

Virtue-Based Ethics

by John Lumsden

WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will introduce virtue-based ethics and look at some of the things that make this a distinct ethical theory. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. [Introduction](#)
2. [Virtues and Vices](#)
3. [Action and Character in Ethics](#)

1. Introduction

To begin with, recall that ethics is the branch of philosophy that analyzes and defends concepts of value and thereby seeks to determine right and wrong. Ethics can evaluate actions in lots of different ways. For instance, it can evaluate the consequences of an action, or its intention instead. But **virtue-based ethics** evaluates an action in terms of its relation to the kind of person someone is.

There are lots of ways that the kind of person you are affects, or is affected by, your actions.

→ **EXAMPLE** If you talk to everyone you meet, this could reveal that you have an outgoing personality and strengthen this trait. But we could also say that forcing yourself to take part in social situations could encourage you to become more outgoing.

So actions can express or reinforce your character, but they can also develop it.

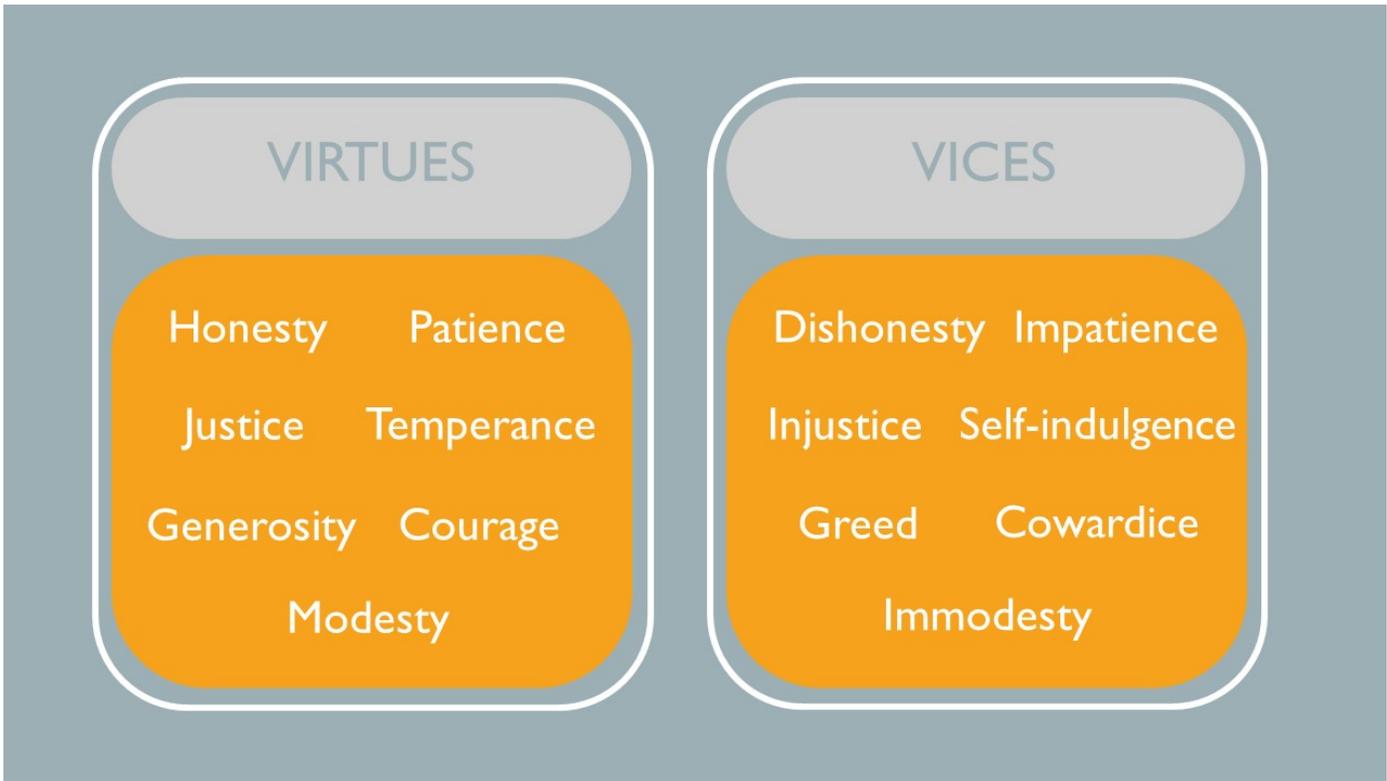
TERM TO KNOW

Virtue-Based Ethics

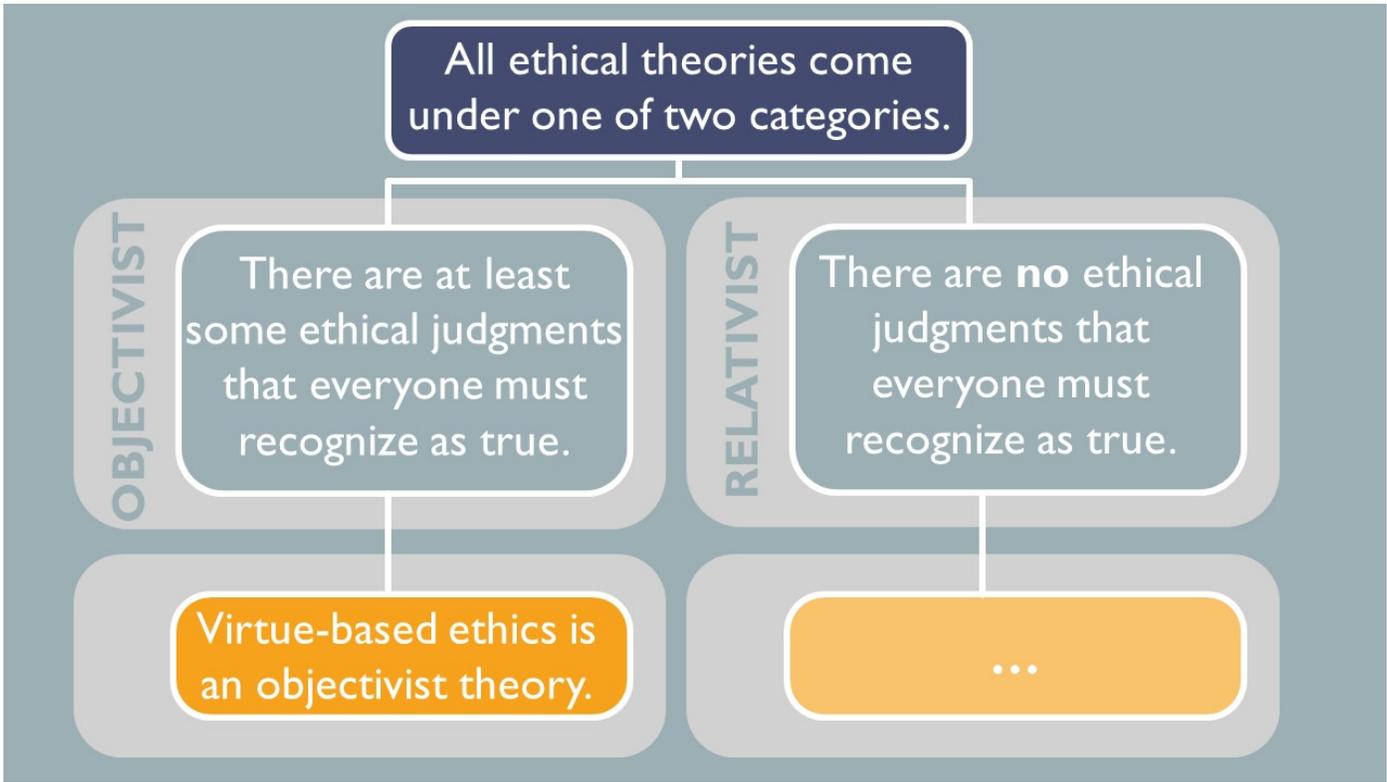
A theory of ethics that maintains that an action is to be evaluated based on how that action informs the aspects of the agent's character.

2. Virtues and Vices

Virtue-based ethics tends to split up character traits into those that are considered morally desirable, and those that are not. The former are called **virtues**, and the latter are called **vices**. Here are samples of both.



Philosophers that advance virtue-based ethics usually claim that everyone should try to cultivate virtues and avoid vices. This tells you what type of ethical theory this is.



TERMS TO KNOW

- Virtue**
A character trait of moral value.
- Vice**
A character trait of moral disvalue.

3. Action and Character in Ethics

Ethical theories can evaluate an agent's actions and the character of the agent. Types of theories, such as utilitarianism and deontology, make actions the primary object of evaluation. Here, the character of the person is only seen in light of their actions. Therefore, character is secondary for these theories.

By contrast, virtue-based ethics makes character the primary object of evaluation. Here, actions are understood in terms of how they impact the character of the agent.

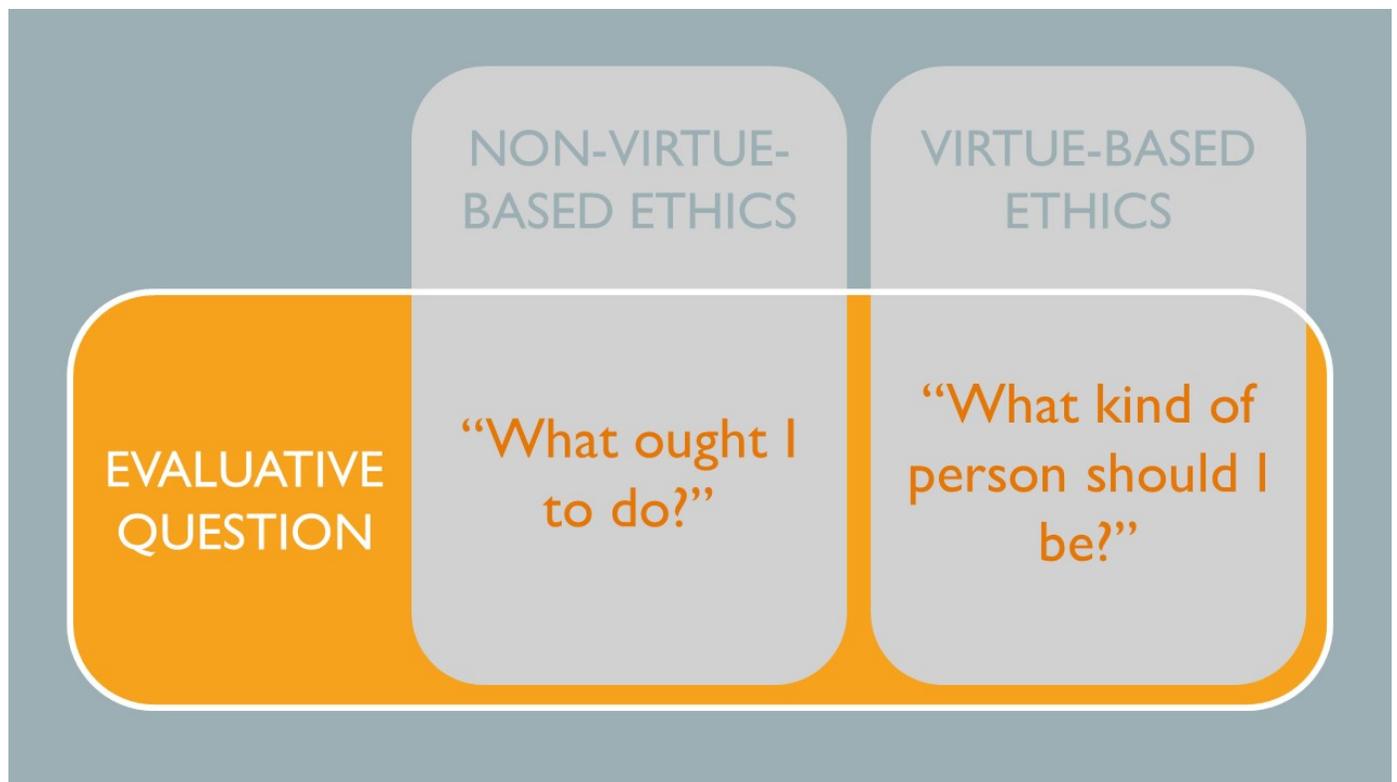
➔ **EXAMPLE** If you saw someone drinking excessively, you could see this as a sign of that person's character, namely intemperance or self-indulgence. You would also evaluate actions in terms of how they encourage certain virtues or discourage certain vices.

IN CONTEXT

If a naturally shy person made an effort to take up public speaking any opportunity they got, you would see this as a good action because it's an attempt to overcome the vice of excessive shyness or bashfulness.

But if someone was already very confident, then speaking publicly all the time might be seen as a sign of arrogance. In this case, this action is bad because it encourages the vice of arrogance.

Because of this emphasis on character, the kind of question you would ask yourself is different than the kind that you would ask yourself if you were primarily concerned with evaluating actions.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial with an **introduction** to virtue-based ethics, focusing on the primacy of character over actions in ethical evaluation. This led to a discussion of **virtues and vices** as the main way to evaluate characteristics of agents. We also briefly listed several different virtues and vices. Finally, we focused some more on the relation between **action and character in ethics**, showing how the one is evaluated in light of the other.



TERMS TO KNOW

Vice

A character trait of moral disvalue.

Virtue

A character trait of moral value.

Virtue-Based Ethics

A theory of ethics that maintains that an action is to be evaluated based on how that action informs the aspects of the agent's character.