# Ethical Theories

Ethical Theories

Virtue Ethics

Learning Objectives

- Outline the basic idea of virtue ethics and Aristotle's "mean."
- Distinguish virtue ethics from deontology and consequentialism.
- Recognize the role of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) in virtue ethics.
- Recall that eudaimonia (flourishing) is the goal of virtue ethics.

Ethical Theories: Virtue Ethics – Aristotle

- **Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC)**

  "Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason and by that reason by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. And it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect."

Nicomachean Ethics II.6

Virtue Ethics vs. Other Theories
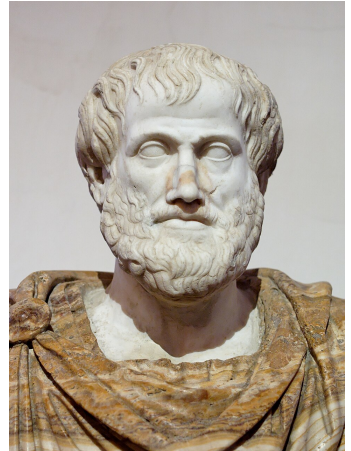
Deontology

- Emphasizes following **moral rules or duties**.
- Example: *You should help others because a rule requires it.*

Utilitarianism (Consequentialism)

- Judges actions by their **outcomes**.
- Example: *You should help because it maximizes overall good.*

Virtue Ethics

- Focuses on whether the action expresses a virtue (e.g., charity, compassion).
- Central question: *"Is this what a virtuous person would do?"*

Balance in Ancient Greek Thought

- **Physical world:** Harmony in body, diet, exercise, and the cosmos was essential to health and order.
- **Political life:** The just city is balanced — no group dominates, power and responsibility are distributed.
- **Moral life:** Virtue is the mean between extremes — neither too much nor too little. (Nicomachean Ethics)

What is a Virtue?

A virtue is an excellent character trait that makes a person morally exemplary. Virtues are not isolated actions, but stable dispositions that shape a person's behavior and decisions. They are qualities of character that enable individuals to act well and lead a good life.

- Virtue is an excellent self-mastery of passions and temptations through human reason.
- Virtue is a balance between two extremes of excess and deficiency.

Example: Integrity in Business

Integrity in business is the mean between *opportunism* (compromising principles for gain) and *rigidity* (refusing any flexibility even when morally permissible). Virtue here lies in upholding ethical standards while applying sound judgment — balancing principle with context.

Aristotle on Virtue and Eudaimonia

Powerful advocate: Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

- *"A moral virtue is a disposition to choose the mean between two vices (extremes) of a feeling appropriate to the situation."*

General Objective: Eudaimonia

(*Glückseligkeit*) as a flourishing life is the life in accordance with virtue. Eudaimonia is the highest good and the ultimate aim of human life in virtue ethics. It is often translated as flourishing or happiness. Importantly, eudaimonia is not understood as a state independent of virtue, but as something constituted through virtuous activity. Living in accordance with virtue is necessary to achieve eudaimonia.

Nicomachean Ethics II.6

Practical Wisdom (*Phronesis*) in Virtue Ethics

> **Definition: Practical Wisdom (*Phronesis*)**
>
> Practical wisdom is the moral understanding that enables a person to do the right thing in specific situations. It is not just knowing general ethical principles, but being able to apply them appropriately in context. Unlike theoretical knowledge, it is oriented toward action.

- **Relation to Virtue:** Practical wisdom is a central virtue that allows all other virtues to be exercised properly. Without it, virtues may be misapplied — e.g., courage without wisdom may become recklessness.
- **Relation to Eudaimonia:** Eudaimonia (flourishing, fulfillment) is the ultimate goal of virtue ethics. Practical wisdom is essential to living a virtuous life and making the right choices that constitute a good life.

Note: Practical wisdom includes the ability to perceive morally relevant features of a situation.

How is Practical Wisdom Acquired?

Practical wisdom is not innate — it develops through experience, reflection, and moral maturity.
It goes beyond good intentions by including the insight to judge rightly in complex situations.

Key Aspects:

- **Experience and Maturity:** Practical wisdom grows over time, shaped by encounters with real-life moral challenges.
- **Moral Development:** Adults with life experience often judge more wisely than well-meaning but inexperienced youth.
- **Reflection and Learning:** Not just acting — but thinking about past actions deepens moral understanding.

The "Ehrbarer Kaufmann" (Honorable Merchant)

- **Acts with integrity and long-term responsibility**, guided not just by law, but by conscience and character.
- **Combines economic success with ethical leadership**, taking responsibility for employees, society, and the environment.
- **Embodies virtues like honesty, fairness, and prudence**, and serves as a role model in the business community.

Promoted by the IHK as a guiding principle of trustworthy entrepreneurship.

Getty Images / Nastasic / DigitalVision Vectors; German Chambers of Industry and Commerce (IHK)

Key Virtues in Virtue Ethics

Virtues are exemplary character traits that shape a person's actions and moral life. In virtue ethics, several core virtues are emphasized:

- **Generosity:** Willingness to share time, talents, and resources for the benefit of others, fostering social connectedness.
- **Courage:** The ability to face danger or difficulty appropriately, avoiding both recklessness and cowardice.
- **Self-discipline:** The capacity to control impulses and desires in pursuit of long-term goals and moral values.
- **Compassion:** Empathy for the suffering of others, motivating one to offer help.

Each virtue relates to a specific domain of life and is essential for moral development and flourishing. Virtues are not isolated traits, but work together to enable a good and fulfilling life.

The Doctrine of the Mean: Virtue as a Balance

Aristotle's virtue ethics explains each virtue as a "mean" between two extremes (vices):

- **Vice of deficiency:** Too little of a trait.
- **Vice of excess:** Too much of a trait.

Deficiency	Mean (Virtue)	Excess
Cowardice	Courage	Recklessness
Stinginess	Generosity	Wastefulness
Indulgence	Self-discipline	Excessive strictness
Indifference	Compassion	Over-sentimentality

The "mean" is not a simple average, but the appropriate response determined by practical wisdom in each situation.

WHU [Otto Beisheim School of Management]

Mini Case:

A student is increasingly uncomfortable with the dominant drinking and party culture at her university. She notices that some peers feel pressured to join in and others are quietly excluded from social life. She wants to voice her concerns publicly — for example, at a student meeting.

Virtue Ethics Perspective:

- **Courage as a virtue** lies in speaking up despite fear of rejection (*deficiency* = silence), but without attacking others or sounding self-righteous (*excess* = aggression).
- **Practical wisdom (phronēsis)** helps her find the right moment, tone, and context to communicate her view constructively and with empathy.

True virtue balances moral conviction with respectful, context-sensitive action.