

Catarina Belo

Ethics and Virtue

Catarina Belo

Ethics and Virtue



Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover picture: Mata do Fontelo, Viseu, 2020. © copyright 2023 by Duarte Belo.
Photo of the author by Ahmad El-Nemr

ISBN: 978-3-95538-041-0



Stuttgart 2023

Alle Rechte vorbehalten

Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Dies gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und elektronische Speicherformen sowie die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 5:48

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	9
Introduction	11
1. The Nature of Ethics	19
2. The Presuppositions of Ethics	33
2.1. Voluntariness	33
2.2. The Conception of the Good and Happiness	50
2.3. The Challenge of Determinism	88
3. Human Nature	103
3.1. Pleasure, Community and the Emotions	103
3.2. Habit	149
4. The Definition of Virtue	159
4.1. The Unity of the Virtues	196
5. Types of Virtues	199
5.1. Moral and Theological Virtues	199
5.2. The Cardinal Virtues	264
5.3. Friendship	280
5.4. The Intellectual Virtues	315
5.5. Vice	335
Conclusion	343

Acknowledgments

This book was written during a sabbatical leave granted to me by the American University in Cairo in Egypt. During that period, I was based at the Center for Philosophy of the University of Lisbon, in Portugal.

I am grateful to my friend and colleague, Abraham Anderson, for introducing me to Anthony Ashley Cooper, the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, when we were both colleagues in teaching at The American University in Cairo from 2006, and for his comments on a previous draft of this book. I am grateful to my friend and colleague, Robin Weiss, for her advice on scholarly literature on Stoicism. I am grateful to my friend and colleague, Marta Mendonça, for her advice on various aspects of modern philosophy.

My friend and colleague, William Melaney, provided detailed comments on a previous draft of this book that were most helpful and for which I am especially grateful.

I am also grateful to Johanna Baboukis for the careful proofreading of the manuscript.

This book is dedicated to my brothers, Diogo and Duarte.

Introduction

Virtue ethics is a branch of ethics which in recent times has returned to the center of the attention of philosophers, in particular ethicists. Virtue ethics was the dominant approach to ethics in the Western tradition since Greek antiquity and through to the modern period. The theme of virtue, including particular virtues, is the subject of several Platonic dialogues, and is an enduring theme in Socrates' and Plato's philosophy as a whole. For Aristotle too, ethics and ethical action are centered around the theme of virtue, and the particular virtues. Virtue plays a central role in the various schools of Hellenistic philosophy. This tradition continues into the Patristic and the Scholastic periods of the history of philosophy and the Renaissance. Within classical or medieval Islamic philosophy, virtue is also the focus of research on ethics, in particular the works of Alfarabi, Averroes and Miskawayh, among others, and virtue is also central to the ethical thought of Maimonides. In so far as virtue ethics, with its focus on virtue, represents an emphasis on the personal moral qualities of individuals, other kinds of ethics, Hindu, Buddhist or Confucian, can also be considered as forming part of virtue ethics.

Within the Western tradition, virtue ethics remained alive and thrived into the modern period, in particular among the British moralists, such as Shaftesbury and Hume. Kant's orientation of ethics towards the principle of duty and the establishment of universal principles of conduct, rather than highlighting particular qualities of the human subject, effectively altered the

dominance of virtue ethics, turning the attention of ethical studies to deontology and the notion of duty. Some contemporary scholars oppose the two kinds of ethics, one which highlights personal qualities of the ethical subject, and the other which insists on universal duties which are independent of particular circumstances or particular individuals. In contemporary scholarship, one finds studies arguing for the compatibility between virtue ethics and the universal notion of duty and norms.

The current revival of virtue ethics has been attributed to analytic philosophy, and in particular Anscombe and her influential paper 'Modern Moral Philosophy', which delineates the differences between duty ethics and virtue ethics. Other studies followed, such as MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. There are currently many studies, including book-length studies on virtue ethics, and also on particular virtues and the significance of virtue within contemporary discourses on ethics. These studies build on the previous tradition of virtue ethics and seek to highlight its significance for contemporary ethical life.

Virtue is a topic which concerns human behavior as a whole and thus concerns central aspects of human life. A topic related to virtue and ethics more generally is politics and the law. The inextricable link between virtue and politics is already present in Plato's and Aristotle's works, both of whom stress the need for virtuous behavior by individuals in their personal relations and within the political state. For Aristotle, the study of ethics is preliminary to the study of politics.

Another issue that is almost always associated with virtue is happiness. Already for the ancient Greek and Hellenistic philosophers, virtue was a means to happiness or identical to happiness itself. These two related issues will be treated in this work, although only in so far as they pertain to the broader theme of virtue.

The present work, composed as a philosophical dialogue, builds on a previous philosophical dialogue of mine, titled *Spirit in Philosophy: A Metaphysical Inquiry* (Stuttgart, WiSa, 2019), which includes a subchapter on ethics. In the present work, I follow the same format, namely that of the philosophical dialogue, which affords a certain kind of freedom and flexibility in tackling various philosophical topics. In addition, I build on the conclusions reached in that work, regarding the significance of a spiritual or idealist approach to ethics, the concept of the good and the final cause as central to ethics, the need to understand human nature in developing an ethical theory, and more broadly the notion of causality and agency as pivotal to debates on ethics.

Contemporary scholars often distinguish between virtue theory and virtue ethics, the former consisting in a clarification of what virtue means and its place within ethical theories, and the latter making the case for virtue as the most suitable approach for producing good ethical conduct. In this sense, virtue ethics is opposed to other ethics theories such as duty ethics and consequentialism or utilitarianism, which measure the goodness of an action based on its results, to the exclusion, for instance, of the means involved in bringing about an

action. This work will make a case for virtue ethics as the most natural and productive form of ethics.

Virtue ethics is characterized by a focus on individual behavior and its improvement, although its consequences are far from being individualistic or particular. Virtuous practice can be found at the communal level or in society as a whole, but virtue is considered to develop first at the level of the individual. In the *Republic*, Plato famously makes parallelisms between virtue, in particular justice, in the soul, as the harmony between the various faculties, and virtue in the state as the harmony between the different classes of citizens. This parallelism is taken up by Alfarabi in his *Aphorisms of the Statesman* and *The Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City* which describes the significance of virtue for the individual and for the state. Without diminishing the significance of virtuous action for the political state, Aristotle holds that virtuous behavior pertains to individuals and has to take account of their circumstances. Nevertheless, he also thinks of ethics as being the first part of politics, and views the link between the two disciplines as continuous.

While tackling related issues such as happiness, considered to be the goal of virtue, and the role of virtue in society and in politics, this work will above all study virtue as an individual endeavor and goal, and more specifically virtue theory as a set of general principles which help each individual to act in a moral way.

As with *Spirit in Philosophy: A Metaphysical Inquiry*, this work draws heavily on the history of philosophy. While it would be difficult to convey all the conceptions

of virtue to be found within the history of philosophy, it is important to take account of the most salient ones, on the one hand, in order to avoid unwittingly repeating what has already been said, and on the other, to build on that rich tradition. This study draws inspiration particularly from the works of Aristotle, Saint Thomas Aquinas and Shaftesbury. Among contemporary philosophers the works of Terence Irwin and Linda Zagzebski are particularly helpful.

Aristotle builds on Plato's discussion of virtue in his dialogues. These dialogues, especially those which are considered to be the early Platonic dialogues, analyze specific virtues, such as piety, friendship, courage and justice, while seeking their precise definitions. One dialogue, the *Meno*, is centered around virtue itself, and how it can be defined. Some related debates discuss the connection between virtue and the soul, virtue and knowledge, and the unity of the virtues. Naturally, Socrates is the protagonist in Plato's dialogues, and some scholars have sought to distinguish his views from those of Plato. However, even the middle dialogues, in which Plato appears to develop his own philosophy and distinct theories, have virtue as the focus of the discussions.

Aristotle, as a historian of philosophy and a former student of Plato, develops his own theory of virtue and his own virtue ethics. Some of the hallmarks of Aristotle's virtue ethics consist in considering virtue as a result of habituation, as a middle term between extremes and as a requisite for happiness. However, like Plato he views virtue as residing in the human soul and as a characteristic of human excellence. Later, the Stoics identify

virtue with knowledge and state that virtue suffices for attaining happiness, and their views are analyzed by ancient, medieval and modern philosophers.

Saint Thomas Aquinas, as an Aristotelian philosopher and a Christian theologian, brings together various aspects of Aristotelian virtue ethics and develops them in tandem with a reflection on God's role in laying down the religious and moral law, and as a model for human virtue. In particular, Aquinas develops the notion of voluntary action, the connection between virtue and the law, as well as those virtues which are distinctively theological.

Shaftesbury is an important representative of the emphasis on the role of emotion in ethics, as well as the aesthetic appreciation of virtue, and therefore foreshadows current reflections on the link between human nature and moral action. His reflections on human nature and the role of religion in shaping moral habits are also central to his philosophy. Many other philosophers wrote about virtue, and several of them will be mentioned later in this work.

Naturally, ethics is a very broad field, consisting of several branches. Even virtue ethics can be understood in different ways, as it has been by many different philosophers. It can be explored in connection with human nature in all its complexity, human action and normative questions. Therefore, it is important to introduce some central and broad questions within the field of ethics before entering issues pertaining specifically to virtue ethics, and making a case for virtue ethics in relation to other branches of normative ethics. Virtue ethics

includes many issues broadly pertaining to ethics, and philosophers who have developed this theory have tended to describe ideal human behavior and character.