

Virtue Ethics

First published Fri Jul 18, 2003; substantive revision Wed Jul 18, 2007 <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>

Virtue, practical wisdom and *eudaimonia*

A virtue such as honesty or generosity is not just a tendency to do what is honest or generous, nor is it to be helpfully specified as a "desirable" or "morally valuable" character trait. It is, indeed a character trait — that is, a disposition which is well entrenched in its possessor, something that, as we say "goes all the way down", unlike a habit such as being a tea-drinker — but the disposition in question, far from being a single track disposition to do honest actions, or even honest actions for certain reasons, is multi-track. It is concerned with many other actions as well, with emotions and emotional reactions, choices, values, desires, perceptions, attitudes, interests, expectations and sensibilities. To possess a virtue is to be a certain sort of person with a certain complex mindset. (Hence the extreme recklessness of attributing a virtue on the basis of a single action.)

The most significant aspect of this mindset is the wholehearted acceptance of a certain range of considerations as reasons for action. An honest person cannot be identified simply as one who, for example, practices honest dealing, and does not cheat. If such actions are done merely because the agent thinks that honesty is the best policy, or because they fear being caught out, rather than through recognising "To do otherwise would be dishonest" as the relevant reason, they are not the actions of an honest person. An honest person cannot be identified simply as one who, for example, always tells the truth, nor even as one who always tells the truth because it *is* the truth, for one can have the virtue of honesty without being tactless or indiscreet. The honest person recognises "That would be a lie" as a strong (though perhaps not overriding) reason for not making certain statements in certain circumstances, and gives due, but not overriding, weight to "That would be the truth" as a reason for making them.

An honest person's reasons and choices with respect to honest and dishonest actions reflect her views about honesty and truth — but of course such views manifest themselves with respect to other actions, and to emotional reactions as well. Valuing honesty as she does, she chooses, where possible to work with honest people, to have honest friends, to bring up her children to be honest. She disapproves of, dislikes, deplores dishonesty, is not amused by certain tales of chicanery, despises or pities those who succeed by dishonest means rather than thinking they have been clever, is

unsurprised, or pleased (as appropriate) when honesty triumphs, is shocked or distressed when those near and dear to her do what is dishonest and so on.

Given that a virtue is such a multi-track disposition, it would obviously be reckless to attribute one to an agent on the basis of a single observed action or even a series of similar actions, especially if you don't know the agent's reasons for doing as she did. (Sreenivasan 2002) Moreover, to possess, fully, such a disposition is to possess full or perfect virtue, which is rare, and there are a number of ways of falling short of this ideal. (Athanasoulis 2000.) Possessing a virtue is a matter of degree, for most people who can be truly described as fairly virtuous, and certainly markedly better than those who can be truly described as dishonest, self-centred and greedy, still have their blind spots — little areas where they do not act for the reasons one would expect. So someone honest or kind in most situations, and notably so in demanding ones may nevertheless be trivially tainted by snobbery, inclined to be disingenuous about their forebears and less than kind to strangers with the wrong accent.

Further, it is not easy to get one's emotions in harmony with one's rational recognition of certain reasons for action. I may be honest enough to recognise that I must own up to a mistake because it would be dishonest not to do so without my acceptance being so wholehearted that I can own up easily, with no inner conflict. Following (and adapting) Aristotle, virtue ethicists draw a distinction between full or perfect virtue and "continence", or strength of will. The fully virtuous do what they should without a struggle against contrary desires; the continent have to control a desire or temptation to do otherwise.

Describing the continent as "falling short" of perfect virtue appears to go against the intuition that there is something particularly admirable about people who manage to act well when it is especially hard for them to do so, but the plausibility of this depends on exactly what "makes it hard." (Foot 1978, 11-14.) If it is the circumstances in which the agent acts — say that she is very poor when she sees someone drop a full purse, or that she is in deep grief when someone visits seeking help — then indeed it is particularly admirable of her to restore the purse or give the help when it is hard for her to do so. But if what makes it hard is an imperfection in her character - the temptation to keep what is not hers, or a callous indifference to the suffering of others — then it is not.

Another way in which one can easily fall short of full virtue is through lacking *phronesis* — moral or practical wisdom.

The concept of a virtue is the concept of something that makes its possessor good: a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent or admirable person who acts and feels well, rightly, as she should. These are commonly accepted truisms. But it is equally common, in relation to particular (putative) examples of virtues to give these truisms up. We may say of someone that he is too generous or honest, generous or honest "to a fault". It is commonly asserted that someone's compassion might lead them to act wrongly, to tell a lie they should not have told, for example, in their desire to prevent someone else's hurt feelings. It is also said that courage, in a desperado, enables him to do far more wicked things than he would have been able to do if he were timid. So it would appear that generosity, honesty, compassion and courage despite being virtues, are sometimes faults. Someone who is generous, honest, compassionate, and courageous might not be a morally good, admirable person — or, if it is still held to be a truism that they are, then morally good people may be led by what makes them morally good to act wrongly! How have we arrived at such an odd conclusion?

The answer lies in too ready an acceptance of ordinary usage, which permits a fairly wide-ranging application of many of the virtue terms, combined, perhaps, with a modern readiness to suppose that the virtuous agent is motivated by emotion or inclination, not by rational choice. *If* one thinks of generosity or honesty as the disposition to be moved to action by generous or honest impulses such as the desire to give or to speak the truth, *if* one thinks of compassion as the disposition to be moved by the sufferings of others and to act on that emotion, *if* one thinks of courage as merely fearlessness, or the willingness to face danger, then it will indeed seem obvious that these are all dispositions that can lead to their possessor's acting wrongly. But it is also obvious, as soon as it is stated, that these are dispositions that can be possessed by children, and although children thus endowed (bar the "courageous" disposition) would undoubtedly be very nice children, we would not say that they were morally virtuous or admirable people. The ordinary usage, or the reliance on motivation by inclination, gives us what Aristotle calls "natural virtue" — a proto version of full virtue awaiting perfection by *phronesis* or practical wisdom.

Aristotle makes a number of specific remarks about *phronesis* that are the subject of much scholarly debate, but the (related) modern concept is best understood by thinking of what the virtuous morally mature adult has that nice children, including nice adolescents, lack. Both the virtuous adult and the nice child have good intentions, but the child is much more prone to mess things up because he is ignorant of what he needs to know in order to do what he intends. A virtuous adult is not, of course, infallible and may also, on occasion, fail to do what she intended to do through lack of knowledge, but only on those occasions on which the lack of knowledge is not

culpable ignorance. So, for example, children and adolescents often harm those they intend to benefit either because they do not know how to set about securing the benefit or, more importantly, because their understanding of what is beneficial and harmful is limited and often mistaken. Such ignorance in small children is rarely, if ever culpable, and frequently not in adolescents, but it usually is in adults. Adults are culpable if they mess things up by being thoughtless, insensitive, reckless, impulsive, shortsighted, and by assuming that what suits them will suit everyone instead of taking a more objective viewpoint. They are also, importantly, culpable if their understanding of what is beneficial and harmful is mistaken. It is part of practical wisdom to know how to secure real benefits effectively; those who have practical wisdom will not make the mistake of concealing the hurtful truth from the person who really needs to know it in the belief that they are benefiting him.

Quite generally, given that good intentions are intentions to act well or "do the right thing", we may say that practical wisdom is the knowledge or understanding that enables its possessor, unlike the nice adolescents, to do just that, in any given situation. The detailed specification of what is involved in such knowledge or understanding has not yet appeared in the literature, but some aspects of it are becoming well known. Even many deontologists now stress the point that their action-guiding rules cannot, reliably, be applied correctly without practical wisdom, because correct application requires situational appreciation — the capacity to recognise, in any particular situation, those features of it that are morally salient. This brings out two aspects of practical wisdom.

One is that it characteristically comes only with experience of life. Amongst the morally relevant features of a situation may be the likely consequences, for the people involved, of a certain action, and this is something that adolescents are notoriously clueless about precisely because they are inexperienced. It is part of practical wisdom to be wise about human beings and human life. (It should go without saying that the virtuous are mindful of the consequences of possible actions. How could they fail to be reckless, thoughtless and short-sighted if they were not?)

The aspect that is more usually stressed regarding situational appreciation is the practically wise agent's capacity to recognise some features of a situation as more important than others, or indeed, in that situation, as the only relevant ones. The wise do not see things in the same way as the nice adolescents who, with their imperfect virtues, still tend to see the personally disadvantageous nature of a certain action as competing in importance with its honesty or benevolence or justice.

These aspects coalesce in the description of the practically wise as those who understand what is truly worthwhile, truly important, and thereby truly advantageous in life, who know, in short, how to live well. In the Aristotelian "eudaimonist" tradition, this is expressed in the claim that they have a true grasp of *eudaimonia*.

The concept of *eudaimonia*, a key term in ancient Greek moral philosophy, is central to any modern neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics and usually employed even by virtue ethicists who deliberately divorce themselves from Aristotle. It is standardly translated as "happiness" or "flourishing" and occasionally as "well-being."

Each translation has its disadvantages. The trouble with "flourishing" is that animals and even plants can flourish but *eudaimonia* is possibly only for rational beings. The trouble with "happiness", on any contemporary understanding of it uninfluenced by classically trained writers, is that it connotes something which is subjectively determined. It is for me, not for you, to pronounce on whether I am happy, or on whether my life, as a whole, has been a happy one, for, barring, perhaps, advanced cases of self-deception and the suppression of unconscious misery, if I think I am happy then I am — it is not something I can be wrong about. Contrast my being healthy or flourishing. Here we have no difficulty in recognizing that I might think I was healthy, either physically or psychologically, or think that I was flourishing and just be plain wrong. In this respect, "flourishing" is a better translation than "happiness". It is all too easy for me to be mistaken about whether or not my life is *eudaimon* (the adjective from *eudaimonia*) not simply because it is easy to deceive oneself, but because it is easy to have a mistaken conception of *eudaimonia*, or of what it is to live well as a human being, believing it to consist largely in physical pleasure or luxury for example.

The claim that this is, straightforwardly, a mistaken conception, reveals the point that *eudaimonia* is, avowedly, a moralised, or "value-laden" concept of happiness, something like "true" or "real" happiness or "the sort of happiness worth seeking or having." It is thereby the sort of concept about which there can be substantial disagreement between people with different views about human life that cannot be resolved by appeal to some external standard on which, despite their different views, the parties to the disagreement concur.

All standard versions of virtue ethics agree that living a life in accordance with virtue is necessary for *eudaimonia*. This supreme good is not conceived of as an independently defined state or life (made up of, say, a list of non-moral goods that does not include virtuous activity) which possession and exercise of the virtues might

be thought to promote. It is, within virtue ethics, already conceived of as something of which virtue is at least partially constitutive. Thereby virtue ethicists claim that a human life devoted to physical pleasure or the acquisition of wealth is not *eudaimon*, but a wasted life, and also accept that they cannot produce a knock down argument for this claim proceeding from premises that the happy hedonist would acknowledge.

But although all standard versions of virtue ethics insist on that conceptual link between *virtue* and *eudaimonia*, further links are matters of dispute and generate different versions. For Aristotle, virtue is necessary but not sufficient — what is also needed are external goods which are a matter of luck. For Plato, and the Stoics, it is both (Annas 1993), and modern versions of virtue ethics disagree further about the link between *eudaimonia* and what gives a character trait the status of being a virtue. Given the shared virtue ethical premise that "the good life is the virtuous life" we have so far three distinguishable views about what makes a character trait a virtue.

According to eudaimonism, the good life is the *eudaimon* life, and the virtues are what enable a human being to be *eudaimon* because the virtues just are those character traits that benefit their possessor in that way, barring bad luck. So there is a link between *eudaimonia* and what confers virtue status on a character trait. But according to pluralism, there is no such tight link. The good life is the morally meritorious life, the morally meritorious life is one that is responsive to the demands of the world (on a suitably moralised understanding of "the demands of the world" and is thereby the virtuous life because the virtues just are those character traits *in* virtue of which their possessor is thus responsive. (Swanton 2003) And according to perfectionism or "naturalism", the good life is the life characteristically lived by someone who is good *qua* human being, and the virtues enable their possessor to live such a life because the virtues just are those character traits that make their possessor good *qua* human being (an excellent specimen of her kind.)