

# Moral Character

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## Introduction

### *Character traits vs. personality traits*

A moral character is the set of traits, good or bad, that make someone the kind of person she is. In the original Greek, *kharaktēr* is an engraving or stamping tool; the Latin “character” comes to mean a distinctive engraving or mark. This idea of distinctiveness is often imported into talk of moral character by contemporary philosophers and psychologists. Yet although our characters do nearly always distinguish us from each other, distinctiveness is not essential to the idea of moral character. Two identical twins with the same virtues or vices, the same strengths or weaknesses, have a character, even though their characters don’t distinguish them from each other.

Not all traits are traits of character. Even people who are morally identical may differ in their degree of gregariousness, their musical tastes, their love of food or wine, their intellectualism, and so on. In other words, they may differ in their personality traits. But the same trait may be a personality trait under one description, and a character trait under another. Thus, under the description, “gives of his wealth freely,” we have a morally neutral personality trait, whereas under the description, “is generous (or prodigal) with his wealth,” we have a character trait.

Is a person’s self – the traits that constitute the kind of person he is – identical with his moral character? In the broadest sense of “self,” the self is all of a person’s moral and personality traits, but what we mean by “self” varies with the context. In hiring someone for a job, it is typical to think of “the kind of person” we want in terms of the candidate’s job skills, “work ethic,” and, perhaps, personality as a colleague, rather than in terms of his overall character and personality. But in making a moral evaluation of a person, and in philosophical ethics, the self in question is usually the moral character. Which traits we include in moral character also varies with our conception of morality. Those who identify morality with both self-regarding and other-regarding traits (as ancient philosophers do) will identify more of a person’s self with her character than those who identify morality entirely with other-regarding traits (as many contemporary philosophers do).

One final general point: all that is required for the notion of character to get off the ground is that the traits in question be dispositions or tendencies with a certain stability over time and consistency across situations. There is no conceptual requirement that character traits be dispositions only of emotion and appetite, or only of intellect, or of both intellect and emotion and appetite.

## ***The importance of moral character***

The idea of moral character plays a central role in our everyday judgments, in fiction, and in philosophy. All ancient ethical theories in the West, as in China and India, focus on the nature of the good life and the character of the agent. In Western philosophy, the first sustained attempt to understand and analyze character is made by Socrates (*see* SOCRATES), who famously declared that a good man cannot be harmed, for genuine harm is harm to the soul (*Apology* 41d). He also famously declared that virtue is knowledge of what constitutes or promotes *eudaimonia* (happiness, flourishing; *see* EUDAIMONISM; HIGHEST GOOD), and that vice is ignorance of this good. Like knowledge of health and disease, knowledge of good and bad cannot be forgotten or overridden by emotion or appetite. Hence there is no such thing as *akrasia* or weakness of will. Plato (*see* PLATO) holds the more commonsensical view that knowledge alone is not enough for a virtuous character: we must also have the right emotions and appetites, for without these we are susceptible to *akrasia*. But it is Aristotle (*see* ARISTOTLE) who provides the most developed and historically influential conception of character.

In two of the most important ethical theories of modern philosophy, Kantian deontology and utilitarianism (*see* DEONTOLOGY; KANT, IMMANUEL; UTILITARIANISM), character occupies only a secondary role. Nevertheless, Kant devotes a great deal of time to understanding human psychology, and many contemporary scholars argue that there are important similarities between Aristotle's and Kant's understanding of character (*see* sections below on Aristotle and on Kant). I will also discuss four contemporary theories of character. In my final section, I take on the widespread assumption that character traits are global or cross-situational, and the Aristotelian idea of the unity or reciprocity of virtue. Both ideas have been challenged on philosophical as well as experimental grounds.

## **Aristotle**

### ***Good functioning, virtue, and eudaimonia***

The final goal of all our actions and inquiries, says Aristotle in Book I, *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) (350 BCE), is our own *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* is the most final, most choiceworthy, and self-sufficient good, and virtuous activity is both a necessary means to it, and partly constitutive of it. To justify the claim that virtue is necessary for *eudaimonia*, Aristotle uses what is now called the method of reflective equilibrium, arguing that his thesis supports many of the *endoxa* (the intuitions and considered opinions of the wise and the many) about *eudaimonia* and virtue, and is supported by considerations of what is involved in functioning well as a human being. But what exactly is virtue, and how does it differ from other character states?

Aristotle gives a sixfold taxonomy of character (*ethos*): divinely virtuous, virtuous (*see* VIRTUE), *enkratic* (strong-willed, continent), *akratic* (weak-willed, incontinent; *see* WEAKNESS OF WILL), vicious, and bestial (NE VII.1). Of these, the first describes

only the rare human beings who are god-like (although the gods themselves are neither virtuous nor vicious), and the last only the rare human beings who, because of disease, an abusive upbringing, or defective reason, are like savage animals (*NE* VII.1, 5, 6). Bestial individuals can no more be described as vicious than beasts can; they are, as we would now say, amoral (*see* AMORALIST). Most of us fall into one of the other four categories, becoming virtuous or vicious, *enkratic* (strong-willed) or *akratic* (weak-willed), through our own choices and actions. Aristotle acknowledges that our choices and actions are heavily influenced by early moral education (*NE* II.1–3) and may even be partly determined by our natural endowment, but still we are partly responsible for our characters because some part is still up to us (*NE* III.5).

Character consists of habituated dispositions to deliberate, feel, and choose in certain ways. Virtue has its roots in learning to avoid excess and deficiency and hit the mean in our emotions, appetites, and actions, and once we have virtue, we characteristically hit the mean, thereby feeling, deciding, and acting “at the right times and on the right occasions and towards the right persons and for the right causes and in the right manner” (*NE* II.6). Aristotle sometimes talks as though we acquire the right emotional and action dispositions – virtues of character – without any help from the practical intellect. However, fully fledged moral virtue requires the ability to discern how to act in novel situations, and this requires an understanding of the reasons for our actions. An individual who has such practical understanding to an exemplary extent has *phronesis* (prudence, practical wisdom; *see* PRUDENCE), “a state grasping the truth, involving reason [intellect], concerned with action about what is good or bad for a human being” (*NE* VI.5). Just as virtue of character requires *phronesis*, *phronesis* requires virtue of character to “reach its fully developed state,” because the right conception of *eudaimonia*, which is the ultimate *telos* (goal) of *phronesis*, “is apparent only to the good person; for vice perverts us and produces false views about the principles of actions” (*NE* VI.4). The virtuous response in a given situation depends on the particulars of that situation and one’s abilities or resources (*see* PARTICULARISM). Hence there can be no exceptionless moral principles telling us what to do in every possible situation; the right response requires *aesthesis* (*see* PERCEPTION, MORAL).

Aristotle holds that the different virtues and vices are exhibited in different spheres of life. Thus, courage, recklessness, and cowardice can be exhibited only in situations of physical danger, and generosity and its opposed vices only in the giving and taking of wealth. But this seems like an artificial restriction, for surely we can be courageous in social situations that understandably evoke fear, or generous with time.

Aristotle believes that practical wisdom is global because it concerns one’s overall good as a human being, not one’s good in this or that sphere. Since practical wisdom entails the virtues of character, it follows that these virtues are also global, and that if you have one virtue, you have all of them (unity thesis). Both the globalist and the unity theses, however, are controversial (Section 5).

### **Enkrateia, akrasia, and vice**

The dispositions of the *enkratic* and *akratic* individuals are like the virtuous person in every respect except one: their emotions and appetites conflict with their understanding of the right ways to act and to be. Hence although the *enkratic* acts well, she does so without pleasure. The *akratic* individual, by contrast, succumbs to his appetites or emotions, contrary to his decision. But how is this possible, if a person's decision is his all-things-considered judgment and the last step before action? This puzzle motivates most contemporary discussions of *akrasia*.

Aristotle regards each virtue as a mean between a vice of excess and a vice of deficiency. But he often sees one of these vices as closer to the mean than the other. For example, prodigality is closer to generosity than stinginess, and recklessness is closer to courage than cowardice. Since, on the unity doctrine, one must either have all the virtues or none, it follows that a person with even one vice can have no virtue; it is an open question, however, if she could be *enkratic* or *akratic* in some respects.

As the worst possible trait, vice consists of a corruption of all three faculties: intellect, emotions, and appetites. In a colorful simile, Aristotle likens the intemperate man (his prime example of a wholly vicious man in Book VII) to a city with bad laws that is unconscious of its badness, and the *akratic* person to a city with good laws that fails to apply them (*NE* VII.10). The intemperate man chooses intemperate pleasures for their own sake, even when he doesn't greatly desire them. He does not consider the possibility of "satanic wickedness" (so called because of Milton's characterization of Satan as someone who takes evil as his good), or the possibility of sheer indifference to right and wrong.

Interestingly, since the vicious person's emotions/appetites and intellect are in harmony, he seems to have a psychological advantage over the *akratic*. In Book IX.4, however, Aristotle portrays the vicious person also as conflicted and self-hating, because he is aware of his many wicked deeds. In Milo's detailed typology of immorality, such a person is "preferentially" wicked, whereas the former is "perversely" wicked (1984: 217–18). Alternatively, self-hating vicious people may be self-hating not because they are aware of their vices, but because they are full of inherently unpleasant emotions and cravings: rage, envy, jealousy, spite, hatred, and so on.

Aristotle's taxonomy of character is more fine-grained than that of most philosophers, but still does not capture the variety of character types we find in real life. This is largely (though not entirely) due to his assumption that character is of a piece. Without this assumption, we can see that some vicious people might be unconscious of their vice in some domains of their lives, and preferentially vicious in others. Again, some might be unconscious of (some of) their vices as a result of self-deception (a phenomenon Aristotle seems not to recognize), others as a result of ignorance induced by a corrupt upbringing or culture. Slave-holders who believed that slavery is ordained by God, or people who believe that anything goes in love and war, illustrate all these possibilities.

## Kant

### *Pure practical reason*

In *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (*GM*; 1948 [1785]), Kant casts scorn on moralists who define moral character in psychological terms and make happiness the supreme good and justification of morality. For inclinations (emotions and appetites) are subject to the laws of nature, whereas morality belongs in the realm of freedom. Courage is just a quality of “temperament,” and happiness and honor are mere “gifts of fortune” (*GM* 1: 393). The source of morality, by contrast, is pure practical reason (PPR). PPR both enables awareness of the moral law and motivates us to act accordingly.

Accordingly, in the *Doctrine of Virtue* (*DV*; 1996 [1797]), Kant defines virtue as the strength of will in doing our duty in the face of contrary inclinations (*DV*: 383) – the strength that Aristotle calls continence, minus the desire for one’s happiness. Kant’s view of inclinations as inherently passive and nonmoral suggests that continence is the highest stage that human beings can aspire to. Thus, two people who are motivated by duty to act justly and beneficently are equally good, even if the emotional life of one is riddled with envy and resentment, and the emotional life of the other is free of all such negativity. Yet Kant makes a number of statements that belie this conclusion and his view of inclinations as inherently passive.

### *Character*

As early as the *GM*, Kant concedes the commonsensical point that unhappiness can tempt us to transgress our duties, and justifies an “indirect duty” to promote our own happiness as a means to doing our duty (*GM* 11–12: 399). In *DV* and other later works he goes further and identifies a duty to cultivate inclinations that support duty. Virtue lies both in having the fortitude to perform our duties, and the fortitude to cultivate these supporting inclinations. Hence, we have an indirect duty to cultivate sympathy “so that we may do what the thought of duty alone would not accomplish” (*DV*: 457). In other words, inclinations play a (nonmoral) motivational role in dutiful action. Nature, then, is not entirely causally independent of the power of our rational agency, nor our rational agency of the influence of nature. But this is hard to reconcile with Kant’s dualistic metaphysics, according to which causal laws govern only the phenomenal world, and the laws of reason only the noumenal world of pure reason and morality.

Some scholars argue that Kant also recognizes the epistemic role of the emotions, interpreting the statement about sympathy quoted above to mean that sympathy enables us to see when we have a duty to help (Sherman 1997: 145–6). In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (*RL*; 1960 [1793]), Kant attributes another epistemic role to emotion, that of giving us certainty about the moral worth of our maxims. He argues that “the firm resolve to do better in the future ... encouraged by good progress, must needs beget a joyous frame of mind, without which man is never certain of having really attained a love for the good, i.e., of having incorporated it into his maxim” (*RL* I: 19, 20). But Kant’s epistemic point here seems to directly

contradict his claim in *GM* that the conflict between the cold-hearted man's unsympathetic feelings and his dutiful actions is the surest sign of his dutiful motivation. The most radical departure from the *GM* doctrine, however, comes when he attributes intrinsic moral worth to inclinations, stating that benevolent feelings are part of a "beautiful moral whole" which is "required for its own sake" (*DV*: 485).

### ***Evil***

Contra Socrates, Kant believes that we do evil knowingly. Contra Aristotle, he believes that even when evil has become "second nature" to someone, "it is within his power" to do better, and that therefore every wrong act is an "original sin" – a fall, freely chosen, from innocence (*RL I*: 4, 36). Evil can consist of *akrasia* ("the frailty of human nature"), impurity of heart (having mixed motives for acting according to duty), or wickedness (having a preference for nonmoral incentives over moral ones, even if our acts conform to the moral law) (*RL I*: 24–5). Radical evil – the evil that "corrupts the ground of all maxims" – is making "the incentive of self-love and its inclinations the condition of obedience to the moral law" (*RL I*: 32). We achieve this by deceiving ourselves about our motives; self-deception is, thus, an element in radical evil (*RL I*: 33–4), enabling us to violate "the first command of all duties": namely, "to know oneself" (*DV*: 441), and maintain our "peace of conscience" (*RL I*: 33).

This pessimism about achieving self-knowledge thanks to our tendency for self-deception anticipates modern depth psychology. Self-deception helps explain how the wicked manage to become "unconscious" of their wickedness, something that Aristotle never really explains. In another respect, however, Kant seems overly optimistic, for he denies that human beings can be devilishly (satanically) evil, repudiating the moral law out of hatred for the moral law, rather than out of self-love (*RL I*: 30).

## **Contemporary Theories**

### ***The character turn***

For almost 200 years after Kant, Kantian and utilitarian ethical theories, in which character plays only a secondary role, dominate the philosophical landscape. John Stuart Mill does argue that a virtuous moral character can become an end in itself for a moral individual, a component of his happiness. But what makes a trait a virtue is not that it is a necessary component of the individual's happiness, but that it is a means to the general happiness.

Theories that took their inspiration from Aristotle in holding that virtue is both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable to an individual, and justified accordingly (see *VIRTUE ETHICS*), started making a comeback with Anscombe's famous paper "Modern Moral Philosophy" (1958; see *ANSCOMBE, G. E. M.*). This paper was followed by Foot's (1978), and Wallace's (1978) seminal work on virtue and vice.

Stocker (1976) and Williams (1981; see *WILLIAMS, BERNARD*) indirectly help the cause of an ethics of character by criticizing modern ethical theories, principally deontology and consequentialism, for not appreciating the moral importance of the

emotions (*see* EMOTION) or of the personal projects that give our lives meaning. A growing literature on friendship, love, and care also brings character to the forefront of philosophical discourse. Kupperman (1991) holds that a focus on virtue leads to a compartmentalized approach to character, and argues for a holistic understanding of character by seeing how good and bad traits of character are related.

### ***Four theories of virtuous character***

The dominant contemporary character-based theories are naturalist and eudaimonist (*see* NATURALISM, ETHICAL). Eudaimonists hold that a virtuous character is justified as partly or wholly constitutive of one's own "true happiness" or flourishing, where true happiness is understood as enjoyment of a worthwhile life. Whereas some eudaimonists rest their case entirely on the claim that the virtuous have a special conception of *eudaimonia*, such that their lives are *eudaimonic* only if they are virtuous (McDowell 1980), others seek (further) justification in human nature, arguing that our ideas of a good human life are akin to our ideas of the goodness of other good living things. Thus, Foot (2001) and Hursthouse (1999) argue that a virtuous (good) human life is one that is characteristic of us as a species, that a characteristic human life is a rational life, and that a rational life is necessary (Foot), or at least the only reliable bet (Hursthouse), for *eudaimonia*. Consequently, virtue is necessary/the only reliable bet for *eudaimonia*. Following the Stoics, Becker (1998) and Annas (1993, 2005a) draw the stronger conclusion that virtue is both necessary and sufficient for *eudaimonia*.

Eudaimonist naturalism, if successful, provides an answer to the "why be moral?" question, and shows why morality is no more arbitrary or alien to our natures than, say, good nutrition. But both the eudaimonist and the naturalist elements of this approach face challenges. Eudaimonism must show that its conception of happiness is adequate to our everyday conception of happiness, a claim that is often disputed. Naturalism must show how appeal to human nature helps us determine the shape of a good human life: a scientific conception of human nature reveals a tremendous variety in characteristic ways of living; and we fare no better if our conception of human nature is internal, or partly internal, to our ethical outlook, as proposed by Hursthouse, Foot (2001), and Nussbaum (1995). For this internal conception is as various as people's ethical outlooks, some of which are ethically repugnant to those with a different outlook (Williams 1995).

Some philosophers argue that *eudaimonia* alone cannot ground good character (Swanton 2003: 93–4), whereas others argue that *eudaimonia* cannot be any part of its ground. Thus, Slote (2001) argues that the virtues are "fundamentally admirable" traits of character that explain or justify other ethical concepts and judgments, but cannot themselves be justified by these other concepts or judgments. Similarly, Zagzebski (2006) holds that admirable persons are the foundation of ethics and the standard of both desirable and admirable lives and traits. We can define both virtue and the desirable by "direct reference" to such persons. A problem for both these views is that it is highly implausible to hold that the role of traits like honesty and benevolence in human well-being cannot explain or justify, even partially, their status as admirable traits.

According to Adams (2006: 52), a good character is intrinsically excellent or admirable because it participates in, or imitates, a transcendent good. A good character is generally beneficial to ourselves and others, but that is largely because human good “consists chiefly in enjoyment of the excellent,” and virtue is “persisting excellence in being for the good” (Adams 2006: 59, 6). Like conceptions of moral exemplars, however, conceptions of the transcendent good also conflict, as shown, for example, by the image of a stern and merciless God in the Old Testament versus the image of a loving, merciful God in the New Testament. Here again, an appeal to human nature and human well-being is necessary for deciding which, if either, of these is truly good.

Driver (2001) offers a consequentialist conception of virtue that stands in opposition to all the theories discussed so far. She argues that “a virtue is a character trait ... that, generally speaking, produces good consequences for others” (Driver 2001: 60). There is nothing intrinsically admirable about virtue or intrinsically shameful/hateful about vice. Counterintuitively, however, Driver’s view entails that, for example, if an envious disposition has good effects for others by motivating the envious to try harder to achieve useful goals, envy is a virtue.

### ***Vicious character***

There is a vast contemporary literature on both *akrasia* and self-deception, but little on the vices or on types of immoral characters. One major exception is Milo’s *Immorality* (1984). Although Milo’s focus is acts rather than character, his distinction among six kinds of immoral acts in terms of their intentions or motives provides a basis for a sixfold taxonomy of immoral character. Another exception is Taylor’s *Deadly Vices* (2006), which analyzes the cardinal vices of medieval ethics. Taylor argues that envy, avarice, anger, lust, gluttony, sloth, and pride are self-destructive traits, reflecting mistaken notions of the good, or of how best to achieve the good. Moreover, the mistake of those in the grip of these vices is not innocent, but the result of self-deception and pusillanimity. The self-ruinous power of vice is indirect testimony to the importance of the virtues in a happy life.

### **Character Traits: Some Challenges**

Many philosophers find the unity thesis highly implausible, and argue that (some) virtues are mutually independent (Flanagan 1991), or even incompatible (Walker 1989). But if we limit the thesis to the major virtues of justice, generosity, temperance, courage, and kindness, and reject the tacit assumption of virtue ethics that virtue/*phronesis* are global (cross-situationally consistent), the unity thesis becomes far more plausible. For a common argument against unity is that the same person can have both virtues and vices: for example, a courageous judge can be an unkind mother. But if globalism is false, and virtues are domain-specific, then this example

becomes compatible with the unity thesis, for domain-specific unity says only that the courageous judge must have justice and the other virtues required for a judge (Badhwar 1996). Russell (2009) agrees that if the global unity of virtue is meant to apply to actual people, it is highly implausible, but he argues that, as model concepts, the virtues are united.

There are two sorts of arguments against globalism. One, based on everyday observation and a consideration of what is required for global virtue, is that such virtue is too demanding, requiring a deep understanding of others, oneself, and human institutions, as well as habituation in the appropriate emotional and action dispositions. Global virtue is logically possible, but it is psychologically impossible: it asks too much of finite human beings with finite powers in a finite life (Badhwar 1996, 2013). Like theoretical accomplishments, virtue/*phronesis* are domain-specific, present in broad but not global areas of our lives. The other argument is based on experimental data. Social psychological experiments such as Milgram's obedience and Zimbardo's prison experiments suggest that most people are highly susceptible to morally irrelevant situational factors. Harman (1998–9) argues that there are no character traits of the type posited by traditional virtue ethics. Doris (2002) concedes that most people have deeply held values, and that some might even be globally virtuous. But most people's values, he argues, are not robust, because trivial situational factors can prevent people from acting on them. All we see are local traits, such as bravery-when-sailing-with-friends-in-rough-weather (Doris 2002). So either virtue ethics is empirically inadequate, positing an ideal that practically no one can attain, or virtue (and other traits) are fragmented and frail, not global or stable.

There have been a variety of responses to this situationist critique: (1) the conclusion that few people are virtuous is hardly news; (2) the experiments test only behavioral dispositions, instead of the subjects' construal of the situations and reasons for their actions (Sreenivasan 2002; Kamtekar 2004; Annas 2005b); (3) the experiments are consistent with the possession of robust cognitive-affective personality traits (CAPS), of which virtue and other traits are possible subsets (Russell 2009; Snow 2009). This attempt to save global traits, especially virtue, however, meets with the following counterarguments: (1) several experiments show that we humans can be *akratic* or vicious far more easily than heretofore imagined, hence they do teach us something new; (2) in the Milgram and Zimbardo experiments, there are no good reasons for the bad behavior; moreover, how we tend to construe situations is itself indicative of our characters; (3) robust CAPS are compatible with robust global traits, but not evidence for them.

Nevertheless, these counterarguments do not imply that Doris's "local" virtues are the only game in town. Local "virtues" are conceptually impossible, for the same sort of reason that local theoretical or linguistic understanding is impossible: understanding requires a certain degree of generality, and excellent understanding requires more (Badhwar 2009). Since virtues are excellences, they require a fairly broad understanding, and correspondingly broad emotional dispositions.

**See also:** AMORALIST; ANSCOMBE, G. E. M.; ARISTOTLE; DEONTOLOGY; EMOTION; EUDAIMONISM; HIGHEST GOOD; KANT, IMMANUEL; NATURALISM, ETHICAL; PARTICULARISM; PERCEPTION, MORAL; PLATO; PRUDENCE; SOCRATES; UTILITARIANISM; VIRTUE; VIRTUE ETHICS; WEAKNESS OF WILL; WILLIAMS, BERNARD

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