incorporate the mechanisms of human self-implementation, and in his structure it can be seen that virtue is aligned with the purpose of happiness, inheriting Aristotle's understanding of virtue, but that human action can be divided between acting out of reason and acting out of desire. According to Martha C. Nussbaum(1947- ), both Utilitarianism and Kantianism include a treatment of virtue, so that virtue ethics cannot be compared with either ethics and constitute a separate path. In *Virtue Ethics: The Misleading Category* , she points out that “But ethics cannot meet these demands if it remains focused only on isolated moments of choice, or on related questions about the agent's duties and obligations” [3]. If ethics remains focused only on isolated moments of choice, or only on the responsibilities and of the actors related issues, ethics will not satisfy the requirement of a moral value statement. Utilitarianism presupposes in teleology that a good act equals a good result, but there

is a neglect of the plurality of the good. The whole character of the Aristotelian actor can be enlightened by reason, and virtue is a moderation about passion and action.

In the Anscombe Incident, the academic community launched a further appeal for virtue ethics in response to the confusion in modern society. This move prompted contemporary researchers in virtue ethics to go beyond the analysis of the neglect of virtue in traditional moral philosophy and devote themselves to the overall criticism of modern normative ethics. In *Pursuit of Virtue*, a classic work on virtue ethics, we can find the criticism of the deficiency of modern normative ethics and the expression of the unique form of virtue ethics. MacIntyre inherited both the Aristotelian moral claim to achieve human happiness and the disciplinary structure of virtue ethics based on the ethical entity of city-state politics and the common good of the traditions and practices of social community [4]. From him, modern virtue ethics opens up a multiplicity of schematic styles such as neo-Aristotelianism, neo-Stoicism, emotionalism or neo-Humeanism, and virtuous egoism or Nietzscheanism. In the context of the whole process of ethical development, it is a process of revival in the midst of renunciation and perseverance in the midst of transmission, which profoundly presents the unusual path of expression of virtue ethics and how it has been able to flourish in contemporary academic research. In particular, MacIntyre, Ford and Hursthouse all focus on the virtue position, emphasising virtue in the Aristotelian sense, and attempt to pursue a new conception of virtue ethics on this basis. Nussbaum, on the other hand, based on a discussion of philosophy throughout the Hellenistic period, emphasizes the philosophical significance of Stoicism's emotional self-control and emotional analysis for the treatment of the mind. Slote further absorbs Scottish moral emotivist ideas, stresses that moral philosophy should be based on the virtue of man as an actor, opposes normative ethics from action alone, and advocates an emotivist methodology as the meta-ethical basis of inquiry in virtue ethics Swanton defines an important characteristic of virtue as the 'expression of a good inner state' and understands Nietzsche's strong will in this light, arguing that the strong will is the key to Nietzsche's theory of virtue.

'virtue ethics' is a term that was originally used to distinguish normative ethics methods that emphasize virtues or moral qualities, as opposed to those that emphasize obligations or rules or the consequences of actions. The construction of a theoretical system of modern virtue ethics must be carried out in the modern life context and academic context, besides cleaning up and criticizing the modern moral philosophy and actively exploring the basic problems of modern ethics such as "action guide" and "psychological motivation"[5]. It is also necessary to rethink the problem of virtue standard itself in the context of modern life and academic research. Nussbaum thus reveals that, in every situation, 'if it is not appropriate, it is inappropriate. It simply cannot be outside of this sphere'. It is as if the nature of the act is either one or the other, and there is no third possibility. The notion of virtue that defines the nature of appropriate behaviour is: 'that which is set up in that realm to choose and respond well' [6]. This reading clearly gives a normative function to Aristotle's concept of virtue. Virtue ethics is an actor-centred discussion of what it means to be a human being. They cannot provide us with guidelines for behaviour when different virtue claims conflict with each other. However, as we all know, when the rules conflict, deontology will encounter the same problem. Many people think that the way that behavioral utilitarianism uses a single maximization rule to deal with difficult situations is a shortcoming, not an advantage. Virtue ethics will actually adopt a strategy similar to some ontological strategies when difficult situations or dilemmas (hypothetical) can be solved. It will argue that these possible conflicts are only superficial.

#### **4. Neo-Aristotelianism and Hursthouse 's Virtue Ethics**

For Aristotle, ethics focuses on the natural facts and practical activities based on human nature, rather than abstract theories that is divorced from experience and human nature. Human nature, for Aristotle, consists of souls with different functions, both the nutritive function shared with plants, the desire

function shared with other sentient species, and the rational Logos function, which is exclusively human. It is the realization of the logical activity of the soul that endows human beings with virtue, and virtue points to the goal of human happiness [7]. With virtue at the centre, Hursthouse proposes a 'normative ethics' in the context of neo-Aristotelianism, and she therefore argues that neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics seeks not only the moral goodness of the actor, but also the prosperity of the ultimate state of being.

On the one hand, Aristotle discussed practical philosophy through an empiricist dialectic. On the other hand, he presupposed a metaphysical premise in his discussion of the supreme good as the internal purpose. This leads Aristotle to be ambiguous about the relationship between practical philosophy and metaphysics and to fall into a theoretical contradiction. If Aristotle's practical philosophy is a complete system both grounded in and transcending his tradition, then the practical philosophy of modernity is the product of a broken system. On the other hand, by denying objective purpose and values, a series of diverse and incommensurable subjective purposes appear. Therefore, practical philosophy either only discusses how to achieve these purposes or how to achieve them. Neo-Aristotelianism thus opposes modern practical philosophy on two levels: firstly, it opposes the subjectivism of purpose (value) on the normative aspects of practice. Secondly, it opposes the regularism of action (practice) on the question of how to practice [8].

In contrast to Aristotle's argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics* the structure of Hursthouse neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics corresponds to the structure of Aristotle's argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The 'starting point' of Hursthouse's neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics is the same as Aristotle's. This is reflected in the fact that Hursthouse inherits Aristotle's conception of happiness and its teleological framework. She makes it clear that the pleasure gained from the lack of virtue is not Aristotle's happiness, because having virtue itself means the actor's excellence in natural state. In this sense, without virtue, even if the virtuous possess power and wealth, they will never really "live well". Neo-Aristotelianism is one of the main paradigms of contemporary virtue ethics. It not only needs to build its own theory of action and motivation on the basis of cleaning up and criticizing modern moral philosophy, but also needs to establish a conceptual standard about virtue and answer the question "What kind of quality is qualified to be virtue?" As a representative of neo-Aristotelianism, Rosalind Hursthouse(1943- ) sets out three interrelated propositions in this regard: (1) virtue benefits its possessor; (2) virtue makes its possessor a good person; and (3) virtue makes its possessor a good person [9].

When she expounded the ethics of virtue, she no longer uses the concept of ethical naturalism in a general sense, involving the way of human ethical existence and the basis of ethical evaluation, but only the standard of virtue in a particular sense. She says: "The ethical naturalism under discussion here should be in the sense of providing a criterion for determining whether specific quality traits are virtuous, not in the sense of providing a direct criterion of right or good conduct." In other words, ethical naturalism answers only the question "whether a quality is a virtue", not "what kind of behaviour a person with this quality is bound to adopt", let alone "what kind of life such a person is bound to achieve ". With the transformation of society from traditional to modern, changes in the social structure no longer support virtue ethics as an alternative type of ethical theory to normative ethics, and it is difficult to justify it adequately in terms of justification for action. Hursthouse points out that in applying virtue ethics to provide guidance on the justification of action, especially in resolving conflicts between virtues, it is inevitable to the concept of 'Worthwhile' is inevitably introduced. This 'worthwhile' is not worthwhile in the sense of utilitarian calculation, but worthwhile in the sense of human existence and life as a whole. It is essentially the setting of values for life [10]. Logically, this setting is the ultimate source of action.

Since Hursthouse one-sidedly corresponds the objectivity of virtue ethics to the objectivity of empirical facts in a simple way, the truth of social and historical objectivity may have been

overlooked by her. Some purely empirical 'facts' are problematic, and it is clearly not desirable to try to find some essential feature or foundation of virtue. Hursthouse's understanding of virtue as a quality characteristic of human flourishing (or good living or happiness) does not solve the problem of justifying action, since 'flourishing' is a very vague concept and thus not a practical guide. Hursthouse's argument for the objectivity of virtue ethics is based on her three sub-themes, of which two main ones bear some resemblance to utilitarian doctrine: one is that virtue maximises the interests of its possessors. The other is that virtue maximises the interests of the whole population. In using these three theses to argue for the objectivity of virtue, she uses and addresses conceptual elements (e.g. the benefit to the possessor). The conceptual elements (e.g. benefiting the possessor) themselves contain utilitarian elements, for example, for the individual, for the individual as a person, and for the individual as a person.

## 5. Conclusion

It is this idea that is captured by the doctrine of the mean. Virtuous responses cannot be embodied in a rule or principle that an agent can learn and then act virtuously. Understanding virtue is a matter of experience, sensitivity, perceptual ability, practical reasoning, etc., and takes a long time to develop. The idea that ethics cannot be covered by a single rule or principle is the 'doctrine of the non-codifiability of ethics'. The diversity and inaccuracy of morality can not be described by a strict criterion, so we must use a theory to describe morality, which is as flexible as the theme itself and can respond to the situation. Therefore, some virtue ethicists regard themselves as anti-theorists, rejecting theories that try to systematically capture and organize all practical or moral importance. Tracing back to the source, virtue ethics has appeared in a unique way since ancient times, and has become a type within a complete ethics system. But its validity can only be confirmed by going back to the philosophical level, as can be seen in Hursthouse's description of virtue ethics. He argues that there are linguistic biases and intra-systemic disagreements, regardless of how ethicists express the systemic or normative character of virtue ethics. In fact, in the process of defining and regulating virtue ethics in academic circles, all virtue ethics are more or less connected to other ethics and even contradict each other's specific claims. This strongly suggests that the long-standing academic disputes can only be understood in a higher dimension if virtue ethics is discussed at the level of philosophical ethics. No doctrine that rejects normative concepts such as morality and obligation can clearly articulate virtue theory, but virtue theory can internalize ethical ideas and moral principles as virtuous qualities in their own right.

It is undeniable that contemporary researchers on virtue ethics in Britain and the United States have focused on the foundations of the purpose of the moral subject and its particular moral value goals, and have produced a wealth of research findings. However, in order to further promote the study of virtue ethics, it is necessary to answer the question of the evolution of the knowledge system of the word "virtue" at the theological level, especially at the level of philosophy history, which is the primary proposition for confirming and developing the study of virtue ethics. On this basis, by studying virtue ethics, we can clearly grasp its pedigree and origins, so as to understand its classical origins and modern evolution. Anscombe's definition of 'virtue ethics' in *Modern Moral Philosophy* makes it a new term in the modern sense, in line with contemporary Anglo-American philosophical contexts, and the subsequent distinction from normative ethics conveys the academic demand for a revival of traditional virtue ethics. However, this new term based on pure psychology does not give a philosophical rigorous explanation to the modernity of virtue ethics, so modern virtue ethics still lacks a sound and thorough foundation of moral philosophy. For any complete ethical system, the actor and the act, the concern for what he can "be" and what he should "do", virtue and duty, etc., are inseparable, and virtue ethics, by forcibly dividing and contrasting them in order to show its uniqueness, must result in a theory that is too contrived, narrow and fragmented, and in which no

thorough philosophical clarification is possible at all. William Frankena pointed out that "If we try to give a clear and more objective definition of virtue, we find that we become either egoistic virtue theorists, utilitarian virtue theorists, or deontological virtue theorists. Each definition of virtue relies on a corresponding normative ethical theory, and therefore virtue ethics has no theoretical independence of its own and can at best be a complement to other ethical theories." But it is this 'complement' that forces itself to be constructed as an independent system, in opposition to other theories, without its own independent existential, intellectual and value-based articulation, which inevitably creates a sense of assertiveness. It is enough to imagine that contemporary virtue theorists only focus on 'virtue' as a substitute for the concept of moral norms, but some rely on Aristotle, some on Stoicism, some on Hume, some on Nietzsche, and so on, and so forth, and all these 'virtues' "the 'philosophical systems' on which these 'virtues' are based are indeed quite different, even opposed to each other.

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