

# Virtue Ethics: Some Reflections from the Philosophy of Aristotle, Hume and Nietzsche

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## Abstract:

This article explores the distinct yet interconnected approaches to virtue ethics presented by Aristotle, David Hume, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Virtue ethics, broadly defined, is a moral theory emphasizing character and moral virtues over rules or consequences. While Aristotle grounds virtue in reason and defines the good life (*eudaimonia*) as living in accordance with rational activity and social excellence, Hume reinterprets virtue through the lens of emotion, arguing that moral judgment stems from feelings like sympathy and benevolence rather than rational deliberation. Nietzsche, diverging further, criticizes traditional moral frameworks altogether, presenting virtue as a dynamic and personal expression of strength and individuality, independent of universal reason or emotion. By employing these three perspectives, the study categorizes Aristotle's model as *eudaimonian* virtue ethics, Hume's as sentimentalist virtue ethics, and Nietzsche's as a virtue ethics of becoming. These distinctions illuminate the evolving role of reason in moral philosophy and highlight contrasting views of human flourishing, moral development, and the nature of virtue itself.

**Keywords:** Happiness, Morality, Passion, Reason, Virtue ethics.

## Introduction:

Virtue ethics is a foundational approach in moral philosophy that shifts focus from rules, consequences, or duties to the moral character of the individual. Rather than asking 'What should I do?' virtue ethics asks, 'What kind of person should I be?' Central to this theory is the concept of virtue, a stable character trait or disposition that enables a person to act rightly across various situations. While the general idea of virtue has remained influential throughout the history of Western philosophy, different thinkers have interpreted it in strikingly different ways, depending on their views of human nature, reason, and morality. This paper examines three major perspectives within the tradition of virtue ethics mainly: Aristotle's ethics, where virtue is closely tied to reason and human flourishing; Hume, on the other hand, argues that moral virtues are grounded not in reason but in sentiment feelings. Nietzsche presents the most radical departure, critiquing traditional morality and proposing an individualistic and existential understanding of virtue as a personal expression of strength, creativity, and life-affirmation. By studying these three influential frameworks, this research aims to clarify how each philosopher understands the nature of virtue, the role of reason, and the path to moral excellence. Finally, it reveals deep philosophical tensions within virtue ethics and illustrates how the concept of virtue has been shaped by different historical and intellectual contexts.

### Definition of Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics is centered on the idea of virtue itself. So, let us start by explaining what we mean by 'virtue.' We will take a broad approach to define it, so that any specific example of virtue can be understood within this general definition. A virtue is a positive quality of character; more precisely, it is a tendency to respond to certain situations or areas of life in an excellent or at least good way.<sup>1</sup> In simpler terms, a virtue is a part of someone's character that leads them to act or make decisions in a morally good way when the situation calls for it.

The field of a virtue refers to the range of things that the virtue is concerned with the situations, experiences, or objects to which a person should respond in a way that reflects that virtue. These can be internal experiences, like the physical pleasures that temperance deals with, or external things, such as other people, property, money, or honors. They can also include specific situations, like dangerous or risky circumstances that call for bravery. Additionally, a virtue might be concerned with abstract concepts like knowledge or beauty; physical objects such as one's children, friends, or animals; or even artistic creations, cultural symbols, or elements of the natural world which are especially relevant to environmental virtues.

Moral receptivity or moral acknowledgment can take many different forms. It is not limited to promoting good or creating value. It also includes honoring certain values; for example, not compromising one's integrity for the sake of justice (i.e., not being unjust in the pursuit of justice). It involves respecting rules, appreciating beauty or effort, loving and respecting others, being open or sensitive to moral concerns, and interacting with things in ways that are appropriate and ethically mindful. For instance, one might respect someone because they are older or hold a position of authority; work to promote value or benefit; support the well-being of a stranger or acquaintance; appreciate the beauty of a piece of art, the natural world, or a colleague's hard work; create something meaningful like a work of art; or find a creative solution to a moral problem.

Now we have taken a broader view of what virtue means, we can move on to defining *virtue ethics*. Due to its growing popularity, defining virtue ethics as a normative moral theory has become somewhat controversial among modern moral philosophers. Many contemporary thinkers offer differing views on what exactly virtue ethics involves. Covering all of those debates would take us too far of course, so instead, we will focus on a few core features that most virtue ethicists agree on.

A fully developed virtue ethical approach prioritizes *aretaic* concepts such as 'good' or 'excellent' over *deontic* ones like 'morally wrong,' 'ought,' 'right,' or 'obligation.' In this framework, *deontic* terms are secondary and are understood in relation to the more fundamental *aretaic* values. Virtue ethics places greater emphasis on evaluating the moral character and inner life of agents such as their traits, motives, and dispositions; rather than focusing primarily on individual actions or decisions.<sup>2</sup> A virtue ethicist also aims to provide a credible explanation of how moral judgments are connected to moral actions.

With this in mind, we can outline several key features of virtue ethics from the standpoint of virtuous action:<sup>3</sup>

1. An action is morally right if and only if it is what a person with virtuous character would do in the same circumstances.
2. *Goodness* takes priority over *rightness*.
3. The virtues are irreducibly plural and are intrinsic goods in themselves.
4. Virtues are objectively valuable.
5. Some intrinsic goods are agent-relative, that is, their moral significance can depend on the agent.

6. Acting rightly does not require maximizing the good.

Now, let us turn to three major figures (namely Aristotle, Hume and Nietzsche) in the history of Western philosophy whose ideas have inspired three distinct versions of virtue ethics.

### Virtue Ethics of Aristotle

Aristotle's ethical theory is often referred to as *eudaimonian ethics* because of its central focus on *eudaimonia*, a Greek term typically translated as "happiness." Basically, Aristotle's concept of happiness differs significantly from the way the term is often used in modern English, where it usually refers to a subjective feeling of well-being or pleasure.

The Greek word *eudaimonia* literally means "having a good spirit" or "being favored by a good daimōn" (a sort of guiding spirit), which might suggest that happiness is a matter of luck. But for Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is not simply a matter of fortune, nor is it purely subjective. Instead, it refers to *flourishing* or *living well*, a life lived in accordance with reason and virtue over the course of a lifetime.

In Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle outlines three major approaches to understanding happiness:

1. The Teleological Method: This approach begins by identifying the *telos* (or final end) of human life. Aristotle argues that every action aims at some good, and the highest good - the one pursued for its own sake, is *eudaimonia*. It is the ultimate aim of all human activity.
2. The Method of *Endoxa*: This method involves examining widely held beliefs and respected opinions about happiness. Aristotle surveys common views and philosophical positions to see which hold up under rational scrutiny.<sup>4</sup>
3. The Biological and Psychological Method: Here, Aristotle considers human nature from a biological and psychological standpoint. He explores the relationship between pleasure, reason, and the human soul. This leads to his well-known function argument, which claims that the good for humans is found in fulfilling our unique function: rational activity performed in accordance with virtue.<sup>5</sup>

Aristotle gives a thorough explanation of intellectual virtue, not simply as the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, but as a means to become a morally good person. He believes that the ultimate aim of ethical philosophy is to improve our character and help us leading better lives.<sup>6</sup> To achieve this, Aristotle bases his approach on the idea that virtue is developed through repeated practice, forming strong and lasting traits of character. This process is similar to learning a craft through constant repetition and training, virtues then become second nature.

Aristotle also acknowledged an important aspect of human nature, famously stating that "Man is by nature a political (or social) animal."<sup>7</sup> People cannot live in isolation; they must participate in and contribute to the life of their community. According to his *ergon* argument, ethical virtue is the activity of the soul guided by reason. More specifically, ethical virtue relates to one's character (*ethos*), which is shaped by social and cultural habits and customs. Character is the tendency or capacity to feel and act in ways that are valued by both one's peers and society at large.<sup>8</sup> He gives a general definition of moral virtue, or virtue of character, it is a stable state that leads to making good decisions. Virtue involves finding the 'mean' or balance between two extremes - one of excess and one of deficiency, determined by the right kind of reasoning; the kind a wise person (called the *phronimos*) would use.<sup>9</sup>

In Aristotle's writings, the magnanimous person is described as someone who possesses all the virtues. Unlike those who are weak-willed or vain, the magnanimous individual has a clear and accurate understanding of their own worth and confidently claims the great honors they deserve; not just general

respect, but also important positions within the city. Because of this, the magnanimous person benefits the city more than the pusillanimous individual, who hides their talents, or the conceited person, who seeks undeserved praise. For Aristotle, honor is especially important to the magnanimous person.<sup>10</sup>

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains that the term ‘justice’ has two meanings. In one sense, justice refers to all virtues taken together. In another sense, it is a specific virtue that reflects how a person views themselves as a member of a community of free and equal citizens. Aristotle considers justice to be the most important virtue, so he devotes a significant part of *ethics* to exploring it in detail. He furthermore distinguishes between two kinds: *universal justice* (also called general or broad justice), which encompasses the whole of virtue, and *particular justice* (also called specific or narrow justice), which is a single virtue of character, similar to courage, temperance, or liberality. Particular justice is one part of the broader concept of universal justice.

### Virtue Ethics of Hume

David Hume is most often celebrated as a great philosopher because of his influential theory of knowledge, rather than for his moral philosophy. Though, his moral ideas suggest that we should reconsider his role as a moral thinker. In fact, Hume’s entire empiricist approach seems deeply connected to his moral theory. He explicitly states that his goal is to establish a foundation for the science of morality. At the beginning of the third book of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, he writes that “morality is the subject that interests us above all others.”<sup>11</sup> This statement clearly supports the view that morality is central to Hume’s philosophical project.

Given the importance of Hume’s moral theory, it is worth exploring his ethical views further. In recent years, some scholars have started to interpret Hume’s moral philosophy as a form of virtue ethics though one quite distinct from Aristotle’s version. This contemporary perspective sees Hume as offering a unique kind of virtue ethics.

According to Hume, the study of human nature can be approached in two distinct ways. One kind of philosopher sees human beings as primarily made for action and takes on the role of promoting the beauty of virtue, hoping to inspire others to live morally upright lives. Another type view is humans more as thinking beings than as doers, focusing less on influencing behavior and more on understanding the workings of the human mind. Philosophers in this second category treat human nature as a subject for careful analysis. They closely examine the underlying principles that guide our understanding, shape our emotions, and influence our approval or disapproval of actions, people, and events.<sup>12</sup>

In Hume’s philosophy, moral judgment is the product of both reason and passion working together. Our goals and values are rooted in feeling, but reason helps to clarify those aims and identify the most effective ways to achieve them. Though Hume famously described reason as the “slave of the passions,” he did not mean it is unimportant. Rather, reason plays a supporting yet essential role, helping human beings act in ways that are both rational and aligned with their natural emotional tendencies.

According to Hume, there are four fundamental categories of things or aspects of human beings that give rise to what he calls *indirect passions*. These include: our wealth, possessions, or external goods; our close family members or those directly connected to us; our physical traits, such as beauty or deformity; and, most importantly, our mental qualities or character traits. These mental traits are significant because they not only bring pleasure to ourselves and others but can also inspire feelings like love or pride, depending on who possesses them. Virtues, then, can be understood as either personality traits or mental

qualities of this nature. Conversely, mental traits that are generally viewed as unpleasant can provoke feelings such as hatred or shame, and are therefore considered vices.

In Book III of the *Treatise*, Hume draws an important distinction between two kinds of virtues: natural and artificial. Some character traits are called ‘artificial’ because they depend on certain social conventions or agreements to exist, unlike “natural” virtues, which arise naturally without such dependence. The conventions relevant here mainly concerned property and promises, and they form the basis for the essential laws and duties that guide the administration of justice.

In Hume’s moral philosophy, benevolence and sympathy are considered extremely important. Since reason plays a largely neutral role in his view, Hume believes that certain feelings and emotional capacities such as benevolence and sympathy are essential for morality to exist. As Christine Swanton explains, reason alone cannot discover fixed, universal moral truths that apply to every rational being regardless of their emotions. Morality depends on an original passion of benevolence, just as prudence depends on an original passion of self-love. This is the core of Hume’s argument.<sup>13</sup>

In Hume’s moral psychology, love and benevolence are not the same. Benevolence is a direct passion; it is the natural desire to wish well for others and to act on that desire, which forms the essence of this virtue. Sympathy, closely linked to benevolence, is not simply pity. Instead, sympathy generates benevolence by helping us feel connected to others’ experiences. It explains why we care about things that benefit other people. We have an innate ability to feel sympathy and compassion for the happiness and suffering of others, whether they are people from the distant past or characters in fictional stories.

### **Virtue Ethics of Nietzsche**

Nietzsche’s ethical ideas came from two main parts of his philosophy: his theory of life-philosophy (called *Lebensphilosophie* in German) and his existential way of thinking. Life-philosophy is a kind of thinking that tries to understand the meaning, value, and purpose of life. This idea is quite broad. More clearly, life-philosophy treats ‘life’ as the most basic and important idea, and it sees life as something that doesn’t always follow logic or reason. Because of this, life is often seen as being in conflict with reason. The idea of life-philosophy is also linked to a movement called ‘vitalism’ in biology. This movement argued against explaining life only through science and machines. Instead, it claimed that life is driven by a special force or energy.<sup>14</sup> Within this framework, life is considered the ultimate standard for making judgments across all areas whether in knowledge, art, ethics, or politics.

Following Thomas Stern,<sup>15</sup> we can identify at least two distinct ways the term “morality” is used in Nietzsche’s philosophy.

1. Morality as a specific value system: This refers to the set of values that belong to a particular historical group or groups of people. These values arise from contingent causes, which could be studied through sociology. Nietzsche points to several examples, including Christian morality, ancient Israelite morality, and Ancient Greek morality.
2. Christian morality as a key example: Christian morality holds a special place in Nietzsche’s thought and can be seen as his primary target of critique. It was highly influential in modern Europe, but Nietzsche’s view of it is complex. Not all followers of Christian morality are devout Christians, and not all devout Christians adhere to what Nietzsche calls Christian morality. In his philosophy, it functions best as a technical term rather than a straightforward religious label.



### Nietzsche's Own Conception of Morality

Nietzsche's understanding of morality is the one from which he sought liberation from nihilism. It is important to note that Nietzsche cannot be seen as a critic of all forms of morality for two main reasons. First, he fully supports the idea of a "higher morality" meant to guide the behavior of "higher men" in their daily lives. Second, he uses the same German word often translated as 'moral' to describe both the moralities he criticizes and the ones he values. This means that simply relying on terminology will not help us distinguishing between the ideals he opposes and those he endorses. Furthermore, Nietzsche's goal includes calling for a reevaluation of existing values, which gives the impression that he is appealing to more universal or general 'moral' standards, albeit in a way that challenges traditional norms. Nietzsche's criticism of morality is not confined to any single system defined by religion, philosophy, society, or history. Instead, he critiques morality in a broad, general sense. So, it wouldn't be accurate to say he only attacks a specific popular morality like Christian, Kantian, European, or utilitarian morality; even though he certainly critiques all of these at different times.<sup>16</sup>

To better understand the difference between the morality Nietzsche opposes and the one he supports, it helps to consider his distinction between *slave morality* and *master morality*. These are the two main types of morality in his philosophy.<sup>17</sup> *Master morality*, called *noble morality*, arises from a strong sense of self-confidence. For the noble class, the idea of what is 'good' is essentially a reflection and expression of their own identity. What the noble considers 'good' is simply what they value in themselves. In this view, 'good' means qualities like honor and everything associated with nobility. Conversely, 'bad' refers to what is lowly, inferior, humble, vulgar, or common. Thus, the noble moral outlook is structured around the opposition of 'good' versus 'bad'. According to Nietzsche, the two different kinds of morality actually reflect two distinct perspectives. As he puts it: the ideas of good and evil have a "two-fold prehistory," first arising in the minds of the ruling tribes and classes, and then in the souls of the oppressed and powerless.<sup>18</sup> This is where Nietzsche's concept of *perspectivism* becomes most evident and also most controversial in his moral philosophy.

In *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche outlines these two competing moral viewpoints: the noble (or master) morality and the slave (or herd) morality, which stand in direct opposition to each other. True to his *perspectivist* approach, Nietzsche denies the existence of any objective "moral facts." What is striking, however, is that neither noble nor slave morality recognizes itself as merely one perspective or interpretation of the world. Instead, both see themselves as the one and only 'true' morality.

The nobleman views himself and his perspective as naturally superior and generally assumes without much reflection that the 'slaves' share this same perspective, which of course means they are the losers. Hence, the standards by which the noble measures his superiority are his own, often unquestioned, and tend to reinforce themselves. In essence, the noble person is his own model of virtue.

In contrast, the slave's mindset is far more complex and interesting. Slave morality can be seen as a reaction to noble morality. Unlike the noble, the slave's morality is confined within a theoretical framework and seeks its own justification. This is most clearly seen in the slave's struggle to accept the reality that, according to the master morality's standards, the slaves are the defeated party. They lack not only the power and privileges of the nobles but also, more importantly, the values the nobles hold dear. These values include not just wealth and status but, even more crucially, the honor and qualities associated with nobility itself.

According to Solomon,<sup>19</sup> the key to understanding Nietzsche's view on ethics is to engage deeply with his writings on emotions. Unlike Kant, Nietzsche did not approach ethics from an allegedly objective, purely rational perspective. Instead, feelings like disgust, anger, joy, wrath, jealousy, pity, awe, envy, and resentment alongside his intense focus on "the will to power" are central to his moral philosophy. For Nietzsche, virtues are essential for affirming a healthy and vibrant life. True virtues must be our own original creations, authentic expressions of the self and vital tools for self-preservation; any other kind of virtue, he warns, can be harmful.<sup>20</sup>

Based on this view, Nietzsche believed moral teachings cannot be effectively communicated through abstract principles alone. Because of, virtues are deeply personal and beyond simple definitions, they cannot be fully conveyed through words. The only real way to teach virtue is by embodying it and serving as a living example for others.

### Conclusion:

A close examination of these three approaches to virtue ethics shows that, while they share many similarities, they differ significantly in how they view the relationship between virtue and reason. To be clear, in Aristotle's *eudaimonian* ethics, reason plays a central role in determining virtues. As we have seen, all virtues of character depend on intellectual virtues, and Aristotle holds intellectual virtues as superior to virtues of character. In contrast, Hume's model presents a different relationship between reason and virtue. For Hume, reason is the servant of the passions, always subordinate to emotion. Since emotions form the foundation of virtues in Hume's moral theory, reason takes a secondary role in shaping human character traits. Nevertheless, reason still serves a practical role in guiding virtue by clarifying how passions can be best fulfilled. Nietzsche, on the other hand, minimizes or even rejects the role of reason in defining virtues. In his moral philosophy, reason plays little to no part in virtue, especially within his concept of noble morality.

Based on this criterion of how reason relates to virtue, we can categorize these three virtue ethics traditions as follows: Aristotle's ethics is *eudaimonian*, because the ultimate goal is happiness (*eudaimonia*), which depends on the individual's use of practical reason (*phronesis*). Hume's ethics is sentimental virtue ethics, since passions or sentiments are the foundation of virtue and reason is subordinate to them. Nietzsche's ethics can be described as a virtue ethics of becoming, as he criticizes any corrective or supportive role of reason in his vision of noble morality.

As a result, these great thinkers together show that virtue ethics is not a fixed doctrine but a flexible framework that evolves with our understanding of human nature, reason and emotion respectively.

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