



## VIRTUE LITERACY BEYOND THE TIME

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**Abstract:** Among universal notions beyond the time, Virtue has been an important directive force in the development of human civilization. The idea of Virtue is located at the center of moral, philosophical, educational and religious discourses that marked the history of thought and determined the modern configuration of ethics. From Socrates and Aristotle to the French moralists, from Machiavelli to Elizabeth Anscombe and Alasdair McIntire, Virtue accumulated a rich spectrum of facets that constitute together the complex modern paradigm of this generic concept.

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Although the word “virtue” in modern language has several senses, their use is clearly disproportional. The predominant meaning in English has become moral virtue (Encyclopedia of Ideas: 476). This word is a label attributing some kind of value to a person or to an action. A virtuous man is someone who lives in accord with certain moral standards; a virtuous action is also characterized by its conformity to some generally approved criteria.

Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines the word “virtue” as behavior or attitudes that show high moral standards; or a particular good quality or habit. According to Webster’s New World College Dictionary, one should understand by “virtue” general moral excellence, right action and thinking, goodness or morality. The notion also expresses a specific moral quality regarded as good or meritorious. Still, as the bases on which we value other persons and their acts are quite relative, various and often subjective, the numerous dictionary definitions are not comprehensive in elucidating the concept of virtue.

Seeking to place “virtue” within a more precise system of axes, one can switch from the synchronic to the diachronic analysis plan. In order to see what happened to the idea of “virtue” along the time and to plainly understand how the conception of virtue evolved, we need to think about it more historically.

A concern for understanding and evaluating human nature and human actions arose in ancient times and gradually allowed to circumscribe a specific theory called “virtue ethics”. Virtue ethics began

with the ancient Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. We owe to these founding fathers of the Western moral philosophy the delimitation of three basic concepts that became crucial for the interpretation of virtue ethics. These are *arête* (excellence or virtue), *phronesis* (practical or moral wisdom) and *eudaimonia* (usually translated as happiness or flourishing) (Hursthouse, Pettigrove : 2). One has to consider the interaction between these three interdependent components in order to realize the frames and the interpretation principles of the virtue ethics doctrine.

The virtue is a character trait, a disposition well entrenched in its possessor to do honest actions. The concept of 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. It is concerned with emotions and emotional reactions, choices, values, desires, perceptions, attitudes, interests, expectations and sensibilities. Virtue ethicists draw a distinction between full or perfect virtue and “continence”, or strength of will. The fully virtuous persons do what they should without a struggle against contrary desires; the continent have to control a desire or temptation to do otherwise (Hursthouse, Pettigrove: 2).

Virtue is not just a habit. Constancy, consciousness and inner motivation are key elements in valuing true virtue. It is also characterized by a psychological maturity, and is not reduced to simple inclination to act well. Children can also act courageously for example, this disposition being what Aristotle calls “natural virtue”, but we would not say that they were morally virtuous or admirable people, as the natural virtue is a proto version of full virtue awaiting perfection by *phronesis* or practical wisdom. Both the virtuous adult and the nice child have good intentions, but the child is much more susceptible to mess things up because he is ignorant of what he needs to know in order to do what he intends.

Many deontologists stress the point that their action-guiding rules cannot, reliably, be applied correctly without practical wisdom, because correct application requires situational appreciation. So *phronesis* comes only with experience of life.

Only practically wise people are able to discern what is truly important, worthwhile and as a consequence really advantageous in life. This knowledge allows these persons to live well and to reach the state of true happiness, that is what is called *eudaimonia*. *This complex concept comprises a quite wide range of attributes and is defined as rational*

*flourishing, an absolute happiness not determined subjectively, sometimes also regarded as equal to thorough well-being.*

*As a traditional authoritative source of moral standards, the Church is an important instance in identifying virtue. In Christianity virtue has been defined as “conformity of life and conduct with the principles of morality.” (Encyclopædia Britannica). According to Christian ethics, a virtuous person has to adopt certain practical attitudes and habits that are in conformity with those principles. There are 7 basic Christian virtues, among which 4 natural virtues are distinguished and the other 3 are theological virtues. The natural virtues, also known as cardinal virtues, comprise prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice and are inherited from the ancient philosophers. The theological virtues are specifically Christian ones, represented by faith, hope, and love. These were enumerated by Apostle Paul, who singled out love as the chief of the three theological virtues (Encyclopædia Britannica).*

A separation between strict philosophical morality and some broader humanists ideals, marked the Renaissance period. The humanists were engaged in raising broad questions about the nature of moral virtue, and whether particular qualities should be accepted as virtues (Encyclopedia of Ideas: 478). Cicero, Petrarch, Machiavelli were seeking for some argumentation much more in accord with the notions of ordinary men than the Stoic ideal. The confrontation between traditional moral virtue and the non-moral sense of virtue sustained by the humanists, led to a new perception of the concept, envisioned as capacity for action. The use of the word virtù (the counterpart of “virtue”) in the sense of the power to do or accomplish something, occurs more and more often (Ibid.: 480).

Throughout the eighteenth century, the idea of virtue is omnipresent and a large variety of discourses on it are available. By the eighteenth century men’s attitudes towards virtue have continued to be shaped by changing political and social circumstances. The discourses on virtue treated some competing models of it, such as Christian virtue, noble virtue and monarchical virtue (Linton: 1). Still, the article on “Vertu” in the famous Encyclopédie of Diderot and d’Alembert described it as one, simple and unalterable in its essence, the same in all times, climes and governments (L’Encyclopédie, tome 17: 176). The moral sense of virtue as an eternal and unchanging value, an inner light, a sentiment given to all men by God, the foundation on which all human societies and all laws were built was predominant at that time.

From about the middle of the eighteenth century the concept of “man of virtue” had come to prominence. This notion was conceived as an ideal of masculine social and political conduct: he had to be independent, open, and incorruptible, both in public and in private life. He was a citizen, devoted to his *patrie*, and to his fellow citizens (Linton: 2). The influence of this model increased especially in the revolutionary period.

This time section is also characterized by differentiated virtue standards for women and for men. If schoolboys of the educated classes of the time could read about the courageous exploits of the ancient heroes, that were taken as models of behavior, their sisters were more familiar with the Christian tradition and were taught that feminine virtue can be primarily achieved through passive suffering, being a loving but submissive wife and mother, having the anguish of the Madonna as inspiration (Ibid.). Chastity was often cited as the main female virtue. Moralistic educational discourses of this epoch as well as the numerous fictional writings were built around the theme of the inner struggle of a person to maintain her virtue.

One of the better known conceptions of virtue that marked the nineteenth century is that of Friedrich Nietzsche. His ideas of virtue are based on the distinction he makes between master morality and slave morality (corresponding to higher and lower types of people). Master morality values pride and power, while slave morality values kindness, empathy, and sympathy.

In accord with the historical tendency to give a higher value to human personality and individuality, Nietzsche asserted that virtues are the most personal means of defense and most individual needs - the determining factors of precisely our existence and growth, which we recognize and acknowledge independently of the question whether others grow with us with the help of the same or of different principles (Encyclopedia of Ideas: 484). The individual character of virtue is put above others. The human being alone, not being constrained or guided by the state or by other centralized political forces, could find self-realization and develop real virtue.

Virtue ethics came to a revival stage in the twentieth century with the works of Elisabeth Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre. In 1958 Anscombe's paper titled “Modern Moral Philosophy” opened a new perspective of treating normative moral theories. This new approach criticized the dogma that ethics is a compilation of laws and that it deals exclusively with obligation and duty. The rigid moral code proclaimed

within the utilitarian and deontological theories, was declared incoherent by Anscombe: rigid moral rules are based on a notion of obligation that is meaningless in modern, secular society because they make no sense without assuming the existence of a lawgiver - an assumption we no longer make (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Simple terms such as "action", "intention", "pleasure", "wanting" are central notions of the philosophy of psychology that should replace ethics according to Anscombe (Chappell: 8).

In her reflections about the so called "philosophy of psychology", Anscombe suggests that the elementary study of ethics should begin with considering the concept "virtue" (Chappell: 8). For her, virtue is a mean of avoiding various artificial and essentially unclear terms as "right" or "ought" that are currently used when trying to explain what morality is. Virtues help rendering coherent our picture of morality, as they permit to understand ethics directly, without appeal to artificial notions and terms ( Hacker-Wright: 210). These theses were however submitted to criticism, as Anscombe's virtue ethics does not provide a criterion of morally right acts.

The modern moral philosophy is criticized for incoherence by Alasdair MacIntyre in his work "After Virtue" first published in 1981. He also points to the fact that there is no core conception of the virtue to be found in the many rival conceptions outlined from Aristotle to his contemporaries. Even in the relatively coherent tradition of thought there are too many different lists of the virtues, different virtues are given different rank order of importance and the various theories do not allow to get to a unitary explanation of the term. MacIntyre tries to formulate his own definition of virtue saying that: "A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods" (MacIntyre: 191).

MacIntyre understands by "practice" any complex social activity ( for ex. medicine, architecture, mechanical engineering, football or chess). A practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods (MacIntyre: 190). Speaking about goods, the theoretician traces a clear difference between internal and external goods : an intelligent child learning to play chess, may do it for a candy – that is an external good for the practice, or if the child gains reasons to excel at the game of chess, getting particular skills and aptitudes – he gains the goods internal to the practice of playing chess. External goods, once achieved become an individual's property and thus

are subject of competition (fame, power, money etc.). The achievement of the internal goods benefits the whole of the community who participates in a practice (virtuosity in arts, sports, scientific achievements etc.).

Further on in his reflections, McIntyre assumes that “if in a particular society the pursuit of external goods were to become dominant, the concept of the virtues might suffer first attrition and then perhaps something near total effacement” (McIntyre: 196). If we consider that the possession of the virtues is declared as necessary to achieve the internal goods, it means that a society without virtues has no other future than stagnation and degradation.

Generally speaking, McIntyre as well as other key thinkers of the moral philosophy of the twentieth century, are clearly Aristotelian and operate with the same basic terms as he did circumscribing the frames of the virtue: there is true virtue or *arête*, *specific practices that require experience and consequentially phronesis* and the enjoyment brought by internal goods achieved that corresponds to *eudaimonia*. *This circular trajectory of the evolution of the idea of virtue does not mean that it has been thoroughly and exhaustively studied and that there are no new directions for virtue research. Such tasks as phenomenological study of particular virtues, the discernment of some superstructure ethical phenomena influencing the virtues and the explication of the relations between them are just some of the possible perspectives to be chosen in new attempts to complete or to amend virtue literacy.*

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