

The Basic Elements of a Moral Virtue

- I. Introduction: Today we will start talking about virtue in general (the first half of each talk will be on some aspect of virtue in general). We will talk about the general structure of a moral virtue, i.e., the “parts” that make it up. It is good to understand this structure, since the way the virtue is acquired depends on the structure.
- II. The four states of character
 - A. Each moral virtue deals with a particular area of our life. More specifically, each virtue deals with one (or two) passions/urges/desires like the desire to eat, or the desire for money, or fear of physical pain, anger, etc. The virtues are distinguished from each other on this basis: temperance deals with our desire to eat, liberality or generosity deals with our desire for money and fortitude deals with fear of pain, etc. (see last page for a chart of sample virtues).
 - B. For each of these passions/desires/urges, there are basically four typical states of character that we find in people.

Type of character	Thinking	Passion/Desire/Urge	Action
Virtue	True/correct	Ordinate	Good
Moral Continence	True/correct	Inordinate	Good
Moral Incontinence	True/correct	Inordinate	Bad
Vice	False	Inordinate	Bad

1. **Virtue:** when a person knows what the right thing to do in this area (e.g., the right amount to eat) is and has orderly desires. This person will consistently do the good act (eat the right amount in a given situation).
2. **Moral Continence:** when a person knows what is the right thing to do in this area (e.g., the right amount to eat), but has inordinate (too strong) desires. This person has to struggle against his strong passions which are pulling him in the wrong direction. He generally wins the struggle and so generally does the good act (the dieter who “wins” and eats the right amount for the situation). This is also called moral strength.
3. **Moral Incontinence:** when a person knows what is the right thing to do in this area (e.g., the right amount to eat), but has inordinate (too strong) desires. This person has to struggle against his strong passions which are pulling him in the wrong direction. He generally loses the struggle and so generally does the bad act (the dieter who “loses” and eats too much for the situation). Afterwards, once his passion has subsided, he regrets what he has done and realizes he should not have done it (he may even know this as he does it, like dieters who “cheat”). This is also sometimes called moral weakness.

4. **Vice:** when a person thinks it is good simply to indulge the desire and so indulges it as much as possible. Such people usually have inordinate desires. For example, a glutton usually has inordinate (too much) desires to eat, and simply indulges them. This indulgence can become very excessive. After his indulgence, he does not regret it, but simply thinks it was an enjoyable thing to do.
- C. Each of these four is a state of character, i.e., it is more or less stable. It will not change in a day or a week or even a month. These are habits and can usually be changed only with consistent effort over a fairly long period of time. This is particularly true of the affective/passionate aspect of character.
- D. How do you assess a person's state of character?
1. See what they do in a consistent way (good or bad).
 2. See what sort of interior struggle there is when they do what they should or shouldn't (e.g., people on diets). This distinguishes virtue from moral continence.
 3. See what sort of regret there is for doing what is bad (distinguishes moral incontinence from vice)
 4. To assess your own affective state, you do what you should do and see how hard it is; for the virtuous person it is not too hard. E.g., for a person who is truly temperate, it is not too hard to eat the right amount. Such a person is not plagued by strong urges that he has to fight. In the case of a morally strong person, he will have to fight the urges. This is hard and even painful.

III. The essential elements of the virtue: Cognitive and affective

- A. Each virtue has two essential parts:
1. A cognitive part by which the person understands what is the right thing to do; what is the right goal to aim at.
 2. An "affective" or passionate or desiring part (more generally an *urge* of some sort). Examples of these urges: desire to eat, desire for sexual pleasure, desire to know, anger, desire for wealth, fear of pain, fear of ridicule, desire for honor and praise, desire to play, etc. As affective or an urge, this "pulls" or "pushes" a person in one direction or another, toward or away from something. This is distinct from thinking, although clearly closely related to it since whether we tend toward or away from something depends a lot on how we understand it (e.g., if we do not think something is harmful, we will not fear it; nevertheless, the thought that the thing is harmful is different from the fear which "pushes" us to flee from it).
 3. To possess a virtue in its full (perfect) form, you need to have both elements: you need to know what the right thing is and have the right passions/urges in its regard.

4. With respect to passion/urges, the virtuous state is not to have no passions (a kind of stoicism), but rather to have the right passion, i.e., to experience desire for the right things, at the right time, in the right way (not too strong or too weak). For example, the virtuous state with regard to the passion of anger (called meekness), is not to have no anger, but to become angry at the right things, at the right time, in the right way etc.

B. Acquiring these essential elements

1. These two elements are not acquired in exactly the same way.
2. The cognitive element has to be learned.
 - a. Children learn this first through example (of parents first, then of others), through approvals and disapprovals (“Good boy” or “Bad boy”), then through literature and through the general surrounding culture. They also learn it by direct teaching, especially as mature.
 - b. Children can learn what is not true. E.g., in our day, it is not unusual that a father teaches his son, by example and by his approvals and disapprovals, that sports (games) is more important than it really is. The child can come to attach excessive importance to success in sports and usually will come to desire it too strongly (this is against the virtue of eutrapelia). Or many children learn that prayer is not important (they see no one praying and are never told it is a good thing to do).
3. The affective element is shaped by habituation.
 - a. There may be some natural, temperamental basis for how strongly one feels a desire toward a particular sort of good, but there is a very large influence of sheer habituation.
 - b. Over time our desires are formed by how they are indulged or curbed. This is how habits are formed.
 - i. If always indulged, they will tend to grow stronger. E.g., if one always indulges his desire to eat, the desire grows stronger and becomes harder to control/oppose. So too if one indulges fears.
 - ii. If one does not indulge the passion, it diminishes over time.
 - iii. Basically one habituates ones passion (appetites) virtuously by repeatedly choosing to do what reason sees as the right thing, whether or not the passions push in another direction.
 - c. Parents need to have a read on where their children stand in terms of their urges and how they are being habituated. Habituation—for better or for worse—starts at a very young age.
 - d. For young children who are not yet able to think about what is best for them, parents supply reason and have the children indulge

passions reasonably by telling them what to do or not to do. Hopefully, with time, the children's reason matures and they can direct themselves. At that point it will be much easier for the children if their affective side has been well habituated under the guidance of their parents. If they have been well habituated, they will be more receptive to the true cognitive state when it is taught to them.

Some examples of virtues and the passions/ urges/emotions they deal with

Things we have to handle in life	Passion/urge/emotion	Virtue	Vice(s)
Food, drink, sex, drugs	Desire for pleasure	Temperance	Over-indulgence
Difficult or painful things	Fear, confidence, daring	Fortitude	Cowardice or temerity
Money	Desire for money (security)	Liberality or Generosity	Greed or extravagance
Games/play	Desire for fun	Eutrapelia	unnamed
Slights of others	Anger	Meekness	Irascibility
Honor and praise	Love of one's own excellence	Humility	Pride

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