Ethical Theories: Virtue Ethics

- Recent interest in virtue ethics has increased because philosophers feel that it accounts for factors missed by Kantianism, utilitarianism and social contract theory
  - E.g. personal and family relationships, emotions, moral wisdom, etc.
- Focus of virtue ethics: What kind of person should I be? Discover virtues (i.e. ideal character traits) through virtuous role models or reflection and develop them.
- What virtues do humans need in order to flourish and be truly happy?
  - Self-control, generosity, empathy, honesty, respect, kindness
  - Others depend on culture
- Traces all the way back to Aristotle and the ancient Greeks. According to Aristotle:
  - Virtuous inner states (dispositions) lead to virtuous behavior
  - Virtuous character traits are stable and consistent. Once established, a virtuous person will act consistently and appropriately in different situations
  - Virtuous character develops over a long period of time. Moral character shaped by other people e.g. parents, church community, teachers, peers, possibly celebrities(?)
  - Virtuous character developed through the repetition of relevant virtuous actions. The virtuous agent recognizes the value of virtue and why it is the right thing to do.
  - Virtue associated with feelings (e.g. courage with fear). Virtue involves reacting with an appropriate amount of emotion.
  - Virtue requires the right reason and the right desire
- Summary of virtue ethics:
  - A right action is an action that a virtuous person, acting in character, would take in the same circumstances
  - A virtuous person is someone who possesses and lives out the virtues over time
  - The virtues are those character traits humans need to flourish and be truly happy
- Utilitarianism theories are outcome-based
- Kantian theories are agent-based
- Virtue ethics is character-based
In some ways, virtue ethics combines the approaches of the other theories we’ve examined by paying attention to the agent as well as the action and its consequences
  o i.e. a good person does “the right thing at the right time for the right reason”

Strengths of virtue theory:
  o Accounts for personal choices due to personal character development and emotions in morality
  o Not as outcome-driven as utilitarianism and as such, doesn’t require as much knowledge of the outcome since it is driven by personal virtuous choices
  o Flexible and doesn’t oversimplify everything. For example, it avoids the “one rule applies in all situations” aspect of utilitarianism and Kantianism. Virtue is a matter of personal character developed over a lifetime.
  o Takes into account several aspects – judgements of virtue are judgements of a whole life rather than of one isolated action
  o Pushes you to be a more virtuous fine

Weaknesses of virtue theory:
  o Nathan: Couldn’t this be recast as utilitarianism?
  o Not action-guiding: no clear action on what to do
  o What if your role models aren’t virtuous as viewed by other societies? Are you doomed to be non-virtuous?
  o Not evaluating the consequences. Should foresight be a virtue?
  o Suffers from differences in culture
  o Self-centered in some sense