

Character-based Approaches to Morality: Virtues & Vices

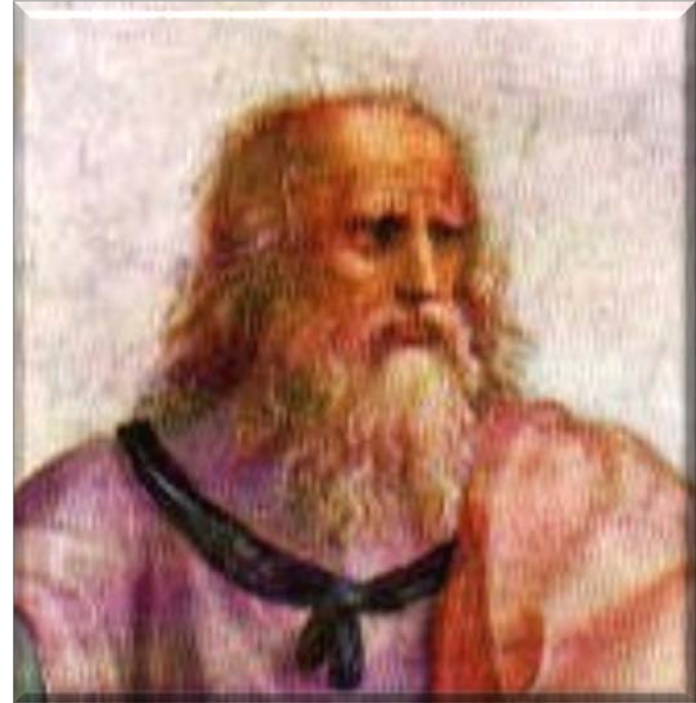
Phil. 321 Social Ethics

Summer 2010

Lawrence M. Hinman
Professor of Philosophy
University of San Diego

Introduction

Concern for character has flourished in the West since the time of Plato, whose early dialogues explored such virtues as courage and piety.

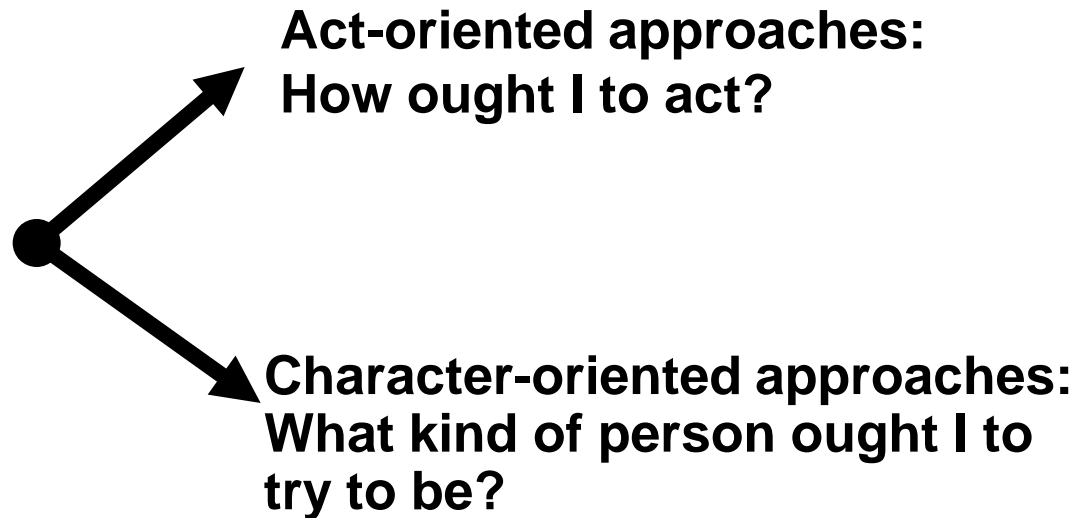


Plato

The Basic Question of Ethics

Historically, philosophers have disagreed about what the basic question of ethics is. They fall into two camps

**Fundamental
Question**



An Analogy from the Criminal Justice System

As a country, we place our trust for just decisions in the legal arena in two places:

- Laws, which provide the necessary rules
- People, who (as judge and jury) apply rules judiciously

Similarly, ethics places its trust in:

- Theories, which provide rules for conduct
- Virtue, which provides the wisdom necessary for applying rules in particular instances

Virtue

Virtue is:

- **Strength of character (habit)**
- **Involving both feeling and action**
- **Seeks the mean between excess and deficiency relative to us**
- **Promotes human flourishing**



Aristotle

Virtues and Spheres of Existence

Sphere of Existence	Deficiency	Mean	Excess
<i>Attitude toward self</i>	Servility Self-deprecation	Proper Self-Love Proper Pride Self-Respect	Arrogance Conceit Egoism Narcissism Vanity
<i>Attitude toward offenses of others</i>	Ignoring them Being a Doormat	Anger Forgiveness Understanding	Revenge Grudge Resentment
<i>Attitude toward good deeds of others</i>	Suspicion Envy Ignoring them	Gratitude Admiration	Over indebtedness
<i>Attitude toward our own offenses</i>	Indifference Remorselessness Downplaying	Agent Regret Remorse Making Amends Learning from them Self-Forgiveness	Toxic Guilt Scrupulosity Shame
<i>Attitude toward our friends</i>	Indifference	Loyalty	Obsequiousness

Spheres of Existence--2

<i>Attitude toward our own good deeds</i>	Belittling Disappointment	Sense of Accomplishment Humility	Self- righteousness
<i>Attitude toward the suffering of others</i>	Callousness	Compassion	Pity "Bleeding Heart"
<i>Attitude toward the achievements of others</i>	Self-satisfaction Complacency Competition	Admiration Emulation	Envy
<i>Attitude toward death and danger</i>	Cowardice	Courage	Foolhardiness
<i>Attitude toward our own desires</i>	Anhedonia	Temperance Moderation	Lust Gluttony
<i>Attitude toward other people</i>	Exploitation	Respect	Deferentiality

Two Conceptions of Morality

We can contrast two approaches to the moral life.

- The childhood conception of morality:
 - Comes from outside (usually parents).
 - Is negative (“don’t touch that stove burner!”).
 - Rules and habit formation are central.
- The adult conception of morality.
 - Comes from within (self-directed).
 - Is positive (“this is the kind of person I want to be.”).
 - Virtue-centered, often modeled on ideals.

Rightly-ordered Desires

Aristotle draws an interesting contrast between:

- ***Continent people***, who have unruly desires but manage to control them.
- ***Temperate people***, whose desires are naturally—or through habit, second-nature—directed toward that which is good for them.

Weakness of will (akrasia) occurs when individuals cannot keep their desires under control.

Moral education may initially seek to control unruly desires through rules, the formation of habits, etc. Ultimately, moral education aims at forming rightly-ordered desires, that is, teaching people to desire what is genuinely good for them

Virtue As the Golden Mean

Strength of character (virtue), Aristotle suggests, involves finding the proper balance between two extremes.

- Excess: having too much of something.
- Deficiency: having too little of something.

Not mediocrity, but harmony and balance.

Courage

The strength of character necessary to continue in the face of our fears

- **Deficiency:** Cowardice, the inability to do what is necessary to have those things in life which we need in order to flourish
 - Too much fear
 - Too little confidence
- **Excess**
 - Too little fear
 - Too much confidence
 - Poor judgment about ends worth achieving

Nichomachean Ethics, 3.7

Fear of the Terrible

What is terrible is not the same for all men; but we say there are things terrible even beyond human strength. These, then, are terrible to every one- at least to every sensible man; but the terrible things that are not beyond human strength differ in magnitude and degree, and so too do the things that inspire confidence. Now the brave man is as dauntless as man may be. Therefore, **while he will fear even the things that are not beyond human strength, he will face them as he ought and as the rule directs, for honor's sake; for this is the end of virtue.** But it is possible to fear these more, or less, and again to fear things that are not terrible as if they were.

EN, 2: The Brave Man

Of the faults that are committed one consists in fearing what one should not, another in fearing as we should not, another in fearing when we should not, and so on; and so too with respect to the things that inspire confidence. **The man, then, who faces and who fears the right things and from the right motive, in the right way and from the right time, and who feels confidence under the corresponding conditions, is brave**; for the brave man feels and acts according to the merits of the case and in whatever way the rule directs.

EN, 3: The Rash Man

Now the end of every activity is conformity to the corresponding state of character. This is true, therefore, of the brave man as well as of others. But **courage is noble**. Therefore the end also is noble; for each thing is defined by its end. Therefore it is for a noble end that the brave man endures and acts as courage directs. Of those who go to excess **he who exceeds in fearlessness has no name** (we have said previously that many states of character have no names), but he would be a sort of madman or insensible person if he feared nothing, neither earthquakes nor the waves, as they say the Celts do not; while the man who exceeds in confidence about what really is terrible is rash. **The rash man**, however, is also thought to be boastful and only a pretender to courage; at all events, as the brave man is with regard to what is terrible, so the rash man wishes to appear; and so he imitates him in situations where he can.

EN, 4: The Coward

Hence also most of them are a mixture of rashness and cowardice; for, while in these situations they display confidence, they do not hold their ground against what is really terrible. The man who exceeds in fear is a **coward**; for he fears both what he ought not and as he ought not, and all the similar characterizations attach to him. He is lacking also in confidence; but he is more conspicuous for his excess of fear in painful situations. The coward, then, is a despairing sort of person; for he fears everything.

EN, 5: The Brave Man, conclusion

The *brave man*, on the other hand, has the opposite disposition; for confidence is the mark of a hopeful disposition. The coward, the rash man, and the brave man, then, are concerned with the same objects but are differently disposed towards them; for the first two exceed and fall short, while the third holds the middle, which is the right, position; and rash men are precipitate, and wish for dangers beforehand but draw back when they are in them, while brave men are keen in the moment of action, but quiet beforehand.

EN, 6: Courage as the mean

As we have said, then, **courage is a mean with respect to things that inspire confidence or fear**, in the circumstances that have been stated; and it chooses or endures things because it is noble to do so, or because it is base not to do so. But to die to escape from poverty or love or anything painful is not the mark of a brave man, but rather of a coward; for it is softness to fly from what is troublesome, and such a man endures death not because it is noble but to fly from evil.

Courage: An Overview

Excess

Underestimates actual danger

Overestimates own ability

Undervalues means, what is being placed at risk

Overvalues goal, what the risk is being taken for

Mean

Correctly estimates actual danger

Correctly estimates own ability

Properly values means that are being put at risk

Properly values goal that is being sought

Deficiency

Overestimates actual danger

Underestimates own ability

Overvalues the means, what is being placed at risk

Undervalues goal, what the risk would be taken for

Courage and the Unity of the Virtues

To have any single strength of character in full measure, a person must have the other ones as well.

- Courage without good judgment is blind, risking without knowing what is worth the risk.
- Courage without perseverance is short-lived, etc.
- Courage without a clear sense of your own abilities is foolhardy.

Issues of Courage

- Fears, dangers, and rightly-ordered fears
- Seeking out danger: mountain climbing
- Courage and nonviolence: Gandhi
- Courage and gender
 - Women's courage is often undervalued
 - Men's courage is tied to their gender identity

Compassion and Pity

Pity looks down on the other.

- Consequently, no one wants to be the object of pity.

Compassion sees the suffering of the other we something that could have happened to us.

- Consequently, we welcome the compassion of others when we are suffering.

Compassion as an Emotion

Emotion is often necessary:

- **to recognize the suffering of others**
 - emotional attunement
- **part of the response to that suffering**
 - others often need to feel that you care

Cleverness and Wisdom

The ***clever person*** knows the best means to any possible end.

The ***wise person*** knows which ends are worth striving for.

Concluding Evaluation

Virtues are those strengths of character that enable us to flourish

The virtuous person has practical wisdom, the ability to know when and how best to apply these various moral perspectives.