THE ETHICS OF VIRTUE

In ethics as in other areas in matters where we begin, with what questions? For Aristotle who wrote The Nicomachean Ethics and so had an idea about both the nature of morality and how one should live a central question was one of character and the aim of a “good character” was “an activity of the soul in conformity with virtue.” Such an understanding, of course, inclines one to wonder, almost immediately, “what then is virtue?” Here we find ourselves at some distance from the central concerns of, say, utilitarianism which began originally as a theory of legislation.

• What are the virtues?
  For Aristotle, Plato and Socrates?

• For Christianity and St. Augustine?
  The role of divine law, God’s will, and obedience.

• Ancient and modern moral philosophy:
  Theories of virtue v. theories of rightness and obligation (rights)
  Private v. Public morality
  The right and the good
  i. What character traits make one a good person?
  ii. What is the right thing to do?

• A Return to the Ethics of Virtue: Elizabeth Anscombe’s critique of Modern Moral Philosophy (1958)

A theory of virtue needs (1) an account of the nature of virtue; (2) a list of virtues; (3) an account of what these virtues require; (4) an account of what human qualities are qualities a person ought to have; (5) an account of whether the virtues are the same for everyone or vary from person to person and from cultural context to cultural context.

(1) Virtue (Edmund Pincoffs): “a trait of character, manifested in habitual action, that it is good for a person to have.”

(2) Examples of Virtues: Courage, generosity, honesty, loyalty. Why are these virtues important? Are they the same for everyone?

Pluses of Virtue Theory:
A. Moral Motivation;
B. As a response to modern doubts about the “ideal” of impartiality.

Minuses of Virtue Theory:
A. Incompleteness;
B. Inadequate response to moral conflict