Ethical Theories: Virtue Ethics

- All three previous ethical theories don’t account for some factors like emotions, personal and family relationships, moral wisdom, etc.
- Recent interest in virtue ethics has increased because of this
- Focus of virtue ethics:
  - What kind of person should I be? Discover a set of virtues (ideal character traits) through interacting with virtuous role models or reflection, and then develop them
  - What virtues do humans need in order to flourish and be truly happy?
    - Honesty, kindness, sympathy, respect for life, courage (universal)
    - Freedom, independence, self-reliance, modesty, pursuit of happiness (culture-dependent)
- Virtue ethics traces all the way back to Aristotle and the ancient Greeks. According to Aristotle:
  - Virtuous inner states (dispositions) leads 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, role models, peers, etc.
  - 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 the appropriate amount of emotion.
  - Virtue requires the right reason and the right desire
- Summary:
  - 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: outcome-based
- Kantian theories: agent-based
- Virtue Ethics: 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 to the action and its consequences.

- Strengths of virtue theory:
  - Avoids the “one rule applies in all situations” aspect of utilitarianism and Kantianism. Virtue is a matter of personal character developed over a lifetime*
    - * But some virtues are universal, you can follow them with no exceptions
  - Leads to overall happiness of person and society (including little things like being friendly/polite)
  - Accounts for situation, character development, emotions in morality, personal freedom
  - Judgements of virtue are judgements of a whole life rather than of one isolated action

- Weaknesses:
  - Not action-guiding: no clear action on what to do
  - Self-centered / personal aspect? (are virtues really self-centered?)
  - No instant learning of virtue – take a lifetime of development
  - You need to want to be virtuous, what if some people are “bad seeds” in the Aristotle sense
  - Inconsistencies in what is a virtue
  - Development of virtue is subject to luck and external factors e.g. access to virtuous role models can be due to luck