Dr. James S. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 6, Virtue Ethics
Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 6, Virtue Ethics, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. James S. Spiegel's lecture introduces virtue ethics as a moral theory focusing on character rather than principles, tracing its origins to ancient Greek philosophers like Aristotle. Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*, or ultimate well-being, is central, achieved through fulfilling humanity's unique function of reason and living a contemplative life. The lecture contrasts this with lives focused on pleasure or honor, highlighting the importance of intellectual and moral virtues developed through instruction and habitual practice. Aristotle views moral virtues as midpoints between extremes and emphasizes the role of moral exemplars and community narratives in fostering virtue. The discussion also considers Christian perspectives on virtue and contrasts virtue ethics with principle-based theories like utilitarianism and Kantianism, noting its strengths in addressing partiality but weaknesses in defining right action and resolving moral conflicts.

2. 16 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 6 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Theology → Apologetics → Christian Ethics).

Spiegel_XnEthics_Session06.mp3

3. Briefing Document: Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 6, Virtue Ethics

Briefing Document: Virtue Ethics

Overview: This document summarizes the main themes and important ideas presented by Dr. James S. Spiegel in Session 6 of his Christian Ethics course, focusing on Virtue Ethics. The lecture contrasts virtue ethics with principle-based moral theories, explores its historical roots in ancient Greek philosophy (particularly Aristotle), details key concepts like *telos* and *eudaimonia*, and examines the development and application of virtues. It also considers the strengths and weaknesses of virtue ethics, including its alignment with Christian teachings and its limitations regarding duty and moral conflict.

Main Themes and Important Ideas:

1. Shift in Focus from Principles to Character:

- Virtue Ethics differs significantly from modern moral theories like utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, and social contract theory, which primarily emphasize moral principles or rules to guide ethical action.

- Instead, virtue ethics centers on the development of excellent character traits. As Spiegel states, **"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."**

- Virtue ethicists argue that the proper focus of ethics should be on people rather than abstract principles. **"So they would say, the Virtue Ethicists would say, that the proper focus in ethics is people, not principles."**

2. Historical Roots in Ancient Greek Philosophy:

- Virtue Ethics is the most ancient of moral traditions, originating with Socrates, Plato, and most notably, Aristotle.

- Aristotle systematized virtue ethics in his book, *Nicomachean Ethics*, which set the agenda for the tradition in Western thought.

3. Aristotle's Concept of Telos and Eudaimonia:

- Aristotle's overarching question is the *telos* (end, purpose, goal, or function) of human beings.

- He concludes that the ultimate *telos* is *eudaimonia*, often translated as happiness but more accurately understood as ultimate well-being or flourishing. **"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."**

- *Eudaimonia* is achieved by fulfilling our unique human function, which Aristotle identifies as the capacity for reason.

- The best life, therefore, is the contemplative life – a life actively engaged in applying reason and critical thought to all aspects of life.

4. Comparison of Different Kinds of Life:

- Aristotle (and Plato) distinguishes three kinds of life: the life of enjoyment (seeking pleasure and wealth), the life of the statesman (seeking honor and reputation), and the contemplative life (seeking wisdom and knowledge).

- Aristotle argues that the life of enjoyment is flawed because money is merely a means, not an end. **"Whatever our ultimate good is, it can't be just a means to other things."**

- The life of the statesman is also flawed because it is too superficial and dependent on the opinions of others. **"If your good that you're seeking is dependent on others' opinion of you, that can be lost all too easily. It's superficial."**

- The contemplative life, focused on wisdom and knowledge, is presented as the highest good because knowledge is valuable in itself and is not as easily taken away. **"Knowledge is valuable in itself. Wisdom is valuable in itself. It's also very practical, isn't it?"**

5. Virtue as Fulfilling One's Function:

- Virtue is understood as the excellence of something in fulfilling its purpose or function. **"When someone or something fulfills its function, or purpose, or goal, we say it's a virtuous thing or a virtuous person."**

- Human virtues are demonstrated within specific life contexts, roles, and relationships, influencing what counts as virtuous behavior for a teacher, parent, friend, etc.

6. Development of Intellectual and Moral Virtues:

- Intellectual virtues are developed through instruction and study.

- Moral virtues, however, are cultivated through training, intentional practice, and the development of good habits. **"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."**

- Repeatedly performing virtuous acts leads to the habituation of virtue and the formation of virtuous character. **"You need to develop good moral habits by repeatedly performing virtuous acts. So, there's a strong emphasis on habituation."**

7. The Doctrine of the Mean:

- Aristotle argues that moral virtues often lie as a mean (midpoint) between two vicious extremes: a vice of deficiency and a vice of excess.

- Examples include courage (mean between cowardice and foolhardiness), temperance (mean between insensibility and profligacy), and generosity (mean between stinginess and prodigality). **"Most moral virtues are a mean between two vices."**

8. The Importance of Moral Exemplars:

- While reading about virtuous people is helpful, living in the presence of moral exemplars is even more crucial for developing virtue. **"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."**

- Observing and emulating virtuous individuals provides inspiration and guidance.

9. The Role of Narrative and Community:

- Contemporary virtue ethicist Alistair MacIntyre emphasizes the importance of personal narratives and communities in understanding and developing virtues.

- Our roles within communities can be seen as characters in a story, shaping our understanding of the virtues we should exemplify.

10. Strengths of Virtue Ethics:

- Provides strong moral motivation for pursuing the good.

- Aligns with Christian teachings on training for godliness through spiritual disciplines (as highlighted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9 and 1 Timothy 4). **"But we, as Christians, are training for something that has eternal consequences. So, how much more dedicated should we be in training for godliness?"**

- Offers a more realistic perspective on moral decision-making by acknowledging the appropriateness of partiality in relationships (contrasting with the strict impartiality of utilitarianism and Kantianism). The canoe example illustrates this point: **"For Aristotle, it's very clear. Who do you save? Your mom. Why? Because she's your mom. She has a special relationship to you. And, you know, it's altogether appropriate to act on that inclination."**

11. Weaknesses of Virtue Ethics:

- Does not provide a clear account of right action or duty. **"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."**

- Struggles with the problem of moral conflict, offering no clear algorithm for determining which virtue should take precedence when they seem to point in different directions (as illustrated by the dilemma of honesty vs. kindness). **"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."**

Conclusion:

Dr. Spiegel concludes that while virtue ethics offers valuable insights into moral motivation, character development, and the importance of community and relationships, it has limitations, particularly in defining duty and resolving moral conflicts. Like other ethical theories, it may require supplementation from other moral considerations. The lecture emphasizes the historical significance of virtue ethics, its unique focus on character, and its surprising alignment with certain aspects of Christian teachings on spiritual formation.

4. Study Guide: Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 6, Virtue Ethics

Virtue Ethics Study Guide

Quiz

1. According to Virtue Ethics, what is the primary focus of ethical inquiry, and how does this differ from other moral theories discussed so far?

2. Explain Aristotle's concept of "telos" for human beings and how it relates to "eudaimonia." What distinguishes humans from other beings in this context?

3. Briefly describe the three kinds of life Aristotle distinguishes and why he considers the contemplative life superior to the others.

4. What is Aristotle's view on the role of politics and the state in relation to ethics? Why is individual virtue important for a just society?

5. Explain how Aristotle defines virtue in terms of function or purpose. Provide an example of how this applies to both objects and people.

6. What are the two main categories of virtues according to Aristotle, and how does the development of moral virtue differ from that of intellectual virtue?

7. Describe Aristotle's concept of moral virtue as a "mean between two vices." Provide an example from the provided text.

8. According to the text, what role do moral exemplars and community narratives play in the development and understanding of virtue?

9. How does the text connect the concept of virtue ethics to Christian teachings and practices, particularly regarding training for godliness?

10. What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of virtue ethics as highlighted in the lecture, particularly in relation to impartiality and moral conflict?

Quiz Answer Key

1. Virtue Ethics primarily focuses on character traits rather than moral principles as the central element of ethical inquiry. Unlike utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, and social contract theory, which emphasize rules and principles to guide action, virtue ethics centers on the kind of person one ought to be.

2. Aristotle's concept of "telos" refers to the ultimate end, purpose, goal, or function of human beings, which he identifies as "eudaimonia," or ultimate well-being and flourishing. He believed that what distinguishes humans is their capacity for reason, and therefore, eudaimonia is achieved through a life lived in accordance with reason.

3. Aristotle distinguishes between the life of enjoyment (seeking pleasure and wealth), the life of the statesman (seeking honor and reputation), and the contemplative life (seeking wisdom and understanding). He considers the contemplative life superior because its aim, knowledge and wisdom, is good in itself and not merely a means to an end, nor is it as superficial or dependent on others as honor.

4. Aristotle viewed ethics (Nicomachean Ethics) as a precursor to politics, or statecraft aimed at building a just civil society. He believed that a just society requires virtuous citizens who possess at least a basic level of moral character, as the character of individuals influences the character of the community.

5. Aristotle defines virtue as the state of something (or someone) that fulfills its function, purpose, or goal excellently. For example, a virtuous computer is one that performs its functions well, and a virtuous person is one who functions well in various life contexts and roles by demonstrating specific excellences.

6. The two main categories of virtues are intellectual and moral. Intellectual virtues are developed through instruction and study, while moral virtues are developed through training, intentional practice, and the formation of good habits, much like learning a skill in the arts or athletics.

7. Aristotle argued that moral virtue is generally a midpoint (the mean) between two extreme vices: one of deficiency and one of excess. For example, in the context of danger, courage is the virtuous mean between the vice of cowardice (deficiency of bravery) and foolhardiness (excess of recklessness).

8. Moral exemplars, virtuous individuals whose lives inspire and guide us, are helpful but not sufficient for developing virtue. Furthermore, understanding ourselves and others as characters within community narratives helps to clarify the virtues we should aim to exemplify in our specific roles and contexts.

9. The text highlights the similarity between Aristotle's emphasis on training for virtue through habituation and discipline and the Christian call to "train for godliness" found in the New Testament. Practices like prayer, scripture reading,

fasting, and meditation are presented as spiritual disciplines aimed at developing godly character traits.

10. A strength of virtue ethics is its realistic approach to relationships and partiality, suggesting it is acceptable to prioritize loved ones. However, weaknesses include its lack of a clear account of right action or duty and the problem of moral conflict, where it doesn't provide a definitive method for determining which virtue should take precedence in a given situation.

Essay Format Questions

1. Compare and contrast the approach to ethical decision-making in Virtue Ethics with that of either Utilitarianism or Kantian Ethics. In what situations might these approaches yield different moral conclusions?

2. Discuss the significance of Aristotle's concept of "eudaimonia" and the role of reason in achieving it. How might a contemporary understanding of happiness differ from eudaimonia, and what are the implications for ethical living?

3. Analyze the importance of habituation and the development of moral virtues in Aristotle's ethical framework. How can individuals intentionally cultivate virtuous character traits in their lives?

4. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Virtue Ethics as a comprehensive moral theory. In what areas does it offer valuable insights, and where might it require supplementation from other ethical perspectives?

5. Explore the connection between Virtue Ethics and Christian teachings on character development and spiritual disciplines. How can the insights of Virtue Ethics inform and enrich Christian practices of sanctification?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Virtue Ethics:** A moral theory that emphasizes the role of character traits and virtues in moral philosophy rather than focusing solely on rules or consequences.

- **Telos:** A Greek term meaning end, purpose, goal, aim, or function. In Aristotle's philosophy, it refers to the inherent purpose of something.

- **Eudaimonia:** A Greek term often translated as happiness, flourishing, or well-being. For Aristotle, it is the ultimate goal of human life, achieved through living virtuously and rationally.

- **Contemplative Life:** According to Aristotle, the highest form of life, characterized by the pursuit of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding through active and rational engagement with the world.

- **Moral Virtue:** Excellent character traits developed through habit, intentional practice, and training, enabling one to act well consistently.

- **Intellectual Virtue:** Excellences of the mind developed through instruction, study, and learning.

- **Habituation:** The process of developing habits through repeated actions. In Virtue Ethics, it is crucial for the development of moral virtues.

- **The Mean (Golden Mean):** Aristotle's concept that moral virtue is typically found as a midpoint between two extremes or vices: one of excess and one of deficiency.

- **Moral Exemplar:** A person who serves as a model of virtuous character and behavior, inspiring and guiding others in their moral development.

- **Impartiality:** The principle of treating all individuals equally and without bias in moral decision-making, a concept questioned within Virtue Ethics in certain contexts.

5. FAQs on Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 6, Virtue Ethics, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Virtue Ethics FAQ

1. How does Virtue Ethics differ from other major moral theories like utilitarianism and Kantian ethics? Virtue Ethics fundamentally shifts the focus of ethical inquiry from moral principles and rules to the character traits of individuals. Utilitarianism emphasizes the principle of utility (maximizing happiness), and Kantian ethics centers on the categorical imperative (acting according to universalizable maxims). In contrast, Virtue Ethics, rooted in ancient Greek philosophy, prioritizes the cultivation of excellent character traits as the key to ethical living, asserting that the proper focus in ethics is on people, not abstract principles.

2. What is the ultimate goal (telos) of human beings according to Aristotle, and how does it relate to virtue? According to Aristotle, the ultimate goal or *telos* of human beings is *eudaimonia*, often translated as happiness or flourishing, but more accurately understood as ultimate well-being. He believed that this state of well-being is achieved by fulfilling our unique function as human beings, which he identified as our capacity for reason. Virtue, in this context, is understood as excellence in fulfilling this function within specific life contexts. When someone or something fulfills its purpose or goal well, it is considered virtuous. For humans, this involves the development of both intellectual and moral virtues to live a life of rational activity and contemplation.

3. What are the two main categories of virtues, and how are they developed? Aristotle distinguishes between two main categories of virtues: intellectual and moral. Intellectual virtues, such as wisdom and understanding, are developed primarily through instruction, study, and learning. Moral virtues, such as courage, justice, and generosity, are not developed through intellectual means alone but require training, intentional practice, and the cultivation of good habits through repeated virtuous actions. This process of habituation is crucial for moral development, similar to how one develops skills in the arts, music, or athletics.

4. What is the concept of the "mean" in Aristotle's Virtue Ethics, and how does it apply to moral virtues? Aristotle argues that moral virtues generally lie as a midpoint or "mean" between two vicious extremes: a vice of deficiency and a vice of excess. For example, courage is the virtuous mean between the vice of cowardice (deficiency of bravery in the face of danger) and foolhardiness (excessive and reckless bravery). Similarly, temperance is the mean between insensibility (deficiency in experiencing pleasure) and profligacy (excessive indulgence in pleasure). Identifying and striving for this virtuous mean in various aspects of life is a key aspect of Aristotelian ethics.

5. What role do moral exemplars play in the development of virtue? While studying virtuous people is not sufficient for developing virtue, moral exemplars play a significant role. Living in the presence of or being mentored by individuals who embody certain virtues can be highly inspiring and provide a practical model for one's own moral development. Observing their actions and character traits can guide individuals in understanding and striving for those virtues in their own lives.

6. How do contemporary virtue ethicists, like Alistair MacIntyre, build upon the classical understanding of virtue? Contemporary virtue ethicists like Alistair MacIntyre emphasize the importance of narrative and community in understanding and developing virtues. They argue that our roles within our communities are akin to characters in a story, and our understanding of ourselves and others is often framed by the narratives we inhabit. This perspective highlights how the virtues we aim to exemplify are shaped and understood within the specific context of our lives and the communities to which we belong.

7. What are some of the strengths of Virtue Ethics, particularly from a Christian perspective? One of the significant strengths of Virtue Ethics is its emphasis on moral motivation and the formation of character, which resonates with Christian teachings that call believers to cultivate godliness through disciplined practice. The concept of training for virtue through habituation and spiritual disciplines like prayer, scripture reading, fasting, and worship aligns well with the virtue ethics framework. Additionally, Virtue Ethics's recognition of the appropriateness of partiality in certain relationships, such as towards family, offers a more intuitive and nuanced approach compared to the strict impartiality often advocated by utilitarianism and Kantianism.

8. What are some of the criticisms or limitations of Virtue Ethics? Despite its strengths, Virtue Ethics faces several criticisms. One major limitation is its lack of a clear account of right action or duty. While it describes ideal character traits, it doesn't provide specific rules or principles to guide actions in particular situations or explain why certain actions are obligatory. Another challenge is the problem of moral conflict, where different virtues might seem to point in different directions, and Virtue Ethics lacks a clear algorithm for determining which virtue should take precedence in such situations.