

Dr. James S. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 6, Virtue Ethics

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This is Dr. James S. Spiegel in his teaching on Christian Ethics. This is session 6 on Virtue Ethics.

Okay, so the next major moral theory we're going to examine here in our survey of moral theories is Virtue Ethics.

So far, we've looked at some moral theories that emphasize the role of moral principles in guiding us morally, such as utilitarianism and their principle of utility. In Kantian ethics, the central principle is the categorical imperative, and we see in social contract theory that a variety of principles and basic rights are identified there. What all of those modern moral traditions have in common is this idea that, ultimately, to guide us in terms of ethics, we need certain basic principles.

That is properly the focus of ethical inquiry. Virtue Ethics is a departure from that approach, but it's not just a recent movement, although Virtue Ethics has certainly been surging. It's been a kind of renaissance of Virtue Ethics in the last generation.

It's actually the most ancient of all of the moral traditions going back to the ancient Greeks, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. However, the distinctive approach of Virtue Ethics is that it focuses on character traits rather than moral principles. In Virtue Ethics, we're not interested in finding some sort of ultimate rule to guide us into how we should act, but rather, in Virtue Ethics, the focus is on excellent character traits, different features of the ideal moral specimen, a person who demonstrates all sorts of particular excellences in their character.

So they would say, the Virtue Ethicists would say, that the proper focus in ethics is people, not principles. And this is where modern moral theory has been wrongheaded with all of its attention to principles as opposed to personal character traits. The best exponent of Virtue Ethics in the ancient world is Aristotle.

Now, Socrates and Plato, who were Aristotle's intellectual grandfather and father, respectively, certainly were Virtue Ethicists, and they did a lot in teaching and expounding upon virtues. But Aristotle systematized Virtue Ethics in his landmark book, *Nicomachean Ethics*. He really set the agenda for Virtue Ethics for all time in the history of Western thought.

So, the overarching question that Aristotle poses is, what is the overarching good or telos for human beings? A telos is a Greek term meaning end, purpose, goal, aim, or function. He wants to know what our ultimate telos, our ultimate good, our ultimate

aim should be. And his answer is happiness, not in the sense of warm and fuzzy feelings, but in the sense of ultimate well-being.

The Greek term eudaimonia is a much more expansive concept of happiness than we usually associate with the term. But ultimate well-being is our overarching good, and exactly what that is, what it means to experience or achieve eudaimonia for a human being, is going to be defined by or determined by what our particular unique function is. What is our peculiar function as human beings as opposed to, you know, that of a chimpanzee or a porpoise or a dog? Human beings must have some sort of peculiar, unique function that's distinctive to who and what we are as human beings.

Aristotle, like the other ancient Greeks, thought what distinguishes us as humans is our capacity for reason. We are rational beings. We have a capacity for logical, rational thought, and that's what distinguishes us from animals, and it is in view of that that we must understand our ultimate good.

So, this is why Aristotle arrives at the conclusion that our best life, the happy life for human beings, is the life of contemplation, and by that, he doesn't mean just kind of sitting back and imagining and reflecting and meditating. No, it may involve that from time to time but the contemplative life, the life of reason, is also very active. We should be actively involved in applying reason and careful, critical thought to everything that we do, creatively productively, the way that we build things, the way that we organize society, the way we practice medicine, the way we teach, the way we conduct business, it all should be done in the most rational, contemplative way possible.

That's a contemplative life. That's eudaimonia. If we do it well, then that is a life of human well-being or flourishing.

To kind of spell this out a little more clearly, vis-a-vis other life choices and other ways of life, Aristotle distinguishes three kinds of life and notes the superiority of the contemplative life. Actually, Plato does the same thing in his Republic. It's one of those areas in which Plato and Aristotle wholeheartedly agree.

They differ from one another; they disagree on a lot of things, but they agree that there are three general kinds of life available to us. One is a life of enjoyment, where one seeks primarily pleasure, especially in the form of money, acquiring wealth, because money can buy all sorts of pleasures, so the person who's committed to a life of pleasure will always be obsessed with and prioritizing money. How can I get more money? That way I can buy more pleasures.

That's the life of enjoyment, and a lot of people pursue that and live their whole life accordingly. The problem with that kind of life is money is merely a means. It's not an end in itself.

No matter how much money you gain, you don't really enjoy the money for its own sake. It's only because of what it can get you. Aristotle says that's a sign that that really isn't the ultimate good for human beings.

Whatever our ultimate good is, it can't be just a means to other things. And really, what it should prompt in you is a quest to find out what it is that I want all this money to achieve for me. There must be something higher, something better, something more permanent, more noble than just all of these dollars. So, the life of the statesman is an alternative kind of life that many other people pursue, and the aim is honor and reputation.

Many people are highly ambitious to become famous or to become honored and appreciated, well-known in their society, and in Aristotle's day, I suppose still to some degree in our day, the honor of being a political leader is something that's attractive to a lot of people. Other people seek a career in entertainment. They want to be a famous singer, a famous athlete.

So, there are lots of different forms that the pursuit of honor and reputation could take, but again, in the days of Plato and Aristotle, this was really epitomized most in the life of the statesman. But whatever form it takes, we can see that the life of the statesman, the life of the person who's achieving honor and reputation, is flawed as well because it's too superficial. If your good that you're seeking is dependent on others' opinion of you, that can be lost all too easily.

It's superficial. It depends too much on the whims of other people. And if they decide they don't care for you anymore, they don't want to buy your albums anymore, they don't want to see you play anymore, they don't want you in office anymore, they can remove you.

Whatever the human good is, it can't be that dependent on the whims and preferences of other people. So, both of those two kinds of life fail in terms of being the sort of life that one idealizes. That can't be the ultimate good for human beings if it's just a means or if it's that superficial.

So what that leaves then is the contemplative life where one seeks wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. That's the aim of the contemplative life: to gain wisdom and knowledge. Notice that that particular aim is not just a means. It's good in itself.

Knowledge is valuable in itself. Wisdom is valuable in itself. It's also very practical, isn't it? With knowledge, we can build buildings and planes and come up with medicines that cure illnesses, and we can make clothes and make art.

There's so much we can do with the knowledge that we gain. But it's also valuable and precious in itself. So that shows it's not just a means to an end.

And it's not just superficial, either. It can't be taken away from us as easily as honor and reputation. When you have real wisdom and knowledge, that's yours.

It is safe with you. Maybe this is why the proverb, Proverb 4:7, says that whatever else you do, however much it costs you, gain wisdom and understanding. This is to be prized over all else.

Gain wisdom and understanding. We find that command not just in the Proverbs but elsewhere in Scripture—the pursuit of wisdom.

This is the aim of the righteous person. So, Aristotle and Plato are on to something here that's actually very biblical. The good is wisdom and understanding.

So here is Aristotle's general approach to virtue ethics. Actually, his ultimate aim when it comes to value theory is politics and political philosophy. He saw this book, *Nicomachean Ethics*, as a kind of precursor to politics.

Or statecraft. Politics is understood in the best sense. I mean, it can be a dirty word these days.

Don't talk about politics over the Thanksgiving dinner. Don't get your uncle going. He's talking about politics as statecraft and the good that is building a just civil society.

This is what we all want. Even if we've had it up to here with political debates, don't we all want a just civil society? Yes. But in order to get to the point where we can do that, we need to think clearly and carefully about ethics and how we should be living as individuals.

What kinds of character traits should we have as individual citizens? You can't have a just civil society without at least basically decent citizens who are living at least with a modicum of virtue in their lives. The concept of *telos*, as I mentioned, is very important for Aristotle.

And he, again, like Plato and Socrates, thought this has got to be the starting point for our inquiry into basically everything that we look into. We ask the question, what is the thing's purpose, function, or goal? And that's especially true here. What is the human, peculiar human good? And the concept of virtue is really dependent on this.

When someone or something fulfills its function, or purpose, or goal, we say it's a virtuous thing or a virtuous person. If you have a computer that's fulfilling its

function, it's an excellent computer, you could say a virtuous computer. And that's how it goes for humans as well.

And we are not just virtuous as a whole. We demonstrate specific excellences, hopefully, depending upon our life circumstances. Depending upon your particular context in which you find yourself as a teacher, as a nurse, as a baker, as a candlestick maker.

Right? If you work in construction, or you're a barber, or you're a physician, an attorney, you are occupying a certain vocational role. And that will determine what counts as, you know, a virtuous, you know, fill in the blank, attorney, medical doctor, teacher, whatever. But we also occupy different roles in terms of our relationships.

I am an uncle, a brother, a son, a father, and a husband. I have various significant relational roles. And I find myself in particular life circumstances where I am called upon to act in certain ways that we might call kind, or generous, or courageous.

Or just. So you've got all these life circumstances, contexts, roles, and relationships that will impact what counts as a virtuous person. Or a virtuous person who acts virtuously in those contexts.

So, our virtues, human virtues, are determined by what it means to function properly within specific life contexts. There are two basic kinds of virtues or two main categories of virtues. One is intellectual, and the other is moral.

Intellectual virtues are developed through instruction, studying, doing class assignments, listening to lectures, and reading extensively. You can develop all sorts of intellectual virtues just by doing that, without really doing anything else. You can master a certain topic through study and instruction.

But moral virtues are not like that. You cannot develop a moral virtue by just reading books, even if they're really inspiring books about great moral exemplars. No matter how many books I read about Mother Teresa, Athanasius, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King, right? Name a person who has admirable or virtuous character traits.

It's not going to be enough to just read about their lives. To study their personal biographies. There are certain things you need to do in order to develop similar virtues.

So moral virtue comes through training, intentional practice, and the development of good habits. This is very much like training in the arts, in music, or training in athletics. How do you become a good basketball player? Is it just by reading books

about Larry Bird and Magic Johnson? And LeBron James and James Harden, great basketball players? Is that going to do it? No, you need to practice.

You need to get out there with a ball and do drills, passing drills, free throw drills, and shooting drills. Do all the things that you need to do in order to, in a hands-on way, develop these basketball skills. Sure, it helps to read, right? You can learn about what different players did in their careers to improve.

But the main thing you need to do is practice virtues the same way. How are you going to become a better piano player? Studying certainly helps, but you need to do your scales over and over and over and over and over again. So, Aristotle points out that in order to become a more courageous person, a more just person, a more generous person, you need to demonstrate these particular virtuous forms of conduct in actual practice.

You need to develop good moral habits by repeatedly performing virtuous acts. So, there's a strong emphasis on habituation. We need to habituate ourselves into, say, generous habits by doing generous things.

My wife and I, early on in our marriage, we noticed that neither of us was as generous as we wanted to be. And not that we were especially stingy or greedy, but we just sensed that we needed to develop this virtue. And so, we set about, you know, we kind of made it a standard practice that we would tip generously when the server's been at least decent.

Especially if they saw us pray before a meal, well, it's kind of a different thing to correct. It's a bad habit, a lot of religious people being, you know, poor tippers. If we were seen praying at a meal, that kind of locked us in at least a 15% tip.

But if, in addition to that, the service was at least decent, if not good, we'd want to tip well beyond that. And that's just a kind of practice and development of this habit of generosity. So, this is the kind of thing that Aristotle's talking about.

You know, you intentionally practice virtue, and eventually, it will harden into a certain kind of character trait. You do this for years and years and years, and eventually, you become the kind of person who is generous. It becomes part of your character.

And so, it goes for all the other virtues as well. Acting kindly, habitually, eventually, people will say, oh, that's a kind person. Acting courageously in various contexts repeatedly, eventually, you become a courageous person.

So, virtues come through training. Another thing that Aristotle notes about virtue is that it tends to be, at least, moral virtues, he argued, midpoints between vicious extremes. Most moral virtues are a mean between two vices.

So, consider this table of virtues, which are among the 15 or so that Aristotle explores in some depth in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. So, you have a certain context, like danger, you're in a dangerous situation, and there's some good that needs to be done that's going to require you to do something. That's going to require you to expose yourself to a certain amount of danger.

You can err on the side of deficiency or on the side of excess. On the deficiency side, the vice is cowardice. You can be a coward and just avoid the danger altogether.

Or, on the side of excess, you can be foolhardy. In a military context, there are plenty of situations where the task at hand is going to call for courage. You're going to be exposed to danger, maybe death.

The coward says I'm not doing it. Well, your commanding officer has told you to. I don't want to. I'm scared.

That's a coward. The foolhardy person says, let's go, I'm ready now. Well, we need to plan this carefully.

There are important tactical things. I don't care. Let's just go. Let's dive in.

That's foolhardy. The courageous person knows, all right, we're going to train for this; it's dangerous, but we're going to do this right. And we're going to play it as safely as we can, which is consistent with fulfilling the mission.

So that's courage. It's a mean between the extremes, the vicious extremes of cowardice and foolhardiness. In the context of pleasure, you don't want to be insensible and avoid all pleasure.

But you don't want to be profligate either, someone who's just constantly indulging in pleasure. Temperance is the mean between those extremes. When it comes to possessions, you don't want to be stingy.

But you don't want to be a prodigious giver either, like John Paul Sartre, who just had no concept of money. And you go to a cafe and drink a few cups of coffee, and then just leave a huge wad of bills on the cafe table. And I'm sure his server was happy to see that, but, you know, it was not good for his personal finances.

It was a good thing for him; he wrote a lot of books that sold pretty well. Most people, when they struggle here with generosity, it's on the stinginess side just like most people struggle when it comes to courage on the cowardice side.

We tend to want to play it safe, and because of that, you know, we're going to err in a certain direction. But I guess some people are foolhardy. Well, I know some people are.

Sometimes, there are these great mountain climbers, rock climbers, who tumble to their deaths because they didn't, you know, take proper precautions. A lot of people have died being foolhardy. And I suppose some people have, you know, put themselves in horrible situations being prodigious in their giving.

We want to achieve the virtuous mean here. Public opinion, we don't want to be petty, but we don't want to be vain. There's a certain healthy pride we should aim for.

Amusement, you don't want to be boorish. You don't want to be a buffoon. Those are vices that are, if not dangerous, at least annoying.

Have you ever been around someone and all they do is joke? They're never serious. That's a buffoon. But then boorish people, you know, they're tedious, and they're annoying in their own way.

A witty person knows how to kind of create levity and spice up conversation and a relationship with, you know, some humorous remarks, jokes, witty observations. That's the mean, the virtuous mean we should be aiming for. And then, finally, when it comes to feelings, you don't want to be sheepish, but you don't want to be shameless, either.

You want to demonstrate a certain modesty. And by the way, in a shameless culture like ours is in many ways, what is modest will appear sheepish to a lot of people. So, another thing we could talk about is just how particular excesses and shortfalls within a particular culture can make certain virtues look like vices.

And I think in a lot of ways in our culture today, a lot of Christian virtues look like vices to a lot of people because our culture is so vicious in various ways. Anyway, that's just a taste of Aristotle's table of virtues and how he analyzes them as virtuous means between vicious extremes. Another important dimension to developing moral virtue is moral exemplars.

While it's not sufficient in the development of virtue just to read about virtuous people, it does help. What's even more helpful, though, is living in the presence of someone who is a virtuous person, who is an exemplar of certain virtues. We can

think about all sorts of examples of virtuous people from history, but think about people in your own life.

Maybe someone who's mentored you or has at least lived in your presence in a way to highlight or exemplify certain virtues for you that is very inspiring. And you say, wow, I want to be like that person. I want to demonstrate that characteristic like they do.

This is extremely helpful in our moral lives as we develop virtues ourselves. Virtues also need to be understood in the context of personal narratives and people within communities. That's an important theme within virtue ethics.

A more contemporary virtue ethicist, Alistair MacIntyre, was actually at the forefront of leading this resurgence or renaissance in virtue ethics after the publication of his book, *After Virtue*, in 1981. He places a very strong emphasis on narrative and communities, local communities, and story. And it's a different angle on virtue ethics that I think is very important.

How our particular roles within the communities in which we find ourselves are like characters in a story. Our understanding of ourselves, as well as other people, is very much framed or may be framed in terms of the part we play in a particular narrative. The function that we're aiming to fulfill within this story.

It is a story of my life or the story of me within this community or institution, which is trying to achieve certain things. That can help us to understand and thicken and flesh out a little bit better the sorts of virtues that we're aiming to exemplify in our lives. Okay, so virtue ethics.

Hopefully, it's evident that there's a lot of insight here and inspiration for the moral life and pursuing the good as Christians in our communities and in our society. This moral motivation that virtue ethics supplies is one of the great strengths of virtue ethics. Specifically, from a Christian point of view, this idea of training for virtue is something that, even if we read the New Testament, we read the scriptures generally; even though there's an emphasis on active training for virtue, it's easy to miss.

But Paul talks about this in a couple of places. In 1 Corinthians 9 he talks about this, verses 24 through 27. Paul notes that people who train for the Olympic games do so with great discipline and vigor.

They train for a crown that will not last, he says. But we, as Christians, are training for something that has eternal consequences. So, how much more dedicated should we be in training for godliness? He says something similar in 1 Timothy 4:7 and 8 in there, that we should train to be godly.

And that means we should be practicing what we call the spiritual disciplines. How do you train for godliness? Well, you pray in a disciplined way. You read scripture, hopefully in a disciplined way.

You fast. You meditate. You worship.

You practice solitude from time to time, confession, and submission. You have all of these spiritual disciplines that we have at our disposal to train to be godly. Some of them are focused on drawing near to God, like worship and prayer.

Others are focused on self-denial, like solitude and fasting. Some are focused on building our knowledge base, study, and meditation. But all of the spiritual disciplines are intended to develop certain character traits in us, to grow us in sanctification, and to bring us into closer cooperation with the work of the spirit.

You don't really get this kind of idea from Kant or Mill, Bentham, or the social contract theorists, who are not really focused on this. But in virtue ethics, in Aristotle especially, but others as well, there's emphasis on moral formation through habituation and discipline. It's a major theme here.

And that's something that, as Christians, we need to affirm. There's no evidence that Aristotle ever read any of the Old Testament books. And he lived about four centuries before the New Testament.

So, he's arriving at this just, you know, philosophically. He sees the benefit of training to be virtuous. And in a way, it's perfectly consistent with what the Apostle Paul talks about in his epistles.

There are also certain doubts about the ideal of impartiality that's endorsed by philosophers like Kant, Bentham, and Mill. That we should always be completely impartial when making moral decisions. Aristotle's virtue ethics, with all of the emphasis on relationships and your place in the community, where you're ensconced in a unique way and the particular concerns you have for family members and friends and so on.

He's a realist about this. He would say that it's okay to show partiality. For the utilitarians, not so much.

Same with Kant. Imagine this situation. You are in a canoe with two people.

An oncologist who knows the cure to cancer but hasn't told anybody. She's been doing this research on her own. She's figured it out how cancer can be cured.

As a celebration, she decides to go on this canoe trip with you. And with your mother. In the canoe, it's you, the oncologist who knows the cure for cancer, and your mom.

You're going down the Arkansas River. You're having a great time. During the course of your conversation, you learn that this oncologist actually can't swim.

That's a little bit disturbing. Then it occurs to you that also your mother can't swim. You probably know where this is going now.

As you're going down the river, the sound of rushing waters is getting louder and louder. Then it dawns on all of you at the same time. We're heading towards a waterfall.

Then you remember, oh yeah, there's this really steep fall in the Arkansas River. It's about 50 feet. Oh man, we're sunk.

We're going to be sunk, literally. What do I do? Well, you're too close to the waterfall at this point to get out and be able to save both your mother and the oncologist. But you've got to save at least one of them.

You're a good swimmer. You're not superhuman, though. You can only save one.

Who will you save? Will you save Mom? You love Mom, but she doesn't know the cure for cancer. She's getting on in years, after all. Or will you save the oncologist who does know the cure for cancer and can potentially save millions of lives? What do you do? The answer for the utilitarian is clear.

You've got to save the oncologist. Sorry, mom. Love you, but.

And the same with the Kantian, probably. At least it's not clear on Kantian ethics that it's okay to save Mom. Could you universalize that? Maybe.

Maybe not. For Aristotle, it's very clear. Who do you save? Your mom.

Why? Because she's your mom. She's your mother. She has a special relationship to you.

And, you know, it's altogether appropriate to act on that inclination. That's something that Kant, by the way, again, would poo-poo and eschew, acting according to that inclination to save Mom. Aristotle says it's perfectly alright.

Save your mother. So, I think it comports best with our intuitions on this. It's okay to save your mom.

It's at least okay to save her as opposed to the oncologist. Something that, you know, some of these other moral theories can't account for. It's okay to be partial, in other words.

That so-called ideal of impartiality. Maybe it's an ideal in certain contexts but not in others. So that's a strength of virtue ethics.

But then there are also problems. One major problem with virtue ethics is that it does not account for right action. Or duty.

There's no real place for duty on this theory. It does a good job of telling us what sorts of character traits are ideal, but we don't have a grounding for duty and obligation. That's completely missed by virtue ethics.

This is the right action you should perform and why you should do it in a particular situation. And then you've got another problem, the problem of moral conflict, that emerges when we consider which of these two virtues seems to point in different directions we should demonstrate. Sometimes, my wife asks me, how do I look? Most days, fortunately, the answer is very easy and simple.

I can be truthful and honest and say, honey, you look great. But maybe she's having a bad hair day. Or maybe I'm not really a fan of that particular outfit or ensemble.

Well, I want to be kind. Maybe I can tell she's not really in the mood to have a critical comment like, I don't know, that skirt makes you look a little frumpy. So, I want to be kind but I want to be honest as well.

It's not clear from Aristotle's Council what the best response is to Virtue Ethics. There's a recent commercial for an insurance company where it's Abraham Lincoln with his wife, Mary Todd, and it's done in such a way as to appear like it's actual footage. It's black and white.

It's very grainy, as if they had video capability in the 1860s. Anyway, Mary Todd says, does this dress make me look fat? Of course, she's a bit chubby there. There's Honest Abe.

He can't answer the question. She's getting irritated because he won't answer the question, but he's Honest Abe, after all. The best he can do to spare his wife's feelings is just to not answer the correct answer.

Of course, the truthful answer is, yes, you look chubby in that because you kind of are chubby. However, when it comes to Virtue Ethics, we have no algorithm or way of determining when a particular virtue should trump another one, and that would

be a definite limitation of Virtue Ethics as well. So, like all these other theories, Virtue Ethics is strong in certain respects but then weak in others where we see it needs help, needs some sort of supplement from other moral considerations and theories.

So, that's Virtue Ethics.

This is Dr. James S. Spiegel in his teaching on Christian Ethics. This is session 6 on Virtue Ethics.