
*Understanding Virtue Ethics* aims to cover a huge amount of ground for such a slim volume. Van Hooft offers the reader an elucidation of modern virtue theory, a discussion of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, a tracing of the development of the concept of virtue through the thoughts of three later philosophers, an argument for the compatibility of a virtue-based approach with the demands of impartial justice, an exposition of some virtues of importance in contemporary Western societies and, finally, an illustration of how the virtues can be used in practical ethics. Whilst this width of scope inevitably gives the book a breathless air at times, van Hooft largely succeeds in providing a lively introduction to a huge swath of issues that drive contemporary virtue theory.

The book opens with a survey of the metaethical terrain that goes with virtue theoretical approaches, contrasting this with a generic ethics of duty. First, van Hooft discusses the nature of morality on two perspectives, explaining the tendency of virtue ethical approaches to (1) reject the division of life into strict moral/non-moral spheres, (2) emphasize the ethical importance of developing our own character and (3) focus on the character, rather than action narrowly construed. He then contrasts this with countervailing tendencies in duty-centred approaches. In the same manner he illustrates the main metaethical distinctions between the two traditions in terms of the terminology they employ, the status they accord to moral norms, their view of moral psychology and the nature of third-personal moral judgments.

The ‘ethics of duty’ with which Van Hooft contrasts virtue ethics is something of an amorphous composite, encompassing divine command theory, Kantianism and utilitarianism. This breadth means that he is occasionally driven into making assertions about the ‘ethics of duty’ which do not hold true of all the diverse approaches which he has grouped within it. For instance, it is claimed that ‘duty ethics shares with the mainstream philosophical tradition of the West a considerable faith in the lucidity of consciousness’ (p. 43) and that this is central to a duty ethics perspective as people who did not have knowledge of their own motivational springs ‘could not be responsible for them since they could not have controlled them’ (p. 44). As the author notes in the next paragraph, however, this claim certainly does not hold true in the case of Kant, nor does it in that of, for example, various ‘self-effacing’ forms of utilitarianism. Similarly, in the section on supererogatory actions, we are told that ‘in the ethics of duty [the notion of “good”] is largely replaced by the more juridical notion of “right”’ (p. 47); this comment does not sit well in the case of utilitarianism, in which the notion of ‘right’ is of course very much secondary to that of ‘good’. Whilst at the outset of the chapter, van Hooft admits that in discussing the ethics of duty he ‘cannot hope to do justice to all the complexities and nuances that moral theorists have developed over hundreds of years’ (p. 7), his shoe-horning together of such widely differing theories under a single banner inevitably leaves him in the position of making generalizations which misrepresent central positions, not mere ‘complexities and nuances’, of some of them. This is a particular problem given that the book is aimed at students who are relative newcomers to moral philosophy, and are therefore particularly likely to be confused by this.

In the second chapter, we return to the historical roots of virtue ethics with a tour of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. The necessary groundwork of a discussion of
Aristotle’s conception of the human soul is completed, before moving on to the matter at hand: the virtues of character. We are offered a careful exposition of Aristotle’s definition of virtue, in which van Hooft takes pains to avoid any impression that the Doctrine of the Mean is a call for moderate responses to all circumstances. This is supplemented by discussions encompassing the importance of control of non-rational appetites, and the possession of practical wisdom. The scope of the work inevitably entails that some important topics are skipped over quickly: the question of how Aristotle expects us to become virtuous by doing virtuous things, when it appears these can only be done by the virtuous, for instance. Nonetheless, van Hooft provides a remarkably clear and reasonable exposition of Aristotle’s views, given the amount of space to which he is limited.

The third and fourth chapters are devoted to development of the concept of virtue in the work of subsequent philosophers. Chapter 3 canters through one thread in the history of the development of virtue, beginning with some (very) brief remarks on the Stoics, Augustine and Aquinas. We are then shown how Hume’s ideas on sympathy can obviate the need for any questionable theological or rationalist underpinnings to the theory of virtue and how Nietzsche’s ‘will to power’ can provide resources for defending the virtue ethical project of self-cultivation as integral to human flourishing. The work of Levinas is then presented as a means of synthesizing these two views, arguing that responsiveness to the needs of others runs just as deep in the natural outlook of humans as Nietzschean self-affirmation. The brevity of this chapter is something of a problem—Hume is dealt with in less than four pages, Levinas in eight—meaning that exposition of their views necessitates sacrificing a full explanation of their import for the development of virtue theory. Also lacking is an indication of how the author sees the work of these later philosophers in relation to Aristotle; are they necessary additions to Aristotle’s schema, without which the theory of virtue would be inadequate, or are they merely re-emphasizing elements which were present in his writing, but had been obscured by his Stoic and Christian successors?

The following chapter benefits from a much tighter focus. It addresses a single issue—namely, the oft-repeated charge that virtue ethics may work well in small, close-knit communities but is inadequate as an underpinning of the impartial justice required in contemporary nation-states—and argues that the work of Paul Ricoeur provides a robust counter to this. By supplementing the two ‘ethical aims’ established in the preceding chapter, living well for oneself and living well with/for others, with a third, living well within just institutions, we are able to respect the claims of impartial justice within a virtue-based framework. Van Hooft does a good job of outlining a convincing reply to a criticism which has long dogged proponents of virtue theory.

The final two chapters move away from the meta-ethical to the practical level. The majority of Chapter 5 is given over to a discussion of three wide-ranging virtues that the author regards as of particular importance in current Western societies: courage, taking responsibility and reverence. Each of these virtues is explored by means of a schema laid out by the author, taking in the characteristic field and aim of the virtue, the emotions and knowledge the agent will have, the agent’s judgement about the situation, the beneficiaries and moral significance of the virtue, and the vices which correspond to it. In the course of this, van Hooft also addresses several long-standing questions in virtue ethics, such as whether the virtues form a unity, and whether a virtue may be used to a bad end.