

CHRISTIAN ETHICS 102: CHARACTER AND VIRTUES

Jesus said: *Every good tree bears good fruit,
but the bad tree bears bad fruit.
A good tree cannot bear bad fruit,
nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.
Every tree that does not bear good fruit
is cut down and thrown into the fire.
Thus, you will know them by their fruits.”*
Matthew 7:17-20¹

INTRODUCTION

Christianity is not first about beliefs. First, it is a Way of Life. When we decide to follow Jesus on this way of life, we want to become like a “good tree that bears good fruit.” The question is: how does one change to become “good”? It’s a practical question. Divine grace plays its role, but how do we play ours?

The Christian Way of Life teaches the importance of our *character* and its *traits*: those *virtues and vices* we have acquired. We begin to “bear good fruit” through paying attention to our character and virtues. This aide-mémoire hopes to stimulate reflection on these.

Classical antiquity placed a great deal of emphasis on character and virtues. Jesus did so in very direct and memorable ways. So did the Christian theologians,² who quoted both Jesus and the classical philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. The latter, for example, had a profound influence on the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas,

¹ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: NRSV Version*, 5th rev’d. ed., Michael Coogan, ed., New York, NY: Oxford University Publishing, 1989, 2018, p.1792. Known hereafter as *NRSV*.

² Such as Ambrose of Milan (d. 397 C.E.) Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) and Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274).

who showed how compatible some of Aristotle's teachings on virtue were with those of Jesus.

Note that ancient philosophy was not today's academic nonsense: it was practical teaching that offered (the upper class) ways of living a good life by becoming a good person. This kind of approach is called *virtue ethics*. In a different context, Jesus taught virtue ethics to the poor and the poor in spirit.

Introductory Exercise:

Picture the person(s) you have most admired in your life: someone who never let you down, whose conduct was an example to you and others, someone who always seemed consistently admirable.

1. What were the qualities you admired in them?
2. What did you learn from them on how to act and behave?
3. How did you learn from them? Did you watch and learn and then copy?

What was outstanding in such admirable is the character and the particular virtues they displayed. In admirable people, good character is like a strong spine and the virtues are like the ribs that hold together the torso. People are not born with good character. Like a strong, healthy body, good character develops over a lifetime.

Character development depends on two factors working together.

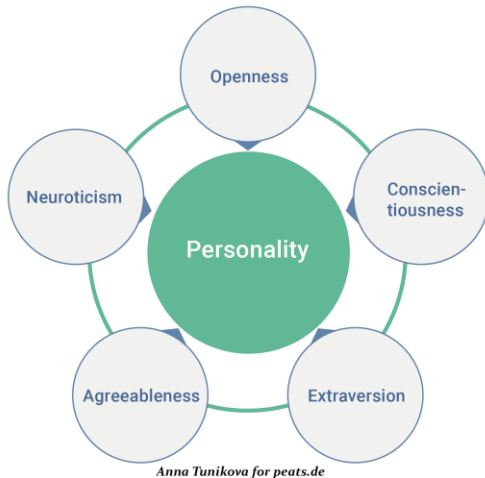
First, good character only develops in a person who is open to divine grace. For us, that begins when we transfer our allegiance from the world to Jesus and follow him on the Way of Life, gradually beginning to trust the holy Spirit operating in our beings.

Second, good character depends on one's conscious, deliberate actions. It begins when we accept responsibility for ourselves and our actions.

CHARACTER

What is character? We must first distinguish *character* from *personality*.

The most accepted theory of personality today is the five-factor inventory:



Openness to experience: inventive, curious vs. consistent, cautious
Conscientiousness: efficient, organized vs. extravagant, careless
Extroversion: outgoing, energetic vs. solitary, reserved
Agreeableness: friendly, compassionate vs. challenging, callous
Emotional stability (neuroticism): sensitive, nervous vs. resilient, confident³

These personality factors (not “traits”) are fairly stable across life and can be attributed to both nature and environment. For example, extroversion - being outgoing and energetic is a factor of one’s personality. It is not a trait of one’s character.

Sometimes when a person’s five personality factors combine into some flamboyance, we would say colloquially that the person is “quite a character” when what they are is “quite a personality.”

When we meet new people, we generally pick up on their personality pretty quickly, especially when they tend to extroversion. Character takes longer to reveal and at first can be obscured by personality factors.

³ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Five_personality_traits

The difference between personality and character is like the difference between being and doing: personality is being and character is doing.⁴

Character Exercise 1:

1. Have you seen people at work behave differently with their co-workers than with their superiors? What happens?
2. Have you ever been disappointed in a celebrity? What happened? What were they “really like”?
3. Have you known someone whose personality made you think they had a good character? How or when did you come to tell the difference?

Character, as the saying goes, is what people do when they think no one is looking.

According to Aristotle, *character* is about *choices*. People have three preferred goals when making choices: the *noble*, the *advantageous*, and the *pleasant*. These preferred goals have their opposites to avoid: the *base*, the *injurious*, and the *painful*. In all three goals, good people tend to go right and bad people tend to go wrong in their choices.⁵ So how does character work?

Character is the *complex of traits* – those habits of virtues and vices – which we have acquired in life. They add up to a disposition to *act well or badly* to human *emotions*, and *pleasure and pain* in particular.⁶ We normally avoid pain, but at times we have to face and endure pain for the sake of the good. Parents have to correct

⁴ Which reminds one of the bathroom graffiti from the '70s:

“To be is to do.”—Sartre

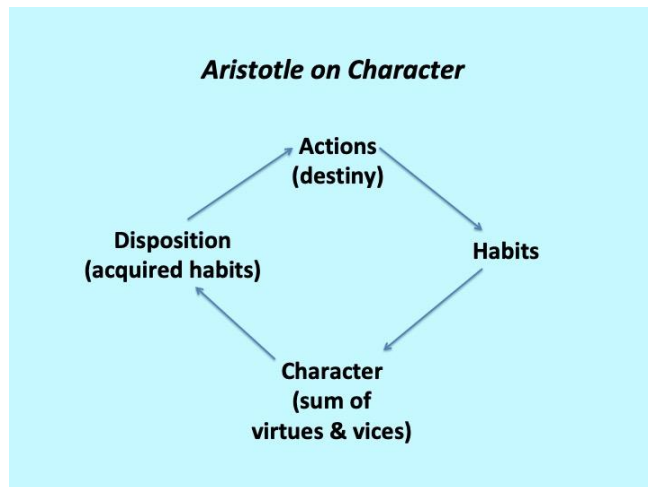
“To do is to be.”—Camus

“Do be do be do.”—Sinatra

⁵ Book II.3, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. David Ross, rev'd. J.O. Urmson & J.L. Ackrill, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1925, 1998, p.33. Known hereafter as *NE: Ross*.

⁶ Book II.3, *op. cit.*, p.32.

their children's faults, even if it leads to the pain of tantrums. We normally seek pleasure, but at times we have to avoid pleasure for the sake of the good. It is better to say no to a night on the town if we're going to spend the grocery money.



Aristotle emphasized that the moral virtues are *not innate* to humans: they are *acquired* character traits, which we learn and assimilate through *practice* and *habit*.⁷

Aristotle's insight that virtues are acquired through practice and habit is reflected in the popular old saying:

Sow a thought and reap a deed;
sow a deed and reap a habit;
sow a habit and reap a character;
sow a character and reap a destiny.

Character Exercise 2:

Think of one of your good habits – for example, in exercise, cooking, personal relations, hygiene, work, etc.

1. Trace its origins. Where did you get the idea? How did you start doing it? How did you make it a habit? How did you keep the habit?
2. Now think of one of your failed attempts at a habit. How did it fail? What was different between this experience and the habit you've kept?
3. Think of the habit you've kept. How did it change things for you? What's different about you now? Where will this habit take you in the future?

⁷ Book II.1, *ibid.*, p.28-9.

VIRTUES AND THEIR VICICES

Good habits and virtues are closely related. What then is a virtue? The word “virtue” translates the Greek *aretē* and the Latin *virtus*, which both mean “*excellence*.” A virtue then is the *distinctive excellence* of a thing or a being.

A virtue gives value to a thing or being.

The virtue (excellence) of an axe is to cut, that of a medicinal plant is to heal, that of a human is to act on decisions.

Aristotle said that a virtue is a human character trait that both
(a) makes a person good and
(b) makes them do their work well.⁸

How then do virtues make a person good? How does it work in practice?

Do you remember the story of Goldilocks? She tried out the bear family’s beds and said: “This bed is too hard, this one is too soft, and this one is just right.”

Similarly, Aristotle explained virtues as *the mean* (the midpoint) *between two extremes*.

A virtue is the mean between two extremes as it relates directly to me as an individual.

Vices are the opposite *extremes* of a given virtue: one of *excess* and one of *deficiency*.

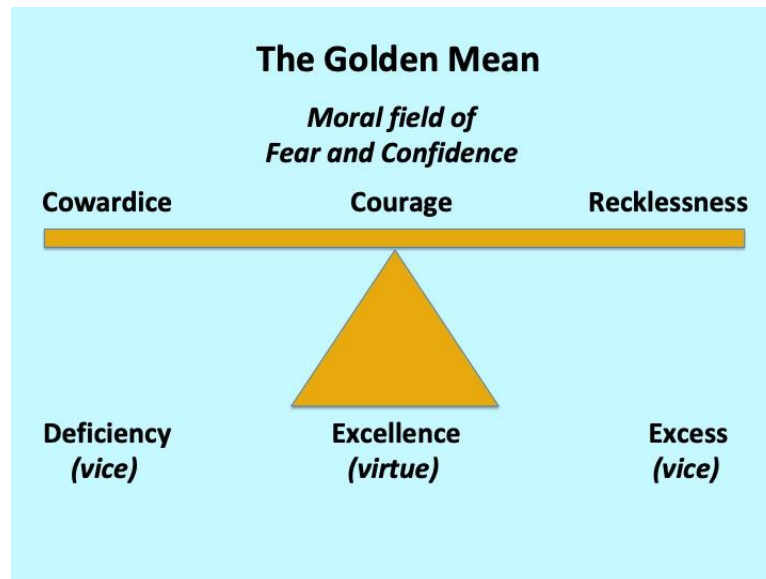
Picture yourself standing in a playground facing a see-saw.

The two seats at the end of the pole are the extremes, the vices.

The virtue lies at the centre of the pole at the pivot point.

⁸ Book II.6, *ibid.*, p.37.

For example, in the moral field of *fear and confidence*, *courage* is the mean. Courage is the *excellence* (virtue) that lies in between *cowardice*, i.e., a lack of courage - a *deficiency* (vice) of courage, and *recklessness*, i.e., too much courage - an *excess* (vice) of courage.



The formal definition of a virtue is that it is *an acquired habit to choose the mean specific to its field of action and emotion.*⁹

Virtue Exercise 1:

Think of times when you have displayed courage, physical or moral.

1. What would have happened without your courage? Was it worth it?
2. Who taught you courage? How did you learn?
3. Have you ever seen cowardice displayed? What caused the defect in courage? How does one overcome cowardice?
4. Have you ever seen reckless behaviour? What caused the recklessness? Can we learn the limits of courage? When should one learn the limits?

The key phrase to remember is: a virtue is the mean between two extremes. An example is: courage lies between cowardice and recklessness.

⁹ *NE: Ross*, p.37 ff.

If we would learn this formula, we could use it to understand more about where we go right and where we go wrong.

When encountering a difficult choice, one would do well by asking, “What would be the mean between extremes?” In many areas, we tend to have difficulty between the mean and one of the extremes. Not many people are prone to recklessness: in a moral dilemma, most of us tend to have difficulty in choosing courage (the mean) over cowardice (a defect of courage).

Another example of a choice between the mean and an excess is in the *field of pleasure and pain*. Most people seek pleasure and avoid pain, unless it is inappropriate. Take the difficult matter of cookies. The mean is where one has some *self-control* and is able to eat a small number of cookies. Self-control means allowing the self x pleasure (such as a cookie) under control while aiming for moderation. Few of us are *insensible* to cookies. Insensibility the (rare) vice of a defect of the self’s ability to experience sensual pleasure or pain. We mostly have difficulty between self-control and *self-indulgence*, which is the vice of excess. Self-indulgence is allowing the self x pleasure without control, without moderation. It results in empty cookie jars, weight gain, and family disapproval.

The issue of how many cookies brings us to the matter of how many moral fields there are and how many virtues and vices.

Aristotle identified 12 moral fields with their virtues and vices and two emotions that are near-virtues. These are better described as qualities, but function like virtues. They are summarized in Table 1 below.¹⁰ Note that Aristotle did not make a systemic study of the virtues; he wrote about them as he thought of them.

¹⁰ Taken from the *Nicomachean Ethics* in *NE: Ross*. I have updated some of the 1950s English translation.

Table 1: Aristotle's List of Virtues and Corresponding Vices
one to seven of 14

No. ¹¹	Field <i>of Action and Emotion</i>	Deficiency <i>The vice of too little</i>	Excellence <i>The virtue at the mean)</i>	Excess <i>The vice of too much</i>
1	Attitude to Emotions: <i>Fear & Confidence</i>	Cowardly	Courageous	Reckless
2	Attitude to Emotions: <i>Pleasure & Pain</i> ¹²	Insensible	Self-control (moderation)	Self-indulgent
3	Attitude to Emotions: <i>Temper</i>	Uncaring	Gentle (and patient)	Angry
4	Pursuits in Society: <i>Money (giving & taking)</i>	Stingy	Generous	Extravagant (wasteful)
5	Pursuits in Society: <i>Money (giving on a large scale)</i>	Meanness	Magnanimous (with taste)	Vulgar
6	Pursuits in Society: <i>Honour (in society)</i>	Apathetic	Noble ¹³	Vain
7	Pursuits in Society: <i>Honour (in personal work)</i>	Un-ambitious	Appropriately Ambitious	Over-ambitious

¹¹ The numbers exist only to identify their sources in *NE: Ross*. 1=ch.3:6-9; 2=ch.3:10-12; 3=ch.4:5; 4=ch.4:1; 5= ch.4:2; 6=ch.4:3; 7=ch.4:4; 8=ch.4:6; 9=ch.4:7; 10=ch.4:8; 11=ch.5; 12=ch.8 & 9, particularly 9:4.

¹² This field is about sensory pleasure and the pain of the desire for sensory pleasure. Self-control means allowing the self x pleasure under control while aiming for moderation.

¹³ Aristotle called a person who seeks honour by doing public work for society's benefit a "great soul."

Table 1: Aristotle's List of Virtues and Corresponding Vices*Continued: eight to 14*

8	Social Relations: <i>Pleasance</i> <i>(in life generally)</i>	Sulky	Friendly	Submissive (fawning)
9	Social Relations: <i>Honesty</i> <i>(about oneself)</i>	Untruthful	Truthful	Boastful
10	Social Relations: <i>Pleasance</i> <i>(humour)</i>	Boorish	Witty	Buffoonish
11	Attitude to Social Justice: <i>Fairness</i> <i>(distribution of goods)</i>	Too small a share	Proportionate (just/ fair/ equal)	Too large a share
12	Personal Relations: <i>Justice in friendship</i>	Mean friend	Good friend: Loving self & others	Needy friend
13	Emotion of <i>Shame</i> (a near virtue) ¹⁴	Shameless	Modest	Shy (inhibited)
14	Emotion of <i>Indignation</i> (a near-virtue): Pain at others' good/bad fortune	Envious	Appropriately Indignant	Spiteful

¹⁴ The two near-virtue emotions are from Aristotle's other book on ethics. Shame and Indignation are discussed in Book III.7, *Eudemian Ethics*, tr. Anthony Kenney, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, p.49-52.

There are, however, 14 items on Aristotle's list: how is anyone to remember all these, never mind acquire them? The human attention span is only so wide.

Fortunately, this is not a memory exercise. The goal is to learn the principles so that we can be *more conscious* when we make choices in life.

The purpose is to learn by doing. We become good by doing good. Aristotle was a lecturer and a tutor. He said in this regard that:

...most people take refuge in theory and think they are being philosophers and will become good in this way, behaving somewhat like patients who listen attentively to their doctors, but do none of the things they are ordered to do.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

The key point in virtue ethics is to learn the principle that a virtue is an acquired habit, a disposition to choose the mean between extremes.

Take, for example, the difficult choices involved in the matter of the second cookie.

Should one eat that second cookie? It would be very pleasant to eat. After all, we are not made of stone (insensible). Eating the second cookie would be the easiest thing to do; and the tastiest (self-indulgence).

On the other hand, weight gain is always an issue. So is blame if the cookie jar empties too soon. Let's assume we have had some previous success in setting limits to our selves in other areas.

¹⁵ *NE: Ross*, p.41.

So, the reaching hand is stayed while we ponder the matter. Given the weight gain issues and the memory of family resentment the last time the cookies disappeared so fast, the hand then returns empty (self-control). There is rejoicing in heaven and another angel gets wings.

When is the best time to learn self-control in the matter of the second cookie? In childhood, of course. When is the next best time? Well, now would be good.

There is more to learn later on about character and virtues, such as the four cardinal virtues¹⁶ and the three theological virtues.¹⁷

Thank you for reading.¹⁸

¹⁶ The four most central virtues: practical wisdom, self-control, courage, and justice. Please see Aide-Mémoire 103: The Four Cardinal Virtues.

¹⁷ These are, as the apostle Paul taught: *faith, hope, and love*.

¹⁸ Compiled for the Anglican parish of St. Mary's, Russell, Gerrit Botha, 2020