

## PHI 334 Virtue Ethics : Sep 22

### INTRODUCTION

Virtue Ethics, one of the three pillars of normative ethics, alongside deontology and consequentialism, gives us a broad perspective on how to lead lives of moral excellence. Unlike its counterparts which concentrate on the morality of actions or rules, Virtue Ethics spotlights human character; it seeks to hone our virtues, promoting their manifestations over time to enkindle an ethical, fruitful life. In other words, it seeks for a good life, which is what ethics should be about in the first place. This ethical theory, deeply embedded in ancient Greek philosophy, traces back to the profound teachings of Aristotle, a philosopher whose reflections continue to shape contemporary ethical discourse. True, as I have said, virtue ethics is a minority position, but it is having a resurgence, especially today, in light of the neoliberal position where we are all businesses in a sense.

### PART I: THE CENTRALITY OF EUDAIMONIA AND THE DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN

The foundation of Aristotle's ethics is the concept of eudaimonia, often translated as 'happiness,' but more appropriately defined as 'flourishing' or living well. Aristotle held the conviction that our main or highest purpose in life is the pursuit and fulfillment of this state. Realizing our human nature to its fullest potential was, to him, synonymous with achieving eudaimonia. This perspective diverts from simply categorizing actions into 'right' or 'wrong,' instead, directing the focus towards leading a fulfilling life enveloped in ethical standard. In other words, it is a guide for how to live a life well, and not be miserable at the end, since you acted right, developed maximally, and overall were a good person living a good life.

Speaking of instruction, as a guide to the good life, to eudaimonia, Aristotle laid out the *Doctrine of the Mean*, positing that virtues are essentially a balance between extremes - deficiency and excess. Virtues lay in that golden mean, the sweet spot between two vices. Display of courage, for instance, leans neither towards recklessness nor cowardice, but finds its steadiness right in the middle. In propounding this doctrine, Aristotle was advocating for a life of balance and moderation.

Here is a diagram:

Deficiency——Mean———Excess [Vice]———[Virtue]———[Vice]

### PART II: DISSECTING THE TWELVE VIRTUES AND THEIR CORRESPONDING VICES

Let us look at the list Aristotle gave of the virtues and their too-much and too-little vices. Each virtue fits with together with vices of both deficiency and excess, in the same category, shaping a moral spectrum seeking balance. They are:

1. Courage: This virtue straddles the line between recklessness (excess) and cowardice (deficiency), promoting the strength and resilience to face fears and adversities. Name an example.

2. Temperance: It lay in the golden mean between overindulgence (excess) and insensibility (deficiency), representing moderation, self-control, and mastery over desires. Name an example.
3. Liberality: Stitched between wastefulness (excess) and stinginess (deficiency), liberality denotes giving appropriately, devoid of lack or excess. Name an example.
4. Magnificence: Treading the balance between tastelessness (deficiency) and vulgar extravagance (excess), it encapsulates the essence of living a life of noble distinction with an adequate injection of grandeur and style. Name an example.
5. Magnanimity: This virtue falls midway between vanity (excess) and pusillanimity (deficiency), encapsulating greatness of soul, ambition, and appropriate pride. Name an example.
6. Proper Ambition: Straddling the line between unqualified ambition (excess) and a lack of ambition (deficiency), fostering this virtue involves striving for realistic goals. Name an example.
7. Truthfulness: This virtue resides between boastfulness (excess) and self-effacement (deficiency), calling for honesty and forthrightness in our dealings. Name an example.
8. Wittiness: Aristotle identified wittiness as the balance between buffoonery (excess) and boorishness (deficiency), emphasizing a refined sense of humor and its appropriate usage. Name an example.
9. Friendliness: More than just being nice, friendliness, according to Aristotle, cancels obsequiousness and flattery (excess) against disagreeableness (deficiency), encompassing thoughtfulness and consideration in social interactions. Name an example.
10. Modesty: This virtue, as Aristotle saw it, flutters the fine line between bashfulness (deficiency) and shamelessness (excess), championing humility and a healthy diminution of vanity. Name an example.
11. Righteous Indignation: This virtue is a balanced response to injustice, neither overly irascible (excess) nor immune to anger (deficiency). Name an example.
12. Justice: Ultimately, justice is a semblance of impartiality, devoid of biased preferences (both for or against others). It is the mean between unfair bias toward others (deficiency) and unfair bias against others (excess). Name an example.

### PART III: APPLYING VIRTUE ETHICS IN VARIOUS SPHERES OF LIFE

Each vice, being the aberration of a virtue, represents a moral defect or crack in the character, which Aristotle strongly advocated should be fixed to achieve eudaimonia. Encouraging these virtues and discouraging vices creates an all-inclusive ethical environment ripe for personal and collective growth – but also practical wisdom.

Now, the point of this class, the point I tried to convey, is that business is a kind of domain that is essentially our life. We all have a business, in a sense, that we occupy ourselves with. Under neoliberalism, it accelerates, and we become, in a sense, always engaged in commerce. Rules cannot cover the extent of the situation that we might find ourselves in, and so instead, it might be a good idea to just focus on culminating a good character, since a good life from that will follow, along with presumably good actions.

#### PART IV: PRACTICAL WISDOM AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT — A LIFELONG JOURNEY

To truly live virtuously, Aristotle maintained the necessity for practical wisdom (phronesis) —the aptitude for finding the mean in specific situations. Acquiring this doesn't happen overnight; it is a habitual learning process, instilling good behaviors, and practices until they become second nature.

Virtue ethics also underscores moral education and growth, insisting that virtue is not ready-made at birth but has to be painstakingly nurtured and honed throughout our lives. This perspective promotes the idea of the lifelong learner, a person constantly developing to grasp and nurture the virtues throughout his/her life.

The implication here being that you can learn virtue, by observation. You learn language by hearing others speak and trying it yourself. At first, when children speak, it sounds like garbage. They are incapable of proper speech. But, overtime, they learn to speak well. Eventually, some excel. The same holds for virtues, it is natural to do too much or too little initially, this is also noticeable in children in teens, but overtime, you hopefully settle in the middle, and can do the right thing, at the right time, to the right extent.