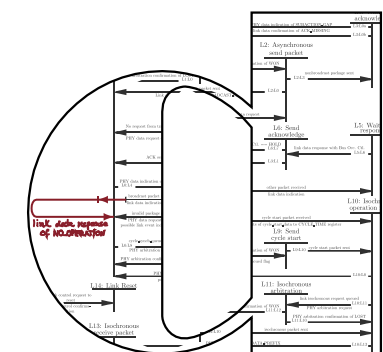




# Ethics for Nerds

An Advanced Course in Computer Science  
Summer Semester 2020

## Ethics 5.1 Virtue Ethics

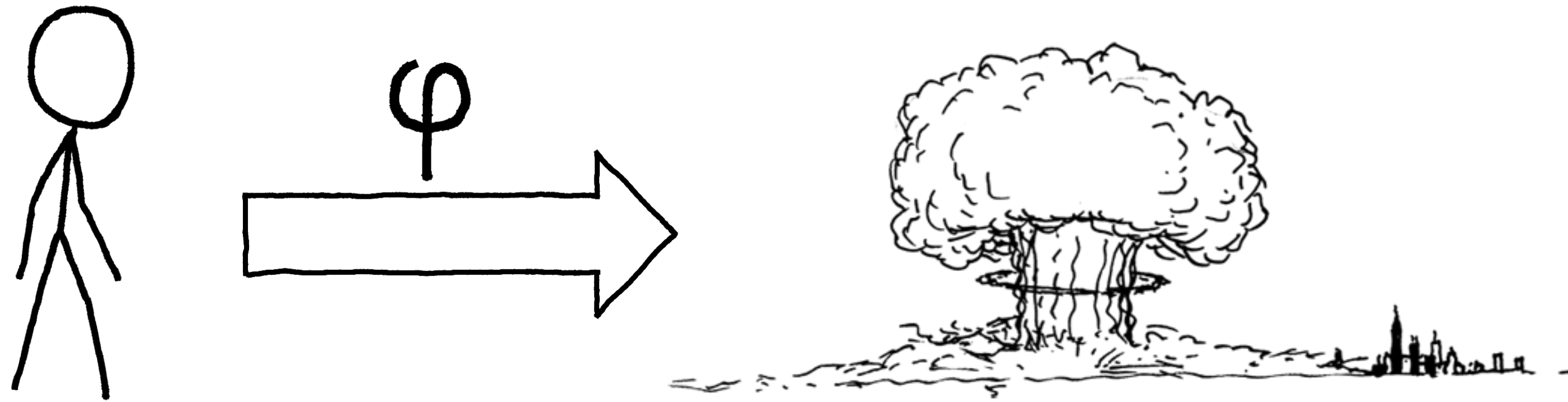


Prof. Holger Hermanns,  
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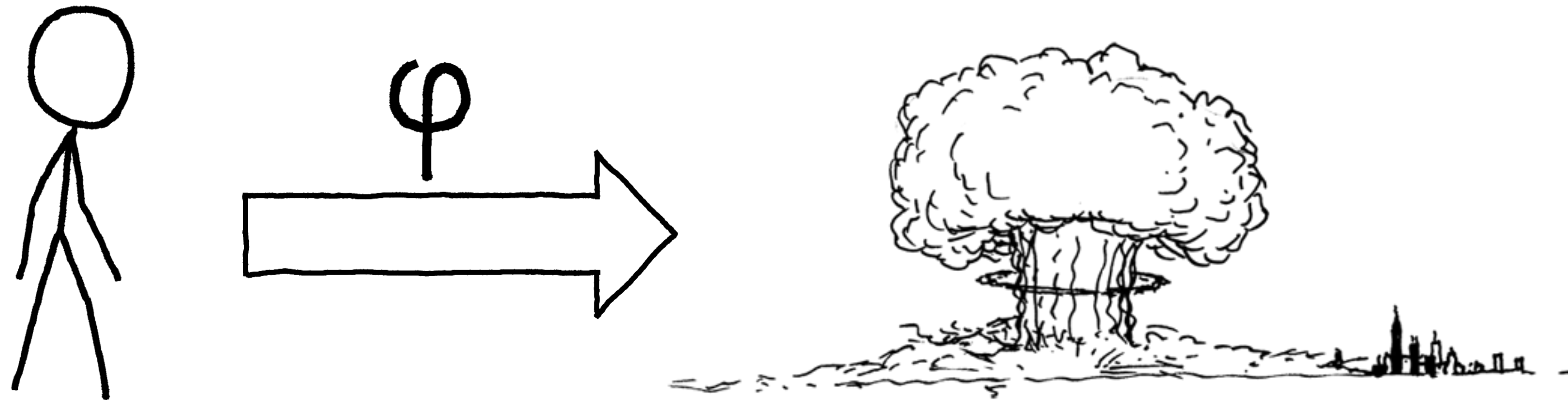
## A Classical Description



An **agent** performs an **act**. An **act** has **consequences**.

# THE FAMILIES OF THEORIES OF NORMATIVE ETHICS

## A Classical Description



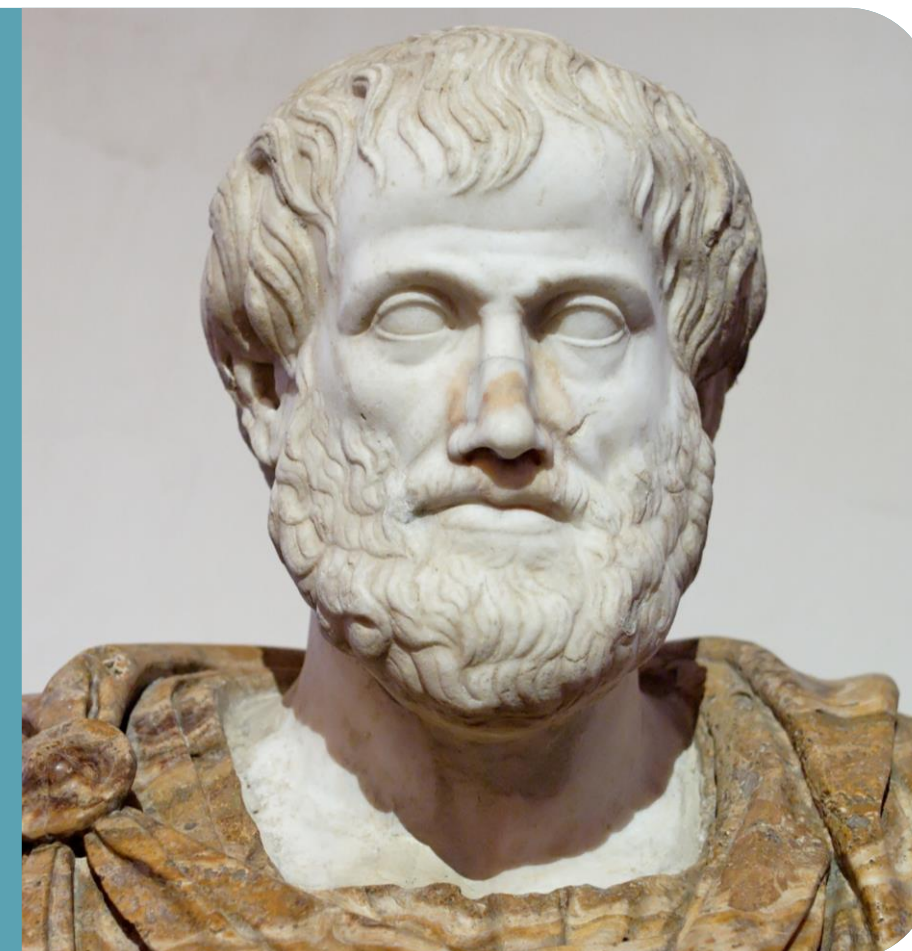
An **agent** performs an **act**. An **act** has **consequences**.

### Virtue Theories

most famously: Aristotle

384–322 BC

*Nicomachean Ethics*

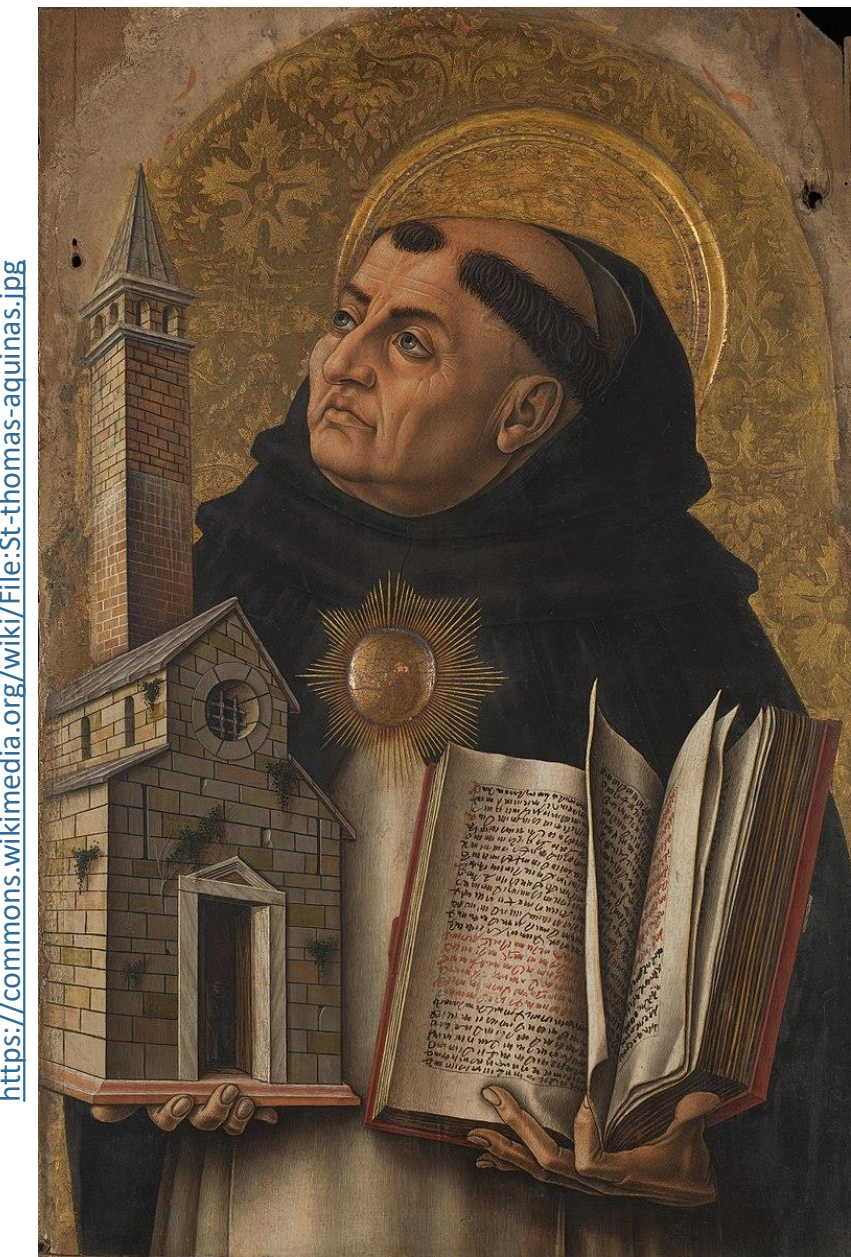
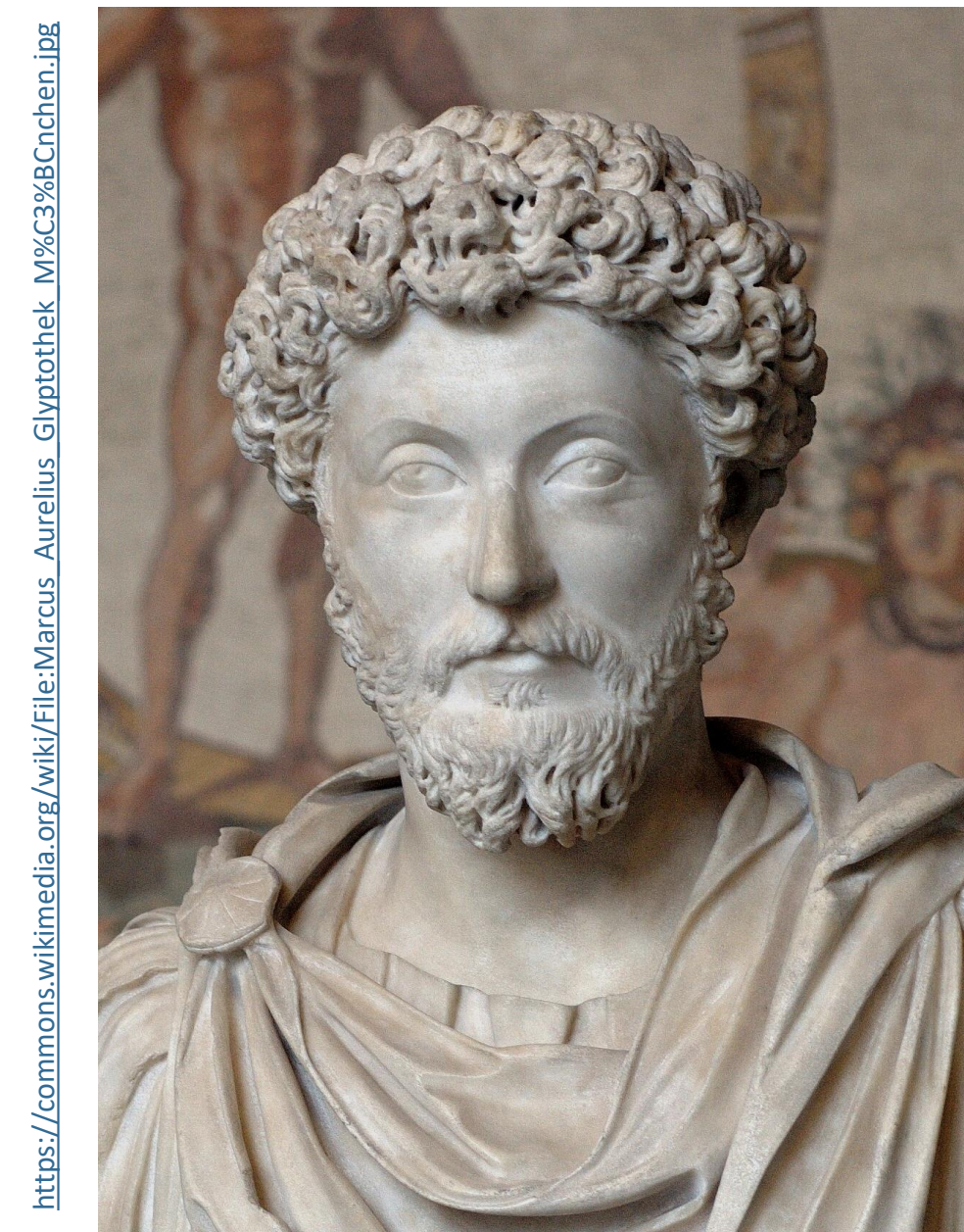
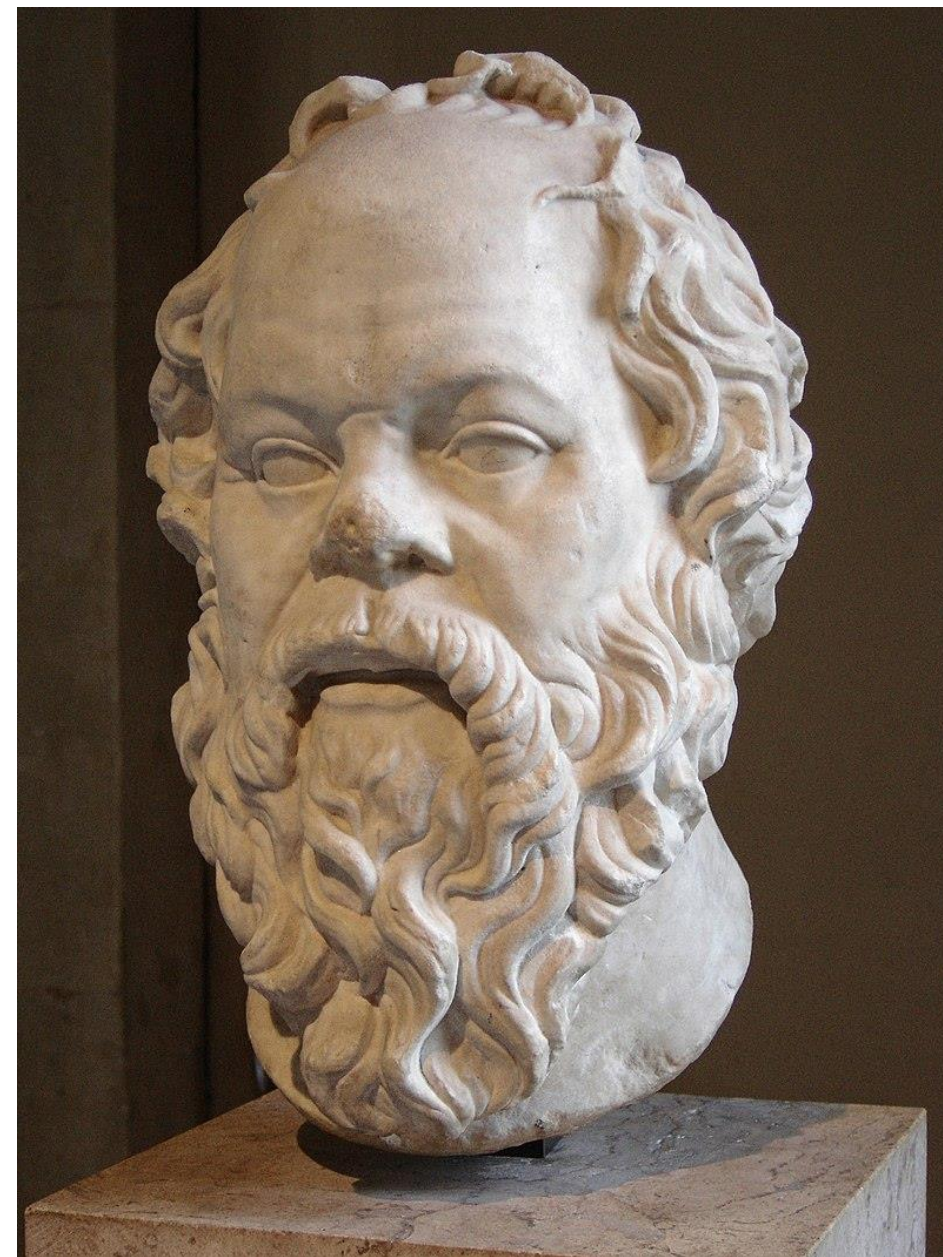


- Also called “aretaic ethics”
- (From the ancient Greek ἀρετή (arete), roughly meaning „excellence“)
- For virtue ethicists, what is the right action is a secondary question.
- The central question is: What is the right way to be for an agent?



# HISTORICAL REMARKS

- Virtue Ethics was the dominant approach in Western moral philosophy until the enlightenment.
  - Ancient: Aristotle, Platon/Socrates, Marcus Aurelius...
  - Postclassical (~ mediaeval times): Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham...
- Many philosophies from the East can also be best understood as virtue approaches (i.e. Confucius).
- Since the 1950's it had some revival, especially thanks to G.E.M. (Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret) Anscombe and, later, Rosalind Hursthouse.





## HISTORICAL REMARKS

### Contemporary Virtue Ethicists



(That's the guy with the integrity objection to consequentialism.)

Left to right: John McDowell, Philippa Foot, Bernard Williams



## BASIC IDEA OF THE ARISTOTELIAN SCHOOL

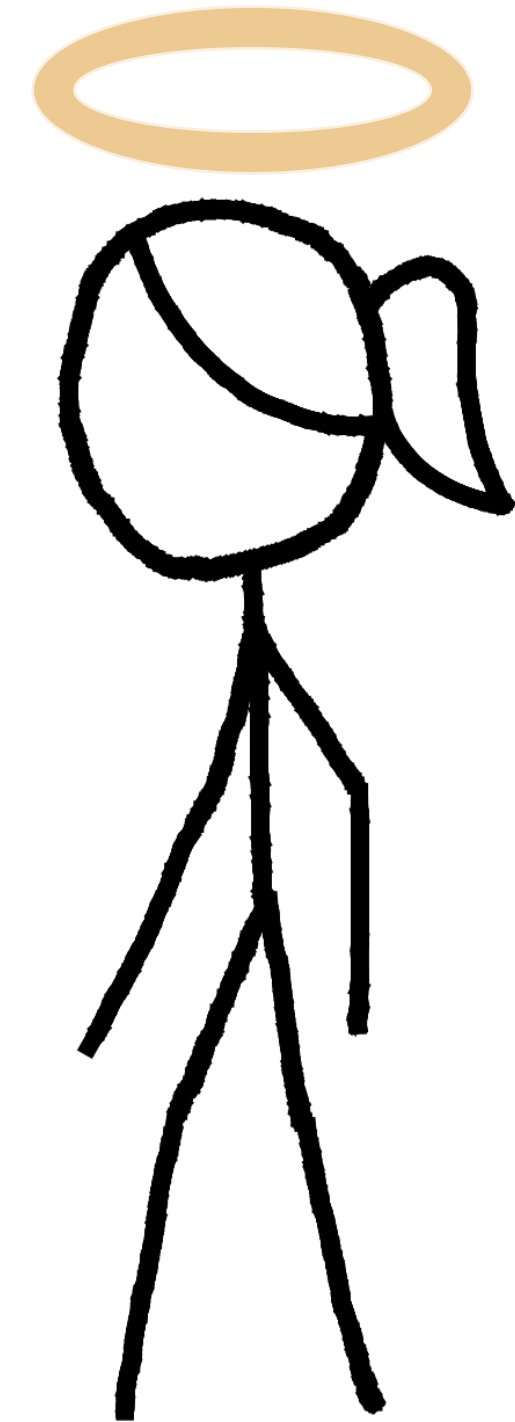


*Virtuous Person*

*Acting and feeling  
morally good &  
admirable*

*Practical Wisdom  
(Phronesis)*

- capable to *recognize* the *relevant features* of a situation
- capable to *adapt* to the situation *appropriately*
- comes only with *experience of life*





## OUR FOCUS: EUDAIMONIST VIRTUE ETHICS (OF ARISTOTLE)

Source: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue>

### Eudaimonia

standardly translated as “happiness” or “flourishing” and occasionally as “well-being.”

Each translation has its disadvantages

### (Eudaimonist characterization of) **Virtues**

- A virtue is a trait that contributes to or is a constituent of eudaimonia
- we ought to develop virtues, the eudaimonist claims, precisely because they contribute to eudaimonia.



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aristotle\\_Altemps\\_Inv8575.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aristotle_Altemps_Inv8575.jpg)

**Aristotle: Eudaimonist Virtue Ethics**

The moral/normative/deontic status of an action depends on the (character of the) agents themselves.

## Possible 'framework': Eudaimonism

Agent  $A$  ought to perform one of the right actions.

An option  $\phi$  is right in context  $C$  (for agent  $A$ ) if and only if  
a **virtuous** person (a **virtuous** version of  $A$ ) would  $\phi$  in  $C$ .

If a **virtuous** person would  $\phi$  in  $C$ , then because of the *right*, i.e., **virtuous** reasons.

An agent should be **virtuous**.

**Note:** This allows doing the right thing for the wrong reasons (meaning: motives).  
In such a case, one would *do* the right thing, but one would still not *be* right.



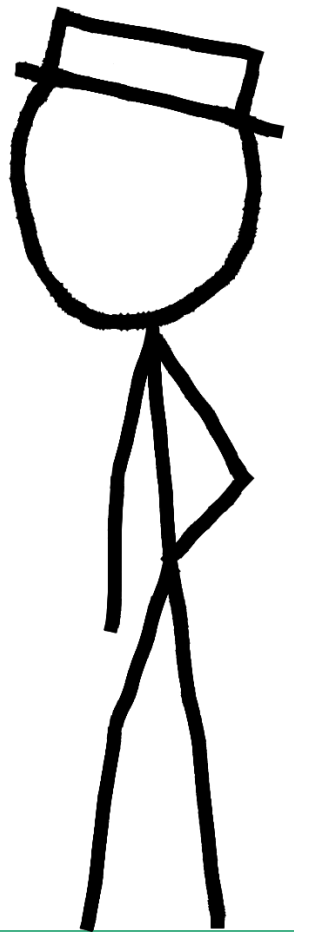
## RECALL KANT



Merchant A:

is honest with their customers  
**but only out of self-interest**

acting merely in accordance with duty



Merchant B:

is honest with their customers  
**because this is what moral duty demands**

acting from the motive of duty

everything less than this is too little for Kant



The moral/normative/deontic status of an action depends on the (character of the) agents themselves.

## Possible 'framework': Eudaimonism

Agent  $A$  ought to perform one of the right actions.

An option  $\phi$  is right in context  $C$  (for agent  $A$ ) if and only if a **virtuous** person (a **virtuous** version of  $A$ ) would  $\phi$  in  $C$ .

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An agent should be **virtuous**.

**Note:** This allows doing the right thing for the wrong reasons (meaning: motives).  
In such a case, one would *do* the right thing, but one would still not *be* right.

*What are virtues (and vices)?*

*Which virtues and vices?*

*What does it mean to be virtuous?*



- What is of relevance is to *be the right way* – to be like the virtuous, showing moral character. But what is that, *moral character*?



- Virtues do not come overnight or by pure will: they are the result of *training* and *experience*.
- Virtue theorists stress the importance of *moral education* (you are welcome! ;)).



# WHAT ARE VIRTUES

- But what are character traits?
- most plausible sort of thing for character traits: *dispositions*.



Sugar has the disposition to dissolve in water.

A brave person has the disposition to act in a certain way in specific situations.

## What are virtues (and vices)?



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Knight-Death-and-the-Devil.jpg>



1. **Prudence (German: Vernunft, Klugheit):** „In order to act well, we need to make good judgments about how we should behave.”/Being able to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason.
2. **Justice:** „The virtue of justice governs our relationships with others (*ST IIallae 57.1*). Specifically, it denotes a sustained or constant willingness to extend to each person what he or she deserves (*ST IIallae 58.1*).“
3. **Fortitude/Courage:** „[C]ourage and its subsidiary virtues modify what Aquinas calls the irascible appetite. By “irascible appetite” Aquinas means the desire for that which is difficult to attain or avoid (*ST Iallae 23.1*).“
4. **Temperance (German: Mäßigung):** „In a general sense, the term denotes a kind of moderation common to every moral virtue (*ST IIallae 141.2*). In its more restricted sense, temperance concerns the moderation of physical pleasures, especially those associated with eating, drinking, and sex (*ST IIallae 141.4*).“

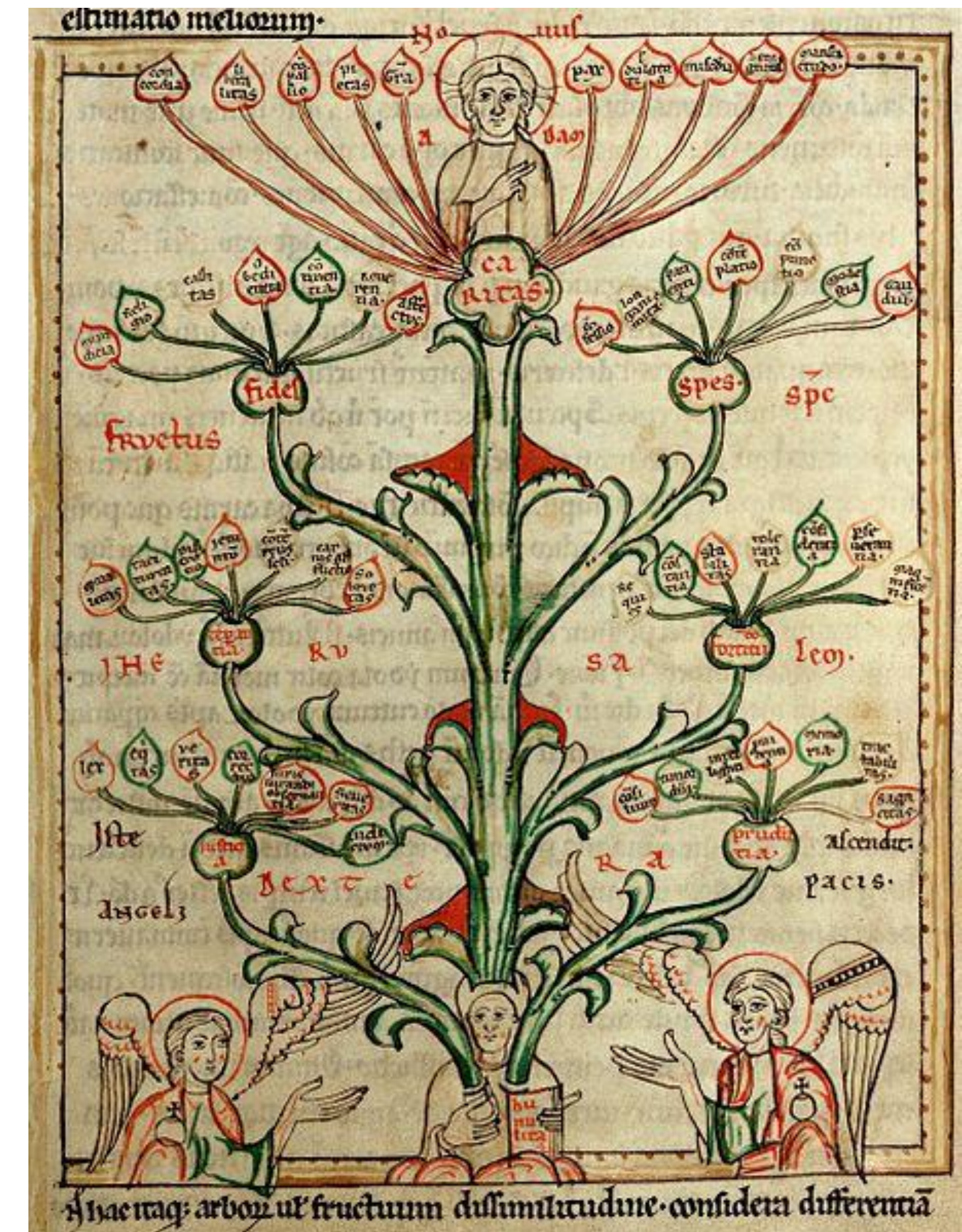
These virtues are interrelated: One without the other can be a bad thing.





# SEVEN VIRTUES ACCORDING TO THOMAS AQUINAS

1. Chastity (German: Keuschheit)
2. Temperance
3. Charity (German: Barmherzigkeit/Nächstenliebe)
4. Diligence (German: Gewissenhaftigkeit/Fleiß)
5. Patience (German: Geduld)
6. Kindness (German: Güte)
7. Humility (German: Bescheidenheit/Demut)



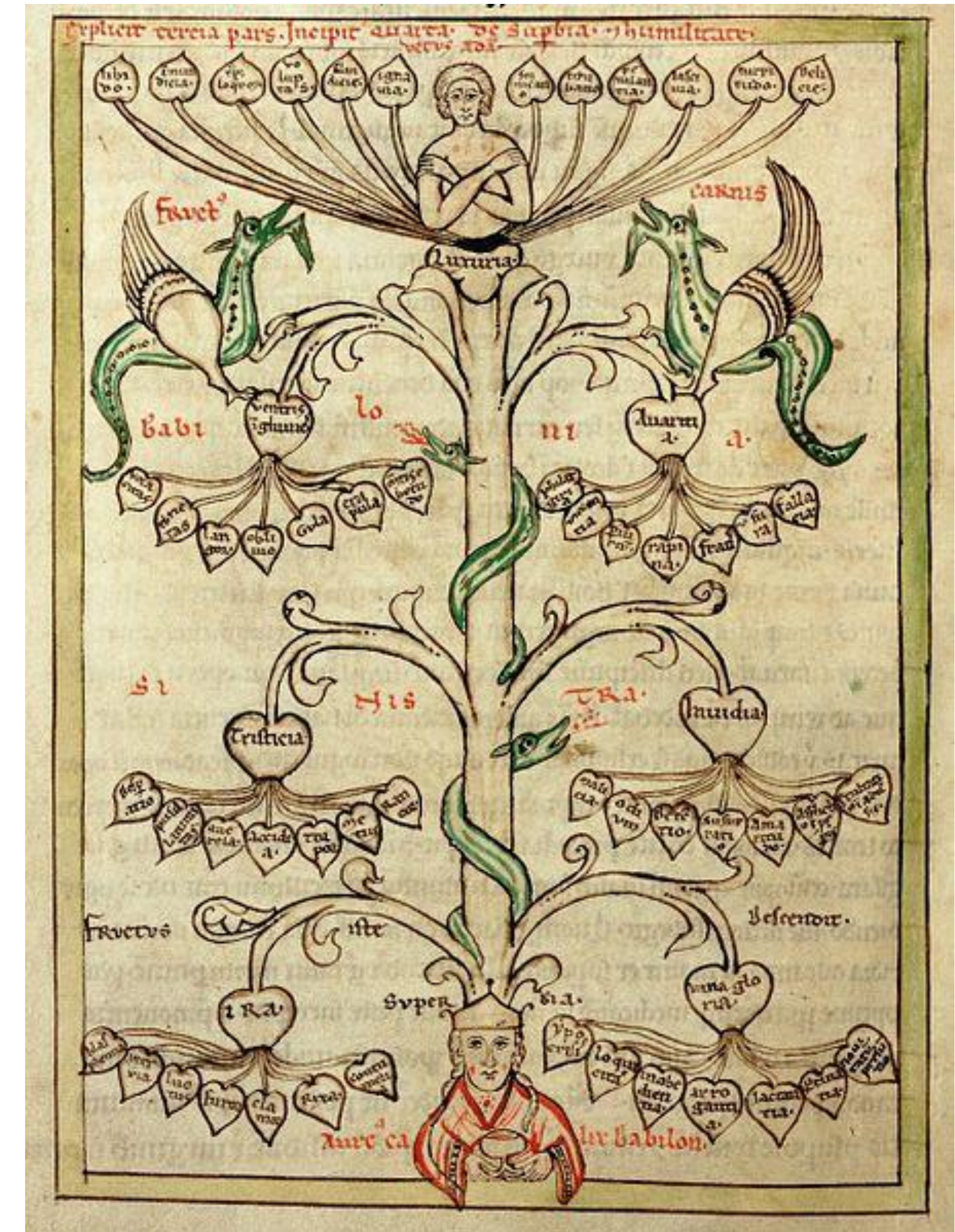


# SEVEN VICES ACCORDING TO THOMAS AQUINAS: THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

1. Lust
2. Gluttony (German: Völlerei)
3. Greed
4. Sloth (German: Faulheit/Trägheit)
5. Wrath (German: Zorn)
6. Envy (German: Eifersucht/Neid)
7. Pride

For Thomas (and the other Fathers of Church), vices and virtues are closely tied to live a good (or bad, respectively) life in the eyes of God.

(This idea is still alive: Linda Zagzebski's *Divine Motivation Theory* is a form of theologically based virtue theory that defines all moral properties of persons, acts, and outcomes of acts in terms of God's motives. )





## VIRTUES AND VICES ACCORDING TO ARISTOTLE

What does it mean to be virtuous?

Which virtues and vices?



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Balance\\_scale\\_MET\\_DP318014.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Balance_scale_MET_DP318014.jpg)



# VIRTUES AND VICES BY ARISTOTLE

What does it mean to be virtuous?

Which virtues and vices?

SPHERE OF ACTION OR FEELING
Fear and Confidence
Pleasure and Pain
Getting and Spending (minor)
Getting and Spending (major)
Honour and Dishonour (major)
Honour and Dishonour (minor)
Anger
Self-expression
Conversation
Social Conduct
Shame
Indignation ( <i>Empörung</i> )



# VIRTUES AND VICES BY ARISTOTLE

What does it mean to be virtuous?

Which virtues and vices?

SPHERE OF ACTION OR FEELING	VICES (EXCESSES)
Fear and Confidence	Rashness ( <i>Leichtsinn</i> )
Pleasure and Pain	Licentiousness ( <i>Zügellosigkeit</i> ) /Self-indulgence ( <i>Maßlosigkeit</i> )
Getting and Spending (minor)	Prodigality ( <i>Verschwendungssucht</i> )
Getting and Spending (major)	Vulgarity/Tastelessness
Honour and Dishonour (major)	Vanity ( <i>Eitelkeit</i> )
Honour and Dishonour (minor)	Ambition/empty vanity
Anger	Irascibility ( <i>Jähzorn</i> )
Self-expression	Boastfulness ( <i>Überheblichkeit/Prahlsucht</i> )
Conversation	Buffoonery ( <i>Possen/Clownhaftigkeit</i> )
Social Conduct	Obsequiousness ( <i>Unterwürfigkeit</i> )
Shame	Shyness
Indignation ( <i>Empörung</i> )	Envy



VIRTUES AND VICES BY ARISTOTLE

SPHERE OF ACTION OR FEELING	VICES (EXCESSES)
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Shame	Shyness
Indignation ( <i>Empörung</i> )	Envy

What does it mean to be virtuous?

Which virtues and vices?

VICES (DEFICITS)
Cowardice
Insensibility ( <i>Gefühllosigkeit/Gleichgültigkeit</i> )
Illiberality/Meanness
Pettiness ( <i>Engherzigkeit</i> )/ Stinginess ( <i>Geiz/Knausrigkeit</i> )
Pusillanimity ( <i>Kleinmut</i> )
Unambitiousness/undue humility
Lack of spirit/unirascibility
Understatement/mock modesty
Boorishness ( <i>Flegelhaftigkeit</i> )
Cantankerousness ( <i>Rechthaberei</i> )
Shamelessness
Malicious enjoyment/ Spitefulness ( <i>Schadenfreude</i> )



VIRTUES AND VICES BY ARISTOTLE

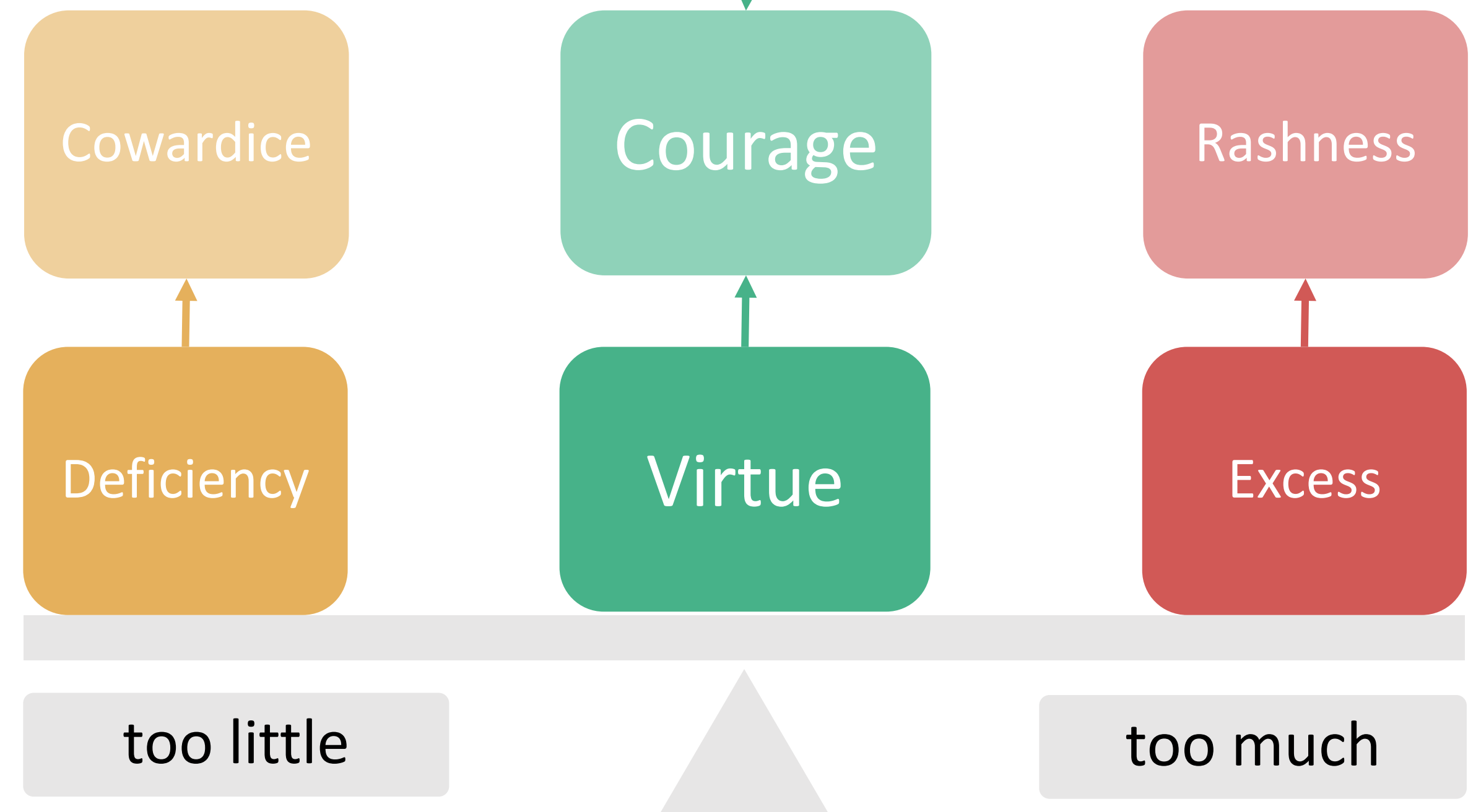
Which virtues and vices?

SPHERE OF ACTION OR FEELING	VICES (EXCESSES)	VIRTUES	VICES (DEFICITS)
Fear and Confidence	Rashness ( <i>Leichtsinn</i> )	Courage	Cowardice
Pleasure and Pain	Licentiousness ( <i>Zügellosigkeit</i> ) /Self-indulgence ( <i>Maßlosigkeit</i> )	Temperance	Insensibility ( <i>Gefühllosigkeit/Gleichgültigkeit</i> )
Getting and Spending (minor)	Prodigality ( <i>Verschwendungssucht</i> )	Liberality	Illiberality/Meanness
Getting and Spending (major)	Vulgarity/Tastelessness	Magnificence	Pettiness ( <i>Engherzigkeit</i> )/ Stinginess ( <i>Geiz/Knausrigkeit</i> )
Honour and Dishonour (major)	Vanity ( <i>Eitelkeit</i> )	Magnanimity ( <i>Großzügigkeit</i> )	Pusillanimity ( <i>Kleinmut</i> )
Honour and Dishonour (minor)	Ambition/empty vanity	Proper ambition/pride	Unambitiousness/undue humility
Anger	Irascibility ( <i>Jähzorn</i> )	Patience/Good temper	Lack of spirit/unirascibility
Self-expression	Boastfulness ( <i>Überheblichkeit/Prahlsucht</i> )	Truthfulness	Understatement/mock modesty
Conversation	Buffoonery ( <i>Possen/Clownhaftigkeit</i> )	Wittiness ( <i>Witzigkeit/Unterhaltsamkeit</i> )	Boorishness ( <i>Flegelhaftigkeit</i> )
Social Conduct	Obsequiousness ( <i>Unterwürfigkeit</i> )	Friendliness	Cantankerousness ( <i>Rechthaberei</i> )
Shame	Shyness	Modesty	Shamelessness
Indignation ( <i>Empörung</i> )	Envy	Righteous indignation	Malicious enjoyment/ Spitefulness ( <i>Schadenfreude</i> )



## The Doctrine of the Mean

- Virtues are the intermediate (the '*golden mean*') between two vices, one an *excess* and one a *deficiency*
- Where this mean lies is also a function of the particular circumstances, including features of the agent.
- Finding this mean is nothing mechanical, it requires thought and experience – and detailed acquaintance with the circumstances: it requires practical wisdom.



What does it mean to be virtuous?

Which virtues and vices?

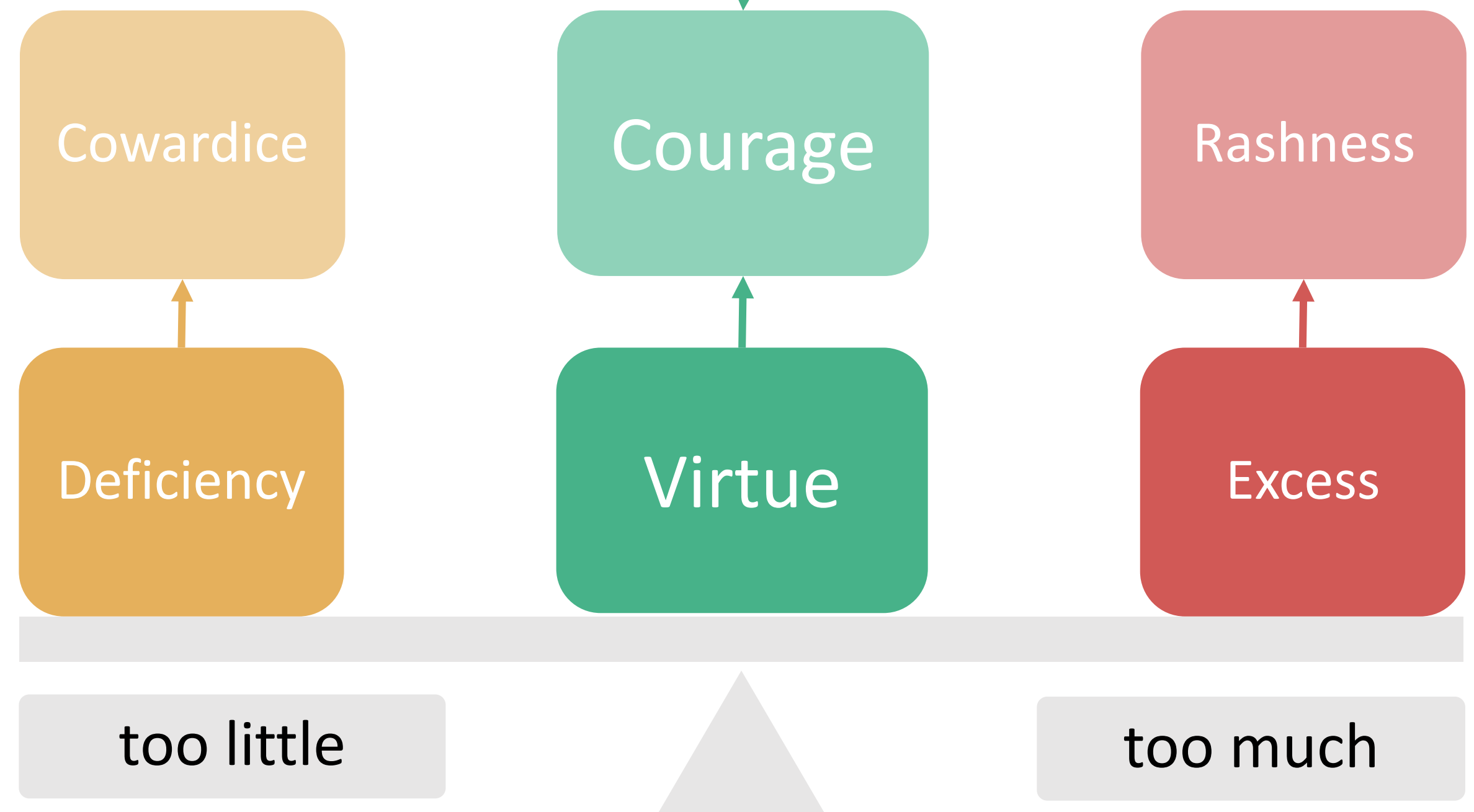


## BEING VIRTUOUS

- The virtuous agent knows him-/herself good enough to identify her possibilities and limits.
- The virtuous agent identifies relevant circumstances necessary to identify the 'golden means' in that circumstances.
- The virtuous agent finds the 'golden means' for her in that circumstances.
- The virtuous agent acts in accordance with these means.

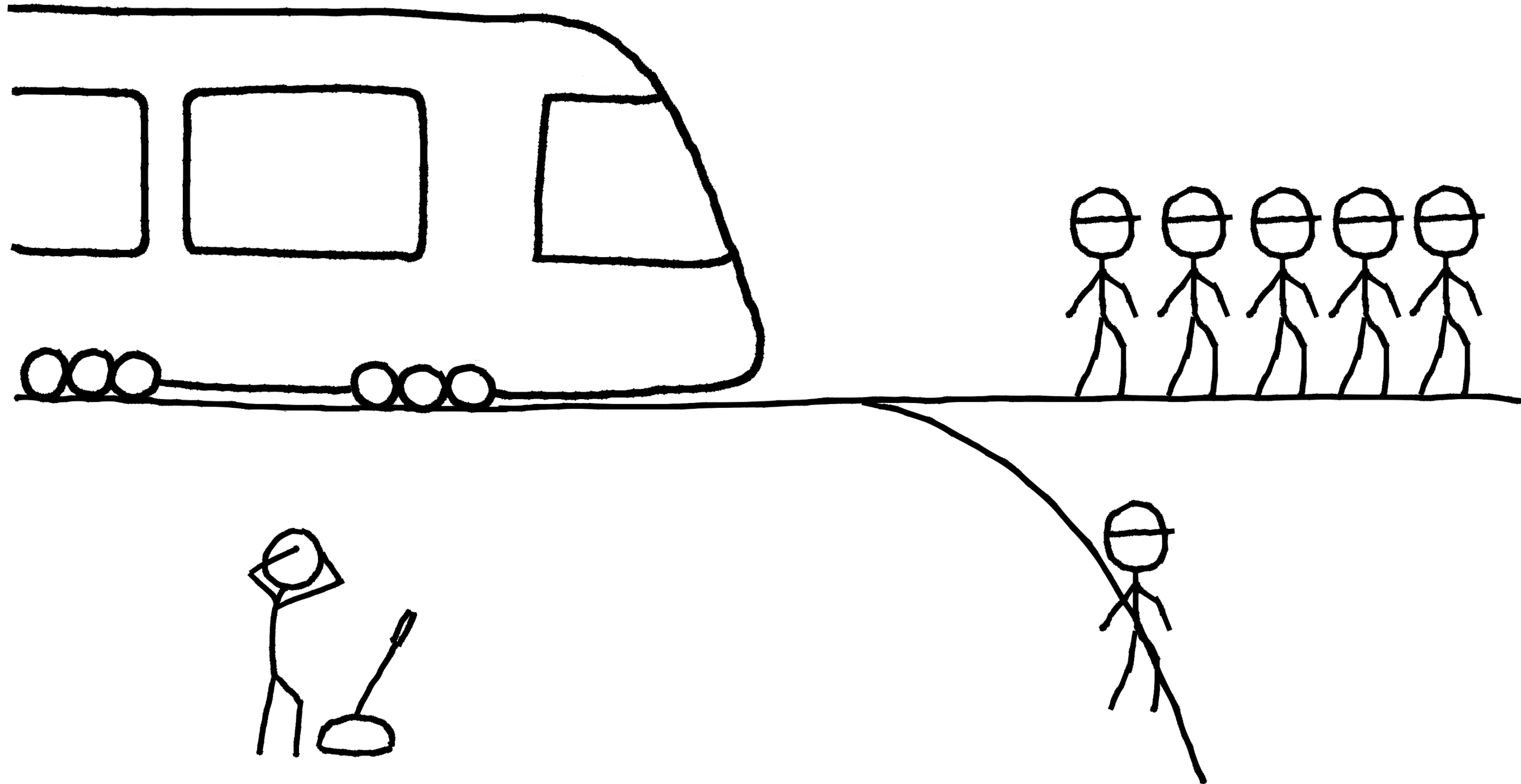
## What does it mean to be virtuous?

*depends on your physical, intellectual and mental capacities and involves self-control, self-awareness etc.*

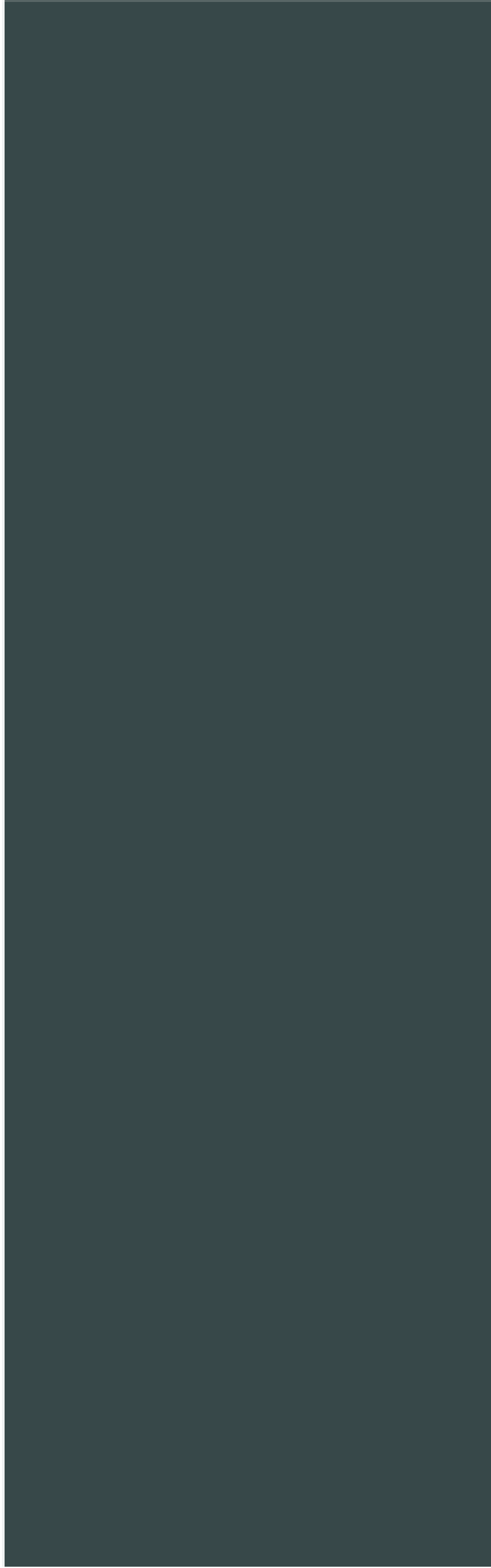
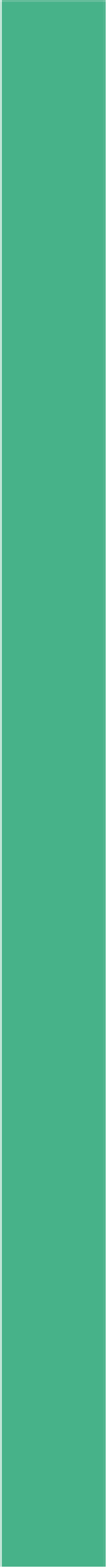
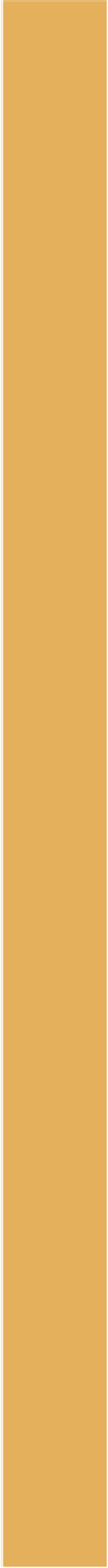




## EXAMPLE?







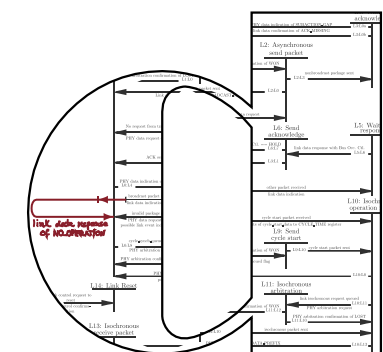




# Ethics for Nerds

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## Ethics 5.2 Problems of Virtue Ethics



Prof. Holger Hermanns,  
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## OUR FOCUS:



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aristotle\\_Altemps\\_In8575.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aristotle_Altemps_In8575.jpg)

**Aristotle:**  
**Eudaimonist Virtue Ethics**

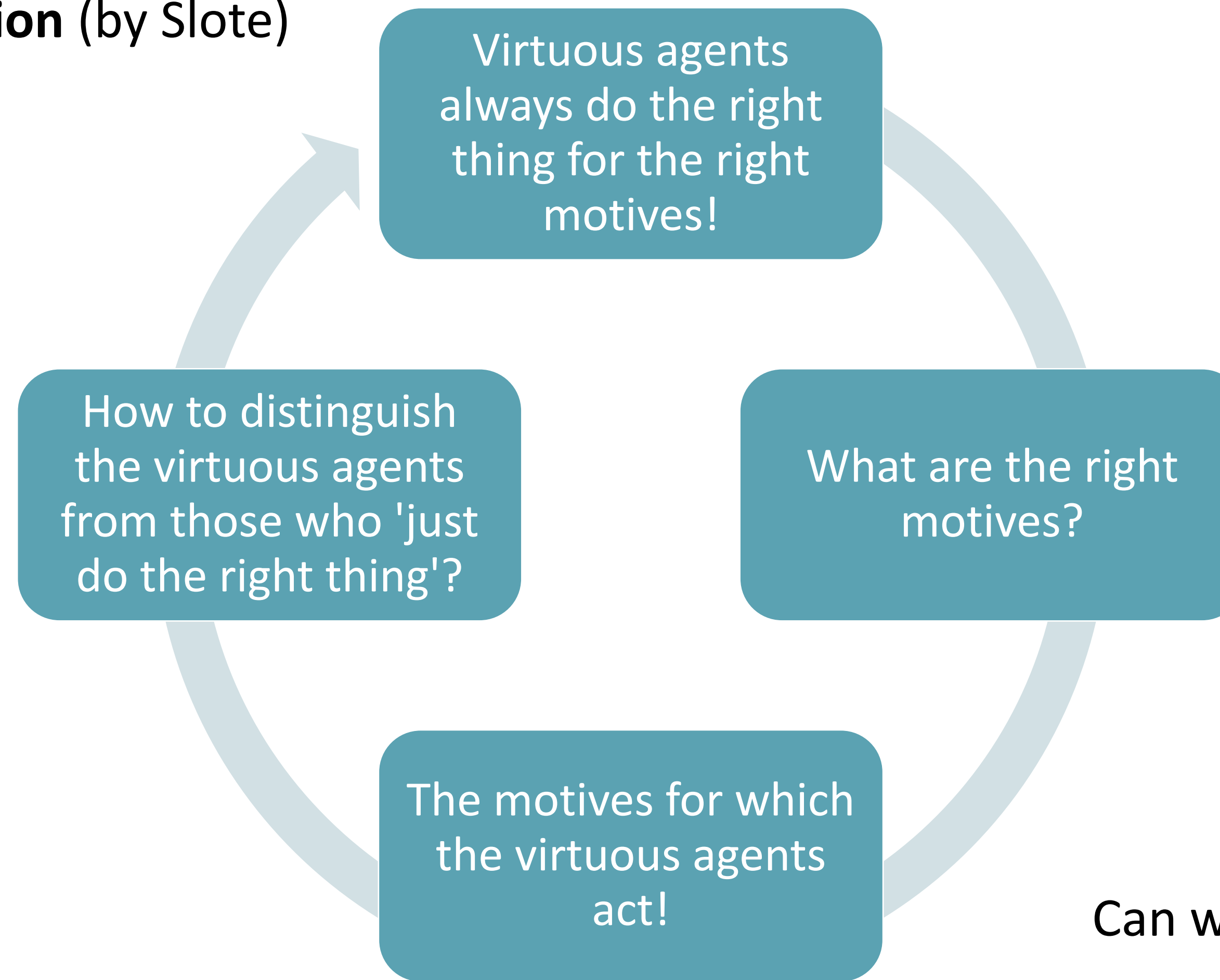


<https://people.miami.edu/profile/mslote@miami.edu>

**Michael Slote:**  
**Agent-Based/Exemplarist Virtue Ethics**



## The Circularity Objection (by Slote)



Can we eliminate this objection?



- The moral/normative/deontic status of an action depends on the (character of the) agents themselves.

## Possible 'framework': Exemplarism/Agent-Based Virtue Ethics

Agent  $A$  ought to perform one of the right actions.

An option  $\phi$  is right in  $C$  only if  $\phi$  expresses a **virtue**.

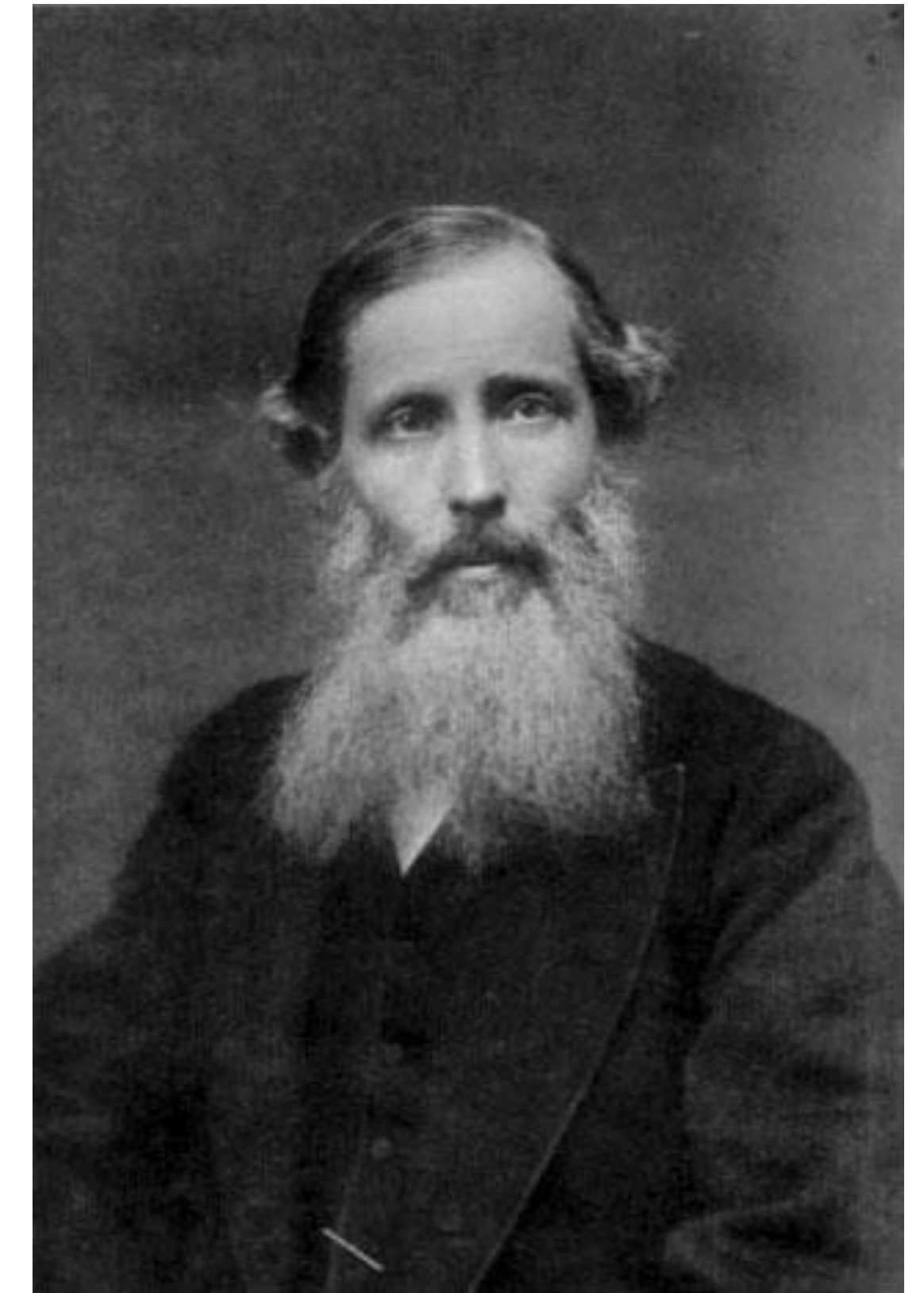
An option  $\phi$  is wrong in  $C$  only if  
 $\phi$  in  $C$  is an act that expresses a vice / is an act against a requirement of virtue.

**Note:** This does *not* allow doing the right thing for the wrong reasons (meaning: motives).  
If it is a right action, then precisely because it is done for virtuous reasons  
(i.e., it is expressing a virtue).



## Sidgwick's Malicious Prosecutor

- Prosecutor Evil Jim is obligated to prosecute Jane.
- Evil Jim feels great personal malice and ill-will for Jane.
- His central and decisive motive to prosecute Jane is this malice and ill-will of Evil Jim.
- Whatever Evil Jim does, he does wrongly so:
  - If Evil Jim prosecutes Jane, he acts wrongly because his action expresses a vice.
  - If he does not, he acts wrongly, because he neglects his obligations (which also expresses as vice).



[https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry\\_Sidgwick#/media/Datei:Henry\\_Sidgwick.jpg](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Sidgwick#/media/Datei:Henry_Sidgwick.jpg)

Henry Sidgwick (1839 - 1900) has used roughly that example for making a different point.

Originally anticipated by Michael Slote (Slote, Michael 2001. *Morals from Motives*, Oxford University Press) and reemphasized by Daniel Jacobson (Jacobson, Daniel 2001. "An Unsolved Problem for Slote's Agent-Based Virtue Ethics" in *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 111, No. 1, pp. 53-67)



# INTERNAL CRITICISM OF AGENT-BASED VIRTUE ETHICS

## Sidgwick's Malicious Prosecutor

- There seems nothing right for Evil Jim to do.
- The main problem with this:

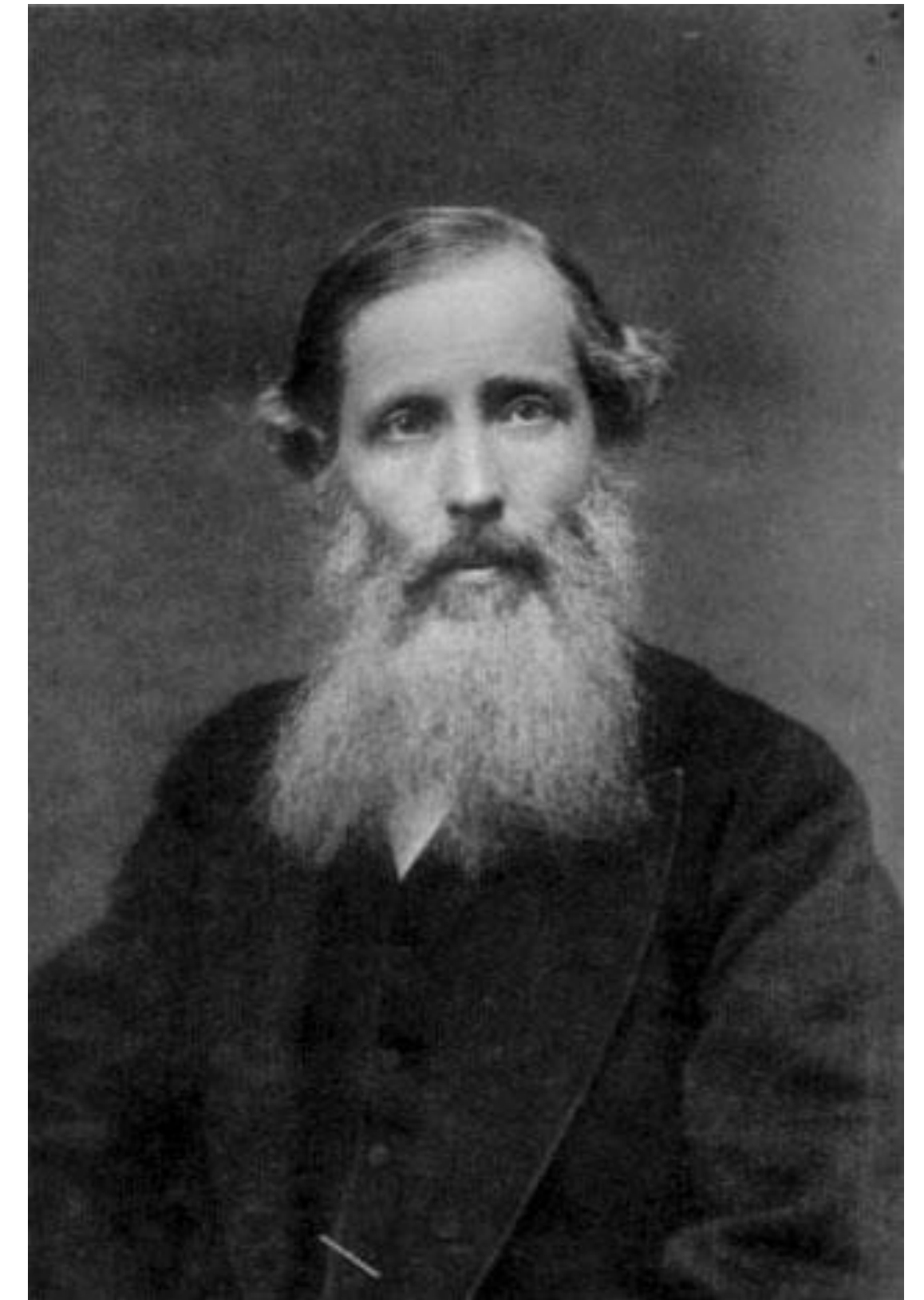
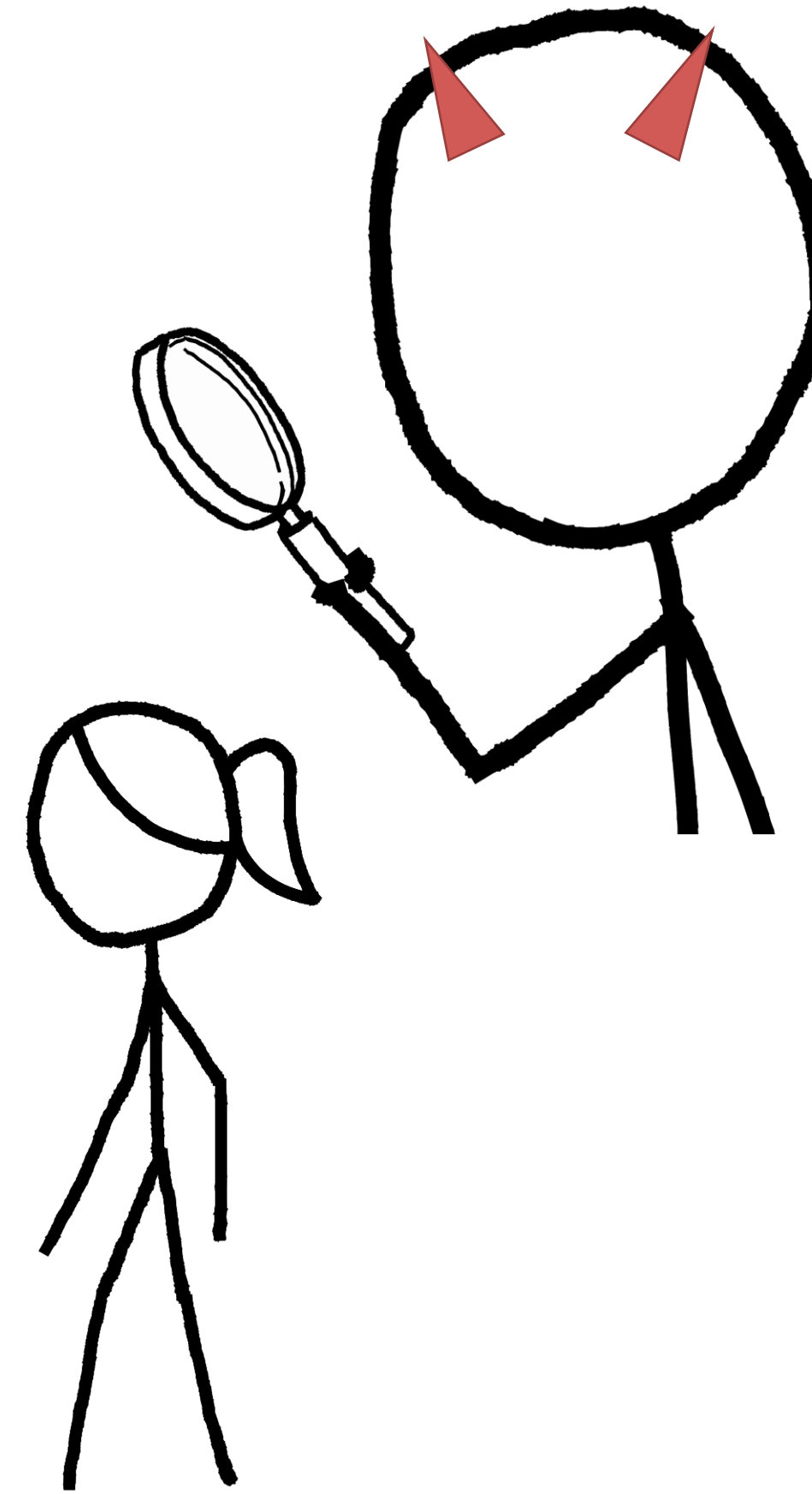
Either badly motivated persons (like Evil Jim) do not have obligations at all according to the theory or the theory violates a famous and widely accepted (meta-)normative principle known as:

**“Ought implies can” (version by Kant):**

*The action to which the "ought" applies must indeed be possible under natural conditions.*

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. A548/B576. p. 473.

- Jim ought to do one of the right actions, but there are no such actions.



[https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry\\_Sidgwick#/media/Datei:Henry\\_Sidgwick.jpg](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Sidgwick#/media/Datei:Henry_Sidgwick.jpg)

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## Further Potential Pitfalls of Virtue Theories

- Need a proper concept of dispositions/character traits.
- Which virtues? Can there be conflicts (think of courage vs. prudence)? If so, how to resolve them?
- If we can form/change our own character only over time, can we be responsible for our wrongdoings? I might be to blame for my neglect of my moral education and training, but am I to blame for specific wrong-doings?
- ...



