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THE IMPORTANCE OF CHARACTER

In Chapters 12 and 13, we examined ethical theories based on duty and on consequences. According to deontologists such as Kant, the answer to the question of “How should we act?” is that we should always act for the sake of duty because it is the right thing to do. According to consequentialists, the rightness or wrongness of acts does not depend on intentions but on consequences, and the right action is that which produces the greatest amount of happiness or pleasure. Kantians and consequentialists hold in common the notion that ethics is an answer to the question “What ought I to do?” (Hinman 1998: 323). These modern philosophers ask a different question than did the classical or ancient philosophers, and because of this, their thinking moved in a different direction, developing theories concerned with rightness or obligation rather than virtue. This chapter is concerned with the ethics of virtue, an approach that emphasizes our virtues or moral character as opposed to a theory that emphasizes duties or rules or one stressing the consequences of actions.

Contemporary virtue theory has been inspired by the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE), in particular by his work *Nicomachean Ethics* (see the “Aristotle” Closer Look box). In contrast to Kantian and consequentialist approaches, Aristotle does not seek to uncover a fundamental principle telling us what to do and how to act in an ethical way. Rather, he is concerned about the sort of people we must become if we are to live the good life—in other words, an ethical life. For example, take a case where it is obvious that I ought to help someone who is in need (Hursthouse 1999: 1). A utilitarian or consequentialist will stress the fact that the consequences of helping will maximize well-being. A deontologist will emphasize the fact that in helping that person I will be following a moral rule, such as “Do unto others as you would have done unto you.” A virtue ethicist, however, would emphasize the fact that offering help would demonstrate my charitable or benevolent character. Most recently, virtue ethics has been promoted by a number of philosophers as a third way of approaching ethical questions and dilemmas. In 1958, the distinguished British philosopher G. E. M. Anscombe published an article suggesting that modern moral philosophy was misguided and that philosophers should stop thinking about obligation, duty, and rightness and place virtue center stage (Rachels 1999: 177).

According to Stephen Darwall (1998: 191), many philosophers have realized that Aristotle