

Lesson 9

Virtue Ethics

Is the discussion of virtues out of date? Our civilization's most fundamental issue is: are there moral road maps? Our civilization is now in an apparent crisis, violence, drug overdoses, war, school shootings, etc. The most striking feature of the moral road map is that it is made up of two roads. The road leads to life, and there is a road that leads to death. There is good, and there is evil. There is right, and there is wrong. C.S. Lewis wrote in his book, *The Great Divorce*, "We are not living in a world where all roads are radii of a circle and where all, if followed long enough, will therefore draw gradually nearer and finally meet at the center, rather in a world where every road, after a few miles, forks into two, and each of those into two again, and at each fork, you must make a decision...I do not think that all who choose the wrong roads perish, but their rescue consists in being put back on the right road." ¹ He went on to explain that our culture today has created the idea that morality is manmade, private, and subjective and that we need to return to a virtue

So why don't we restore the map? Because it is old because it is "out of date." But when you are edging closer and closer to the abyss, the most progressive direction is backward. We are at the cliff. On the side of roads are installed guard rails installed to prevent cars from going off the side of the road into that abyss.

Virtues are essential in our lives both individually and because we are part of a greater society. But virtues cannot come from society but must be molded from within because only the way to a good society is through good individuals. Confucius said: "If there is harmony in the heart, there

¹ Peter Kreeft, *Back To Virtue*, quoting C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*. Pg. 11

will be harmony in the family. If there is harmony in the family, there will be harmony in the nation; if there is harmony in the nation, there will be harmony in the world."

Virtue ethics is about right being over right action. Virtue ethics are sometimes referred to as character-based ethics. It is a concern, ideally, in the development of human excellence. This type of moral theory is about becoming a certain kind of person. The actions flow from one's character; virtue ethics aspires to develop good people and good human communities. C.S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Abolition of Man*, a prophetic book about what happens when new philosophy is combined with the loss of the knowledge of morality and virtue. Virtue ethics are not an alternative to ethical theories that stress right conduct, but rather theories of right action complement each other. Virtue is the quality of moral excellence, righteousness, and responsibility...a specific type of moral excellence or other exemplary quality considered meritorious, a worthy practice, or ideal. More important than the rules or principles we follow is our character. A person of virtuous character can be depended upon to do the right thing. From Buddhism to Taoism to Aristotle and Jesus's philosophies are often associated with virtue ethics. Ethics without virtue is an illusion. The purpose of ethics is to make people good and virtuous, and without a road map of the virtues and vices, how likely is it that we will find our way home. Ethics without virtue is an illusion. What is the highest purpose of ethics? It is to make people good, that is, virtuous. Without a road map of the virtues and vices, how likely will we find our way home, especially if we are lost? And the one thing nearly everyone knows is that modern man is lost.

The discussion of virtues throughout history has taken on many different views. One of the first to discuss virtue ethics is Aristotle in the 4th century BC. He wrote in his book *Nicomachean Ethics* about the central questions of character. He asks, "what is the good of man" and answers

with "an activity of the soul in conformity with virtue." Aristotle taught that there are three reasons for seeking knowledge. The most important one is truth, the next is a moral action, and the last and least important is power. Many of Aristotle's views on virtues can be found in many ancient Eastern religions. In the 1st century AD, early Christianity and Judaism viewed God as a lawgiver, and they saw obedience to those laws as a key to virtuous living. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries, the Greeks believed that virtue and reason were inseparable. In the 4th century, Augustine moved to distrust reason and believed that moral goodness depends on subordinating oneself to the will of God. It was not until the Renaissance period in the 1400s-1650s that the moral philosophy became more secular. The divine law became moral law and returned to reason, a system of rules specifying which actions are right. Moving into the 20th century, philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe 1958, in her book *Modern Moral Philosophy* that modern moral philosophy is misguided because it rests on the incoherent notion of a "law without a lawgiver."

So, what are virtues? Virtues are an overarching quality of goodness or excellence that gives unity and integrity to a person's character. Aristotle said there are four cardinal or natural virtues: justice, prudence, fortitude, and temperance. The word cardinal comes from the Latin word "hinge." Confucianism used the word *jen* and that the virtues include benevolence, love, affection, compassion, and altruism. Hinduism teaches the virtues of nonviolence, truth, purity, and self-control. Christianity takes the four natural virtues from Aristotle and also adds faith, hope, and love. Virtues are a trait of character manifested through a habitual action that is good for anyone to have. As discussed in Lesson 2, it is what happens through our moral motivation. One of the trademarks of virtuous people is that they act on principle and give us an example to

follow. They also serve as role models, and virtuous people can be counted on to act in a manner that benefits others. They are willing to perform supererogatory actions.

In discussing virtues, we must also discuss the idea of vices. A vice, in contrast, is a character trait or disposition to act in a manner that harms oneself and others. Vices stand in our way of achieving happiness and the good life. Virtues generally entail the middle between two extreme ends. Aristotle calls this the doctrine of the mean. This doctrine is found in both Eastern and Western philosophies. In Islam, balance or moderation is considered a virtue as well. Buddhism denounces the extremes of excessiveness and instead promotes the path of the noble path.

According to the mean doctrine, the mean is between the vice of excess and vice of deficiency. If we take the virtue of courage for a moment, courage is the ability to do something in the face of fear. The vice of excess would be foolhardiness or throwing caution to the wind. On the other hand, the vice of deficiency would be cowardness or giving into fear. Either deficiency or excess destroys most moral qualities. Similarly, our bodies and physical health can be damaged by eating too little or too much. Again, some people take virtues to extremes that they are no longer virtues or vices. The doctrine of the mean should not be misinterpreted as advising us to be wishy-washy or to compromise our moral standards. The doctrine of mean does not suggest that we seek a consensus or take a moderate position. The doctrine of mean applies to the virtues that we hold on moral issues. Aristotle wrote in *Nicomachean Ethics*:

It is the nature of such things to be destroyed by defect and excess...both excessive and defective destroys the strength and similarity drink, and food which is above and below a certain amount destroys health...So too is it, then, in the case of temperance and courage and the other virtues. For the man who flies from and fears everything and does not stand his ground against anything becomes a coward, and the man who fears nothing at all but

goes to meet every danger becomes rash;...courage the, [is] destroyed by excess and defect and preserved by mean.²

By living according to the doctrine of mean, we can find the greatest happiness and inner harmony. To do this, it is essential to be aware of the tendencies of your personality so that, if necessary, you can adjust yourself to compensate for them.

Virtue ethics has several advantages:

1. **Right being is more important than right action:** Personal integrity and the person you want to be are critical to our actions.
2. **A virtuous person is more likely to do what is right:** It is the placing of moral values above the nonmoral values. Sir Edmund Burke said, "the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing."
3. **Virtues entail hitting the mean between excess and deficit:** virtues are hitting the middle of the road and being able to see the guardrails that will keep us safe.
4. **Provides moral motivation:** moral motivation combines moral sensitivity, moral reasoning, and moral character. Virtue in a man will be the disposition that makes him a good man and enables him to perform his function well.

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, <https://socialsciences.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/aristotle/Ethics.pdf>