

Virtue Is The Behavior That Shows The Highest Moral Standards

Posted on May 13, 2020

Expanded Outline

Introduction

Virtue is behavior and character that reflect high moral standards. Although societies and traditions differ in how they name and prioritize virtues, the concept generally concerns qualities that help a person act well toward others and pursue a good life.

Thesis Statement

The meaning and expression of virtue vary across religious, social, cultural, and philosophical settings, but virtue cannot be reduced entirely to whatever a society happens to approve; it requires cultivated habits, practical judgment, and standards capable of criticizing harmful norms.

Main Point 1: Virtue as Moral Character

Virtue is a morally valuable quality such as honesty, courage, justice, compassion, humility, patience, integrity, or wisdom. People may possess capacities for these qualities, but virtues develop through education, example, choice, and repeated action.

Main Point 2: Virtue as Habit

Virtues should be cultivated until good action becomes a stable disposition rather than an occasional response. Habit alone is insufficient, however, because moral situations require judgment about which virtue applies and how competing duties should be balanced.

Conclusion

A virtuous person learns from community values but also examines them critically. Genuine virtue joins good character with practical wisdom, respect for human dignity, and responsibility for the consequences of action.

Expository Essay

Virtue is behavior that shows high moral standards, but it is also more than visible behavior. A person may perform one generous act for praise without becoming generous, or tell the truth once while remaining generally deceptive. Virtue concerns a relatively stable quality of character that inclines a person to recognize what is good and act accordingly. The original essay correctly observed that societies, religions, cultures, and traditions define moral excellence in different ways. Some communities emphasize obedience, others independence; some praise humility, others assertiveness; and expectations may vary according to role, age, gender, or status. These differences show that virtue is interpreted through social life. However, they do not prove that every accepted norm is morally right. Societies have approved slavery, discrimination, violence, and exclusion. A complete account of virtue must therefore explain both how communities teach morality and how individuals can criticize unjust standards.

The Meaning of Virtue

The word “virtue” commonly refers to moral excellence. A virtue is a quality that helps a person act well, form trustworthy relationships, and contribute to a worthwhile life. Examples include honesty, courage, justice, compassion, temperance, loyalty, patience, humility, generosity, and integrity. Virtues differ from skills because they concern the ethical use of ability. A persuasive person may use communication to teach, manipulate, defend, or deceive. Persuasion becomes morally valuable only when directed by good judgment and purpose. Virtue also differs from reputation. A person may appear respectable while acting unjustly in private. The moral quality lies in character and action, not merely in social approval.

Aristotle and the Habit of Good Action

Aristotle’s virtue ethics provides a major explanation of how virtues develop. He argues that people become just by doing just acts, courageous by doing courageous acts, and temperate by practicing self-control. Virtue is therefore cultivated through habituation. Children and adults learn through repeated choices, guidance, laws, institutions, and examples. This supports the original essay’s claim that virtues should be practiced until they become habitual. Yet Aristotle does not describe virtue as mindless routine. Good character requires practical wisdom, the ability to perceive what a situation demands. A habit that ignores circumstances can become rigid or harmful. (Aristotle, 2019)

The Doctrine of the Mean

Aristotle often describes virtue as a mean between extremes relative to the person and situation. Courage lies between cowardice and rashness; generosity lies between stinginess and wastefulness.

The mean is not a simple numerical middle. A courageous response to danger may involve withdrawal, endurance, protest, or intervention depending on risk and responsibility. Practical wisdom identifies the fitting action. This idea helps explain why possessing a list of virtues does not automatically solve moral problems. Honesty may conflict with protection of privacy, loyalty with justice, and patience with the need to oppose abuse. Virtue requires balance without making every compromise morally acceptable. (Aristotle, 2019)

Are Virtues Innate or Learned?

The original essay described virtue as an intrinsic quality possessed by every human being and also as something imposed through education and social conditioning. These claims can be reconciled by distinguishing capacity from developed character. Human beings may possess capacities for empathy, cooperation, self-control, aggression, and self-interest. Experience shapes which tendencies become stable. Children are not born with a complete understanding of justice or honesty. They learn language, rules, emotional regulation, and the effects of behavior through relationships. Education can cultivate virtue, but coercive conditioning can also teach prejudice or blind obedience. Moral development therefore requires example and reflection, not only compliance.

The Role of Family

Families are often the first setting in which children encounter moral expectations. Adults teach children to tell the truth, share, apologize, keep promises, and consider how actions affect others. Stories with moral lessons, as the original essay noted, can make abstract virtues understandable. Children also learn from observation. A parent who demands honesty while lying regularly teaches inconsistency. A household that practices care, fairness, and accountability gives virtue a lived form. Family teaching is powerful but not infallible. Harmful beliefs may also be transmitted, so maturity involves evaluating inherited values rather than accepting them automatically.

Schools and Moral Education

Schools develop character through curriculum, rules, discipline, classroom relationships, and institutional fairness. Lessons about citizenship or ethics have limited effect if students experience humiliation, favoritism, or dishonesty. Moral education should provide opportunities to reason about conflicts, cooperate, repair harm, and understand perspectives. Punishment may suppress behavior temporarily, but virtue requires internal motivation and judgment. Schools can teach academic integrity, respectful disagreement, service, and responsibility while avoiding the claim that one cultural style is the only moral form.

Society and the Definition of Moral Norms

Communities define acceptable behavior through law, custom, religion, language, and social reward. This social role explains why virtues are expressed differently. Hospitality, modesty, filial duty, individual freedom, communal responsibility, and honor may receive different emphasis. Cultural understanding is necessary because moral judgment without context can become arrogant. Nevertheless, the original claim that anyone following social norms is virtuous and anyone violating them is evil is too strong. Reformers often violate accepted norms precisely because those norms are unjust. Social conformity is not identical to virtue. (Snow, 2010)

Moral Relativism and Its Limits

Moral relativism holds, in one form, that moral standards depend on culture or perspective. It encourages humility by reminding people that their practices are not universal. However, complete relativism makes criticism difficult. If a society defines oppression as normal, relativism appears to require acceptance. Human-rights traditions, religious ethics, natural-law theories, consequentialism, and virtue ethics provide different grounds for judging norms beyond popularity. One does not need to assume that every culture must express virtue identically to argue that cruelty, exploitation, and arbitrary domination are morally defective. Cultural variation and moral criticism can coexist. (Russell, 2013)

Honesty

Honesty is commonly taught as a central virtue because trust depends on reliable communication. Yet honesty is not the indiscriminate disclosure of every fact. A person may have duties of confidentiality or need to protect someone from an aggressor. Honest character includes avoiding deception, representing evidence accurately, admitting mistakes, and refusing to manipulate. It also requires sensitivity in expression. Telling a harsh truth for the purpose of humiliation is not made virtuous merely because the statement is accurate. Honesty works with compassion and judgment.

Courage

Courage enables action despite fear when an important good is at stake. It may appear in physical danger, moral dissent, confession of error, defense of another person, or persistence during hardship. Fearlessness is not always courage because an individual who does not understand risk may act recklessly. Courage acknowledges danger and responds proportionately. Societies may praise military courage while overlooking the courage required to challenge corruption, prejudice, or abusive authority. A virtuous account should recognize multiple forms.

Compassion

Compassion involves attention to suffering and motivation to respond. It prevents morality from becoming only rule enforcement. However, compassion needs wisdom and boundaries. Helping in a way that creates dependence, ignores consent, or distributes resources unfairly may not achieve good outcomes. Compassionate people listen to those affected rather than assume they know what others need. In professional settings, compassion must be joined with competence because good intention cannot replace skill.

Justice

Justice concerns fair treatment, rights, distribution, accountability, and institutions. It extends virtue beyond personal kindness. A person may be polite while benefiting from an unjust system. Justice asks whether rules themselves are fair and whether burdens and opportunities are distributed appropriately. This is why virtue cannot require unconditional obedience to society. Moral excellence may involve reforming law and custom. Justice also limits favoritism: loyalty to family or group cannot justify harming outsiders.

Humility

Humility is accurate self-understanding rather than self-contempt. A humble person recognizes limitations, listens, gives credit, and remains open to correction. Humility protects virtue from becoming moral pride. Someone who constantly announces their goodness may be more concerned with status than character. Yet humility should not be used to silence people or demand submission from those with less power. It must be mutual and compatible with self-respect.

Integrity

Integrity joins values and action across situations. A person of integrity does not abandon principles whenever secrecy or advantage makes wrongdoing easy. Integrity also includes coherence: professional conduct, private behavior, and public claims should not contradict one another without explanation. Complete consistency is impossible because people learn and circumstances change. Integrity therefore includes acknowledging change honestly and correcting failures. It is not stubborn refusal to reconsider beliefs.

Patience and Tolerance

The original essay noted that some people devote themselves to patience and tolerance. These can be valuable when they prevent impulsive harm and support coexistence. However, tolerance has limits. Tolerating differences is virtuous; tolerating abuse or injustice may enable harm. Patience should create space for understanding and long-term effort, not justify endless delay when action is required. Practical wisdom determines when endurance should give way to protest.

Activism and Moral Judgment

The original essay contrasted patience with judgment and activism. Activism can be virtuous when directed toward justice through responsible means. Moral judgment is unavoidable because action requires evaluating claims and consequences. The problem is judgment without humility or evidence. A virtuous activist combines courage with honesty, compassion, discipline, and willingness to learn. Strong conviction does not excuse dehumanization. The method used to pursue a good end affects the character of the action.

Conflicts Between Virtues

People cannot always maximize every virtue at once. Loyalty to a friend may conflict with honesty about wrongdoing. Compassion for an offender may conflict with justice for a victim. Courageous disclosure may conflict with confidentiality. These conflicts show why morality cannot be reduced to a checklist. Practical wisdom considers relationships, duties, likely consequences, power, and alternatives. A morally mature person explains the trade-off and accepts accountability rather than claiming that one virtue automatically overrides all others.

Virtue and Success

The original essay suggested adopting the trait most beneficial in an environment to achieve success and stability. Virtue should not be defined only by success. Dishonesty and cruelty can produce short-term advantage, while integrity may carry cost. If a trait is chosen merely because it is useful, it becomes strategy rather than virtue. Ethical success concerns the kind of person and community produced, not only wealth or status. Prudence can help people act effectively, but effectiveness must be guided by worthy ends.

Virtue in a Modern and Diverse World

Modern societies contain many religions, cultures, identities, and conceptions of a good life. It is unrealistic to expect complete agreement on every virtue. Shared civic life can nevertheless rely on honesty, nonviolence, fairness, respect, responsibility, and willingness to reason together. Institutions should protect freedom while setting limits on harm. Diversity makes practical wisdom more important because behavior considered respectful in one context may be interpreted differently in another. Virtue includes the ability to listen and revise assumptions.

Digital Life and Character

Technology creates new settings for old virtues. Honesty applies to misinformation and false identities; courage applies to resisting online harassment; temperance applies to attention and impulsive posting; justice applies to algorithmic bias and access; compassion applies to communication with people who may be reduced to usernames. Digital distance can weaken empathy and make cruelty easier. Character is therefore expressed through online behavior as much as face-to-face conduct. The speed of communication increases the need to pause and verify.

Organizations and Institutional Virtue

Organizations influence character through incentives and norms. A company that rewards results regardless of method teaches employees that integrity is optional. A public institution that hides error undermines accountability. Although virtue traditionally describes individuals, institutions can support or obstruct virtuous action. Ethical cultures protect whistleblowers, distribute responsibility clearly, and align evaluation with stated values. Individuals still make choices, but expecting heroism inside a corrupt system is insufficient. Moral development requires both character and institutional design.

Can a Person Be Fully Virtuous?

No person displays every virtue perfectly. People possess strengths, blind spots, habits, and conflicting motives. Virtue ethics is therefore developmental rather than a division between good and evil people. A person can act honestly in one area and fail in another. Moral growth begins with recognition, practice, feedback, apology, and repair. The desire to appear flawless can prevent improvement because it makes admission of error threatening. A virtuous person is not someone who never fails but someone who takes moral responsibility seriously.

Conclusion

Virtue is behavior and character that show moral excellence, but its meaning cannot be reduced either to private preference or to social conformity. Communities teach honesty, compassion, courage, justice, patience, humility, and integrity through family, school, religion, law, and example. These qualities become virtues through repeated practice and practical wisdom. Society provides a necessary moral language, yet society can also normalize injustice. A virtuous person therefore learns from communal values while remaining capable of criticism. Moral standards vary in expression, but high character requires respect for dignity, awareness of consequences, fairness, and the willingness to correct harmful habits. Virtue is not one isolated quality or a strategy for success. It is the ongoing formation of judgment and action toward a good life shared with others.

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