

Virtue Ethics

A Basic Introductory Essay, by Dr. [Garrett](#)

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Some students would prefer not to study my introductions to philosophical issues and approaches but learn directly from the source. I have no objection to this procedure if it works for you. Others may wish to consult the source before or after hearing or reading my introductions. Here is the horse's mouth himself, Aristotle, discussing the nature of moral virtue, in [Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*](#).

I have added some lecture notes from the Fall 2002 lectures on virtue ethics. See [below](#). There may be some overlap between the two parts of this webpage, but materials from the one section may add to your understanding of the other.

Virtue ethics is an approach that deemphasizes rules, consequences and particular acts and places the focus on the kind of person who is acting. The issue is not primarily whether an intention is right, though that is important; nor is it primarily whether one is following the correct rule; nor is it primarily whether the consequences of action are good, though these factors are not irrelevant.

What is primary is whether the person acting is expressing good character (moral virtues) or not.

A person's character is the totality of his character traits. Our character traits can be good, bad or somewhere in between. They can be admirable or not. The admirable character traits, the marks of perfection in character, are called virtues, their opposites are vices.

Character traits are

- 1) dispositions or habit-like tendencies that are deeply entrenched or engrained. They have been referred to as second nature--"first nature" referring to tendencies with which we are born. Character traits are not innate--we were not born with them. Thus infants are neither virtuous nor vicious.

- 2) formed as a result of more or less freely selected actions of a certain

kind. We are not born honest or liars, but we become so by repeatedly telling the truth or by repeatedly lying.

Moral Virtues :

1) are admirable character traits; generally desirable dispositions, which contribute, among other things, to social harmony

Craft knowledge is a technical virtue specific to a particular line of work (rhetoric or the art of effective persuasion, the housebuilder's art, the computer programmer's art, the accountant's art). The moral virtues have a more general scope.

2) enable us to act in accordance with reason

You cannot be morally reasonable in the fullest sense, you cannot have the virtue called prudence, unless you are morally virtuous. The person who is not morally virtuous is sometimes ruled by his or her appetites or passions. Her emotions get in the way of doing the reasonable thing or even recognizing what the reasonable thing might be.

3) enable us to feel appropriately and have the right intention

The person whose character is less than virtuous may do what looks, from the outside, like the right thing to do, but her motives will leave something to be desired. A truthful person will usually tell the truth, and he will do so because it is the right thing to do, not because he fears the negative consequences of being found out.

4) are orientations towards the mean, rather than the extremes (vices relate to extremes).

In Aristotle's famous study of character, a frequent theme is the fact that a virtue lies between two vices. The virtue of courage, for example, lies between the vices of rashness and cowardice. The coward has too much fear, or fear when he should have none. The rash person has too little fear and excessive confidence. The courageous person has the right amount.

While courage is the virtue related to the emotions of fear and confidence, mildness is the virtue related to anger. A person who gets angry too quickly will be irascible; a person who never gets angry, even when she should, is inirascible (the term does

not matter). The virtuous person will get angry when she should, but not excessively and not contrary to reason. Aristotle calls the virtue of appropriate anger mildness or gentleness.

Emotion/Action	Vice: Deficiency	Virtue: Mean ("Middle")	Vice: Excess
Giving Money	Stinginess	Generosity	Prodigality
Fear	Rashness	Courage	Cowardice
Anger	Inirascibility	Mildness	Irascibility
Seeking Pleasure	Insensibility	Moderation	Self-Indulgence

Virtue ethics can be used to determine the rightness or wrongness of an action by relating the choice to admirable character traits:

An act or choice is morally right if, in carrying out the act, one exercises, exhibits or develops a morally virtuous character. It is morally wrong to the extent that by making the choice or doing the act one exercises, exhibits or develops a morally vicious character.

To apply virtue ethics to a given case one should discuss which character traits (virtues, vices, intermediate states) are relevant and reflect on the kind of actions, attitudes, and feelings go along with them. It is not enough to say "This action expresses virtue," you must say which virtue (generosity, appropriate compassion) and be prepared to say why.

Virtue ethics can be used to praise or criticize institutions. Do they express virtues or vices? Do they promote or hinder the development of virtue? For example, some bureaucracies are criticized because they are cold and insensitive, or because they make people irresponsible, negligent or lazy.

Application of virtue ethics require a sensitive appreciation of human character and therefore considerable familiarity with human psychology. It used to be easier to talk about these things because, in past ages, members of a culture shared a common background, a set of stories with heroes and villains, and we formed our notions of good character from heroes and bad character from villains. See [question 6](#) below.

Criticism of Virtue Ethics:

Different cultures seem to provide different models of moral virtue, and there may be several, some conflicting, within a given culture. For instance, the ancient Greeks had a place for the virtue of *pride* (an appropriate sense of one's honor), while

medieval Christian monks thought *humility* more important. The ancient Greeks had a moral ideal of *seriousness*, which could be expressed in religious, philosophical, or ethical activity, but not so easily in physical production; early modern thinkers, however, recognize a virtue of *industriousness*, which tend to be expressed in activity related to production, to subduing the physical environment.

How can we be sure the models proposed are ideal unless we invoke moral rules to evaluate them? Thus, however valuable virtue ethics may be, it seems to need another ethical theory in order to complete it.

VIRTUE ETHICS (Fall 2002)

1. Why should we bother with virtue ethics?

* Do you want to be liked or loved by good people for what kind of a person you are? Or would you rather just be liked or loved because of your money or your good looks which nature gave you and you did not create?

* Do you want to be the kind of person who can stand on her or his own two feet and who, after examining an issue carefully, can be fairly confident of his own moral judgments? Or do you want to be someone who needs constant approval of his actions from people around you even though they disagree among themselves and do not remain consistent even in their own judgements?

* Do you want to be able to do the courageous thing, the honorable thing, honest thing, and enjoy doing it, even if most other people would find it uncomfortable or painful? Or do you want to do the courageous or honest thing reluctantly--as if it really hurts, as if you would rather be doing the opposite?

If you have answered yes to the first question in each of these pairs, then you want to develop the good character traits known as moral virtues.

Other Reasons

Another reason to pay attention to virtue ethics, which centers on character, is that often we are concerned with evaluating persons and their enduring moral characteristics (their character) rather than on a single action and how it relates to a rule or what sort results it produces. We are then not chiefly concerned with what rule one follows or what consequences you produce, but what kind of person you are, e.g. generous or stingy, courageous or cowardly, moderate or weak-willed or

self-indulgent.

Moreover, we often cannot evaluate an action unless we know something about the psychology of the person who is acting. But to understand motive it is helpful to know about character.

Finally, one of the best ways to foster social cooperation and harmony is to promote and solidify the better sides of humanity. Rules by themselves may give guidelines, but they cannot make people good. Concern with consequences is important but without a reform of persons we are not likely to produce greater total satisfaction or more substantial freedom for people.

2. What do we need to know about human psychology in order to understand the virtues?

This analysis is derived from Plato and Aristotle. Other Greek philosophers had somewhat different analyses. The mental side of the human person consists of several capacities.

* The soul--roughly, the mental side of the person--has capacities for many kinds of activities, calculating, deliberating, wishing or intending something, fear, anger, hate, jealousy, love of victory, love of honor, anxiety, hunger, thirst, sexual desire, love of money, etc.

* These can be grouped into two or three "faculties," as Plato and Aristotle did:

1) reason

2) passions

A. The spirited part (social emotions: fear, anger, hate, jealousy, love of victory, love of honor)

B. The appetitive part (love of money, hunger, thirst, sexual desire, desire for other physical pleasures, aversion to physical pain)

"Desire" is not limited to just one part.

The rational part naturally desires to understand and to promote the good of the whole as it perceives this good.

We can call the desire of the rational part "wish" or "intention"

The spirited part desires victory/honor/praise etc.

The appetitive part desires pleasure, possessions, etc.

In the virtuous person, the rational part is fully educated so that it perceives the good and the spirited and appetitive part are trained so as to follow the lead of reason.

3. Relate the notion of moral virtue to reason and the emotions.

Aristotelian definition of virtue:

A moral virtue is a disposition to act as the morally reasonable person would act (=according to reason) and to feel emotions and desires appropriately.

A (moral) disposition is related to a mere capacity and to an activity or actual feeling as follows. We are born without moral dispositions but with capacities to acquire the dispositions. One who has a disposition is not necessarily using it at any given moment but is able to put it to use immediately. A courageous person is not always feeling confidence but in a risky situation she feels appropriate confidence.

We develop moral dispositions--virtues, vices, and intermediate dispositions--through repeated activity and experience over time.

Capacity	Ability to learn	Capacity to Acquire Moral Virtue
Disposition	Knowledge (Cognitive Virtue)	Moral Virtue (Possessed)
Activity or Feeling	Using Knowledge	Action or Feeling Expressing Virtue

4. Why did Aristotle say that virtue is a middle ground or "mean"?

It's possible to err morally by going too far and also by not going far enough. The virtue of generosity is a mean between stinginess and a tendency to give excessively or to the wrong kinds of people. The virtue of distributive justice is a mean between rewarding a person excessively and rewarding the person deficiently. The virtue of courage stands between cowardliness, which involves excessive fear, and a sort of foolhardiness, which involves a deficiency of fear. Mildness, the virtue related to anger, stands between the habitual tendency to fly off the handle and the habitual tendency of accepting just any abuse.

5. Is there a condition (a moral disposition) between virtue and vice? Aristotle

thinks so. In fact, there may be two:

Moderate person (virtuous in relation to pleasure) -- Knows and wishes to do the moderate thing, and does it

Self-controlled person -- Knows and wishes to do the moderate (correct) thing, but has to struggle against strong appetites in order to do the moderate thing.

Weak-willed person -- Knows and wishes to do the moderate (correct) thing but often loses to strong appetites which overpower reason.

Immoderate or self-indulgent person (vicious in relation to pleasure) -- Has no wish to do the moderate thing and does not do it.

6. How do we use the virtue ethics approach in analyzing a case?

We try to determine what state of character is exhibited by the persons in the case. The externals of the action do not give us much guidance. We need to understand the action from outside but also to get inside the person, and understand the situation as it developed from that person's perspective. We need to be able to judge whether the person's motives were appropriate, including whether her feelings were appropriate or not (whether they were excessive or deficient). Good novels, novels that are not merely about physical actions, can help us develop that sensitivity. We can rarely be certain that a person is vicious or virtuous on the basis of one action alone, viewed from outside. At the very least we should be willing to specify what type of vice or virtue is exhibited in the action. Stinginess, cowardice, irascibility? To be sure about that we have to follow the person across time.

Evaluate Nick from the "[cheating](#)" case.

He seems to have immoderate appetites, and a strong tendency toward self-indulgence, sexual intemperance, or immoderation. If we want to be charitable, we might say that we are unsure whether his conduct expresses the vice of self-indulgence or weakness of the will. But weakness of the will supposes that he recognizes that what he is doing is wrong.