

Lecture 2: Virtue Ethics and Modern Technology

Are Social Media and AI Making Us Stupider, Meaner, and Less Happy?

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The Big Question

Does technology shape who we become?

Three Concerns About Modern Technology

- **Stupider?** Shortened attention spans, misinformation, “structural stupidity”
- **Meaner?** Online trolling, polarization, loss of empathy
- **Less Happy?** Anxiety, depression, loneliness—especially among teens

The Virtue Ethics Approach

Rather than asking “Is this action right or wrong?” we ask: **What kind of person am I becoming?**

? Discussion Question

Do you think you're a different person online than in person? Better or worse?

Why Virtue Ethics?

Other Ethical Approaches

- **Consequentialism:** Focus on outcomes
- **Deontology:** Focus on rules and duties
- **Rights-based:** Focus on individual rights

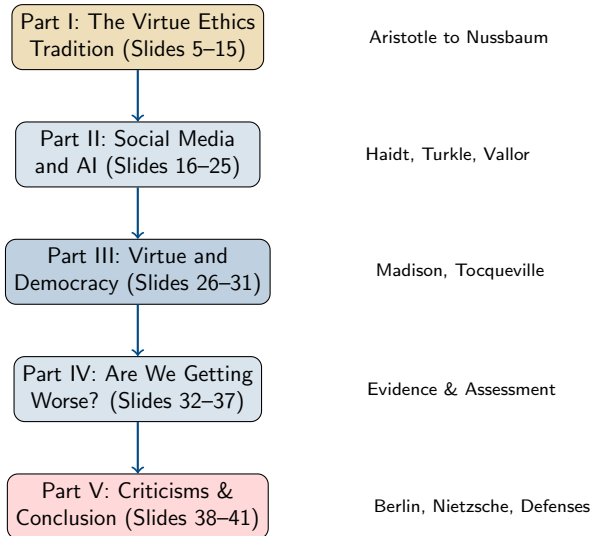
Virtue Ethics

- Focus on **character formation**
- We become what we **repeatedly do**
- Technology shapes our **habits**
- Habits shape who we **are**

Key Insight

If technology changes what we *repeatedly do*, it changes *who we become*.

Roadmap for Today



What Is a Virtue?

Definition

A **virtue** is an *excellent character trait*—a stable disposition to act, feel, and think in ways that promote human flourishing.

Examples of Virtues

- **Courage:** Acting well despite fear
- **Temperance:** Moderation in pleasure
- **Honesty:** Truthfulness in word and deed
- **Justice:** Giving others their due
- **Wisdom:** Good practical judgment

Examples of Vices

- **Cowardice:** Excessive fear
- **Intemperance:** Excess in pleasure
- **Dishonesty:** Deception
- **Injustice:** Taking more than one's share
- **Foolishness:** Poor judgment

? Discussion Question

Which virtues do you think are most important for life in the digital age?

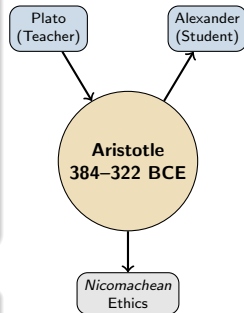
Who Was Aristotle?

Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

- Student of Plato, tutor to Alexander the Great
- Founded the Lyceum in Athens
- Wrote on logic, physics, biology, ethics, politics, poetry
- **Nicomachean Ethics**: Most influential work on virtue
- Asked: “What is the good life for a human being?”

Why Aristotle Still Matters

His framework for thinking about character, habit, and human flourishing remains remarkably relevant 2,400 years later.



Aristotle's Key Ideas

Eudaimonia: Human Flourishing

The goal of life is not just pleasure or wealth, but **eudaimonia**—living well and doing well, fulfilling our potential as human beings.

The Function Argument

Just as a good knife cuts well (fulfills its function), a good *human* lives according to **reason**—our distinctive capacity.

Virtue as Habit

“We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.” — Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II.1

★ Implication for Technology

If we become what we repeatedly do, then what we repeatedly do *online* shapes our character.

Aristotle's Virtues: The Doctrine of the Mean

The Golden Mean

Virtue is a **mean** (middle point) between two vices: one of *excess* and one of *deficiency*.

Sphere of Action	Deficiency (Vice)	Mean (Virtue)	Excess (Vice)
Fear and confidence	Cowardice	Courage	Recklessness
Pleasure and pain	Insensibility	Temperance	Self-indulgence
Giving money	Stinginess	Generosity	Prodigality
Self-regard	Self-deprecation	Proper pride	Vanity
Social interaction	Boorishness	Wit	Buffoonery
Truth about self	Self-deprecation	Honesty	Boastfulness

? Discussion Question

Where would “posting on social media” fit? What’s the virtuous mean between over-sharing and never engaging?

Phronesis: Practical Wisdom

Definition

Phronesis (practical wisdom) is the master virtue—the ability to discern the right thing to do in particular circumstances.

What Phronesis Requires

- Experience and good judgment
- Understanding context
- Balancing competing goods
- Knowing *when, how, and to whom*

Why It Matters for Tech

- Rules alone aren't enough
- Context changes everything
- Algorithms can't replace judgment
- We need wisdom, not just information

? Discussion Question

Can practical wisdom be taught? Can it be coded into an algorithm?

The Stoics: Epictetus on What We Control

Epictetus (50–135 CE)

- Born a slave in Roman Empire
- Later freed, became influential philosopher
- Taught that virtue is the *only* true good
- Key distinction: what's **up to us** vs. what's **not up to us**

“ Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, Ch. 1

“Some things are within our power, while others are not. Within our power are opinion, motivation, desire, aversion... Not within our power are our body, our property, reputation, office...”

Applied to Social Media

- **Up to us:** How we respond, what we post, whether we engage
- **Not up to us:** Others' reactions, likes, viral spread, algorithmic promotion

Aquinas: Virtue Meets Christianity

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)

- Dominican friar, synthesized Aristotle with Christian theology
- Adopted Aristotle's **cardinal virtues**: prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance
- Added the **theological virtues**: faith, hope, and love (charity)

Cardinal Virtues

- Acquired through **practice**
- Accessible to all humans
- Based on **reason**

Theological Virtues

- Infused by **divine grace**
- Orient us toward God
- Perfect the natural virtues

Key Contribution

Aquinas emphasized that virtues must be integrated—you can't be truly just without also being wise, temperate, and courageous.

John Dewey: Virtue in Democracy

John Dewey (1859–1952)

- American pragmatist philosopher
- Emphasized **democratic virtues**: open-mindedness, intellectual humility, cooperative inquiry
- Education as character formation for democratic citizenship
- Influenced progressive education movement

Dewey's Democratic Virtues

- **Open-mindedness**: Willingness to consider new evidence and perspectives
- **Intellectual humility**: Recognizing the limits of one's knowledge
- **Cooperative inquiry**: Working with others to solve problems
- **Experimental attitude**: Treating beliefs as hypotheses to be tested

Martha Nussbaum: Capabilities and Flourishing

Martha Nussbaum (b. 1947)

- Contemporary philosopher at University of Chicago
- Developed the **capabilities approach** to human development
- Key works: *The Fragility of Goodness*, *Not for Profit*, *Political Emotions*
- Argues emotions are **intelligent responses** that matter for ethics

The Capabilities Approach

Justice requires ensuring people have the **capability** to achieve various “functionings”—being healthy, educated, politically active, etc.

Central Human Capabilities

- 1 Life
- 2 Bodily health
- 3 Bodily integrity
- 4 Senses, imagination, thought
- 5 Emotions
- 6 Practical reason
- 7 Affiliation
- 8 Other species
- 9 Play
- 10 Control over environment

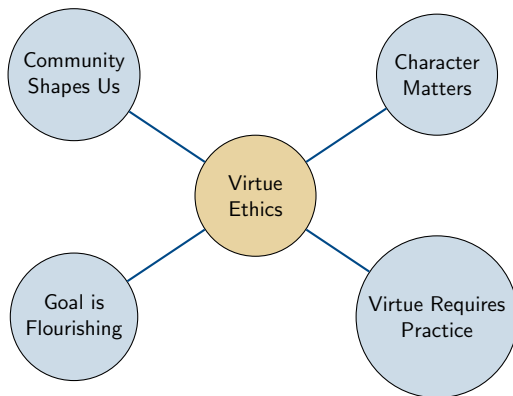
Virtue Beyond the West

Tradition	Key Virtues	Central Idea
Confucianism	<i>Ren</i> (benevolence), <i>Li</i> (ritual propriety), <i>Yi</i> (righteousness)	Virtue cultivated through proper relationships and social roles
Buddhism	Compassion, mindfulness, equanimity, non-attachment	Virtue as liberation from suffering through wisdom
Ubuntu (African)	Humaneness, community, interdependence	"I am because we are"—virtue is inherently relational
Aristotelian	Courage, temperance, justice, wisdom	Virtue as excellence of character enabling flourishing

Common Threads

Despite differences, these traditions share: emphasis on **character formation**, **community**, **practice**, and the idea that virtue must be **cultivated** over time.

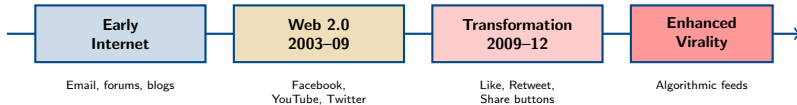
What Unites Virtue Ethicists?



Summary: The Virtue Ethics Framework

- Ethics is about **who we are**, not just what we do
- Virtue is developed through **habituation and practice**
- We need **practical wisdom** to navigate particular situations

A Brief History of Social Media



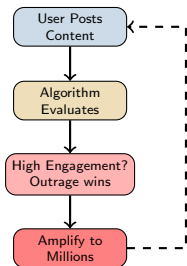
The Key Transformation (2009-2012)

Social media shifted from **connecting friends** to **maximizing engagement**. The introduction of the Like button (2009), Retweet (2009), and algorithmic feeds changed everything.

? Discussion Question

Do you remember social media before algorithmic feeds? What was different?

The Virality Machine



What Algorithms Optimize

Engagement, clicks, shares—**not** truth, wisdom, or flourishing

The Problem

Platforms are designed to capture attention. Outrage is more engaging than nuance.

★ Key Insight

The platforms are designed to capture attention, not to make us better people.

Quote: Jonathan Haidt on Babel

“ Jonathan Haidt, “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid” (2022)

*“The story of Babel is the best metaphor I have found for what happened to America in the 2010s... **Something went terribly wrong**, very suddenly. We are disoriented, unable to speak the same language or recognize the same truth.”*

*“Social media has both **magnified and weaponized** the frivolous. Is it any wonder, then, that the public square has become so dull, so crude, so dominated by posturing and so hostile to genuine dialogue?”*

★ The Babel Metaphor

Like the Tower of Babel, we've lost our common language—our ability to share a reality.

Hubert Dreyfus: The Risk of Disembodiment

Hubert Dreyfus (1929–2017)

- Philosopher at UC Berkeley, early critic of AI
- Argued that human intelligence is fundamentally **embodied**
- *On the Internet* (2001): Warned about online disembodiment

Embodied Commitment

Real-world actions involve **risk**—our bodies are on the line. This creates genuine commitment and accountability.

Online Disembodiment

Online, we can say things without physical risk. This **undermines commitment** and enables behavior we'd never engage in face-to-face.

? Discussion Question

Does online anonymity bring out our “true self” or enable our worst impulses?

Sherry Turkle: “Alone Together”

Sherry Turkle (b. 1948)

- MIT professor studying technology and human relationships
- *Alone Together* (2011): Documents how technology offers “the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship”
- *Reclaiming Conversation* (2015): Argues for the importance of face-to-face talk

“Turkle’s Central Insight

“We expect more from technology and less from each other... We’re designing technologies that will give us the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship.”

The Paradox

We’re **connected** to more people than ever, yet **loneliness** is at epidemic levels. Connection is not the same as **relationship**.

Shannon Vallor: Technology and the Virtues

Shannon Vallor (Contemporary)

- Philosopher of technology at University of Edinburgh
- *Technology and the Virtues* (2016): Argues we need “technomoral virtues” for the digital age
- Applies Aristotelian virtue ethics to emerging technologies

Vallor's Technomoral Virtues

- | | |
|---|--|
| • Honesty: Truth-telling online | • Justice: Fair treatment online |
| • Self-control: Managing digital distraction | • Courage: Speaking up despite backlash |
| • Humility: Epistemic modesty | • Empathy: Understanding across screens |

Key Claim

Technology isn't neutral—it shapes our character. We must **cultivate virtues** to use it well.

Jonathan Haidt: The Three Great Untruths

From *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018)

Haidt and Greg Lukianoff identify three harmful ideas spreading among young people—ideas contradicted by ancient wisdom and modern psychology:

The Untruth of Fragility

“What doesn’t kill you makes you weaker.” (Actually: Resilience comes from overcoming challenges.)

The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning

“Always trust your feelings.” (Actually: Feelings can mislead; we need to examine them.)

The Untruth of Us vs. Them

“Life is a battle between good people and evil people.” (Actually: Most people are complicated mixtures.)

Haidt's Argument About Social Media

▷ Argument in Standard Form

- ① The developing adolescent brain is particularly vulnerable to **social comparison and social feedback**.
 - ② Social media provides **constant, quantified social feedback** (likes, comments, followers) during these vulnerable years.
 - ③ This feedback is **optimized for engagement, not wellbeing**, and often rewards negative content.
 - ④ Adolescent mental health (especially for girls) **declined sharply** after 2012, when smartphone adoption became widespread.
- ∴ Social media is a **major contributing cause** of the teen mental health crisis.

? Discussion Question

Is this argument convincing? What alternative explanations might there be?

What Are We Losing? Individual Virtues

Virtue	What It Requires	How Social Media Undermines It
Patience	Waiting, delayed gratification	Instant feedback, infinite scroll
Humility	Recognizing limits of knowledge	Echo chambers, confirmation bias
Wisdom	Deep reflection, nuance	Hot takes, 280 characters, outrage
Courage	Standing for truth despite cost	Pile-ons, cancel culture, anonymity
Temperance	Moderation in pleasure	Addictive design, variable rewards
Honesty	Truthfulness	Misinformation, deepfakes, personas
Friendship	Deep, mutual caring	Shallow connections, parasocial bonds

The Pattern

Social media is **structurally designed** in ways that make virtue harder and vice easier.

Policy Suggestions: Personal and Family Level

+ For Individuals

- **Digital self-control:** Set time limits, turn off notifications
- **Curate feeds:** Unfollow outrage merchants
- **Slow down:** Resist the urge to react immediately
- **Cultivate offline life:** Hobbies, face-to-face relationships

For Parents/Educators

- **Delay smartphones:** Wait until high school if possible
- **Protect free play:** Unsupervised, unscheduled time
- **Model good habits:** Put your own phone away
- **Talk about it:** Make technology use a topic of discussion

For Platforms and Governments

- Raise age limits for social media (Haidt suggests 16)
- Require age verification
- Algorithmic transparency—let users understand what they're seeing and why

Democracy Requires Virtuous Citizens

The Founders' Insight

Democracy is not self-sustaining—it depends on the **character of citizens**.

“James Madison (Virginia Ratifying Convention)

“Is there no virtue among us? If there be not... no theoretical checks, no form of government can render us secure.”

Tocqueville's Observation (1830s)

American democracy worked because of “**habits of the heart**”—civic virtues cultivated through local self-government, voluntary associations, religious communities, and family life.

Key Claim

Laws and institutions alone cannot sustain democracy. Citizens must possess virtues like honesty, civility, and concern for the common good.

Tocqueville's Warning: Soft Despotism

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859)

French political thinker who visited America in 1831 and wrote *Democracy in America*. He admired American democracy but worried about its vulnerabilities.

“Soft Despotism”

Tocqueville feared democracy could decay into a new form of tyranny—not violent, but **smothering**. Citizens become so focused on private comforts that they **abandon public life**. Government grows ever more powerful while citizens become passive subjects.

Signs of Decline

- Withdrawal from local government and associations
- Focus on individual gain over common good
- Distrust of fellow citizens
- Reliance on distant authorities

2024 Data

- Only **15%** trust government
- Local turnout often **¡20%**

Nussbaum: Political Emotions and Democratic Education

Martha Nussbaum's Argument (*Political Emotions*, 2013)

Rational principles alone cannot sustain democracy. We also need **political emotions**—attachments to justice, fellow citizens, and shared projects. Great democratic leaders (Lincoln, Gandhi, King) understood this.

“Nussbaum's Key Claim

“The public culture cannot be tepid and passionless if good principles and institutions are to survive.”

Nussbaum's Concern (*Not for Profit*, 2010)

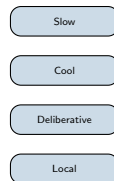
- Education increasingly focused on **profit and technical skills**
- Humanities and arts—which cultivate empathy, critical thinking, imagination—are being **abandoned**
- **“The future of the world's democracies hangs in the balance”**

Haidt: Madison's Nightmare Realized

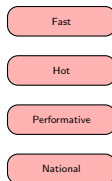
Madison's Constitutional Design

- Factions are inevitable ("sown in the nature of man")
- Geography and institutions would **slow things down**
- No faction could "spread a general conflagration"
- Passions would cool; compromise would be necessary

Madison's Design



Social Media



What Social Media Changed

- Outrage spreads **instantly** nationwide
- Politicians **perform for Twitter**
- Compromise is **punished**; extremism rewarded

"Haidt

"The tech companies that enhanced virality from 2009 to 2012 brought us deep into Madison's nightmare."

The Decline of Democratic Virtues

Virtue	What It Requires	How It's Being Undermined
Civility	Treating opponents as fellow citizens	Algorithms reward outrage; "affective polarization"
Deliberation	Listening, weighing evidence	Performative politics; echo chambers
Trust	Faith in institutions and shared facts	Disinformation; institutional failures
Local Engagement	Town halls, school boards	Nationalization of politics; decline of local news
Tolerance	Accepting reasonable disagreement	"Cancel culture"; authoritarian populism
Compromise	Accepting partial victories	Primary voters reward purity

The Vicious Cycle

As virtues decline → institutions work worse → trust falls further → virtues decline more

Policy Suggestions for Democratic Renewal

Institutional

- Open primaries, ranked-choice voting
- Nonpartisan redistricting
- Fund **local journalism**

Educational

- Restore **humanities and civics**
- Teach “narrative imagination”
- Support the arts

Cultural/Civic

- Revive **associations**
- Cross-partisan dialogue
- Local government

“ Nussbaum

“Love is what gives respect for humanity its life, making it more than a shell.”

? Discussion Question

Which suggestions would have the biggest impact? Which are most realistic?

The Case for Pessimism

Evidence of Decline

- **Trust in institutions** at historic lows
- **Political polarization** increasing sharply
- **Teen mental health crisis**: Depression, anxiety rising since 2012
- Rise of **conspiracy theories**: QAnon, election denial
- **“Structural stupidity”**: Dissent punished, bad ideas elevated

The Tragedy of the Epistemic Commons

Just as individuals acting rationally can destroy shared environmental resources (tragedy of the commons), individuals making rational sharing decisions can **pollute our shared information environment**.

Regina Rini's Insight

Each person sharing something outrageous does little harm, but collectively we poison the well.

Quote: Haidt on Structural Stupidity

“ Jonathan Haidt, “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid” (2022)

Context: Haidt argues that institutions become “stupid” when they punish internal dissent and reward conformity.

*“The most reliable cure for confirmation bias is **interaction with people who don’t share your beliefs**. They confront you with counterevidence and counterargument... People who try to silence or intimidate their critics make themselves stupider, **almost as if they are shooting darts into their own brain.**”*

★ The Paradox of Our Age

We have **more information** than ever in human history, yet we seem to have **less shared understanding**. More data, less wisdom.

The Case for Optimism

Evidence of Progress

- **#MeToo movement**: Accountability for powerful abusers
- **Global coordination** on climate awareness
- Access to **education and information** unprecedented
- **Marginalized voices** can reach global audiences
- **Citizen journalism** exposes injustice

The “Hidden Tribes” Study

67% of Americans are the “**exhausted majority**”—tired of polarization, willing to listen, seeking common ground. The vocal extremes are loud but *small*.

A Hopeful Possibility

Perhaps the current dysfunction is a **transition phase**. We’re still learning to adapt to new technologies—just as past generations adapted to print, radio, and television.

The Problem of Adaptive Preferences

Nussbaum's Concept: Adaptive Preferences

People tend to **adjust their desires** to what seems achievable. If you've never known something better, you might not realize what you're missing.

The Worry

Are we **adapting** to diminished forms of:

- Attention?
- Friendship?
- Civic engagement?
- Shared reality?

...and calling it **normal**?

The Counter-Worry

Maybe we're just **nostalgic**:

- Each generation adapts
- The past wasn't perfect either
- Change isn't always decline
- New goods emerge too

★ The Challenge

How do we distinguish genuine decline from mere change? How do we know what we're

Borgmann's "Hyperreality" Revisited

Albert Borgmann (b. 1937)

Philosopher of technology who warned in 1992 about **"hyperreality"**—online environments offering "stylized versions of ourselves" competing with organic reality.

"Borgmann's Prescient Warning (1992)

*"Social hyperreality has already begun to transform the social fabric... growing and thickening, **suffocating reality** and rendering humanity less mindful and intelligent."*

Long Dismissed as "Moral Panic"—But Consider:

QAnon (millions believe elaborate fiction), election denial, COVID misinformation—have we lost a **shared reality**?

? Discussion Question

When significant portions of the population believe demonstrably false things, have we entered "hyperreality"?

What Would Aristotle Say?

Likely Concerns

- Virtue requires **practice**—do we practice patience, temperance, or their opposites?
- Virtue develops in **community**—are online “communities” real communities?
- Flourishing requires **leisure** for contemplation—does infinite scroll allow this?
- The mean requires **judgment**—do algorithms make judgment for us?

Likely Appreciation

- Access to **knowledge**—Aristotle loved learning!
- Potential for **expanded friendship** networks
- Tools for **civic participation**
- New forms of **creative expression**

Probable Verdict

A **cautious critic**—worried about defaults and incentive structures, but hopeful about potential if used wisely.

Criticism 1: The Liberal Objection (Isaiah Berlin)

Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997)

Political philosopher famous for distinguishing **negative liberty** (freedom *from* interference) and **positive liberty** (freedom *to* achieve self-realization).

Berlin's Worry About Positive Liberty

"Positive liberty" can become **tyrannical**: If we claim to know what human flourishing requires, we might force people to be "free" *our way*. History is full of coercion "for your own good."

Applied to Virtue Ethics

Who decides what counts as **virtue**? Isn't this just **paternalism**? What about people who *choose* different visions of the good life?

? Discussion Question

Can we promote virtue without becoming paternalistic?

Criticism 2: The Nietzschean Objection

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900)

Radical critic of traditional morality who saw conventional virtues as expressions of “**slave morality**.”

The Objection

What we call “virtues” are often: humility, meekness, self-denial = the **weak consoling themselves**. True excellence requires going **beyond** conventional virtue. Great achievements often require what others call “vices.”

Modern Version

Many great artists, innovators, and leaders had **difficult personalities**. Steve Jobs was notoriously harsh. Would we want to “cure” them of their “vices”?

? Discussion Question

Can you think of someone whose “vices” were essential to their achievements?

Defending Virtue Ethics

Response to Berlin

- Focus on **capabilities**, not coercion
- **Nussbaum**: Provide opportunities, let individuals choose
- **Enable** flourishing, don't define it rigidly

Response to Nietzsche

- Aristotle includes **greatness of soul**—ambition is a virtue!
- **Practical wisdom** = knowing when rules don't apply
- Virtue ethics is more **flexible** than rules

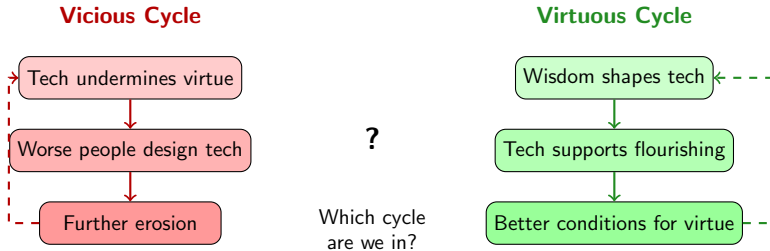
The Stronger Claim

In the digital age, we need virtue ethics *more*, not less—because algorithms and platforms won't guide us toward flourishing on their own.

★ Key Insight

We already shape character through education and culture. The question is *how*, not *whether*.

Conclusion: The Stakes



The Central Question

Will we shape technology, or will it shape us?

“ Final Quote—Jonathan Haidt

*“We cannot expect Congress and the tech companies to save us. **We must change ourselves and our communities.**”*

Course Connection