

A Very Brief Primer on the Virtues

Happiness as a goal

- The moral life is goal-directed: all human action (at least that which has a purpose) is aimed towards the achievement of some *goal (telos)* that we see worthy of pursuit.
- For the Greeks (like Plato and Aristotle), the ultimate goal of human life is happiness (*eudaimonia*=good spirit), to live and do well (flourish) over a complete life.
- For Christians, perfect happiness is to be in the eternal presence of God in the life to come.

What is the role of virtue in the pursuit of happiness?

- We are born neither good nor bad, so we need to develop a “second nature” that enables us to pursue true happiness.
- Virtues are those excellences of character (good character traits), that enable us to strive for happiness. Indeed, to flourish *just is* to be a person of virtue.
- Virtue stands in the mean between the extremes of vice (e.g., courage is the mean between cowardice and foolhardiness).
- For the Greeks, we develop the virtues through habituation (consistent practice), so that they become a stable part of who we are.
- Virtue, in its fullest expression, is not only about action. A person of virtue has the right sort of perception, emotions, and desires. Likewise, a person of virtue deliberates and judges well.
- Character formation requires supporting contexts: community (esp. friendship), moral exemplars, etc.
- For Christians, virtue is acquired through habituation (as the Greeks thought), but it is also received as a divine gift (in Aquinas’s language, virtue is *infused*). In this way, grace perfects nature.

Other considerations

- Virtues are not synonymous with values.
- An ethics of virtue does not rest so much on rule or principle; it is not a decision procedure. Rather, the focus of the moral life is on the character of the person.