Chapter 6
Moral Virtues
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We can experience fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity, and generally any kind of pleasure and pain either too much or too little, and in either case not properly. But to experience all this at the right time, toward the right objects, toward the right people, for the right reason, and in the right manner—that is the mean and the best course, the course that is the mark of virtue.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

Suppose, however, that in articulating the problems of morality the ordering of evaluative concepts has been misconceived by the spokesman of modernity and more particularly of liberalism; suppose that we need to attend to virtues in the first place in order to understand the function and authority of rules.

Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*

**Introduction**

Virtue is a central part of our moral life. We can see virtue as trained behavioral disposition that results in habitual acts of moral goodness. And we can see its opposite vice as a trained behavioral disposition that results in habitual acts of moral wrongness. The searching for virtues, such as generosity, courage and honesty, means the searching for morally good life, which brings us real happiness. Only the society constituted from morally good people is the real happy one.

There are three branches of normative ethics. Virtue ethics, deontology and consequentialism. The second two are sometimes called “action-based ethics” because they deal with the action itself and the criteria or rules by which an action can be judged. For instance, deontology focuses on “duty” while consequentialism deals with “utility” in order to judge an action. But such ways of judging our actions ask people to follow a behavior which follows a certain rule or leads to a certain outcome, even though a person might not think it is right from the bottom of their heart. Virtue ethics emphasizes more the virtues of individuals and how to develop them. The moral
virtues, however, are the inner dynamo of people which leads them to become morally good people and direct their good actions. The virtues are not only instruments, with which people can judge behavior, but they are an intrinsic good – something inside a person – which leads to a happy human life and a harmonious society.

**History and Concept of Virtues**

The term “virtue” is from Latin and originally meant “strength” or “power”. It is based on the word *vir* - man. The ancient Greeks, starting with Homer, praised virtue. The Greek term for virtue was *areté*. The Greek philosopher Aristotle developed a whole science of virtues. This became dominant in moral philosophy for 2000 years, and philosophers who followed Aristotle made virtues the centerpiece of their systems. Here we can examine the historical development of virtue theory briefly.

**The Development of the Concept of Virtues in the West**

**The Ancient Greek**

Western tradition of virtue ethics began with the ancient Greeks. The Greek philosopher Plato (428/427-348/347 B.C.) offered a short list that has been dubbed “cardinal virtues”---simply meaning the “main virtues.” In his famous book the *Republic* Plato contended that the healthy functioning of the state requires three different groups of people with their own particular virtues: the rulers, the soldiers and the civilians. The ruler needs wisdom (prudence), the soldiers need courage, the civilians need temperance. All people need justice (harmony). (Book IV, 426-435) Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), the most famous student of Plato, wrote several books about ethics and established the influential tradition of virtue ethics. His theory will be discussed in more detail in the following part of this chapter.

**The Medieval Age**

In Christianity, the three theological virtues are faith, hope and love. Christian scholars frequently add the four Greek cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, and courage) to the theological virtues to arrive at seven virtues, which are two sets of virtues: from ancient Greek philosophy, are prudence, justice, temperance (meaning restriction or restraint), and courage (or
fortitude); and the three theological virtues, from the letters of Saint Paul of Tarsus, are faith, hope, and love. These were adopted by the Church Fathers as the seven virtues.

The “Seven Heavenly Virtues” are opposed to the “Seven Deadly Sins”, which are pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth. They are thought as sins because they are abuses or excessive versions of one's natural faculties or passions, for example, gluttony abuses one's desire to eat.

Virtue ethics basically occupied the center of moral discussion together with overwhelming dominance of Christianity in Europe.

**The Modern World**

The modern period began with Continental Rationalism and British Empiricism; the former emphasized the faculty of reason for human knowledge and the latter emphasized experience. The emphasis on reason reached its climax in Immanuel Kant’s (1723-1803) philosophy. For Kant, in the field of ethics, morality became the “imperative” of reason. The sheer respect for experience led to the skepticism of David Hume (1711-1776). He reduced morality to psychological emotions. For both of them the discussion of virtues and the role they played in morality began to disappear from Western philosophy.

**The Contemporary Revival of Virtue Ethics**

The contemporary revival of virtue theory is frequently traced to the philosopher G. E. M. Anscombe's (1919-2001) 1958 essay “Modern Moral Philosophy”. But the most famous figure is Alasdair MacIntyre (born 1929), who has made an effort to reconstruct a virtue-based theory in dialogue with the problems of modern and postmodern thought. His most representative work is *After Virtue* (1981).

**Four Cardinal Virtues**

The Four Cardinal Virtues were formulated in the writings of Classical Antiquity and, also recognized (along with the theological virtues) in the Christian tradition. They were, as we saw, firstly indicated by Plato in his famous work the *Republic*. 
1) Prudence: (φρόνησις, *phronēsis*; Latin: *prudentia*): also described as wisdom, the ability to judge between actions with regard to appropriate actions at a given time;

2) Temperance: (σωφροσύνη, *sōphrosynē*; Latin: *temperantia*): also known as restraint, the practice of self-control, abstention, discretion, and moderation tempering the *appetition*; especially sexually, hence the meaning of chastity;

3) Fortitude: (ἀνδρεία, *andreia*; Latin: *fortitudo*): also termed fortitude, forbearance, strength, endurance, and the ability to confront fear, uncertainty, and intimidation;

4) Justice: (δικαιοσύνη, *dikaiosynē*; Latin: *iustitia*): also considered as fairness, the most extensive and most important virtue; the Greek word also having the meaning righteousness.

The four cardinal virtues of Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance are interconnected. This means that if you do not possess one of them, all the others are incomplete and compromised, and so you do not possess virtue at all. A few examples. A man might know what is good, and know what he must do to get good results, but if he lacks temperance his decisions will be swayed by his love of pleasure. Or a man might be willing to risk his life, yet his actions are not guided by the right purpose. A bank robber who risks his life is not a prudent man, and so cannot be called a brave man.

**The Ideal Model: Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics**

**Ethics as a Branch of Politics**

In Aristotle’s classic work on the virtues, Nicomachean Ethics, he identified virtues as simply those characteristics that enable individuals to live well in communities. To achieve a state of well-being (from the Greek *eudaimnonia*, meaning “happiness’ or “human flourishing”), proper social institutions are necessary. Thus, the moral person cannot really exist apart from a flourishing political setting that enables him or her to develop the required virtues for the good life. For this reason, ethics is considered a branch of politics. The polis, which is different from the political state nowadays but a community of life, is not neutral toward the good life but should actively encourage citizens to develop the virtues, which in turn are the best guarantee of a flourishing political order.
**Eudaemonia as the Function of Humans**

For Aristotle, all things have their essence and function, for instance it is the function of a knife to cut well. Human beings also have functions. The function of a doctor is to heal the sick and restore health, the function of a ruler to govern society well. Humanity in general also has a function. It is to use reason in pursuit of the good life (*Eudaimonia*). The virtues indicate the kind of moral-political characteristics necessary for people to reach their function which is their happiness.

**Moral and Intellectual Virtues**

After locating ethics as a part of politics, Aristotle explains that the moral virtues are different from the intellectual ones. Whereas the intellectual virtues may be taught directly, the moral ones must be lived to be learned.

**Intellectual Virtues**

The intellectual virtues include: scientific knowledge (*episteme*), artistic or technical knowledge (*techne*), intuitive reason (*nous*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and philosophic wisdom (*sophia*). Scientific knowledge is a knowledge of what is necessary and universal. Artistic or technical knowledge is a knowledge of how to make things, or of how to develop a craft. Intuitive reason is the process that establishes the first principles of knowledge. Practical wisdom is the capacity to act in accordance with the good of humanity. Philosophic wisdom is the combination of intuitive reason and scientific knowledge.

**Moral Virtues**

Moral virtues are not innate, but that they are acquired through exercising them. An individual becomes truthful by acting truthfully, or becomes unselfish by acting unselfishly.

According to Aristotle, the moral virtues include: courage, temperance, self-discipline, moderation, modesty, humility, generosity, friendliness, truthfulness, honesty, justice. The moral vices include: cowardice, self-indulgence, recklessness, wastefulness, greed, vanity, untruthfulness, dishonesty, injustice. Acts of virtue bring honor to an individual, acts of vice bring dishonor to an individual.
The Golden Mean

By living well, we acquire the right habits; these habits are in fact the virtues. The virtues are to be sought as the best guarantee to the happy life. But, again, happiness requires that we be lucky enough to live in a flourishing polis. The morally virtuous life consists in living in moderation, according to the Golden Mean. By the Golden Mean, Aristotle means that the virtues are at a middle ground between excess and deficiency. For example, courage is the mean between cowardice and fool-hardiness; liberality is the mean between stinginess and unrestrained giving. He indicates,

We can experience fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity, and generally any kind of pleasure and pain either too much or too little, and in either case not properly. But to experience all this at the right time, toward the right objects, toward the right people, for the right reason, and in the right manner—that is the mean and the best course, the course that is the mark of virtue. (Nicomachean Ethics, 1099a)

An Elitist View of Virtues

Aristotle held a rather elitist view that people have unequal abilities to be virtuous: Some are endowed with great ability, but others lack it altogether. For some people it is natural for them to be slaves. An event for those who are capable of developing moral dispositions can be prevented by circumstances from reaching the goal of happiness. The moral virtues are a necessary but not a sufficient condition for happiness. One must, in addition to being virtuous, be healthy, wealthy, wise, and have good fortune.

Moral Courage

The Ideal Individual

But if we observe the moral phenomenon generally, we will find that Aristotle’s so-called “elitist view” is not necessarily discriminatory but could be understood as a kind of truth. There are really some people who present more virtue than others. For instance: Jesus, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa…etc. Why are these people so different from others? Here we could provide a simple answer: They have more moral courage than others.
Moral courage could be understood as: The determination to act to maintain righteousness, fairness and justice in society despite the difficulties and the risk of doing so. All of us might have “the beginning of goodness” (as the Chinese philosopher Mencius contends), but only some people have the courage to practice virtuous behavior in the face of obstacles. We call them the “ideal individual of morality.” They are the models of morality for all human beings.

Factors of an Act of Moral Courage

Moral courage can be understood through four factors:

1) Acting with righteousness, fairness, respect, responsibility, and honesty.
2) Passion and commitment to act despite the risks of doing so and the forthcoming dangers.
3) Being prudent and flexible in response to the risks.
4) Practice, Practice, and Practice.

Virtue in the Great World Cultures

The tradition of virtue ethics was not only dominant in Western culture, but also in other cultures. We can see this clearly in Chinese culture and Buddhism.

Cardinal Virtues in China

“Four Robes” by Guan Zhong

Guan Zhong (管仲, c. 720–645 B.C.) was a chancellor and reformer of the State of Qi during the Spring and Autumn Period (771-476 B.C.) of Chinese history. The book Guanzi (管子), named for and attributed to Guan Zhong, was a collection of political and philosophical texts compiled by his disciples. The chapter “On Shepherding the People” (Mumin 牧民) said:

A country has four robes (Si Wei 四維). If one robe breaks off, then the country becomes inclined; if two break off, then the country exposes in danger; if three then the country falls; if four then the country perishes. What are called the four
robes? The first one is propriety (Li 禮), the second righteousness (Yi 義), the third honesty (Lian 廉), the forth (the sense of) shame (Chi 耻). If people know the propriety, they will not get beyond the code of conduct; if they know righteousness, they will not toady for personal gain; if they are honest, they will not whitewash the mean conduct; if they have the sense of shame, they will not do the unjust conduct.

The four virtues are not only important to individual, but also to the country. This concept of the four robes was advocated through the dynasties of China.

“Five Basic Virtues” in Confucianism

Confucianism thinks that there are “five basic virtues” (五常德) for individuals to live well in a society, they are human-heartedness (Ren 仁), righteousness (Yi 義), propriety (Li 禮), knowledge (Zhi 智) and trustworthiness (Sin 信). Confucius (551-479 B.C.) emphasized the first three, Mencius (327-289 B.C.) added the fourth and in the Western-Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-9 A.D.) Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒, 179-104 B.C.) added the last one.

Mencius even indicated that human-heartedness, righteousness, propriety and knowledge are the “beginnings” of the essence of man:

From this case we may perceive that the feeling of commiseration is essential to man, that the feeling of shame and dislike is essential to man, that the feeling of modesty and complaisance is essential to man, and that the feeling of approving and disapproving is essential to man. The feeling of commiseration is the beginning of human-heartedness. The feeling of shame and dislike is the beginning of righteousness. The feeling of modesty and complaisance is the beginning of propriety. The feeling of approving and disapproving is the beginning of knowledge. Men have these four beginnings just as they have their four limbs. When men, having these four beginnings, yet say of themselves that
they cannot develop them, they play the thief with themselves. (Mencius, Ch. Gong Sun Chou I)

For Confucianism the five basic virtues, similar to the “Four Robes”, are not only the constituents of perfect humanity, but also of a harmonious society. These five basic virtues prevailed throughout the rest of Chinese history.

**Cardinal Virtues in Buddhist Tradition**

This book has a special chapter focuses on Buddhist ethics which deals with this topic in detail. But for our purposes of demonstrating virtue ethics, we can refer to the “Noble Eightfold Path,” which can be regarded as a progressive list of virtues. Buddha’s main concern was to prevent the suffering in human life, and the Noble Eightfold Path is the ‘right path’ which can lead people to escape from suffering.

1) Right View (正見): We should have the right view about life and recognize that our actions have consequences; death is not the end, and our actions and beliefs have also consequences after death; the Buddha followed and taught a successful path beyond this world and the other worlds (heaven and underworld/hell);

2) Right Resolve (正思惟): This involves giving up one’s home and adopting the life of a religious mendicant in order to follow the path; this concept aims at the peaceful renunciation of the world and entering an environment of non-sensuality, non-ill-will (loving kindness), absence of cruelty (compassion). Such an environment aids contemplation of impermanence, suffering, and non-Self;

3) Right Speech (正語): No lying, rude speech, gossip about other people, and only speaking that which leads to salvation;

4) Right Conduct (正業): No killing or injuring, no taking what is not given, no improper sexual acts;

5) Right Livelihood (正命): Beg for food, only possessing what is essential to sustain life;
6) Right Effort (正精進): Guarding against sensual thoughts; this concept aims at preventing unwholesome states that disrupt meditation;

7) Right Mindfulness (正念): Never be absent minded, being conscious of what one is doing; this, encourages the mindfulness about impermanence of body, feeling and mind, as well as to experience the five aggregates (skandhas), the five hindrances, the four True Realities and seven factors of awakening.

8) Right Samadhi (正定): Practicing four stages of meditation (dhyāna) culminating into unification of the mind.

Buddha indicated that if we want to escape suffering, become enlightened and achieve ultimate nirvana, we should follow the eightfold-path.

Conclusion

The emphasis on virtue in moral life is the common point of most influential cultures. Virtue is the essential part of humanity. Both in Aristotle’s ethics and in ancient Chinese thought we see that virtue is not only important for individual development of morality, but also important for a happy and harmonious society. If most members of the society tend to be virtuous, then the society will not fall into Hobbesian “state of nature” of war of all against all.

The claim from virtue ethics is simple and intuitive: We don’t need too many moral regulations and criterion to teach us how to follow morally good behavior. Just learn to be a virtuous person and then what one does will be naturally good. The search for virtue is, in fact, also the search for a happy life: choose to be a virtuous person, by choosing to live a virtuous life.

References


**Questions for further Reflection**

1. Recount briefly the historical development of virtue ethics in Western culture and the four cardinal virtues.

2. Please clarify the points of Aristotle’s virtue ethics.

3. Please explain the “Four Robes” and the “Five Basic Virtues” in Chinese culture.

4. Please illustrate the “Noble Eightfold Path” in Buddhism.

**Recommendation for further Reading**


