Virtues and Vices
Storytime!
Axial Age, 8th-3rd century BCE
Virtue Theory: Important Concepts
Virtue

A virtue is a state or disposition of a person; unlike a mere habit, however, a virtue is a disposition to act *for reasons*, and so a disposition that is exercised through the agent's practical reasoning.
In other words, virtue is moral and intellectual excellence; it requires doing the right thing for the right reason without serious internal opposition, as a matter of character.
For this reason, virtue involves two aspects: the emotional (or affective) and the intellectual.
This way, Heart.
Eudaimonia, sometimes translated as “flourishing”, is the final end of life; it is what all the actions in a complete life aims towards.

Virtue is devoted to achieving this final end.
Vice

A vice is a quality that prevents a thing from achieving its final end or from performing its function well.
“By the time you come to think about ethics and want to develop or improve your life as a whole, you already have a life. You already have a social position, a cultural education, a family, a job, and so on” (Annas 2009: 523).
“However, classical virtue ethics always assumes that reflection about our ethical views will reveal them to be inadequate. All classical virtue ethics assumes, in a way oddly absent from many modern theories, that ethical thought essentially includes an aspiration to be better than we are, to reach an ideal that is not already attained” (Annas 2009: 523).
Right Action

The right action is the action that the virtuous character would do; e.g., What would Jesus do?
Wrong Action

The **wrong action** is the action that a vicious character would do; e.g., What would Jafar do?
“The answer that virtue ethics offers to the question what is the right thing to do denies that there is any such thing as a ‘theory of right action’ in this abstract sense. In explaining what is the right thing to do, virtue ethics appeals to the idea of what would be done by the virtuous person.

For virtue ethics appreciates that ‘the virtuous person’ cannot be defined in a void and then used to derive right actions in a void.

Rather, the thought is that what I should do, in my situation, is what I would do if I were brave (generous, fair, etc.), where this is taken to mean: braver than I am, nearer the ideal of the brave person.

Working out the answer is complex” (Annas 2009: 524).
There is a progress from the mechanical rule-following of the learner to the greater understanding of the expert, whose responses are sensitive to the particularities of situations, as well as expressing learning and general reflection.
Main Point:
Integral to virtue theory is reasoning well.
To review...
“In classical virtue ethics, we start our moral education by learning from others, both in making particular judgments about right and wrong, and in adopting some people as role models or teachers or following certain rules...”
“At first, as pupils, we adopt these views because we were told to, or they seemed obvious, and we acquire a collection of moral views that are fragmented and accepted on the authority of others...”
“[T]hen, the learner will begin to reflect for himself on what he has accepted, will detect and deal with inconsistencies, and will try to make his judgments and practice coherent in terms of a wider understanding which enables him to unify, explain and justify the particular decisions he makes....”
“[This is a process that requires the agent at every stage to use his [or her] mind, to think about what he [or she] is doing and to try to achieve understanding of it” (Annas 2009: 517).
Traditionally, reasoning is defined as the process by which one concludes one thing on the basis of something else; i.e., it is the mental act of moving from evidence to a conclusion based on the evidence.
Why did reason evolve?
reason? why?
The Traditional View

From Aristotle to the 20th century, reason has been viewed as a means for individuals to acquire more accurate beliefs and hence make better decisions.

In other words, reason, by performing this intellectual function, allows humans to gain knowledge: reasoning is for forming true beliefs (see Mercier and Sperber 2017).
“(Man) has great power of adapting his habits to new conditions of life. He invents weapons, tools, and various stratagems to procure food and to defend himself. When he migrates into a colder climate he uses clothes, builds sheds, and makes fires; and by the aid of fire cooks food otherwise indigestible.”

~Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, p. 188-9
Question:
Who is a virtuous person?
Proposed Theories
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vices (Deficiency)</th>
<th>Virtues</th>
<th>Vices (Excess)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cowardice</td>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>Rashness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Insensibility</td>
<td>Temperance</td>
<td>Self-indulgence</td>
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<td>Stinginess</td>
<td>Charity</td>
<td>Prodigality</td>
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<td>Pettiness</td>
<td>Proper self-value</td>
<td>Vulgarity/Vanity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apathy</td>
<td>Proper ambition</td>
<td>Greed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of spirit</td>
<td>Good Temper</td>
<td>Volatile</td>
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<td>Mock modesty</td>
<td>Truthfulness</td>
<td>Boastfulness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boring</td>
<td>Wittiness</td>
<td>Buffoonery</td>
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<td>Shamelessness</td>
<td>Modesty</td>
<td>Shyness</td>
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The ethics of care is a 20th century movement that sought to shift virtue ethics away from Aristotelian virtues (that saw the culmination of eudaimonia in aristocratic ideals) towards more interpersonal virtues with a focus on how we can care for each other.
### Aristotle’s Virtues

- Courage
- Temperance
- Charity
- Proper self-value
- Proper ambition

### Ethics of Care

- Compassion
- Self-understanding
- Giving conscientiously
- Proper self-love
- Proper values

The main difference between Aristotle and Held is that **Held emphasizes** not just not harming others, but **actively helping others** and building strong interpersonal relationships (which can be challenging).
Buddha Virtues

- Compassion
- Generosity
- Integrity
- Renunciation, i.e. giving up excess desire
- Wisdom
- Sympathetic Joy (antidote to envy)
- Effort
- Patience
- Truthfulness
- Resolution
- Lovingkindness
- Equanimity, or Evenness of Mind

All of these can be challenging.
Problems
Which is the right set of virtues?

There are many different accounts of just what virtue is...
How do we decide which is the right account?
Wouldn’t this require another code of ethics to decide which is the best one?
The Puzzle of Collective Action?

Although Aristotle argues that citizens must actively participate in politics if they are to be happy and virtuous, this theory doesn’t directly address how collective action is possible.
How will we know when we’re virtuous?

We can look for virtuous people to help us, but how will you know someone is virtuous if you don’t know what virtue is?
Cognitive Bias of the Day
the **Dunning–Kruger effect** is a cognitive bias in which people of low ability have illusory superiority and mistakenly assess their cognitive ability as greater than it is ([Kruger & Dunning 1999](#)).