The Ethics of Character: Virtues & Vices

Lawrence M. Hinman, Ph.D.
Director, The Values Institute

University of San Diego

11/8/2005 (c) Lawrence M. Hinman
Concern for character has flourished in the West since the time of Plato, whose early dialogues explored such virtues as courage and piety.
Two Moral Questions

- The Question of Action: How ought I to act?
- The Question of Character: What kind of person ought I to be?
- Our concern here is with the question of character
An Analogy from the Criminal Justice System

As a country, we place our trust for just decisions in the legal arena in two places:

– Laws, which provide the necessary rules
– People, who (as judge and jury) apply rules judiciously

Similarly, ethics places its trust in:

– Theories, which provide rules for conduct
– Virtue, which provides the wisdom necessary for applying rules in particular instances
Virtue

- Strength of character (habit)
- Involving both feeling and action
- Seeks the mean between excess and deficiency relative to us
- Promotes human flourishing

Aristotle
# Virtues and Spheres of Existence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sphere of Existence</th>
<th>Deficiency</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Excess</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward self</td>
<td>Servility, Self-deprecation</td>
<td>Proper Self-Love, Proper Pride, Self-Respect</td>
<td>Arrogance, Conceit, Egoism, Narcissism, Vanity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward offenses of others</td>
<td>Ignoring them, Being a Doormat</td>
<td>Anger, Forgiveness, Understanding</td>
<td>Revenge, Grudge, Resentment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward good deeds of others</td>
<td>Suspicion, Envy, Ignoring them</td>
<td>Gratitude, Admiration</td>
<td>Over indebtedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward our own offenses</td>
<td>Indifference, Remorselessness, Downplaying</td>
<td>Agent Regret, Remorse, Making Amends, Learning from them, Self-Forgiveness</td>
<td>Toxic Guilt, Scrupulosity, Shame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward our friends</td>
<td>Indifference</td>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>Obsequiousness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Spheres of Existence--2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude toward our own good deeds</th>
<th>Belittling Disappointment</th>
<th>Sense of Accomplishment</th>
<th>Self-righteousness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward the suffering of others</td>
<td>Callousness</td>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>Pity “Bleeding Heart”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward the achievements of others</td>
<td>Self-satisfaction</td>
<td>Admiration</td>
<td>Envy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complacency</td>
<td>Emulation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward death and danger</td>
<td>Cowardice</td>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>Foolhardiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward our own desires</td>
<td>Anhedonia</td>
<td>Temperance</td>
<td>Lust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Moderation</td>
<td>Gluttony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward other people</td>
<td>Exploitation</td>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>Deferentiality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Two Conceptions of Morality

- We can contrast two approaches to the moral life.
  - The childhood conception of morality:
    - Comes from outside (usually parents).
    - Is negative (“don’t touch that stove burner!”).
    - Rules and habit formation are central.
  - The adult conception of morality.
    - Comes from within (self-directed).
    - Is positive (“this is the kind of person I want to be.”).
    - Virtue-centered, often modeled on ideals.
Both of these conceptions of morality are appropriate at different times in life.

Adolescence and early adulthood is the time when some people make the transition from the adolescent conception of morality to the adult conception.
Rightly-ordered Desires

- Aristotle draws an interesting contrast between:
  - *Continent people*, who have unruly desires but manage to control them.
  - *Temperate people*, whose desires are naturally—or through habit, second-nature—directed toward that which is good for them.
  - *Weakness of will* (akrasia) occurs when individuals cannot keep their desires under control.
Rightly-ordered Desires and the Goals of Moral Education

- Moral education may initially seek to control unruly desires through rules, the formation of habits, etc.
- Ultimately, moral education aims at forming rightly-ordered desires, that is, teaching people to desire what is genuinely good for them.
Virtue As the Golden Mean

- Strength of character (virtue), Aristotle suggests, involves finding the proper balance between two extremes.
  - Excess: having too much of something.
  - Deficiency: having too little of something.
- Not mediocrity, but harmony and balance.
- See examples below.
For Aristotle, virtue is something that is practiced and thereby learned—it is habit (*hexis*).

This has clear implications for moral education, for Aristotle obviously thinks that you can teach people to be virtuous.
The strength of character necessary to continue in the face of our fears

- **Deficiency:** Cowardice, the inability to do what is necessary to have those things in life which we need in order to flourish
  - Too much fear
  - Too little confidence

- **Excess**
  - Too little fear
  - Too much confidence
  - Poor judgment about ends worth achieving
Nichomachean Ethics, 3.7

What is terrible is not the same for all men; but we say there are things terrible even beyond human strength. These, then, are terrible to every one—at least to every sensible man; but the terrible things that are not beyond human strength differ in magnitude and degree, and so too do the things that inspire confidence. Now the brave man is as dauntless as man may be. Therefore, while he will fear even the things that are not beyond human strength, he will face them as he ought and as the rule directs, for honour’s sake; for this is the end of virtue. But it is possible to fear these more, or less, and again to fear things that are not terrible as if they were.
Of the faults that are committed one consists in fearing what one should not, another in fearing as we should not, another in fearing when we should not, and so on; and so too with respect to the things that inspire confidence. The man, then, who faces and who fears the right things and from the right motive, in the right way and from the right time, and who feels confidence under the corresponding conditions, is brave; for the brave man feels and acts according to the merits of the case and in whatever way the rule directs.
Now the end of every activity is conformity to the corresponding state of character. This is true, therefore, of the brave man as well as of others. But courage is noble. Therefore the end also is noble; for each thing is defined by its end. Therefore it is for a noble end that the brave man endures and acts as courage directs. Of those who go to excess he who exceeds in fearlessness has no name (we have said previously that many states of character have no names), but he would be a sort of madman or insensible person if he feared nothing, neither earthquakes nor the waves, as they say the Celts do not; while the man who exceeds in confidence about what really is terrible is rash. The rash man, however, is also thought to be boastful and only a pretender to courage; at all events, as the brave man is with regard to what is terrible, so the rash man wishes to appear; and so he imitates him in situations where he can.
Hence also most of them are a mixture of rashness and cowardice; for, while in these situations they display confidence, they do not hold their ground against what is really terrible. The man who exceeds in fear is a **coward**; for he fears both what he ought not and as he ought not, and all the similar characterizations attach to him. He is lacking also in confidence; but he is more conspicuous for his excess of fear in painful situations. The coward, then, is a despairing sort of person; for he fears everything.
The brave man, on the other hand, has the opposite disposition; for confidence is the mark of a hopeful disposition. The coward, the rash man, and the brave man, then, are concerned with the same objects but are differently disposed towards them; for the first two exceed and fall short, while the third holds the middle, which is the right, position; and rash men are precipitate, and wish for dangers beforehand but draw back when they are in them, while brave men are keen in the moment of action, but quiet beforehand.
As we have said, then, courage is a mean with respect to things that inspire confidence or fear, in the circumstances that have been stated; and it chooses or endures things because it is noble to do so, or because it is base not to do so. But to die to escape from poverty or love or anything painful is not the mark of a brave man, but rather of a coward; for it is softness to fly from what is troublesome, and such a man endures death not because it is noble but to fly from evil.
Courage

The strength of character necessary to continue in the face of our fears.

– *Deficiency*: cowardice, the inability to do what is necessary to have those things in life which we need in order to flourish.
  • Too much fear.
  • Too little confidence.

– *Excess*:
  • Too little fear.
  • Too much confidence.
  • Poor judgment about ends worth achieving.
Courage

- Both children and adults need courage.
- Without courage, we are unable to take the risks necessary to achieve some of the things we most value in life.
  - Risk to ask someone out on a date.
  - Risk to show genuine vulnerability.
  - Risk to try an academically challenging program such as pre-med.
Courage and the Unity of the Virtues

- To have any single strength of character in full measure, a person must have the other ones as well.
  - Courage without good judgment is blind, risking without knowing what is worth the risk.
  - Courage without perseverance is short-lived, etc.
  - Courage without a clear sense of your own abilities is foolhardy.
## Courage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excess</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Deficiency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Underestimates actual danger</td>
<td>Correctly estimates actual danger</td>
<td>Overestimates actual danger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overestimates own ability</td>
<td>Correctly estimates own ability</td>
<td>Underestimates own ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undervalues means, what is being placed at risk</td>
<td>Properly values means that are being put at risk</td>
<td>Overvalues the means, what is being placed at risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overvalues goal, what the risk is being taken for</td>
<td>Properly values goal that is being sought</td>
<td>Undervalues goal, what the risk would be taken for</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Issues of Courage

- Fears, dangers, and rightly-ordered fears
- Seeking out danger: mountain climbing
- Courage and nonviolence: Gandhi
- Courage and gender
  - Women’s courage is often undervalues
  - Men’s courage is tied to their gender identity
Compassion and Pity

- Pity looks down on the other.
  - Consequently, no one wants to be the object of pity.

- Compassion sees the suffering of the other as something that could have happened to us.
  - Consequently, we welcome the compassion of others when we are suffering.
Compassion

- Etymology: to feel or suffer with…
- Both cognitive and emotional
- Leads to action
- Excess: the “bleeding heart”
- Deficiency: moral callousness
- Contrast with pity
Compassion as an Emotion

Emotion is often necessary:
- to recognize the suffering of others
  - emotional attunement
- part of the response to that suffering
  - others often need to feel that you care
Example from Le Chambon

“Later in the week they captured an Austrian Jew named Steckler—he had made the mistake of going to a pharmacy without all of his papers. The police put him—their only prisoner—in one of the big buses. As he sat there, the villagers started gathering around the periphery of the square. The son of Andre Trocmé [the village pastor], Jean-Pierre, walked up to the window of the bus at which Steckler sat and gave him his last piece of rationed (imitation) chocolate. This started the closing of the circle of villagers. They brought their most precious foodstuffs and put them through the window into Steckler’s arms. Soon the quiet little man had a pile of gifts around him about as high as he sat in the seat.

“When the buses left with their one Jew the villagers sang a song of affection and farewell to him.”
Cleverness and Wisdom

- The clever person knows the best means to any possible end.
- The wise person knows which ends are worth striving for.
Self-Love

Introduction

- Involves feeling, knowing, and acting
- Characteristics of loving another person:
  - Feelings of tenderness, care, appreciation, respect toward that person
  - Knowing that person (infatuation usually does not involve knowledge)
  - Acting in ways that promote the flourishing of that person
Characteristics of self-love

- Having feelings of care, appreciation, and respect for others
- Valuing yourself--flows from feelings of self-love
- Knowing yourself--a long, often arduous, and never completed task
- Acting in ways that promote your genuine flourishing
Deficiency

– Too little feeling: self-loathing
– Too little self-valuing: self-deprecating
– Too little self-knowledge: unwilling or unable to look at one’s own motivations, feelings, etc.
– Too little acting: not taking steps to insure one’s own well-being
Self-Love: Excess

- Excesses of self-love take many forms: arrogance, conceit, egoism, vanity, and narcissism are but a few of the ways in which we can err in this direction.
- Too much caring: self-centeredness
- Too much self-valuing: arrogance, conceit
- Too much self-knowledge: narcissistic
- Too much acting for self: selfishness
Forgiveness

This, too, is a virtue indispensable for human flourishing

- In any long-term relationship (friendship, marriage, etc.), each party will do things that must be forgiven by the other.
- Long term relationships are necessary to human flourishing.
- If we cannot forgive, we cannot have continuing long term relationships.
Forgiveness:
Excess and Deficiency

■ Excess: the person who forgives too easily and too quickly
  – may undervalue self
  – may underestimate offense

■ Deficiency: the person who can never forgive
  – may overestimate his or her own importance
  – usually lives a life of bitterness and anger
Cleverness and Wisdom

- The clever person knows the best means to any possible end.
- The wise person knows which ends are worth striving for.
Concluding Evaluation

- Virtues are those strengths of character that enable us to flourish.
- The virtuous person has practical wisdom, the ability to know when and how best to apply these various moral perspectives.