

1 Virtue Ethics: A Very Brief Introduction

- **Virtues are good features of a person's character.**

DISCUSSION QUESTION 1: Who are some people you admire? What do you admire about them?

- **Virtues are not *actions*.**

ARISTOTLE: “[The] possession of virtue seems actually compatible with being asleep, or with lifelong inactivity.”¹

AQUINAS: “Moreover, virtues exist in sleepers, because they are only taken away by mortal sin. But there are no virtuous acts of sleepers, since they do not have the use of free will. Therefore, virtues are not acts.”²

DISCUSSION QUESTION 2: My friend Trent is a trombone player. Does Trent cease to be a trombone player when he goes to sleep? If he does not, what kind of thing makes someone into a trombone player?

- **Virtues are the *mean* between two extremes.**

AQUINAS: “Moreover, the middle and extremes belong to the same thing. But virtue is a kind of mean between contrary passions, as courage between fear and boldness, and temperance between too much and too little in things desired.”³

Virtues are always “sandwiched” between two **vices**.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 3: *Generosity* and *honesty* are virtues. What are the two extremes these virtues are “sandwiched” between?

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I §5. Trans. WD Ross.

² Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, A1, *sed contra*. Trans. Ralph McInerny.

³ Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the Virtues*, A4, *sed contra*. Trans. Ralph McInerny.

- **Virtuous acts must be done for the right reason**

All virtue ethicists believe that for an action to be virtuous (to come out of virtue), it must be done for the *right reason*. But virtue ethicists don't all agree about what the *right reason* for action is.

The *Stoics* believe that you should only be motivated to do the right thing because it's the right thing. Nothing else.

Aristotle thinks that when we do the right thing, we should (at least sometimes) be motivated by *emotion*.

2 Aristotle vs. the Stoics + Kant

KANT: "We have a duty to be charitably helpful where we can, and many people are so sympathetically constituted that without any motive of vanity or selfishness they find an inner satisfaction in spreading joy and take delight in the contentment of others if they have made it possible. But I maintain that such behavior, done in that spirit, has no true moral worth, however amiable it may be and however much it accords with duty."⁴

SENECA: "My father will be murdered: then I will defend him: he has been slain, then I will avenge him, not because I am grieved, but because it is my duty."⁵

ARISTOTLE: "But we must take the pleasure or pain that [comes along with a person's] actions to be a sign of the state of his character. For if someone who abstains from bodily pleasures enjoys this abstinence itself, he is temperate; but if he is grieved by it, he is intemperate."⁶

DISCUSSION QUESTION 4: Who do you think you side with more? Aristotle or the Stoics, and Kant?

⁴ *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 8, trans. Jonathan Bennett

⁵ *De Ira* I12, trans. Aubrey Stewart

⁶ *NE* 2.3 1104b5–10. Trans. Terrence Irwin.

3 A divide in *common sense*?

Some philosophers believe that the disagreement between Aristotle and the Stoics + Kant is a *divide in common sense*.

JULIA ANNAS: “That [these views] are so different suggests that this is a deeply difficult issue. It seems at first that the Aristotelians stay closer to common sense, which rejects the thought of getting rid of emotions. But...[The Stoics/Kant] are arguably closer to common sense, since common sense appears to back the thought that it is sufficient for the virtuous person to act, that he recognizes that virtue requires. Common sense appears to be divided on this issue.”⁷

Despite initial appearances, if Annas is right here, it is **very important** and has **huge implications** for our moral reasoning.

“**Common sense**” is a technical term in philosophy. Common sense is constituted by what *seems to be true to us*.

So, what seems to be the case to *us* when it comes to *ethics* is our conscience. If there is a divide in our conscience, then maybe we shouldn’t trust it! Which is really bad news.

Today, I’m going to argue that common sense is **not** divided on this issue—Aristotle’s view is commonsensical, and the Stoic/Kantian position is not.

⁷ Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, p. 66.

4 But how is it even possible to argue for something like that??

DISCUSSION QUESTION 5: Can you ever be mistaken about what's going on in your own mind?

What I need to show is that you can be mistaken about what *seems to be true* to you.

EXAMPLES:

- *What is the answer to $-5 - 2$?*
- *Is the following argument valid? It is 99.99999999% probable that Jon will get a sandwich after class. Therefore, Jon will get a sandwich after class.*

PROCEDURE FOR RESOLVING A POTENTIAL CONFLICT IN COMMON SENSE:

If two incompatible claims, *A* and *B*, appear to be equally commonsensical, try to *explain* why one might think one of these claims is commonsensical even if it is not. In order to find such an explanation, look for a third claim, *C*, that might easily be confused with *A* but is compatible with *B* (or *vice versa*).

I am going to look for such a third claim by thinking about what Aristotle says in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

5 Aristotle on Difficulty

DISCUSSION QUESTION 6: *Speaking generally*, which of the following things are more valuable? Easy actions or difficult actions?

ARISTOTLE:

(1) “Both craft and virtue in every case are about what is more difficult, since a good result is even better when it is more difficult.”⁸

(2) “Moreover, there are many ways to be in error—for badness is proper to the indeterminate, as the Pythagoreans pictured it, and good to the determinate. But there is only one way to be correct. That is why error is easy and correctness is difficult, since it is easy to miss the target and difficult to hit it. And so for this reason also excess and deficiency are proper to vice, the mean to virtue; ‘for we are noble in only one way, but bad in all sorts of ways.’”⁹

⁸ *NE*, 2.6.1107a31–35. Trans. Terrence Irwin.

⁹ *NE*, 2.6.1106a30–35. Trans. Terrence Irwin.

6 How is Difficulty Related to Virtue?

DISCUSSION QUESTION 7: Consider something that you've had to practice a lot: it could be a sport, playing an instrument, or even a video game level. Does practicing make these things easier? In other words, if you try playing *Happy Birthday* on the piano and you're just learning to play the piano, will it be more difficult than playing it once you've been playing the piano for several years?

ARISTOTLE:

(1) "That is why it is also hard work to be [virtuous]. For in each case, it is hard work to find the intermediate; for instance, not everyone, but only one who knows, finds the midpoint in a circle. So also getting angry, or giving and spending money, is easy and everyone can do it; but doing it to the right person, in the right amount, at the right time, for the right end, and in the right way is no longer easy, nor can everyone do it. Hence, doing these things well is rare, praiseworthy, and fine."¹⁰

(2) "[S]trength, for instance, arises from eating a lot and from withstanding much hard labor, and it is the strong person who is most capable of these very actions. It is the same with the virtues. For abstaining from pleasures makes us temperate, and once we have become temperate, we are most capable of abstaining from pleasures."¹¹

¹⁰ *NE*, 2.9.1109a24–31. Trans. Terrence Irwin

¹¹ *NE*, 2.2.1104b31–1104b1. Trans. Terrence Irwin.

7 Continence, Incontinence, Virtue, Viciousness

A **virtuous** person is someone who has practiced doing good. Doing good things, for them, is easy and second nature. They barely even have to think about it.

A **vicious** person is someone who is practiced at doing *bad*. They tend to do a bad thing pretty much all the time; a bad thing is second nature for the vicious person.

An **incontinent** person is someone who has some vicious tendencies, but is aware of them and recognizes that they are bad. The incontinent person is trying not to do bad things, but because they have bad tendencies, they sometimes lapse into bad actions.

A **continent** person is someone who lacks virtue—and maybe even has some vicious tendencies. Nevertheless, they still do the right thing.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 8: In your groups, try coming up with examples of someone in each of these categories. Which of these people do you think will enjoy doing good things the most? Who will enjoy doing good things the least?

8 Putting the pieces together

MARATHON: John and Jane are both running a marathon. Jane is a seasoned runner: she's been running for years and, over time, has developed the cardiovascular endurance required to run a four-minute mile, a fifteen-minute 5k, and a three-hour marathon. By contrast, John has never run in his entire life. In the marathon both John and Jane ran in, Jane finished in 3 hours 15 minutes, and John, surprisingly, finished the entire race in just under 4 hours.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 9: Consider these two questions: In the **MARATHON** case, who is the more impressive *runner*? By contrast, who has a more impressive performance in the marathon they both ran?

What we see here illustrates that *the individual right actions of a non-virtuous person are often better (more impressive) than those of virtuous people because they are more difficult.*

The Stoic and the Kantian, therefore, are missing the forest for the trees. They are focusing on the value of individual actions rather than on what kind of person it is better to be.

9 Concluding Question: Aristotle vs. Christianity?

DISCUSSION QUESTION 10: Up to this point, I've been describing virtue as something you have to practice. As Christians, however, we believe that God is ultimately responsible for making us virtuous. So, if virtues are things you have to practice to get, does this fit well with our Christian faith?