

# Virtue Ethics and the Greeks

The Greek philosophers (especially Plato & Aristotle) chose not to ask: What is the right thing to do?

Instead, they asked: What traits of character make one a good person?

These traits they called **virtues**.

## What is a virtue?

- A trait of good character, manifested in habitual action (you practice it all the time), that it is good for a person to have.
- They are the character traits that exemplify the "better nature" of human beings.
- In other words, virtues are needed for human beings to conduct their lives well.
- They believed that if you acquired the right virtues, you would then act in the right way.

For example: An honest person wouldn't lie.

Plato focused on what he called the Four Cardinal Virtues:

- temperance
- justice
- courage
- wisdom

## Aristotle and the Golden Mean

Aristotle, Plato's student, chose to focus on temperance

Aristotle called this concept the **Golden Mean**.

Aristotle believed that a person of moral maturity (one who had learned the habits of good character and subsequently gained the acuity of moral reasoning) would naturally seek the action that would further excellent moral character—an action that would logically lie somewhere between two extremes—one excessive, the other deficient.

Aristotle didn't intend that we should begin with the extremes and then identify the mean. This would tend to lead us into mediocrity rather than excellence.

Aristotle also held that the process of reasoning that would lead to the moral mean was dependent on the individual and on the circumstance. The moral mean would, thus, be different for each person—no one, absolute mean would suffice.

"Everybody who understands his business avoids alike excess and deficiency; he seeks and chooses the mean, not the absolute mean, but the mean considered relatively to ourselves."

Aristotle was much in favor of teaching the young to develop the habit of moral reasoning so that when they were adults, they would naturally gravitate toward the moral mean in any given situation.

Ultimately, the moral mean can only be discovered by the application of both learned theory and personal perception (the practical application of our natural senses to a situation).

Aristotle's model of the Golden Mean is not a simple, arithmetical calculation of an average action.

- It is the result of acquired character, a moral maturity, and an ability to perceive a situation accurately as it pertains to the individual involved.
- Any person of moral maturity with an understanding of what is right and what is wrong would view the situation through the lens of his personal experience and naturally choose the moral mean.
- As every situation differs, every moral mean will likewise differ.

The moral mean is not only the right quantity.

- It occurs at the right time:
  - When a virtue is needed the most
- toward the right people:
  - Those who merit your acting on your virtues
- for the right reason:
  - To advance your character
- and in the right manner:
  - With propriety

## Are there virtues that are needed by all people at all times?

- **Courage:** because no one is so safe that danger may not sometimes arise.
- **Generosity:** because there is always property to be managed and always some people who are worse off than others.
- **Honesty:** because no society can exist without communication among its members.
- **Loyalty:** because everyone needs friends.

## Strengths in Virtue Ethics

- It provides the proper moral motivation.
  - The building of good character
- It allows for flexibility in being partial.
  - We can generally recognize "bad" character when we see it
- It supports some feminist concerns.
  - Other theories typically emphasize impersonal duty, contracts, the harmonization of competing interests, and the calculation of costs and benefits (often considered male priorities).

## Weaknesses in Virtue Ethics

- There is no simple way to determine right action
- No way to resolve conflicts of virtues (honesty vs kindness)

## How can we use virtue today?

- To answer questions of character.
- To bring consistency to "situational" claims.
- To help describe "ideal" persons for certain positions or occupations by asking what virtues would best suit that job.