The oldest theory of ethics is naturalism, also known as moral self-development (or realization), and more recently as virtue ethics. Naturalism is the theory that everything in the world has its inherently natural purpose or function, and that everything is better off when it follows its natural function or purpose. This is equally true of people and objects other than people. The purpose or function of a knife is to cut, and the best knife is one which cuts the best—that is, one which is sharp. The “virtue” of a knife, in other words, is to be sharp, in order to fulfill its function or purpose of cutting. The purpose or function of a rubber band, on the other hand, is to hold tightly, and a good rubber band is therefore elastic—elasticity being the “virtue” of a rubber band. By analogy, the “virtue” of a human being is what enables each of us to fulfill our function or purpose as human beings, thus fulfilling (perfecting) our human nature. This not only makes a person “good” in the moral sense of being honest, industrious, courageous, and so on, but, according to naturalism, is also “good for” a person, something that helps or benefits a person. Unlike many modern ethical theories (Kantian or Utilitarianism, for example) which stress the clash between what a person feels she ought to do (not cheating on the exam) and what she thinks is selfishly in her own best interests (cheating to pass an exam she would otherwise fail), naturalism claims that a person can be happy and successful only by fulfilling and perfecting her full potential (function, purpose, nature) as a human being—i.e., by being virtuous. As Plato argued, only the just person can be truly happy. Or, to put it another way, only someone very stupid (who didn’t know this) would prefer to get ahead by being unjust, dishonest, and so on; any intelligent person (who realized the connection between being virtuous and being happy) would clearly prefer to be virtuous (and therefore happy).

Nonetheless, naturalism and virtue ethics recognize the conflicting drives in all of us to be both virtuous and selfish. We don’t always feel like
developing our full human potential, being the most we can be as human beings; indeed, we often feel like doing precisely the opposite! (Egoistic theories argue that precisely because these egoistic drives are so universal and so powerful, egoism *is* our true human nature and therefore what we should follow—always look out for Number One, don’t be conventionally virtuous unless it serves your own best interests.) This is why most naturalistic theories stress the important role of moral training and discipline, developing good habits throughout one’s life in order to “internalize” the virtues so that we are not constantly fighting against ourselves (need to study but want to party; need to quit smoking but desperately want a cigarette), but eventually come to want to do the right thing (at least most of the time). And this means that naturalistic (virtue) theories emphasize becoming a good person and not just performing the right actions, however reluctantly.

As you read some of these philosophers, ask yourself how we can ever decide questions of human nature (do all human beings from all times and places share a common human nature, and if so, what is it?), and if these questions are completely undecidable, is it a good idea to develop a theory of ethics on this basis? What do you think—is there a human nature or not? If so, why do you think so, and how would you argue against someone who said there was no human nature or someone who agreed with you that there was a human nature but who had a very different idea of what that human nature was like—an egoist, for example, who argued that our nature was to be selfish? Do you agree with the naturalist claim that the virtues benefit us, that they are necessary in order for us to be happy? Why can’t the immoral (but rich and powerful) egoist be just as happy as the virtuous person? More specifically, do you think there is one set of virtues applicable to all people everywhere in the world? Are industriousness and “saving for a rainy day” virtues appropriate only for modern, industrial, capitalist countries, or must everyone who wants to be “virtuous” pursue these particular virtues? Is chastity still as important a virtue for us today as it was for our great-grand-parents? Should we adopt a virtue of quiet reflection and meditation, or is this a uniquely Asian virtue?

**Suggested Further Reading**


