

VIRTUE ETHICS AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MORAL CHARACTER: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ARISTOTLE'S ETHICAL THOUGHT

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Abstract

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics is a character-centered approach to moral philosophy that emphasizes the cultivation of good character traits rather than strict adherence to rules or the pursuit of outcomes alone. Aristotle defines virtue as a stable and enduring disposition of the mind, developed through conscious choice and guided by reason toward what is genuinely good in human life. In this framework, ethical behavior arises from the formation of virtuous habits that enable individuals to act appropriately in different situations. According to Aristotle, the highest aim of human existence is *eudaimonia*—often translated as human flourishing or genuine happiness. This state is achieved by living in accordance with reason and by consistently practicing moral virtues. Moral character, therefore, is not an innate quality but a developed disposition shaped through repeated actions, experience, and deliberate choices. Through habituation, individuals acquire virtues that guide their

emotions, desires, and actions toward excellence. Aristotle's ethical theory remains one of the most influential traditions in moral philosophy. His emphasis on virtue highlights the importance of personal character in ethical decision-making. Central to his theory are the concepts of the Doctrine of the Mean, the development of moral character, and the role of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) in guiding human conduct. This seminar paper explores Aristotle's understanding of virtue, the process of character formation, the significance of moderation in ethical life and the contribution of practical wisdom to achieving human flourishing.

Keywords: Aristotle, Virtue Ethics, Moral Character, Eudaimonia, Reason, Practical Wisdom, Human Flourishing.

Introduction

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) occupies a central position in the history of Western philosophy and is widely regarded as one

of the most influential thinkers in the intellectual tradition of the ancient world. A distinguished student of Plato and the tutor of Alexander the Great, Aristotle made seminal contributions to diverse fields, including metaphysics, logic, political philosophy, ethics, and natural science. Among his enduring philosophical achievements, his ethical theory, as articulated primarily in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, remains one of the most significant and influential frameworks for understanding human conduct and moral excellence (Aristotle, trans. 2009).

Unlike ethical theories that evaluate actions primarily in terms of rules, duties, or consequences, Aristotle's moral philosophy places the cultivation of character at the centre of ethical life. His virtue ethics is fundamentally concerned with the question of how human beings ought to live in order to achieve the highest good. According to Aristotle, the ultimate end of human existence is *eudaimonia*, commonly translated as "happiness," "well-being," or "human flourishing." However, *eudaimonia* does not signify a temporary emotional state or subjective pleasure; rather, it denotes a complete and fulfilling life achieved through the exercise of reason and the cultivation of moral and intellectual virtues (Aristotle, trans. 2009; MacIntyre, 2007).

A distinctive feature of Aristotle's ethical thought is the emphasis on moral character (*ethos*) as the foundation of ethical behaviour. He argues that virtues are neither innate qualities nor merely theoretical ideals; instead, they are stable dispositions acquired through habituation and repeated practice. Individuals become just by performing just actions, courageous by engaging in courageous acts, and temperate by exercising self-restraint. Through continuous moral training and conscious deliberation, virtuous actions gradually become an integral part of one's character, enabling individuals to act rightly and appropriately in varying circumstances (Kraut, 2018).

Central to Aristotle's conception of virtue is the Doctrine of the Mean, which maintains that moral virtue lies between the extremes of excess and deficiency. Virtuous conduct, therefore, requires the ability to identify the appropriate course of action relative to particular situations. Courage, for example, represents the mean between cowardice and recklessness, while temperance lies between self-indulgence and insensibility. The determination of this mean is guided not by rigid rules but by practical wisdom (*phronesis*), an intellectual virtue that enables individuals to make sound moral judgments in

concrete situations (Aristotle, trans. 2009; Ackrill, 1981).

Aristotle's theory of virtue and moral character continues to be highly relevant in contemporary ethical discourse. In an age characterized by rapid technological change, moral uncertainty, and increasing social complexity, virtue ethics offers a valuable framework for understanding ethical decision-making through the development of character, responsibility, and practical wisdom. Its emphasis on moral education, personal integrity, and human flourishing has influenced contemporary discussions in philosophy, education, psychology, leadership studies, and professional ethics (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2023). This paper examines Aristotle's concept of virtue and moral character, focusing on the nature of virtue, the process of character formation through habituation, the significance of the Doctrine of the Mean and the role of practical wisdom in achieving *eudaimonia*. Through a critical analysis of Aristotle's ethical philosophy, the study seeks to highlight the enduring relevance of virtue ethics in understanding moral development and the pursuit of the good life.

Review of Literature

Aristotle's theory of virtue and moral character has remained one of the most

influential traditions in moral philosophy and has generated extensive scholarly discussion across different intellectual periods. The foundation of Aristotle's ethical thought is found in *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he develops a virtue-centered approach to morality that emphasizes character formation, rational deliberation, and the pursuit of *eudaimonia* (human flourishing) as the ultimate end of human life (Aristotle, trans. 2009). Unlike deontological and consequentialist ethical theories, Aristotle's ethics focuses on the moral agent rather than on rules or consequences, thereby highlighting the cultivation of virtuous dispositions through habituation and practical wisdom. Scholars have consistently recognized Aristotle as a pioneering thinker who shifted ethical inquiry from the question of "What should one do?" to "What kind of person should one become?" According to MacIntyre (2007), Aristotle's virtue ethics provides a comprehensive framework for understanding moral life by situating virtues within social practices and communal traditions. MacIntyre argues that virtues are indispensable qualities that enable individuals to achieve internal goods and attain excellence within particular forms of social life. His reinterpretation of Aristotelian ethics contributed significantly to the revival of virtue ethics in contemporary moral

philosophy. Ross (2009), in his interpretation of Aristotle's ethical philosophy, emphasizes that virtue is neither an innate quality nor a mere emotional tendency but a stable disposition acquired through repeated practice and guided by rational judgment. He argues that moral virtues emerge through habituation and become integral aspects of an individual's character. Such virtues enable a person to act appropriately and consistently in diverse moral situations. Ross further notes that Aristotle's ethical system establishes a close relationship between moral virtue and practical wisdom (*phronesis*), suggesting that virtuous conduct requires both right desire and correct reasoning. The concept of the Doctrine of the Mean has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Barnes (1995) observes that Aristotle does not advocate mediocrity or compromise; rather, he proposes that virtue represents the appropriate balance between two extremes of excess and deficiency. Courage, for instance, lies between rashness and cowardice, while temperance occupies the middle ground between self-indulgence and insensibility. Barnes argues that this doctrine reflects Aristotle's attempt to provide a practical and context-sensitive framework for ethical decision-making. The significance of moral character in Aristotle's philosophy has also

been examined by Annas (2011), who contends that virtue is best understood as a developmental achievement resulting from lifelong moral education and self-cultivation. According to her analysis, Aristotle's ethical project is fundamentally concerned with shaping individuals who possess the intellectual and moral capacities necessary for living a flourishing life. Annas further maintains that virtue ethics offers a dynamic model of moral growth that remains relevant in contemporary discussions of character education and ethical leadership. In the Indian academic context, Masih (1993) highlights Aristotle's contribution to Western ethical thought by emphasizing the central role of reason in moral life. He argues that Aristotle's conception of virtue represents a synthesis of rationality and habit, where moral excellence is achieved through the disciplined cultivation of virtuous actions. Similarly, Bhattacharjee (2004) notes that Aristotle's ethical theory differs significantly from the intellectualism of Socrates and Plato by stressing the practical dimensions of morality and the importance of habituation in character formation. Contemporary scholars have increasingly explored the relevance of Aristotelian virtue ethics in addressing modern ethical challenges. Hursthouse and Pettigrove (2023) argue that virtue ethics provides valuable

insights into issues such as professional ethics, leadership, environmental responsibility, and technological decision-making. They suggest that Aristotle's emphasis on character, practical wisdom, and moral judgment offers an alternative to rigid rule-based ethical systems, particularly in complex situations where universal principles may be insufficient.

Objectives of the Study

1. To critically examine Aristotle's concept of virtue and its central place within his ethical philosophy, particularly in relation to the attainment of eudaimonia or human flourishing.

2. To analyse Aristotle's understanding of moral character as a product of habituation and rational deliberation, with special reference to the significance of the Doctrine of the Mean and practical wisdom.

Research Questions

1. What is virtue according to Aristotle?
2. How is moral character developed?
3. What is the relevance of virtue ethics in contemporary society?

Methodology

This is philosophical research. Collected data have been critically analysed by adopting analytic and descriptive methods.

The present study is based on secondary data. Information has been collected from books, research articles, journals, historical documents, conference proceedings and scholarly publications related to the Aristotle's Philosophy.

Discussions:

Aristotle's Concept of Virtue

Aristotle's ethical philosophy is fundamentally centred on the concept of virtue (*aretē*), which he regards as the essential condition for achieving the highest human good. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that virtue is neither an innate quality nor a mere emotional disposition; rather, it is a stable state of character developed through rational choice and habituation (Aristotle, trans. 2009). Virtue enables an individual to act in accordance with reason and to fulfil the distinctive function (*ergon*) of human beings, namely rational activity. For Aristotle, virtue represents excellence in human conduct. He defines moral virtue as a disposition to choose actions that lie in a mean relative to us, determined by reason and guided by the judgment of a practically wise person (Aristotle, trans. 2009). Virtuous conduct therefore involves the harmonious regulation of desires, emotions, and actions under the guidance of rational deliberation. Aristotle classifies

virtues into two broad categories: intellectual virtues and moral virtues. Intellectual virtues are cultivated through instruction, education, and experience, whereas moral virtues are acquired through repeated practice and habituation (Kraut, 2018). Intellectual virtues include wisdom (*sophia*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*), scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*), and intuitive reason (*nous*). Moral virtues, such as courage, temperance, generosity, and justice, regulate human passions and actions, enabling individuals to act appropriately in diverse situations. The cultivation of both intellectual and moral virtues contributes to the development of an integrated moral personality capable of attaining human flourishing.

The Doctrine of the Mean: Excess, Deficiency and Moderation

One of Aristotle's most influential contributions to moral philosophy is the Doctrine of the Mean. According to this principle, virtue consists in finding the appropriate balance between two opposing extremes—one characterized by excess and the other by deficiency (Aristotle, trans. 2009). Virtue is therefore not located at either extreme but occupies a rational and context-sensitive middle position. The doctrine does not imply mathematical

equality or mediocrity. Rather, the mean is determined by practical reason and varies according to individual circumstances. Aristotle maintains that moral excellence requires the ability to discern the appropriate response in a given situation. Thus, courage occupies the mean between rashness and cowardice; temperance lies between self-indulgence and insensibility; and generosity stands between prodigality and miserliness (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2022). The significance of the Doctrine of the Mean lies in its recognition of the complexity of moral life. Ethical conduct cannot be reduced to rigid rules or universal prescriptions; instead, it requires discernment, moderation, and practical judgment. Through this doctrine, Aristotle presents virtue as a dynamic process of balancing competing tendencies in pursuit of moral excellence and personal fulfillment.

Moral Character Formation: Habit, Practice and Education

A central feature of Aristotelian ethics is the emphasis on character formation. Aristotle rejects the notion that individuals are born virtuous or vicious. Instead, he contends that moral character is shaped through habitual action and sustained practice. As he famously states, "we become just by doing just acts, temperate

by doing temperate acts, and brave by doing brave acts” (Aristotle, trans. 2009). Habit (*ethos*) occupies a foundational place in Aristotle’s moral philosophy. Repeated performance of virtuous actions gradually cultivates stable dispositions that become integral aspects of an individual’s character. Virtue is therefore acquired through consistent practice rather than theoretical knowledge alone. This perspective underscores the practical nature of ethics, emphasizing that moral excellence emerges from lived experience and disciplined action. Education and upbringing play a crucial role in this process. Aristotle maintains that the cultivation of virtue begins in childhood through proper moral training, socialization, and guidance. Families, educational institutions, and political communities contribute significantly to the development of virtuous citizens by fostering habits of self-discipline, responsibility, and moral reflection (Curren, 2013). Consequently, character formation is both an individual and a social enterprise, requiring supportive institutions that encourage ethical behaviour and rational deliberation.

Practical Wisdom (*Phronesis*): Meaning and Significance

Among Aristotle’s intellectual virtues, practical wisdom (*phronesis*) occupies a position of exceptional importance. Practical wisdom refers to the capacity to deliberate correctly about what is good and beneficial for human life and to apply moral principles effectively in concrete situations (Aristotle, trans. 2009). Unlike theoretical wisdom, which seeks universal truths, practical wisdom is concerned with action and decision-making. It enables individuals to evaluate circumstances, assess consequences, and determine the most appropriate course of action. Practical wisdom therefore bridges the gap between moral principles and practical conduct. Aristotle argues that moral virtue and practical wisdom are mutually dependent. Moral virtues provide the proper ends or goals of action, while practical wisdom identifies the most suitable means for achieving those ends (Annas, 2011). Without practical wisdom, virtuous intentions may be misguided; conversely, practical wisdom without moral virtue may become merely instrumental and self-serving. Thus, genuine ethical excellence requires the harmonious integration of virtuous character and sound judgment.

The Concept of Eudaimonia: Human Flourishing and the Highest Good

The ultimate objective of Aristotle's ethical theory is *eudaimonia*, often translated as happiness, well-being, or human flourishing. However, Aristotle's conception of happiness differs substantially from modern understandings associated with pleasure or subjective satisfaction. For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* represents the highest and most complete good that human beings can achieve through the realization of their rational and moral capacities (Aristotle, trans. 2009). Human flourishing involves living a life in accordance with virtue and reason. Since rationality constitutes the distinctive function of human beings, a flourishing life is one in which rational capacities are exercised excellently and consistently. Consequently, *eudaimonia* is not a temporary emotional state but a lifelong process of self-development, moral growth, and virtuous activity (Broadie, 2002). Aristotle further argues that external goods such as health, friendship, and material resources contribute to human flourishing, although they are not sufficient in themselves. True happiness arises when individuals cultivate virtue and engage in meaningful activities that express their highest capacities. In this sense, *eudaimonia* represents the

culmination of moral excellence and the fulfilment of human potential.

Contemporary Relevance of Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

Despite originating in ancient Greece, Aristotle's virtue ethics continues to exert significant influence on contemporary ethical discourse. In an era characterized by moral uncertainty, technological transformation, and social fragmentation, virtue ethics offers a character-centred framework that emphasizes personal responsibility, moral development, and ethical judgment. In the field of education, Aristotle's emphasis on character formation has inspired contemporary approaches that prioritize moral education alongside intellectual achievement. Educational institutions increasingly recognize the importance of cultivating virtues such as honesty, responsibility, empathy, and integrity among students (Kristjánsson, 2015). Within professional ethics, Aristotelian principles provide valuable guidance for professions such as medicine, law, business, and public administration. Ethical professionalism requires not only technical competence but also the cultivation of virtues that promote trustworthiness, fairness, and social responsibility. Similarly, Aristotle's ethical framework has become increasingly

relevant in discussions of leadership. Virtuous leadership emphasizes integrity, prudence, justice, and accountability, qualities that are essential for addressing contemporary organizational and political challenges. Leaders guided by virtue seek the common good rather than personal gain and contribute to the creation of ethical institutions. The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital technologies has generated new ethical concerns that cannot always be resolved through rule-based approaches alone. Virtue ethics offers a valuable perspective by focusing on the character, intentions, and responsibilities of technology designers, policymakers, and users (Vallor, 2016). The cultivation of virtues such as responsibility, transparency, and practical wisdom is increasingly important in navigating the ethical implications of technological innovation.

Aristotle's emphasis on civic virtue remains highly relevant to contemporary social and political life. Democratic societies depend upon citizens who possess moral responsibility, civic engagement, and commitment to justice. Aristotle's vision of ethical citizenship highlights the importance of fostering communities that support human flourishing and collective well-being. Therefore, Aristotle's virtue ethics

continues to provide a robust philosophical framework for addressing contemporary moral challenges and promoting ethical excellence in personal, professional, and social life.

Findings

Aristotle's virtue ethics presents morality as fundamentally rooted in the cultivation of character rather than in obedience to rules or the pursuit of consequences. The study reveals that virtue (*aretē*) is not an innate attribute but a stable disposition acquired through repeated moral actions and conscious habituation. Moral excellence is achieved through the harmonious integration of reason, will, and action, where rational judgment directs human desires and emotions toward ethically appropriate conduct. Aristotle emphasizes that moral character cannot be developed through theoretical knowledge alone; instead, it emerges through the continuous practice of virtuous actions that gradually become enduring aspects of an individual's personality. Central to this ethical framework is the Doctrine of the Mean, which defines virtue as the rational balance between the extremes of excess and deficiency, determined according to the specific circumstances of each situation. Equally significant is the role of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), which

enables individuals to deliberate carefully, exercise sound judgment, and choose morally appropriate actions in diverse contexts. Aristotle further distinguishes between intellectual virtues, which cultivate rational understanding, and moral virtues, which regulate conduct, emotions, and habits, thereby demonstrating the complementary relationship between knowledge and character. The ultimate objective of ethical life is *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing, achieved through the sustained practice of virtue in accordance with reason. The findings also underscore the importance of moral education, supportive social environments, and habitual practice in shaping virtuous citizens, highlighting the social dimensions of ethical development. Unlike rule-based ethical theories, Aristotelian virtue ethics adopts an agent-centred approach that prioritizes the formation of moral character as the foundation of ethical behaviour. Its continuing relevance is evident in contemporary discussions on ethical leadership, professional integrity, civic responsibility, and character education, where personal virtues remain essential for responsible decision-making. Moreover, the cultivation of virtues such as courage, temperance, justice, generosity, honesty, and prudence contributes not only to individual well-being but also to the creation of a morally responsible and

harmonious society. Overall, Aristotle's conception of virtue and moral character remains one of the most enduring and influential contributions to moral philosophy, offering timeless insights into the development of ethical individuals and the pursuit of the good life through rational action, virtuous habits, and human flourishing.

Conclusion

Aristotle's conception of virtue and moral character represents one of the most enduring and influential contributions to the history of ethical thought. Unlike ethical theories that primarily emphasize rules, duties, or consequences, Aristotle places the cultivation of character at the centre of moral life. For him, virtue is neither an innate disposition nor a mere theoretical ideal; rather, it is an acquired excellence developed through habituation, rational deliberation, and continuous moral practice. The formation of moral character, therefore, emerges as a lifelong process through which individuals learn to harmonize reason, emotion, and action in pursuit of the good life. The present study demonstrates that Aristotle's ethical framework is fundamentally teleological, directing human beings toward *eudaimonia*—a state of flourishing achieved through the exercise of virtue in

accordance with reason. The doctrine of the mean, the role of habituation, and the significance of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) collectively provide a coherent account of how moral excellence can be cultivated and sustained. Virtuous action, in this context, is not merely conformity to external standards but the expression of a well-formed character capable of discerning and choosing the appropriate course of action in varying circumstances. Aristotle's emphasis on moral education and character formation continues to possess remarkable relevance in contemporary society. In an age characterized by ethical uncertainty, technological transformation, and increasing social complexity, his virtue-centred approach offers valuable insights for fostering responsible citizenship, ethical leadership, professional integrity, and human well-being. The Aristotelian vision reminds us that the quality of individual character remains inseparable from the quality of collective social life. Aristotle's theory of virtue transcends its ancient philosophical origins and continues to serve as a profound framework for understanding moral development and human flourishing. His ethical thought underscores the enduring significance of cultivating virtuous dispositions as the foundation of both

personal excellence and a just and flourishing society.

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