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Is Aristotle a virtue theorist? (ABSTRACT)

Some recent attempts to take the virtues seriously have looked to Aristotle for inspiration. This is a reasonable thing to do, since he discusses the virtues and their importance in the most choiceworthy life. Some aspects of 'virtue theory', therefore, claim to rest on Aristotelian premisses. But virtue theories come in different versions, and in different strengths, so that readers of Aristotle disagree about whether, and to what degree, he is a virtue theorist. One current version of virtue theory offers a distinctive third option, besides the Kantian and the utilitarian views, in debates about the relation of the right and the good. The other two options are deontological and teleological. According to this view, virtue and morality are independent, because virtues are not the source of obligations and obligations do not necessarily involve virtues. The outlook of virtue asserts that some emotions are intrinsically good, quite apart from whether they are obligatory, and that desires arising from these emotions are intrinsically good. An action is virtuous, therefore, in so far as we do it from an intrinsically good desire. Does Aristotle hold such a view? In particular, does he define virtuous action by reference to virtuous character? If not, what does he take to be the relation between virtue and obligation? Is his view defensible?