Aristotle and Habituation:

Is Virtue Really Attainable Without God’s Help?

A Dissertation Submitted to

The Faculty of Liberty University School of Divinity

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Roy M. Mattson

Lynchburg, Virginia

June 2019
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Acknowledgments

I must acknowledge that but for the grace of God this dissertation could not have been completed. I discovered along the way that I lack many of the virtues and disciplines necessary to complete and excel at a project like this. I trust that God will continue to work on my behalf and make this treatise profitable to all that take the time to read it.

Second only to the Almighty was the support and encouragement of my lovely and infinitely patient wife, Tammy. My work and sacrifices pale in comparison to hers. She pampered me, cared for every member of our growing family (4 children, 3 married, and 5 grandchildren) and cared for my mother as well. She is truly an exceptionally talented and virtuous woman; her children rise up and bless her, as do I.

I am indebted to the kindness and diligence of my committee, Dr. Edward Martin (chair), Dr. David Beck and Dr. Richard Holland. Their comments and suggestions eliminated all manner of missteps from which all other readers have been spared.

Finally, I am very grateful for Liberty University. The faculty is outstanding and they made it possible to pursue a very challenging topic. Liberty plays an important educational role in a society that no longer appreciates the interdependence of faith and reason. To all those that make Liberty University possible, please accept my sincere thanks.
Abstract

We are by nature moral beings who desire virtue.\textsuperscript{1} This fact is borne out by innumerable studies.\textsuperscript{2} Aristotle’s \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} and \textit{Eudemian Ethics} remain among the most influential works on ethics and human moral psychology. Aristotle claims that human beings can develop good character traits and achieve virtue with the appropriate upbringing (what Aristotle called habituation). Much of what Aristotle says about character traits, virtue, and habituation is accepted today and inspires character education.\textsuperscript{3} Yet recent results in experimental psychology challenge the notion of character traits and virtue as understood by Aristotle.\textsuperscript{4} The challenge is the abundance of evidence showing that almost all human beings lie, cheat, steal, and harm others; we lack virtue. Christian Miller captures the problem when he says, “the burden is on the Aristotelian to show how realizing such a normative ideal is psychologically realistic for beings like us.”\textsuperscript{5} This dissertation argues that virtue is not a realistic ideal for us absent God’s help. I contend that Aristotle was mistaken about human nature and the power of a good upbringing to create good character traits and achieve virtue. Further, I assert that Aristotle’s mistake has been incorporated into the secular western world view and contemporary character education.

\textsuperscript{1} Jan-Willem Van Prooijen and Paul A. M. Van Lange, \textit{Cheating, Corruption, and Concealment: The Roots of Dishonesty} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 2. Also note the relationship between virtue and happiness noted in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.


\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 207.
methodologies. The error is a total disregard, even disdain, for the role of God in human moral development.

That said, there is much to like about Aristotle’s ethics and moral psychology. Aristotle thinks virtue and happiness are integrally related, and happiness is universally desired. This makes virtue incredibly important. Aristotle thinks virtue combines practical reason and proper desires to ensure a person consistently chooses the noble and good. He thinks a proper upbringing is essential to attaining such character traits and moral reasoning skills. Most of Aristotle’s claims in this regard are accepted to this day. Sadly, Western history, contemporary western culture, and recent social science contradict core tenants of Aristotle’s ethics and moral psychology. The West enjoys the highest standard of living, a plethora of human rights, universal secondary education with unprecedented access to higher education, and a well ordered civil society, yet virtue is exceedingly rare. It appears that humans are fundamentally flawed to an extent that Aristotle failed to appreciate. That flaw cannot be remedied by habituation.

But, virtue is not impossible. In fact, there is evidence that virtue is possible, especially with the help of a divinely inspired moral transformation. The most obvious and frequent examples of virtue appear to occur in connection with a relationship with God. Yet Aristotle, contemporary ethics, as well as contemporary educational methodologies, ignore the obvious flaw in our moral psychology and ignore the role of God in addressing it. Using the Apostle Paul, Augustine, John Newton, and Franklin Graham as examples, this dissertation argues that habituation is inadequate, and to some extent unnecessary, to attain virtue. Instead, a God inspired moral transformation is the most crucial ingredient in one’s journey towards virtue. Any upbringing and education that disregards the role of God in our quest for virtue is doing a great disservice to those it purports to help.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

For just as man is the best of the animals when completed, when separated from law
and adjudication he is the worst of all . . . without virtue, he is the most unholy and
the most savage of the animals Aristotle Aristotle’s Politics

This dissertation is motivated by the sober realization that living a virtuous life is
surprisingly difficult and much less common than expected. In fact, virtue seems incredibly
unlikely, maybe impossible, apart from God’s help. That may seem like a very pessimistic
opinion, but consider the content of Elizabeth Anscombe’s influential 1958 article “Modern
Moral Philosophy.” In it she makes several important claims about the state of contemporary
ethics; two are of interest here. One, she notes that the most prominent contemporary ethical
theories are ill-equipped to deal with the notion of a “bad man,” a man lacking virtue. How is it
that 2,000 years post-Aristotle contemporary ethical theory cannot explain a “bad man?” She
thinks this is due to the lack of consideration of character, a person’s intentions and motives.
This observation appears to have been true because there was a subsequent surge in interest in
virtue ethics. This dissertation examines virtue and uses Aristotle’s ethics to explore the concept
of character building.

Anscombe’s more important claim is that she thinks there is no point in moral philosophy
until ethicists have an adequate moral psychology. By this she means an account of human

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1253a33-37.
2 G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy, 33,
3 Ibid.
5 Ibid, 1.
nature, a definition of a virtuous trait, and what it means for humans to flourish. Any adequate ethical theory must appropriately take into account human nature, human capacities, human rationality, and human society (family and community). It matters greatly if human infants arrive in the world morally as a “blank slate,” or with a selfish nature, or with a nature amenable to moral training. Regardless of the answer to those questions, we must then understand what, if anything, can be done to produce virtuous adults. All theories of child rearing, moral education, criminal justice, economics, government, and ethics have to be based on an accurate understanding of human nature and human moral psychology. Anscombe’s observation, if true, that after several millennia of human progress we lack these fundamental insights is very sobering. This dissertation claims that human moral psychology is fundamentally self-interested and not amenable to attaining virtue apart from God’s help.

The prevailing conviction in Western society, academia, government, and social work is that human beings and human society have within themselves the resources to become virtuous. The presumption is that human nature is such that we are readily trained to be virtuous. Aristotle’s ethical writings are based on this assumption. Aristotle says proper habituation (a good upbringing, to include a good education and a moral society) leads to virtue. However, what if Aristotle, and Western society, have overestimated the power of habituation (upbringing and education)? At this point in history there appears to be abundant evidence that habituation is not able to overcome powerful human inclinations to evil. If that is true, then virtue, happiness, and a healthy society are beyond reach given our current approach to education and socialization.

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6 Ibid, 18.
7 Being self-interested is not necessarily immoral. In fact, I will argue later that we have moral obligations to take care of ourselves, to provide for our own basic health and welfare. However, when self-interest preempts important moral obligations to others it makes us immoral. Later chapters will illustrate how unconstrained self-interest can lead to a host of moral errors and evils.
This dissertation focuses on human moral psychology and virtue based primarily on Aristotle’s writings. Aristotle is the focus because his account of our moral psychology and the path to virtue are still largely accepted today. That said, there appears to be an abundance of evidence in history, in social science, and in contemporary culture, suggesting the human moral condition is much worse than Aristotle assumed. The evidence suggests that few, if any, human beings have the ability to become virtuous based on their upbringing and their own efforts. The currently accepted view, that a good upbringing and a good education will produce a virtuous person, is extremely problematic. My thesis is that human nature, in particular, our moral psychology, is fundamentally self-interested, and virtue is highly unlikely apart from a divinely inspired moral transformation.

**Human Nature and Moral Psychology**

To speculate coherently about virtue depends on an accurate understanding of human nature and human moral psychology. As previously noted, Elizabeth Anscombe was frustrated by the lack of consensus on this very question. She said, “it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking.”

Exactly what do theories of human nature and moral psychology tell us? A theory of human nature attempts to describe accurately the key features of human beings (traits, propensities) that contribute to human behavior. Some possible traits include: being a social creature; being rational; being able to learn and use a

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8 The evidence that will be offered is the ubiquity of immorality in Western society, particularly the United States. Aristotle, as well as Kant and Mill, thought universal access to education, an improved civil society (better legal system, human rights) and a widely shared improved standard of living, would lead to a more virtuous society. However, many standards of measure, war, genocide, divorce, widespread cheating and lying, indicate that modern society is no more virtuous than the barbarians of Aristotle’s day.

language; having a free will; etc. A claim about human nature attempts to capture a reality that is not directly observable (the fact that humans have a mind, emotions, aspirations, free will, etc.). Theories of human nature result in claims about human flourishing, human society, and the human role in the cosmos. In his book about the current views of human nature, Steven Pinker states that a theory of human nature “is embedded in the very way we think about people.”

Moral psychology is a subset of a theory of human nature that describes how humans think and feel in an ethical context. Moral psychology notices possible traits like: having a moral sense, a conscience; caring deeply about being moral; being outraged by injustice/evil; experiencing guilt, compassion, etc. Moral psychology is necessarily interdisciplinary. It involves at least sociology, psychology, biology and philosophy. Moral psychology is not just a matter for biologists and psychologists. Science focuses on what is, not on questions of value and what should be. For example, consider Dr. Julia Shaw’s book *Evil: The Science Behind Humanity’s Dark Side*. Shaw is a senior lecturer in criminology and psychology at University College in London. She holds a Master’s in psychology and law, and a PhD in psychology. She says evil is a subjective claim that humans create when they label something so. And she goes on to claim that “neither humans nor actions should be labelled evil.” Shaw’s claim that evil is subjective and should be banished from our lexicon is not a scientific claim. It is an ethical claim, and one I believe would be rejected by most people, including most philosophically educated ethicists. She appears to base her claim on the ubiquity of what is often labelled immoral/evil behavior. This is not the place to argue her claim, it is mentioned simply to

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12 Ibid., 260-261.
illustrate the importance of adding a philosophical and ethical perspective to the work of a psychologist. Not only is moral psychology an interdisciplinary venture, it is a venture everyone must undertake in order to coherently address ethics. Aristotle is a prime example.

Aristotle’s ethics rest on claims about the human desire for happiness, the centrality of human rationality, and the importance of pleasure and pain in human experience. Although these claims rest on biological and psychological facts, how we value each and how they should influence our moral judgements is a matter of ethical deliberation. This dissertation claims that history, current events in Western culture, and contemporary sociological experiments reveal that humans typically prioritize self-interest over moral obligations. If that is true, then virtue is unattainable absent a means of changing that trait. Prior to outlining my approach to understanding our moral psychology I need to clarify a few assumptions.

**Preliminary Assumptions**

This dissertation is based on several assumptions upon which there is no consensus. This is necessary because it is focused on one moral issue (human moral psychology), not all of them. So to begin, the goal is to be open about those assumptions. This inquiry is based on the following assumptions: there are objective moral facts; all normal humans have the faculties to discover those facts; all normal people want to be good and have some idea of what that means; people have the ability to choose their actions, to choose the good or the bad, the right or the wrong; people ultimately choose whether to pursue virtue or not. These assumptions accord with “common sense” but they are nevertheless controversial. The reader may not share these moral assumptions, but that does not make this project irrelevant. This dissertation is about

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13 By “normal” I simply mean the vast majority of people that are not clinically pathological or mentally/emotionally impaired to the point of being clinically diagnosed with a disorder.
whether human moral psychology is in fact amenable to a successful quest for virtue based on purely human resources. Regardless of what one thinks about the aforementioned assumptions, the answer to that question is important. The main point will be the claim that we are fundamentally moral beings that want to be good, but that we typically find virtue beyond reach apart from God’s help.

**What is New About this Thesis?**

The debate about moral psychology is old, but the context and available research is new. Philosophers and theologians have debated moral psychology since Plato and Aristotle circa 370 B.C. Yet, as Anscombe said, there is currently no consensus solution. That said, our insight into human moral psychology is greater now than ever before. Given recent history, new social science experiments, explorations in the fields of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, and insights gained from modern social research, we are better equipped than ever to evaluate Aristotle’s moral psychology. Aristotle’s ethical insights are enjoying a revival in both philosophical ethics and educational methods. What has not been noticed is what appears to be a disconnect between the recent emphasis on virtue/character and what history and social science have to say about Aristotle’s moral psychology.

On the one hand, many contemporary educational models emphasize the ubiquity and importance of character/moral education. Consider the following statements from Dr. Daniel Lapsley, the Aristotelian Character Education Collegiate Professor of Psychology at Notre Dame. “Clearly, moral-character education (and moral psychology generally) is enjoying a remarkable renaissance.”\(^\text{14}\) He goes on to make two claims about the current consensus in moral-

character education. One, “there is consensus, for example that moral-character education is
immanent to education and inevitable even if remanded to the hidden curriculum (and has never
been eliminated from American schools).”\textsuperscript{15} His point should actually be a cautionary one.
Moral-character education is happening whether it is intentional or not. Our young are being
morally trained, the only question is, what kind of morals are they learning? Two, Lapsley claims
“there is consensus that both virtuous dispositions and the quality of moral deliberation are
desirable outcomes and targets of character education.”\textsuperscript{16} Educators and politicians realize that
moral-character education is an imperative in a democratic society. “Societies need moral
members. They need children to develop into moral adults. It is not enough for society to be
populated with benign hedonists, as a truly civil society needs citizen to care about the general
welfare and those who cannot advocate for themselves.”\textsuperscript{17} Of course Aristotle insisted that
successful societies needed virtuous leaders and citizens over 2,000 years ago.

But while many ethicists, educators, and politicians see the need for virtue, they have
failed to consider whether Aristotle’s moral psychology is accurate. Modern education, like
Aristotle, has eliminated all linkage between God and morality. Modern public education, and all
secular child rearing, is based on the assumption that human happiness and virtue is readily
attainable without any link to God.\textsuperscript{18} The assumption is that education and socialization will

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 502.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Wolfgang Althof and Marvin W. Berkowitz, Moral Education and Character Education: Their
Relationship and Roles in Citizenship Education,” \textit{Journal of Moral Education}, 35 No.4 (December 2006): 496,
DOI: 10.1080/03057240601012204 (accessed October 26, 2018).
\textsuperscript{18} Apart from a divinely inspired moral transformation, habituation is the most important, maybe the only,
way humans have of cultivating virtue. Barring supernatural transformation, whatever virtue exists today stems from
a person’s genetic inheritance and habituation, with habituation likely having the larger, more important role. My
critique of Aristotle is not focused on his specific method of habituation. It is focused on all methods of habituation
that exclude a role for God. Aristotle’s method had no role for God and contemporary public education has adopted
that same stipulation. It is difficult, if not impossible, to discern whether anyone today is habituated specifically
according to Aristotle’s virtues. Although it is likely that many are. But what is clear is that Western society has
produce virtuous, happy adults. But if human nature is not readily made virtuous without a divine moral transformation, how is secular moral-character education going to succeed? We now have 2,400 years of history and recent (last 50 years) social science with which to examine Aristotle’s moral psychology. This dissertation assembles current interdisciplinary information to argue that Aristotle’s moral psychology is inaccurate. I claim that Aristotle underestimates the degree to which humans are self-interested and the extent to which their pleasures and pains mislead them. He also overestimates the efficacy and necessity of proper socialization (habituation). It turns out that a divine moral transformation is likely required for virtue, and such a transformation is able to overcome the lack of proper habituation. Given that bold claim, here is an overview of the dissertation.

An Outline

This dissertation has 7 chapters, this introduction being chapter 1. Chapter 2 clarifies and defines some key terms. It will distinguish virtue from virtue ethics. It will say more about moral psychology. And it will survey important definitions of virtue before integrating them into one for use in this dissertation. Like Aristotle’s work (*Aristotle’s Politics*), chapter 3 of this dissertation notes the importance of virtue to happiness and to a healthy society. It includes an overview of not only Aristotle’s view, but Immanuel Kant’s, and John Stuart Mill’s. This chapter notes our moral psychology appears to be constructed such that virtue and happiness are closely

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almost totally adopted a form of habituation that excludes a role for God. What this dissertation claims is that the ubiquity of immorality proves that habituation with the exclusion of God is failing. One might claim that if we habituated precisely the way Aristotle recommended virtue would flourish. That is not obvious. Certainly his methods have been attempted and not proven to provide extraordinary results. Aristotle claimed that habituation could change what causes us pleasure and pain. When we look at people who have undergone extensive habituation, maybe close to what Aristotle recommended (monasteries, military academies, boarding schools) it is not clear virtue is the result. Sure, some superficial habits/behavior may change temporarily. But it does not seem to change our preference for self-interest over moral obligations. The fact that Western society has the moral problems it does, impugns the idea that habituation, without a moral transformation, can succeed.
linked. Aristotle, for different reasons, believed the same. Chapter 3 does not advance the argument that our moral psychology is predominantly self-interested, but it emphasizes what is at stake if we get moral psychology wrong. Chapter 4 examines what Aristotle’s ethics say about moral psychology, moral and intellectual virtue, incontinence and, most importantly for this dissertation, habituation. The focus on habituation is due to its crucial role in developing virtue. Chapter 5 is an interdisciplinary look at the findings of history, our current culture, and social science to see how Aristotle’s moral psychology holds up. It provides the basis for the claim that proper habituation is simply inadequate to remedy a corrupt human nature. Chapter 6 explores the possibility of virtue given the possibility of divine transformation to influence the human moral condition. Chapter 7 concludes that human moral psychology is fundamentally self-interested to the detriment of virtue. That condition cannot be remedied by habituation. Any habituation that lacks respect for divine assistance, or denigrates that possibility, does a great disservice to our youth and to our society. It is difficult to see how virtue and a just society can be achieved apart from divine intervention. With that preview in mind, this examination of moral psychology and virtue begins with a look at key terms.
CHAPTER 2
VIRTUE, MORAL PSYCHOLOGY & OTHER KEY CONCEPTS

Virtue implies ability and readiness to overcome our inclination to evil on moral principles.  
Immanuel Kant, Lectures on Ethics

Discussions of virtue often go astray due to several confusions: confusing virtue ethics and virtue, confusion between a virtuous person and a virtuous action, and confusion regarding the meaning of virtue. The purpose of this chapter is to clarify virtue by defining terms and noting the differences in how virtue is defined. This chapter examines Aristotle’s, Immanuel Kant’s, and John Mill’s views on virtue. Despite their differences, as ethicists they have much in common when it comes to describing virtue. This dissertation explores the possibility of becoming virtuous. Can anyone, based on his own resources, become a virtuous person? Before engaging on that quest, a clear understanding of virtue, moral psychology, and other key terms is essential. The first distinction to address is the difference between virtue ethics and virtue.

Virtue Ethics vs Virtue

Virtue ethics is a family of normative ethical theories in which virtues are fundamental. That is to say, that in a virtue ethic right action is defined as one which a virtuous person would perform. By contrast, a normative ethical theory like consequentialism holds that right acts are fundamental. It identifies a right act based on its consequences. Consequentialism then defines a

virtue as a character trait that leads to performing right acts. In consequentialism right acts are fundamental and virtue is derivative. Similarly, a duty based (deontological) ethical theory identifies moral obligations as fundamental. It then defines virtues as character traits that lead to fulfilling moral obligations. In consequentialist and deontological theories, right acts are fundamental and provide the basis for defining virtues. In a virtue ethic, virtues are fundamental and provide the basis for defining right acts. This dissertation does not endorse a particular normative ethical theory. I am not defending Aristotle’s virtue ethics. Aristotle’s ethics is the foundation of this dissertation because it includes a substantive moral psychology and offers a methodology for becoming a virtuous person. Aristotle’s means of identifying a right action is incidental. Other theorists may agree with most of what Aristotle has to say about what it means to be a virtuous person, and how character development works without agreeing that right actions are defined by what virtuous people choose to do.

Both John S. Mill (a consequentialist) and Immanuel Kant (a duty ethicist) place a high value on virtue. Like Aristotle, they agree that a person’s character, their disposition to do good (i.e. a right act), is extremely important to them and to society. Kant viewed virtue as the moral strength of will to fulfill one’s duty. Mill thought our hopes of happiness were founded on inward improvement and virtuous exertion in favor of social interests. Aristotle, Kant and Mill all agree that virtue is about a person’s character traits. In contrast, different normative ethical theories (virtue ethics, consequentialism and deontological ethics) disagree on how to identify a

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right action. Virtue is focused on the character and behavior of the individual not on how the individual identifies a right action.

**Virtuous Action vs A Virtuous Person**

There is obviously a connection between virtuous actions and virtuous persons, but it is important not to assume that a person who performs a virtuous action is a virtuous person. As mentioned, ethical theories identify virtuous actions differently. Aristotle, Kant, and Mill would all give different explanations of what made truth telling (a virtuous action) right and lying wrong. Aristotle (Virtue Ethic) would say since virtuous people tell the truth and vicious people tell lies, truth telling is right and lying is wrong. Immanuel Kant (a duty-based ethic) would say human reason derives a categorical imperative (a duty) to tell the truth and not to lie, thus truth telling is right and lying is wrong. And John Stuart Mill (a consequentialist ethic) would claim that truth telling leads to positive consequences and lying leads to negative consequences, thus truth telling is right and lying is wrong. But just because an action is right does not mean the person doing it is virtuous. A right action can be done by a bad person. And a right action can be done for wrong reasons. The theoretical dispute over how to define a right action differs from defining a virtuous person.

Aristotle, Kant, and Mill would all agree that a virtuous person is motivated by good reasons and a good will. When a person is consistently motivated by a good will and good reasons, they exhibit one or more virtues. A virtue is simply a character trait. That said, there is an ongoing debate about what constitutes a character trait. John Doris notes that “describing virtues as behavioral dispositions is only a very partial accounting; virtue is standardly thought to involve not only what occurs “on the outside” in the form of overt behavior, but also what occurs
“on the inside” in the form of motives, emotions, and cognitions.” Miguel Alzola elaborates on cognitions by noting they include beliefs, values, and framing capacities. Most ethicists would agree with Aristotle that a virtuous person must know what the virtuous act would be, must choose it for that reason, and must do so from a firm and unchanging state. It is premature to think that a person is virtuous, or not virtuous, simply based on what they do in one instance. Much more has to be known about their values, their beliefs, the constancy of their convictions, their motive for choosing to do what they did, and the possible conflicting values at stake. This is why it is extremely difficult to know if a person is virtuous. One would have to know them well enough to know why they do what they do. Additionally, one would have to know them long enough to know they are consistently virtuous in a range of situations and temptations. Aristotle seems to be correct in noting that virtue involves a choice and an “unchanging state.”

A virtuous person makes an informed choice based on a strong, enduring conviction. Suppose a person is checking out of a store after buying a very expensive home theater ensemble. During checkout the clerk errs by ringing up the purchase and undercharges by over $100.00. The person checking out notices the error and must decide whether to point it out or keep the money. In order for the buyer to be counted as virtuous, she must realize that the honest thing to do is to report the error. Regardless of what she does, if she fails to recognize that the morally appropriate response is to tell the clerk, she cannot be counted as virtuous. So, if she reports the error because she feels like belittling the clerk, she is right in pointing out the mistake, but not virtuous because her motive had nothing to do with attempting to be honest. Or,

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suppose she is deeply conflicted about the decision and decides to be honest in this case, but she does so because she is also cheating on her income tax return, and she cannot handle the additional guilt. In this case she is being honest, but her honesty is motivated by her desire to exploit a more lucrative opportunity. Her honesty is not a firm and unchanging conviction. In order for her to be virtuous, she must be committed to honesty and be unwilling to compromise it in all such clear-cut cases (to include her taxes). Understanding whether the buyer is virtuous (a question of character) is different from determining whether her action was virtuous (whether it was right or wrong depends on the normative ethical theory: consequentialist, deontological, or virtue ethics). This dissertation is about what it takes for the person to be virtuous. It is not a defense of the normative ethical theory, virtue ethics. Nor is it about what makes actions virtuous (right) or not virtuous (wrong). This dissertation is about the possibility of developing a good character, becoming a virtuous person. Questions of character and virtue are always based on a conception of human moral psychology.

Moral Psychology

To think clearly about moral psychology, it will help to consider a few alternative views. Stephen Pinker identifies three broad, competing views in *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*. I am going to borrow his taxonomy but define each view slightly differently and more briefly with emphasis on just a few key features. They are: a Christian model, the Standard Social Science Model (SSSM), and a Darwinian model. Pinker thinks the Christian

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model is still quite common but outmoded by contemporary science. However, there are several elements of the Christian view that are very popular and compelling. They are:

- Human beings are made in the image of God (they have a particular design and purpose and are not completely malleable)\(^\text{10}\)

- Humans have a moral sense (to include a sense of justice and compassion) and a religious impulse (to want to know God)

- Humans have a free will. They can choose to do good or evil (they are not completely constrained by nature or nurture)

- Humans are innately sinners (they are self-centered rather than God-centered, others-centered, or society-centered)

- Humans can become God-centered through a supernatural spiritual/moral transformation (this enables them to behave in a way that is God-centered, others-centered and society-centered)

The Christian model includes several features with which Aristotle would agree. Aristotle held the view that humans had a purpose, a design. This design implies that humans can function optimally only in a certain way. When we do function optimally, we are happy. This is very compatible with the Christian view that attributes our design to God. And, Christians would agree that we are designed to live and behave in certain ways. Aristotle did not say much explicitly about humans having a moral sense. However, his theory implies that we can recognize virtuous people and that when exposed to noble things we will prefer them. The Christian model goes farther, but again is consistent with Aristotle’s view. Aristotle definitely thought ethics was about choices and that we could choose the good. That said, Aristotle also

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\(^{10}\) Christians who accept the biblical creation account hold that humans were originally made in the image of God and were perfect and immortal. The image of God includes being rational and having moral sensibilities like: a conscience, a sense of right and wrong, an appreciation for justice, guilt about wrong doing, and an appreciation of the good. Essentially, human nature includes that image to this day. But due to the Fall, humans now have a flawed nature and are mortal. This flaw includes putting self-interest ahead of moral obligations. This is an accidental feature of humans that Christians believe will at some point be totally rectified. Many Christians, including the author, believe human nature can be partially rectified by a spiritual/moral transformation that gives a person the ability to overcome his current bondage to self-interest.
thought that we needed training (habituation) to ensure we took pleasure in good things. Absent such training we take pleasure in base things or things which deviate from a healthy mean (what is optimum). Most Christians agree that we have the ability to choose good or evil. It is not clear what Aristotle would say about humans being innately prone to evil. He would agree that barbarians, those lacking habituation, choose base things. But Aristotle might say that is due to lack of proper upbringing, not due to an innate preference for base things. Aristotle excluded any role for God in our path to virtue. For many Christians, God has an important role. The Christian model is quite different from the other models but shares some features with them.

Some Christian claims are consistent with features of the SSSM or the Darwinian model. Many Darwinians would agree that humans are self-centered and that they have an inherited nature that is not completely malleable. Darwinians believe we have evolved a very specific nature and that humans cannot just become something totally inconsistent with their evolutionary heritage. Some proponents of the SSSM would agree that humans have good moral senses and a free will. And they would claim that our free will and rationality greatly supersede any biologically inherited nature. Pinker captures this claim in what I label the SSSM (Pinker called it the Blank Slate model).

According to many, the SSSM is nearly a consensus in the social sciences. The SSSM claims the following:

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11 The term Standard Social Science Model (SSSM) can likely be attributed to detractors of what many think is the ruling paradigm in the social sciences. The term SSSM was used by John Tooby and Leda Cosmides in their seminal paper “The Psychological Foundations of Culture.” Other detractors include Steven Pinker and Christopher Badcock. Both Pinker and Badcock claim that the SSSM, or some version of it, is the consensus in the social sciences.
- Human nature is essentially, but not solely, a product of learning and socialization, or is socially constructed.\textsuperscript{12}

- Human nature is not fixed but quite plastic.\textsuperscript{13}

Adherents to the SSSM typically take a very benign view of human nature. Pinker claims they are more inclined to the “noble savage” view of Rousseau.\textsuperscript{14} SSSM adherents tend to attribute human immorality to social causes rather than individual causes. Some SSSM adherents are total social constructivists and believe that human nature is completely a creation of social conditioning. There are a spectrum of beliefs in the SSSM, but all believe that “we have evolved into a state where we are so much the creatures of our culture that our evolutionary origins can tell us little or nothing about what we now are.”\textsuperscript{15} This view is consistent with Aristotle’s view that habituation is the key to virtue. For the SSSM, social construction is the key to all our behavior. As you might expect, the Darwinians do not share this view.

Some professionals in the fields of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology believe the Darwinian model will eventually become the accepted psychological theory for explaining human behavior.\textsuperscript{16} Although they acknowledge a role for the social environment, they believe


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 905.

\textsuperscript{14} Pinker, \textit{The Blank Slate}, Chapter 1. Pinker refers to the SSSM as the “Blank Slate” theory. He views it as a total denial of human nature. It is the ultimate social constructivist view.

\textsuperscript{15} Stenmark, “Three Theories of Human Nature,” 917.

\textsuperscript{16} Evolutionary psychology remains controversial but it does have a base of adherents who think it offers a more scientific approach to explaining human behavior. John Tooby and Leda Cosmides (“The Psychological Foundations of Culture”) are perhaps the most well-known proponents but some others are Christopher Badcock (\textit{Evolutionary Psychology: A Critical Introduction}), David Buss (\textit{The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology}), Steven Pinker (\textit{The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature}), and Robin Wright (\textit{The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are}).
our genetic inheritance plays a crucial role in our behavior. Darwinians typically accept the two following principles.

- Human nature is essentially, but not solely, the product of natural selection, or is naturally given.\(^\text{17}\)

- Human nature (human traits or propensities) is not plastic but quite fixed.\(^\text{18}\)

By relying on natural selection, Darwinists do not mean that all one’s behaviors are directly driven by genetics. Instead, they claim that the human mind has an inherent structure, a specific information processing system that offers a limited array of successful solutions for things like kinship, social coalitions, mating, etc. The mind is not, as the SSSM model asserts, a general-purpose learning and reasoning mechanism that can be molded to support any potential outcome.\(^\text{19}\) Of course evolution works extremely slowly, so social conditioning remains the primary focus for changing behavior. But the evolutionary psychologist would say there are some behavioral paths that are doomed to failure. For example, perhaps there are some gender differences between men and women that simply cannot be erased by any amount of social conditioning. Similarly, it may be that some evolved traits result in narcissistic and Machiavellian behavior that cannot be totally rooted out by social conditioning. That is important to know with respect to ethics and virtue.

Human nature and moral psychology place limits on what can be expected morally from people and what can count as being virtuous. These not only limit what an individual can accomplish but what can be expected from society and from social conditioning. Elizabeth

\(^{17}\) Stenmark, “Three Theories of Human Nature,” 903.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 907.

Anscombe and Aristotle both believe that a theory of human nature and human moral psychology precedes any normative ethical theory and any theory of human virtue. For example, consider the nature of sexual relations. The Christian model might claim that humans were designed for heterosexual relations in the context of monogamous marriage. Christians might further claim that deviations from that are immoral and harmful to individuals and society. Adherents to the Darwinian model might agree that humans have evolved to be heterosexual but deny that monogamous marriage is part of our nature. In fact, Darwinians might say that males are by nature promiscuous. That would not mean men have to be promiscuous, but simply that such behavior will always be attractive to men. A Darwinian might deny that any amount of habituation would change a man’s desire to be promiscuous. A Darwinian might be open to promiscuity prior to marriage and may also be open to different models of marriage, polygamy for example. Adherents to the SSSM might claim that there is no normative sexual behavior and that humans are free to choose whatever sexual relations they please. Society may have reasons for preferring marriage and child rearing, but there might be many modes of family (polygamy, homosexual marriage, etc.) that are acceptable. Moral psychology is important because it sets the boundaries of what is possible and what should be normative for humans. Aristotle was right to pursue ethics in light of human nature and human moral psychology. But for reasons I cannot explain, Aristotle said little about the role of religion and the role of God.

**Religious Influence, A Flawed Nature & Transformation**

Another key concept employed in this paper is that of a moral transformation. It is important to understand what a moral transformation is, why it is necessary, and how it is distinguished from religious training. Suppose that in the human moral psychology, humans are aware of both what benefits or pleases them (self-interest), and moral norms and obligations.
Suppose further that in the human moral psychology humans naturally prioritize self-interest over moral norms and obligations. Such an innate ordering of priorities I term a flaw in our moral psychology. This would not mean humans did not want to be moral, but it would mean that when morality and self-interest conflict, humans would, all other things being equal, choose self-interest. If this strong preference for self-interest is “built in” to our moral psychology (a flaw) then virtue, as understood by Aristotle, Kant, and Mill, would not be possible. If humans innately prioritize self-interest so highly, no amount of habituation could convince them to do otherwise. However, what could change our “built-in” prioritization is a supernaturally accomplished moral transformation. God could supernaturally change our moral psychology, transform us, so that moral norms and obligations could be prioritized over self-interest. Such a transformation would make virtue possible. A supernatural transformation is not synonymous with becoming religious.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I want to distinguish religion from relationship. I am defining religion as all those things (doctrine, ritual, tradition, behavioral norms, etc.) humans practice in an attempt to satisfy a desire for meaning and significance. Religious training from this perspective is simply another mode of habituation. Religious training and practice is simply human effort to govern behavior in a way acceptable to one’s religious beliefs. As human effort, religion has no more power to change our “built-in” moral psychology than any other form of habituation. Religious effort may include more zeal and thus have more power than other forms of habituation to modify behavior, but it is still unable to change the human moral psychology. Relationship is different from religion.

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20 This claim about the ordering of human priorities is taken from my reading of Duns Scotus and others. It will be explained in more detail in chapter 6 when I discuss moral transformation.
When a person has a relationship with God, God connects to them in a way that spiritually and morally transforms them. When God connects with a person, God supernaturally changes that person’s moral psychology to enable spiritual and moral obligations to be selected above self-interest. This does not mean that a transformed person will be virtuous. It simply means that a transformed person has the power to be virtuous. A transformed person is disposed to put moral norms and obligations first. But like all humans, transformed people have habits and inclinations for pleasure that contradict the disposition to put moral obligations first. Later, I offer examples of transformation that occur in the context of Christianity. But those examples include a relationship with God. A relationship with God typically occurs in the context of a religion. But religion, including Christianity, without a relationship, cannot deliver a moral transformation. Transformation makes virtue a viable option.

**How Aristotle Defines Virtue**

This dissertation focuses on what makes a person virtuous as opposed to what makes an action virtuous. Despite significant differences in defining right actions, virtue ethicists, consequentialists, and deontological ethicists share significant similarities in describing a virtuous person. Although they may differ from Aristotle in some ways, Aristotle’s description of a virtuous person is often the foundation from which others start.

1) Virtue, then, is of two sorts, virtue of thought and virtue of character.22

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21 This dissertation does not make the argument that Christianity is the only religion in which a relationship with God is possible. It is conceivable that other religions might include a relationship with God. I simply argue that God plays a necessary role in moral transformation; purely religious efforts are insufficient. I believe there are good reasons for thinking that God only works in the context of true beliefs about Him. If so, not all religions are likely to produce a relationship with God.

2) There are five states in which the soul grasps the truth in its affirmations or denials. These are craft, scientific knowledge, intelligence [emphasis added], wisdom and understanding.\textsuperscript{23} 

3) Virtue of character is concerned with feelings and actions\textsuperscript{25} 

4) Virtue then is (a) a state that decides, (b) consisting in a mean, (c) the mean relative to us, (d) which is defined by reference to reason, (e) i.e. to the reason by reference to which the intelligent [emphasis added] person would define it.\textsuperscript{26} 

5) But having these feelings at the right times, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the intermediate and best condition, and this is proper to virtue.\textsuperscript{27} 

6) First, he must know [that he is doing virtuous actions]; second, he must decide on them, and decide on them for themselves; and, third, he must also do them from a firm and unchanging state.\textsuperscript{28} 

Plenty of books and articles have been written about the above Aristotelian statements regarding virtue. Hopefully a shorter explanation will suffice to understand Aristotle’s view of virtue. 

Aristotle thought virtue was primarily a rational activity, but it certainly included an important role for our feelings of pleasure and pain. Reference statement #1 above, Aristotle speaks of two kinds of virtue, virtue of thought (intellectual virtue) and virtue of character (moral virtue). In statement #2 Aristotle identifies five kinds of intellectual virtues. Intelligence (\textit{phronēsis}), also called practical wisdom, is not only an intellectual virtue, but the key component of moral virtue. In statement #3 Aristotle clearly states that moral virtue includes our

\textsuperscript{23} Anthony Kenny, \textit{The Aristotelian Ethics} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2016), 164. Here \textit{phronēsis} is translated \textit{intelligence}. It is often translated “practical wisdom.” Intelligence/practical wisdom is a virtue of thought (intellectual virtue) but it is essential to virtue of character (moral virtue) since it provides the reasoning power that ensures an appropriate end, the appropriate time, place, person(s), and mean. 

\textsuperscript{24} Aristotle, \textit{Nicomachean Ethics,}, 1139b15

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 1106b16. 

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 1107a1. 

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 1106b21. 

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 1105a31.
feelings, our likes and dislikes, the things that cause us pleasure and pain. Statement #4 is Aristotle’s definition of virtue. He calls it a state; some people would call it a disposition. In either case it is, from statement #6, a firm and unchanging condition. A virtuous person has a well-developed commitment to behaving virtuously. This is why we expect virtuous people to be consistently virtuous, predictably virtuous, and not just occasionally or sporadically virtuous. We also see in this definition that Aristotle thought a virtue was an appropriate intermediate point between two vices. Aristotle’s first example is bravery, an intermediate point between rashness and cowardice. This intermediate point, Aristotle calls it a mean, is not an arithmetic mean, but a response determined by reason (intelligence/practical wisdom) appropriate to that person in that situation.

The right reasons and the right feelings are key to Aristotle’s definition of virtue. It is the practical wisdom of a virtuous person that allows her to recognize the right goal, the right way to attain that goal, and the appropriate response for that person, at that time, in those circumstances (statement #5). Notice that according to Aristotle, virtue includes having the desire to do the right thing. The virtuous person does not have to overcome a desire to do the wrong thing. A virtuous person has developed a noble character that desires to do the right thing. As a result, a virtuous person knowingly chooses to do the right thing because he recognizes that it is noble and wants to do the noble deed. It is consistent with his well-developed character (statement #6). Virtue is not a trait of the young. Virtue belongs to the mature who developed practical wisdom from training and experience and who have developed a desire and preference for noble things.

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29 Ibid., 1115b23-1116a7.
They take pleasure in doing good and are pained by the thought of the bad. Later philosophers will dissent from parts of this definition, but to a large extent they agree with Aristotle.

Kant’s View of Virtue Compared to Aristotle’s

Immanuel Kant agreed with Aristotle on the role of rationality and developing virtue, but disagreed about the use of the mean and our ability to train our feelings. Some of Kant’s key statements follow:

1) Virtue is the strength of a human being’s maxims in fulfilling his duty. – Strength of any kind can be recognized only by the obstacles it can overcome, and in the case of virtue these obstacles are natural inclinations, which can come into conflict with the human being’s moral resolution;\textsuperscript{30}

2) The supreme principle of the doctrine of virtue is: act in accordance with a maxim of ends that it can be a universal law for everyone to have.\textsuperscript{31}

3) Be a man ever so virtuous, there are in him promptings of evil, and he must constantly contend with these.\textsuperscript{32}

4) There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a good will.\textsuperscript{33}

5) It follows that we must first of all discipline ourselves. By repeated endeavour we must stamp out the tendency which arises from sensuous motive. He who wishes to discipline himself morally, must watch himself carefully; he must at frequent intervals give to the judge within him an account of his deeds; by constant practice he will strengthen the moral grounds of impulse, through self-cultivation he will acquire a habit of desire and aversion in regard to what is morally good and bad. In this way his moral feeling will be cultivated,\textsuperscript{34}


\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 157.


\textsuperscript{34} Immanuel Kant, \textit{Lectures on Ethics}, 246.
Statement #1 reveals that Kant viewed virtue as a strong commitment to obey the moral law as revealed by reason. Unlike Aristotle, Kant does not think virtue is identifying a mean between extremes.\(^{35}\) Instead, he thinks we rationally derive maxims that we test by determining if they could be a universal law for everyone to live by (statement #2). The key to virtue for Kant is our determination to live by good maxims (a good will) even when our inclinations pull us in a different direction (statement #1 & #4). Unlike Aristotle, Kant does not believe a virtuous person arrives at the state where there are no inclinations opposing the good maxim (statement #3). It may seem that Kant and Aristotle have very different views of virtue, but they actually have a lot in common.

Kant agrees with Aristotle that virtue is a well-developed state of character that makes decisions governed by reason. Kant recognizes that virtue is about choices. Kant thinks one choice is a moral maxim that everyone could follow, and which would respect them as rational persons with free will. However, there are a host of other choices a person might make, many of which reflect pleasing inclinations. A virtuous person with a strong, good will, would choose the moral maxim. Kant thinks a virtuous person is one committed to living by moral maxims, just as for Aristotle a virtuous person lives by practical wisdom (intelligence). For both, the virtuous person has the rational ability to recognize the noble deed and the power to choose it. For both, this ability should be an enduring one, not just a sporadic one. For both, virtue is developed over time by choosing to cultivate a desire for the noble (statement #5). Regarding virtue, Kant and Aristotle agree more than they disagree, the same will hold true for Aristotle and John Stuart Mill.

Mill’s View of Virtue Compared to Aristotle’s

Rationality, our capacity for the nobler feelings, is the key element of virtue from Mill’s perspective. This resembles the importance of practical wisdom for Aristotle and our ability to formulate good maxims for Kant. Mill made the following statements relating to virtue.

1) The utilitarian standard … is not the agent’s own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether; and if it may possibly be doubted whether a noble character is always the happier for its nobleness, there can be no doubt that it makes other people happier, and that the world in general is immensely a gainer by it. Utilitarianism, therefore, could only attain its end by the general cultivation of nobleness of character,\(^{36}\)

2) It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others.\(^{37}\)

3) Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites and, when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification. … there is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation.

4) Education and opinion, which have so vast a power over human character, should so use that power as to establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole, especially between his own happiness and the practice of such modes of conduct, negative and positive, as regard for the universal happiness prescribes; so that not only he may be unable to conceive the possibility of happiness to himself, consistently with conduct opposed to the general good, but also that a direct impulse to promote the general good may be in every individual one of the habitual motives of action, and the sentiments connected therewith may fill a large and prominent place in every human being’s sentient existence.\(^{38}\)

Mill thought that nobleness of character included a confirmed commitment to always seek the good of the whole (statements #1 and #4). Like Kant, he was not necessarily convinced that

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 8.
\(^{38}\) Ibid., 17.
choosing the good of the whole always led to one’s own happiness. In this matter, both Kant and Mill deviate from Aristotle. But Mill agrees that a noble/virtuous person has been trained to associate the good of the whole with their own good (statement #4). Virtue is the result of many years of practicing a mode of conduct with a noble end in mind. These years of practice are supposed to affect our desires and sentiments so that we want to be virtuous (statement #4). Like Aristotle, Mill thinks humans are fundamentally rational and not satisfied with purely sensual pleasures (statement #3). It is our intelligence which directs us to the “higher pleasures” of feelings, imagination, and moral sentiments (statements #2 and #3). Mill thought a virtuous person’s perspective included an “indissoluble association” between his happiness and the good of the whole (statement #4). A truly virtuous person is “unable to conceive” of pursuing her happiness as opposed to the good of the whole (statement #4). Like Aristotle, Mill thought humans could be trained, and train themselves, to have a “noble character” which reliably pursued virtuous actions. For Mill, those actions were consistent with the principle of utility. Despite some differences with Aristotle, both Kant and Mill agreed with many of Aristotle’s views on virtue.

**Contemporary Views of Virtue**

In addition to the classical ethicists (Aristotle, Kant, and Mill), Robert Adams and John Doris offer two contemporary perspectives on virtue. Robert Adams defines moral virtue as “persisting excellence in being for the good.”\(^{39}\) As he explains what this means it becomes clear that he shares many of the perspectives of the classical ethicists. Adams links virtue to an enduring character trait. He makes it clear that virtue is more than an assessment of what a

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person does, but also what it reveals about who she is. Virtue includes the person’s motives, feelings, thoughts, and intentions.\textsuperscript{40} Virtue includes what a person values, loves, wants, cares about, respects, and strives for.\textsuperscript{41} Adams goes on to say that virtue is an enduring psychological state that makes the virtuous person’s actions predictable.\textsuperscript{42} Virtue clearly involves a person’s will and the choices that he makes. Adams agrees with Aristotle that virtue can and must be taught. He has little to say about the specific role of “practical wisdom” or of a “good will.” But obviously both are required to some extent in order to identify the good and decide to pursue it. Robert Adam’s perspective is from one who believes in virtue and character, John Doris defines character from the perspective of one who is skeptical of its existence or power.

John Doris identifies what he thinks classical ethicists mean by virtue as a prelude to his rejection of the importance of character. Doris believes that “situational factors are often better predictors of behavior than personal factors.”\textsuperscript{43} To make his case he first identifies what he thinks most philosophers mean by virtue and character. Doris calls his conception of character \textit{globalism} and defines it by three features: consistency, stability, and evaluative integration.\textsuperscript{44} He defines consistency as character traits being reliably manifested by appropriate behavior across a diversity of conditions that vary widely in their conduciveness to manifesting the trait in question.\textsuperscript{45} For example, consistency would expect an honest person to tell the truth in mundane circumstances, but also in circumstances when there is much to be gained by lying. A virtuous person is consistently honest in all circumstances, even those in which he has large incentives to

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 15-16.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{43} John M. Doris, \textit{Lack of Character} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
lie and could get away with it. Stability is defined as reliably manifesting the appropriate trait over iterated trials of similar trait-eliciting conditions. Stability implies that over time and many similar circumstances, an honest person tells the truth in each instance. A virtuous person is routinely honest over time, they have a stable personality. Doris defines evaluative integration as that feature of virtue which makes it likely that one possess all or most of the virtues to the same degree. If a person is moderately honest, she will likely be moderately compassionate, moderately generous, etc. Virtue typically extends across one’s character and is not limited to just one aspect. This last claim, often called the unity of the virtues, does not enjoy a consensus among philosophers and is not critical to the other features of virtue. The key features of virtue that Doris addresses in globalism are consistency and stability.

Consistency and stability are attributes of character that connect actions to internal dispositions. Doris notes that ethicists define virtue to include not only correct and predictable behavior, but appropriate emotions, motives, and cognitions. He agrees that the common understanding of virtue is that it includes intellectually recognizing a noble outcome, understanding the appropriate way to achieve it, wanting to achieve it, and then acting appropriately. Despite doubting the moral psychology associated with virtue, Doris understands that virtue is typically understood very similarly to what Aristotle described.

A Consensus View of Virtue and Comments

Although the ethicists surveyed differ on an exact definition of virtue there seems to be a consensus on several features. Below is my take on a consensus view of virtue.

1) Virtue is about being a good person and doing good things

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46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 16.
2) Virtue is about intellect, will and emotions as well as actions
   a) Virtue includes the wisdom to know the good end state
   b) Virtue includes the understanding of how to appropriately achieve the good end state
   c) Virtue includes the desire to achieve the good end state
   d) Virtue includes the will to choose to do the right thing to achieve the good
   e) Virtue is consistently and gladly choosing to do the right thing

3) Virtue is a well-developed character that persists in seeking and doing good

4) Virtue is the result of many years of training and practice in recognizing, seeking and doing good things

The key point to notice about this consensus view is the importance of the intellect, will and emotions. This gets to the importance of motives and strength of character. A virtuous person is motivated by the desire to see good prevail; the desire to fulfill moral obligations. A virtuous person has the will power and strength of character to persist in seeking the good despite any contravening urges of self-interest or external societal pressure.

A virtuous person is committed to doing good things even when no one else knows, when there is no recognition or reward for doing so. Think of all the athletes we have never heard of because they declined to cheat. By refusing to take steroids they could not compete professionally or could not excel professionally. This ethical stand changed the direction of their career and their life. Or think of the large number of people who give 10% or more of their income to charity but no one knows except some clerk in the IRS. These people have a moral commitment that we simply do not know about or celebrate. They make real sacrifices to do what is right. To exhibit this kind of moral commitment takes great strength of character. These are just a few of the factors that make virtue very difficult and very rare. It is even more difficult to be virtuous in the face of certain hardship.
A virtuous person does the right thing even in the face of public hostility or mockery. Think of the courage it takes for a Muslim in Pakistan to oppose the use of blasphemy laws to punish Christians who defend their faith. Such a person is taking an unpopular, and even dangerous, stand in order to do what is right. In strict Muslim countries there is intense pressure to conform to the accepted understanding of the Koran and Sharia law. To publicly deviate from the majority Muslim position in an Islamic nation involves real sacrifice. Not only does it make the person unpopular, but also it invites persecution and possibly violence, against the individual and his family. Multiple Pakistani leaders who defended Christian, Asia Bibi (accused of blasphemy), paid with their lives. Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab province, was assassinated by his own bodyguard. The guard was prosecuted and executed but also hailed as a hero by many Muslims. Pakistan's minister for minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti, was assassinated for demanding justice for Bibi. The point is that virtue often requires a significant amount of selflessness. In some cases, it requires extreme selflessness.

The ability to deny self is probably the hallmark of virtue but no single trait or single act proves one is virtuous. Virtue is hard to identify because it includes motives and because it extends to all aspects of good and right, not just one. We do not know if the individuals discussed above (honest athletes, contributors to charity, tolerant Muslims) were indeed virtuous. We know they did something good in one instance. We do not know why, and we do not know about other important aspects of their lives. This ambiguity confirms that virtue is difficult to achieve and difficult to identify. The consensus view of virtue does not include a solution of the following two disputes about virtue.

There are two things about virtue that are particularly controversial. First, is a virtuous person necessarily a happy person? In general, the answer is yes. But that said, there are obvious instances when the answer appears to be no. When a virtuous person is wrongly imprisoned, tortured, and executed it seems hard to describe them as “happy.” Or, when a virtuous person is hit by a drunk driver and paralyzed from the neck down, it is hard to imagine that they are “happy.” These types of examples led Aristotle to say that happiness required some good fortune. Aristotle thought a good/happy life would not include such tragedies. Whether virtue requires good fortune is a debate that need not be settled here, since it does not change what to expect from the character of a virtuous person. A virtuous person would handle such tragedies with courage. The second difficulty has to do with the unity of the virtues and consistency.

Can a person be virtuous and simultaneously have a significant vice, or significant moral failures? Aristotle thought that once a person developed practical wisdom (intelligence), he would have all the virtues. This seems to be the position of many of the Greeks and to have some support today. Given the obvious imperfections and frailties of humans, it seems clear that no one is perfectly virtuous and all of us make significant moral errors on occasion. Perfect virtue is an ideal everyone should strive for while understanding that perfection is not to be had on this earth. Still there do seem to be virtuous people. They are the ones who have acquired the most important virtues (Adams would say the cardinal virtues) and practice them very consistently, although not perfectly. Possibly a virtuous person could commit a significant moral blunder under difficult circumstances. He would acknowledge it, apologize, and not do it again.

It seems unlikely to claim a virtuous person has a significant moral vice. Persisting in something clearly wrong is not compatible with practical wisdom and good character. This is another reason why virtue is so difficult and so rare. Even when a person does some really good things, if they also have a persistent vice, it seems to disqualify them from virtue. That is why virtue is both a noble goal and a very ambitious goal.

The Virtuous Person

What would attaining virtue look like? It seems to me that it would be a rare and wonderful thing. A virtuous person has an enduring character committed to doing the right thing, her wisdom recognizes the right thing, and she has the desire and will power to do the right thing regardless of the circumstances. A virtuous person is not a slave of self-interest. Virtue is not simply doing the right thing. In the vast majority of the mundane moral decisions in life we do the right thing for self-interested reasons. Taking care of ourselves, our families and those around us is to our advantage and it is society’s expectation. Being polite, honest, and hard-working is typically to our benefit. It is normally right to do those things, but doing them because they are to our advantage is no indication of virtue. Virtue requires the right motives! All the great ethicists thought virtue required habituation, moral training. Habituation seems necessary, and typically takes considerable time and effort. Habituation is needed not only to develop the right habits, but to develop “practical wisdom.” The virtuous person is not perfect, but is routinely able to do the right thing, for the right reasons, because he wants to. This dissertation is based on this perspective of virtue. This virtue is inconsistent with any major vice or numerous peccadillos. Frankly, I do not think there are many people like this around.
Virtue, Continence and “Decent”

Is there a good state a little short of virtue? Aristotle thought so and described that as continence. These are people trying to be virtuous but have not been trained adequately to desire the noble. They choose to do right but have to overcome inclinations to do wrong. They have a strong will, maybe good friends and mentors, and are on the right track but have not achieved virtue yet. There is no telling how many people are in this category. I suspect it is not a large number because few of us have a strong will, good friends, and good mentors. Chapter 5 will discuss what is going on in our culture and what the social sciences are finding. It looks like most people are in a category that could be called a “decent” person. A “decent” person is one who publicly chooses what is socially acceptable. This includes many moral practices: keeping promises, being polite, occasionally being helpful, obeying the law, treating family members well, etc. A “decent” person may be religious and keep some religious rules that are typically good moral rules. Or a “decent” person may support a charity or help with some club. But the “decent” person has limits.

“Decent” people tend to take care of themselves, even if that means crossing moral boundaries. It turns out that what “decent” people do in private, at least when they think it is private, is not always moral. So, it turns out that a lot of “decent” people cheat on tests, falsify resumes, cheat on taxes, gossip, watch pornography, actually give very little to charity/church, and pursue self-interest as long as they can maintain an image of moral rectitude. Worse than that, “decent” people tend to fail badly when put in positions of extreme temptation, more on this later. Apparently, the vast majority of us fall in the category of “decent” person. We all want to appear moral, especially to ourselves. But we also want to satisfy as many of our desires as possible, even immoral desires. So, we are all careful to appear “decent,” but if we can get ahead
by cheating on the sly, we often do it. And if we encounter a really tempting opportunity, we are likely to rationalize taking it. Of course, there are “bad” people out there. They are often “decent” people in terrible circumstances. Many “decent” people just found themselves in circumstances where the only option for satisfying important desires was to do something criminal or flagrantly immoral. The only real difference between them and us “decent” people is the circumstances and temptations they faced. That is not always true. There are some truly psychopathic people out there. But they are probably pretty rare. Chapter 5 will make the case that the vast majority of us are “decent” people. “Decent” people are not virtuous, we do immoral things, and if faced with strong temptations will do really immoral things. Fortunately, most “decent” people are not faced with big temptations and go through life being “decent.” But because society is flawed, many of the things we think are decent are actually pretty bad. We are not nearly as good as we think. When I claim human nature is flawed, I am not suggesting most people are psychopaths, or consistently evil. I am saying we are “decent.” That is, self-interest rules. We care more about ourselves than others or society. We are likely to fall in the face of large temptations. And we often succumb to small temptations, if the cost is not too high. The contents of chapter 5 seem to confirm this and are therefore quite discouraging. But before we pursue this argument, it is worth taking note of what is at stake in the quest for virtue.
 CHAPTER 3

THE IMPORTANCE OF VIRTUE

The ultimate destiny of the human race is the greatest moral perfection, provided that it is achieved through human freedom, whereby alone man is capable of the greatest happiness.  Immanuel Kant, Lectures on Ethics

The question of whether virtue is attainable is no mere obscure academic controversy. Failing to become virtuous has tremendous personal and societal implications. Sub-consciously we all know that, which is why we jealously guard a self-image that includes our righteousness. Before examining the possibility of virtue, I think it is important to note how much our personal happiness and our societal success depends upon the widespread attainment of virtue. There are at least three components to the claim that virtue is exceedingly important: 1) philosophers note the close relationship between virtue and happiness, 2) social science notes that virtue is essential to a healthy self-image, and 3) social science also notes that the lack of virtue is destructive to individuals and society. Given the tremendous importance of virtue to personal and social well-being, it is surprising that human society has not made more progress at understanding virtue and spent more energy pursuing it. This chapter examines all three of the aforementioned important implications of virtue.

The Relationship of Virtue to Happiness

Before addressing what ethicists have to say about the connection between virtue and happiness, it is necessary to note different definitions of happiness. Writing in the Stanford

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2 Social science is a reference to the various studies and research projects conducted by psychologists, sociologists, criminologists, economists, and other scholars. Research by business, government, educators, operations researchers, doctors and others contribute to our knowledge of human behavior. The term “social science” is meant to capture all the data and analysis collected on human behavior and social interactions.
Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Dan Haybron claims happiness can be defined many ways but most definitions fall into one of two categories: 1) a desirable state of mind or 2) a life that goes well for the person leading it.\(^3\) With respect to moral theories a “state of mind” account appears to be an inadequate definition of happiness. Human happiness seems to demand a much richer account that includes conditions beyond our state of mind and includes the full use of our human capacities. For example, an independently wealthy drug addict may claim to be happy, content to spend his life on a chemically induced “high.” This might pass for a life filled with a happy state of mind. But most people, and certainly most philosophers, would deny that this person is truly happy. A drug addict is disconnected from the true condition of his own life and is oblivious to a richer kind of happiness that comes with fruitfully using the time, talents, and resources with which he has been blessed. Most of the prominent ethicists, like Aristotle, Kant, and Mill, think some version of the “life that goes well for the person leading it,” also called a “well-being” theory, is a better account of happiness. Each may offer a slightly different account of well-being, but each account of “well-being” offers a richer definition of happiness. Also noteworthy is that all agree that virtue is absolutely essential to personal and societal happiness.

Aristotle on Virtue and Happiness

Aristotle identifies happiness as the supreme good for a human being. He definitely held a “well-being” account with a very rich view of happiness. Roger Crisp categorizes Aristotle’s definition as an “objective list” theory of happiness.\(^4\) Objective list theories identify a number of

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constituents of well-being. Aristotle thought the list should include everything that is good in itself and necessary to fulfill or perfect human nature. Aristotle’s list of items necessary for a happy life include: moral virtue, intellectual virtue, contemplation, pleasure, friends, some wealth, health, a good family, and some good fortune (no diseases, serious accidents, tragedies, etc.). Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* explaining the relationship between virtue (moral and intellectual virtue) and happiness. Aristotle thought that happiness most appropriately described a full life of virtuous activity. He defined happiness as “an activity of the soul expressing complete virtue.” In Aristotle’s view, happiness was the direct result of virtuous activity; it could not be attained any other way. This is because Aristotle has a specific view of virtuous activity that differs from a simpler moral perspective.

Virtue for Aristotle had to do with excellent human functionality. An excellently functioning human is characterized by moral and intellectual virtue. Aristotle did not limit virtue to doing morally good things or having morally good motives. Virtue meant living a life governed by practical and theoretical wisdom. Practical wisdom leads to virtues of character like temperance, generosity, and bravery. Theoretical wisdom leads to intellectual virtues like wisdom, comprehension, and intelligence. A person with these traits will tend to accumulate and enjoy all the things on Aristotle’s list of constituents of happiness. Happiness is not simply good fortune, but good fortune added to our own sustained virtuous efforts. Aristotle’s idea of

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5 Ibid.
6 Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098b20 – 1099b5.
7 Ibid, 1100b20
8 Ibid, 1102a5.
9 Ibid, 1103a5.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
virtue is broad and certainly included practicing all the moral virtues of good character. Under Aristotle’s account of virtue and happiness, personal happiness is impossible without virtue since happiness is the result of a virtuous life. Aristotle also thought virtue had very important ramifications for society.

Aristotle taught that a successful community or society could only occur with virtuous citizens. Aristotle believed humans were by nature political and that by nature we live in community. But communities are successful only to the extent they foster virtue in their citizens. Throughout his *Politics* Aristotle discusses different kinds of regimes, what makes them succeed and fail, and how they are dependent on the citizens who rule and play various roles in society. Aristotle thinks communities succeed the same way individuals do, by working properly according to virtues analogous to those practiced by the citizens. When this happens the citizens are able to become virtuous and happy. Virtuous citizens tend to make the city/state prosperous and independent. These claims seemed justified to Aristotle based on looking at the various city states in and around Greece. The social science observations to be noted later will tend to confirm Aristotle’s philosophical claims. Kant’s views of the linkage between virtue and happiness are quite different, but the link is still very strong.

Kant on Virtue and Happiness

Kant said that “virtue and happiness together amount to possession of the highest good in a person.” But unlike Aristotle, Kant denied that virtue necessarily led to happiness. Kant

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13 Ibid, 1253a.
14 Ibid, 1337a15.
15 Ibid, 1310a15.
thought that human beings necessarily wanted happiness. But, Kant’s view of happiness was more limited than Aristotle’s. He did not think happiness could be objectively defined for all human beings. His view was closer to the “state of mind” view, at least in the sense that Kant thought happiness was more subjective. Aristotle thought happiness was the product of any well-functioning human being. Whereas Kant thought happiness was “the sum of satisfaction of all inclinations.” Because happiness depended on each person’s inclinations, Kant thought it varied widely and could not be described by any general statement or be the outcome of any form of government or social policy. Kant certainly agreed that happiness was important. But Kant thought virtue was the most important goal of any person. It was clear to Kant that virtue could often lead to unhappy consequences. But since virtue was the supreme goal of a person, if virtue required the loss of happiness then so be it. Yet, Kant believed that human society was evolving to a point of both virtue and happiness.

Kant thought that the highest good of the world was for happiness to be distributed to persons in direct proportion to their morality (virtue). He thought this because of the supreme importance of virtue and because of the human need for happiness. Kant envisioned a future world in which humans lived in a just civil society that allowed them to achieve all their potential to include virtue and happiness. He believed that a look at human history suggested a

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18 Ibid, 12.


gradual improvement in civil society yielding an improvement in the human condition in terms of both virtue and happiness. The key ingredient for this was not the pursuit of happiness, but the pursuit of virtue.

If all of us behaved in this way, if none of us ever did any act of love and charity, but only kept inviolate the rights of every man, there would be no misery in the world except sickness and misfortune and other such sufferings as do not spring from the violation of rights. The most frequent and fertile source of human misery is not misfortune, but the injustice of man.23

Kant believed the key to a just civil society, and subsequent happiness, was virtue. In Kant’s view, the ultimate key to personal happiness and societal happiness is virtue. In this he does not differ much from John Stuart Mill.

Mill on Virtue and Happiness

John Stuart Mill thought the fundamental principle of morality was to maximize pleasure, which he equated with happiness. In his work Utilitarianism, Mill states, “By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.”24 Mill equated happiness with pleasure and thought that from a moral perspective, virtue was about maximizing everyone’s happiness. Mill did not articulate as sophisticated a moral psychology as Aristotle. Yet he did not think pleasure and happiness were simply feelings. He had an idea of character as expressed in his discussion of individuality in On Liberty.

It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it. Among the works of man which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance surely is man himself. … Yet desires and impulses are as much a part of a perfect human being as beliefs and restraints; and strong impulses are only perilous when not properly balanced, … It is not because men’s desire are strong that they act ill; it is because their consciences are weak.25

23 Kant, Lectures on Ethics, 194.
Mill believed “that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others.”

He thought human beings had a dignity and nobility that would lead them to cultivate all their capacities to include a concern for others. He states his belief in man’s desire for self-improvement in *On Liberty* when he endorses the following quote from Wilhelm von Humboldt:

The end of man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal or immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole.

Mill was convinced that as individuals grew intellectually, they would appreciate the “higher” pleasures and become more altruistic. “Furthermore, the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent’s own happiness but that of all concerned.” That might mean sacrificing my pleasure in order to please a greater number of other people. Mill certainly thought virtue included both pursuing one’s own happiness and being motivated to pursue the happiness of others. So, it is not surprising that virtue would be essential for a successful society.

Like Kant, Mill thought human society was progressing and that virtue was key to that progress. Mill believed that progress was determined by the improvement in man’s intellectual and moral faculties. Mill thought that these improvements to man would come about based on the alleviation of poverty and improvement of education.

In a world in which there is so much to interest, so much to enjoy… everyone who has this moderate amount of moral and intellectual requisites is capable of an existence which may be called enviable; … if he escapes the positive evils of life, the great sources of physical and mental suffering – such as indigence, disease, and the unkindness, worthlessness or premature loss of objects of affection. The

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present wretched education and wretched social arrangements are the only real hindrance to its being attainable by almost all.\textsuperscript{30}

Mill was convinced that as people progressed socially and intellectually, they could become more virtuous provided society was intentional about it.

… utility would enjoin, first, that laws and social arrangements should place the happiness or the interest of every individual as nearly as possible in harmony with the interest of the whole; and secondly, that education and opinion, which have so vast a power over human character, should use that power as to establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole,\textsuperscript{31}

To the extent people became virtuous, committed to achieving the happiness of all concerned, “there can be no doubt that it makes other people happier, and that the world in general is immensely a gainer by it.”\textsuperscript{32} In Mill’s political and social economy, the cultivation of virtue is foundational to both personal happiness and to a happy society.

History’s three most respected ethicists all thought that there was a very strong relationship between virtue, personal happiness, and societal success. On that basis they would all claim that there was no more important personal goal then the pursuit of virtue. Not only is the pursuit of virtue an essential personal goal, but it is the most important objective of government and education. From the perspective of these ethicists, undermining virtue is personally destructive and destructive of society. The importance of virtue is also highlighted by findings in psychological research.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 11.
Virtue is Essential to a Healthy Self-Image

There is a tremendous amount of evidence for the claim that humans have a deep-seated need to see themselves as moral and to believe their actions are honorable and fair. Before elaborating on this claim, it is important to note the distinction between “being virtuous” and “believing I am virtuous.” Virtually everyone believes they are virtuous, yet clearly a large number of people who believe this are not virtuous. The social science discussed in this section concerns the universal need for persons to believe they are virtuous. Of course, it is easier to believe one is virtuous if that is, in fact, the case. However, as we shall see, humans are masters at justifying as moral, behavior that is clearly immoral. It turns out that people seem fairly content to be immoral as long as they can convince themselves that they are virtuous and that others see them as virtuous. But disconnects between what one does and what one believes are a source of cognitive dissonance that make it difficult to maintain a healthy self-image. And a healthy self-image appears to be a necessary ingredient of emotional health and happiness.

The problem is that there appear to be many instances in which our self-interest and our virtue lead to opposing courses of action. An obvious example is filing an income tax return. The IRS estimates that it loses over $400 billion per year in tax evasion. Clearly many are instances of individuals doing something illegal, and immoral, yet presumably feeling justified in doing so.

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33 Jan-Willem Van Prooijen and Paul A. M. Van Lange, eds., Cheating, Corruption, and Concealment (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 98. Several of the distinguished contributors to this book concur with this claim (C. Daniel Batson, Daniel A Effron, Francesca Gino, Celia Moore, Shaul Shalvi, et.al.) and cite numerous studies to back it up.

34 Most ordinary people probably would not use the word “virtuous” to describe themselves. Nevertheless, they do typically believe they are moral, that what they do is morally permitted. Although the average person would not claim to be virtuous in the Aristotelian sense, they would claim to behave morally. Although the terms moral and virtuous are not perfectly synonymous they both imply a standard of behavior that we must attain in order to maintain a healthy self-image.

Taxes are just one of many examples of instances in which self-interest -- maybe it should be called unenlightened self-interest -- diverges from the dictates of morality. Other examples include lying, gluttony, drinking to excess, gambling, sexual promiscuity, being uncharitable, and being unhelpful. In each of these cases what we want to do conflicts with what we ought to do. These immoral acts are behaviors ethicists would likely preclude by urging moral virtue. Aristotle, Kant, and Mill would likely say failure to develop virtues in these areas leads to unhappiness. Yet, as we shall see, social science indicates that many, maybe most, of us favor self-interest. Traditional economic models suggest that individuals become unethical when the benefits of wrongdoing outweigh the costs.\(^{36}\) The economic model suggests that the only relevant factor in the ethical decision is a straightforward cost/benefit calculation. On the contrary, a self-concept model suggests a more complex calculation that includes protecting the individual’s self-image.\(^{37}\) The self-concept model acknowledges that self-interest leads individuals to be unethical, but it captures the fact that individuals are also interested in virtue and that interest places limits on behavior. Dan Ariely illustrates this in an experiment he describes in his bestseller *The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty.*\(^{38}\)

The experiment illustrates that people are motivated to cheat due to self-interest but are constrained by the need to maintain a virtuous self-image. MIT students were recruited to participate in an experiment which would pay them for about 10 minutes of their time. The experiment asked students to examine lists of matrices each containing 12 numbers and find 2 numbers in each matrix that added to 10. The students were then paid for each matrix they solved.

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\(^{36}\) Van Prooijen and Van Lange, eds., *Cheating, Corruption, and Concealment*, 98.

\(^{37}\) Ibid.

correctly. The experiment was structured so that participants scored their own work and could report the result without having anyone check it (i.e. they could cheat and get away with it). The experiment was done numerous times varying the payment for correct answers to see if cheating increased when the reward was higher. If cheating were simply a matter of cost/benefit, one would expect participants to maximize their cheating and their profits. But that is not what happened. Few if any participants cheated to the maximum. Instead, most participants cheated just a little. In fact, in circumstances that paid the most per false report the participants cheated less. Why? It seems that when cheating offered the most, it was less attractive because at that point it would be extremely difficult to rationalize.\textsuperscript{39} People were inclined to cheat, but they could only cheat to a limited extent and still maintain the notion that they were virtuous. Cheating, and still considering oneself virtuous, requires some clever self-deception strategies.

Social scientists have identified three common self-deception strategies that most of us use to rationalize unethical behavior: motivated attention, motivated construal, and motivated recall.\textsuperscript{40} Motivated attention means paying over-attention to evidence of our virtue and avoiding evidence of our corruption.\textsuperscript{41} A common example of avoiding evidence of our corruption is willful ignorance. David Kugel was an associate of infamous Ponzi-schemer Bernie Madoff. As one of his closest colleagues, Mr. Kugel saw Mr. Madoff’s incredible (fallacious) trading reports. But Mr. Kugel apparently never questioned Mr. Madoff on those reports. By not confirming the truth or falsity of the reports, Mr. Kugel could maintain the belief that he was not part of the fraud, could make a lot of money, and avoid the damage to his self-image that would have

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Van Prooijen and Van Lange, eds., \textit{Cheating, Corruption, and Concealment}, 100-101.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 101-103.
occurred had he been forced to acknowledge his link to a massive Ponzi scheme. Even someone benefitting from incredible corruption was maintaining a virtuous self-image by avoiding evidence of corruption.

Motivated construal is a strategy that saves our self-image by framing our unethical behavior in a morally acceptable way. Social scientists note that people are more likely to be dishonest when the situation can be described in more malleable ways. Experiments show that people will take a beverage that is not theirs, or office supplies, or tokens, but not take money. Apparently taking money is hard to justify, but taking other items is easier to rationalize. Social psychological research indicates that people strive to maintain a positive self-image. An important part of the self-image is moral virtue. So, despite making unethical, self-serving decisions, we are careful to only do those things that we can rationalize as fair or consistent with virtue.

Another strategy many people employ to maintain a virtuous self-image is motivated recall. Put simply, people tend to forget their transgressions and only remember their good deeds. And when remembering transgressions, people recall all mitigating factors that put the best light on the transgression and forget the factors most damaging to their reputation. This strategy ensures people always think very highly of themselves. It explains why most of us think we are more virtuous than others.

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42 Ibid., 103.
44 Ibid.
46 Van Prooijen and Van Lange, eds., Cheating, Corruption, and Concealment, 111.
These are just a few of the most common strategies for maintaining a positive self-image. The reason there are so many such strategies that are so commonly used is because considering ourselves virtuous is central to our self-image. For us to be happy, content with who we are, we have to be confident of our virtue. So even if that confidence is unjustified, we all engage in a certain amount of self-deception to ensure we can feel good about ourselves. What this tells us is that we are moral beings. No healthy person is content to think of themselves as corrupt or evil. We will go so far as to ignore certain aspects of reality, we describe stealing or cheating as something other than what it is, or we simply forget certain aspects of events in order to salvage our sense of virtue. Despite our frequent failures to be virtuous, it is essential to our mental health and happiness to consider ourselves virtuous. Unfortunately, deceiving ourselves about reality has self-destructive implications.

**Lack of Virtue is Self-Destructive**

The findings of social science confirm our premonitions that immorality is eventually self-destructive. Immorality not only causes great personal harm, but it is destructive of the social order as well. The data is clear that immorality typically decreases our quality of life and ultimately the length of our life. This is not to say that science can prove that every immoral deed results in a cosmic penalty. We have heard the anecdotal evidence of the smoker and boozer that lives to 100 or the “playboy” that enjoys the parties and illicit sex to a ripe old age; Hugh Hefner (founder of Playboy magazine) passed away in 2017 at the age of 91. But as we will see, these anecdotes are the exception to the rule. Prior to looking at some statistics I want to briefly make
the case that choosing to do things that reduce one’s quality of life or lead to premature death are immoral.47

As already noted, the most prominent ethicists (Aristotle, Kant, and Mill) held the view that virtue typically results in well-being or happiness. Of course, there are important exceptions in which a person’s integrity or truthfulness results in harm. This is typically due to living in an unjust society in which the authorities do not appreciate honesty. But when it comes to choices about personal conduct, like eating, drinking, exercise, smoking, drug abuse, promiscuity, reckless driving, or even suicide, it seems clear a virtuous person would make choices that cause his own life to go well, and the lives of those around him to go well. Regardless of whether one takes a virtue ethic approach, a consequentialist approach, or a deontological approach, to right actions a strong case can be made for having a moral obligation to avoid self-destructive behavior. For example, consider the difficult claim, that we have a moral obligation not to be obese. From an Aristotelian perspective the question would be, would a man of practical wisdom allow himself to get obese knowing the impact on his health, his mobility, his ability to participate in physical activities, and, in our society, the social disapproval? Unlikely. From a consequentialist position the question would be, would being obese bring more positive than negative consequences for all concerned? When we consider the impact to family and to health care costs in addition to the personal downsides, it seems like an immoral option. The deontological question is more ambiguous. The question might be, do I have moral obligations to myself and to others that are adversely affected by being obese? It seems plausible that avoiding

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47 Not everyone will agree that most of these are moral decisions. I will offer only a brief defense of that view. My own view is that the majority of ethicists would agree that they are. The material already presented on Aristotle, Kant and Mill indicate that all of them would view behavior that has a high probability of harming oneself as immoral.
the health risks of being obese are morally significant. This is especially true if one has a wife
and children. I simply fail to see how any normative ethical theory dismisses the adverse
personal and societal costs of ill health and premature death caused by obesity as morally
insignificant. As the following statistics will show, these health risks are not insignificant.

Virtuous people may not always live longer, but it sure improves your odds. An analysis
of causes of death in the U.S., especially causes of premature deaths, reveals that personal
decisions are the leading cause of premature death.\textsuperscript{48} Below is a chart of the findings of Ralph
Keeney who analyzed the CDC data on mortality and attributed a proportion to personal
decisions. Scientific analysis shows that many of the important factors leading to premature
death are in our control. Smoking, excessive drinking, excessive weight, illicit drug use,
unprotected sex, reckless/distracted driving, overdoses, poor nutrition, lack of exercise, and
suicide, all have fairly predictable effects on our longevity. The majority of these personal
decisions are also moral decisions.

\textsuperscript{48} Ralph L. Keeney, “Personal Decisions Are the Leading Cause of Death,” \textit{Operations Research} 56 No. 6
## Deaths in Year 2000, Causes and Contributing Personal/Moral Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause of Death</th>
<th>Total Deaths in 2000</th>
<th>% Caused by Personal Decision</th>
<th>Contributing Personal Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heart Disease</td>
<td>710,760</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>Smoking and excessive weight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cancer</td>
<td>553,091</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>Smoking, obesity, alcohol and unprotected sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stroke</td>
<td>167,661</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>Smoking, excessive weight and excessive alcohol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Respiratory Diseases</td>
<td>122,009</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>Smoking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accidents</td>
<td>97,900</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>Excessive alcohol, illicit drugs, distracted driving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>69,301</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>Obesity and excessive alcohol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flu &amp; Pneumonia</td>
<td>65,313</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>Smoking and excessive alcohol</td>
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<td>Alzheimer’s</td>
<td>49,558</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kidney Disease</td>
<td>37,251</td>
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<tr>
<td>Septicemia</td>
<td>31,224</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>29,350</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Complex assortment of factors – ultimately personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Other</td>
<td>469,930</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Smoking, obesity and excessive alcohol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,403,351</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td></td>
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Keeney uses the wealth of scientific analysis of the impact of various factors on the probability of falling into one of the above categories. For example, the CDC developed a methodology for determining the smoking attributable deaths for specific diseases. It published
that data for the years 1995 – 1999. Keeney used that to determine an average % of deaths attributable to smoking for each disease and applied that to the 2000 data.\textsuperscript{49} Keeney was able to get similar information for overweight/obese people and for alcohol consumers. Interestingly, Keeney discovered that smoking and obesity accounted for 80% of premature deaths due to personal decisions.\textsuperscript{50} The following findings from Keeney’s work are significant.

Clearly, we have a great deal of influence on our longevity. In the CDC data, heart disease is the single greatest cause of death (710,760 of 2,403,351, or 30%). But Keeney’s analysis says that personal decisions are largely responsible for 44.5% of heart disease deaths. Personal decisions are more deadly than cancer or any other factor. That is particularly true regarding premature deaths that occur early in life. For the year 2014, the CDC found that for ages 10 – 24, 70.7% of fatalities were the result of accident (39.6%), suicide (17.4%), or homicide (13.7%).\textsuperscript{51} Clearly individuals do not own all the responsibility in these cases. Individuals die in accidents caused by others or get murdered in circumstances beyond their control. But individuals own the vast majority of the responsibility for premature death. Many accidents are the result of speeding, drinking, texting, or overdose. Suicides are hard to understand, but with the exception of severe mental illness, they are totally personal decisions. Even homicides are not totally unpredictable. Certainly, the killer is making the determining decision (clearly an immoral one). But most homicides are drug-related and/or gang-related. The victim is typically someone who knows they are in a high-risk situation of their own making.

Between the ages 25 - 44, 45.1% of deaths are due to the same causes (accident (28.2%), suicide

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 1339.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 1337.
(11.2%), and homicide (5.7%).\textsuperscript{52} Through the healthiest and most active time of our life, our own moral decisions have a huge impact on our longevity. Additionally, the habits we develop during this phase of life regarding smoking, drinking, eating, and exercise will have a significant impact on the length and quality of the years ahead. Although Keeney’s analysis in 2000 is somewhat dated, it looks like the significant impact of moral decisions on longevity holds true today.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Causes of Death, 2015 vs 2000</th>
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<td><strong>Top 10 Causes of</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Death in 2015\textsuperscript{53}</strong></td>
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\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.  
The big differences between 2000 and 2015 occur in the number of deaths due to Alzheimer’s (+61,000), suicide (+14,800), and accidents (+48,700). The increase in Alzheimer’s is a 61,000 person increase in deaths in which personal decisions are not a factor. The 14,800 person increase in suicides is an increase in deaths due exclusively to personal decisions. The 48,700 person increase in fatal accidents is likely due to two factors. The biggest jump is likely due to the large increase in deaths due to overdoses in the opioid epidemic. Overdoses of cocaine and heroin rank a distant 2nd and 3rd, although still significant. A second reason for the increase in accidental deaths is likely due to the increased number of people driving under the influence of drugs, especially in states that have recently legalized marijuana. It looks like the claim that approximately 44.5% of the deaths every year are related to poor moral decisions still holds true. What Keeney does not mention is that these factors, and others, degrade our quality of life long before they affect our longevity.

A lack of virtue not only shortens our life, but it destroys our quality of life. It does not require a social science study to confirm that smoking, excessive drinking, illicit drug use, being obese, engaging in promiscuous unprotected sex, or going through a divorce, significantly decrease our quality of life. Simply a few moments of consideration will confirm that all of us would avoid these behaviors if we could. Sadly, many of us cannot. Long before a person gets lung cancer, smoking adversely affects his social life, his work habits, his budget, and his self-image. Long before a person gets cirrhosis of the liver or esophageal cancer, alcoholism adversely affects his marriage and family, his social life, his work habits, his budget, and his self-image. Illicit drug use is a symptom of a person who has problems and is unfortunately compounding them. Being obese in our society is particularly hard on one’s self-image (being overweight is not always the result of one’s choices). Unfortunately, one aspect of our media
driven culture is that it glorifies a slender body shape, especially for women. So, in addition to
the adverse health impacts of obesity, overweight people must deal with the stigma of not
meeting the culture’s ideal body image. Our cultural ideal combined with our failure to avoid
obesity destroys one’s quality of life and eventually shortens one’s life.

A lack of virtue regarding sexual ethics destroys one’s health and the quality of
important relationships. Our cultural obsession with sex and easy access to pornography is
disastrous for those lacking strong sexual mores. Despite the fact that people know more about
sex and safe sex than ever before, we are experiencing an epidemic of sexually transmitted
diseases (STDs), broken relationships, and failed marriages. Many STDs are incurable and many
lead to physical problems and even death. Keeney cites studies indicating that STDs were
precursors to 20,000 deaths in the year 2000.54 Another study suggests that all cervical cancers
are caused by sexually transmitted viral agents in addition to other factors.55 Illicit sexual
relationships, however one defines them, have adverse effects on our physical health, emotional
health, and self-image.

A lack of virtue certainly plays a key role in failed relationships and the resulting reduction in
quality of life. The most critical sign of a failed relationship is divorce. Divorce statistics can be
very misleading, and the probability of divorce varies greatly by education level, age at marriage,
race, and religion. One compelling overview statistic is the number of first marriages that will
survive 20 years. According to a large CDC survey conducted from 2006 – 2010 the probability
of a first marriage lasting 20 years was 52% for women and 56% for men.56 If a person has a

54 Keeney, “Personal Decisions are the Leading Cause of Death,” 1341.
55 Ibid., 1342.
56 Casey E. Copen, Kimberly Daniels, Jonathan Vespa, and William D. Mosher, First Marriages in the
United States: Data From the 2006 – 2010 National Survey of Family Growth (National Health Statistics Reports,
Bachelor’s Degree, the probability of the marriage lasting 20 years changes to 78% for women and 65% for men.\textsuperscript{57} However, the fact remains that for most people the probability of divorce is significant, and often approaches 50/50. Note that keeping a marriage intact is not the same as having a happy, successful marriage. It appears that a large number of us do not have the virtue to love another person and make the most important relationship in our life work. The amount of unhappiness, stress, and ill health this leads to is well known. The point is that virtue is the most important factor in avoiding all the very sad consequences for individuals, and society, that come from failed relationships and divorce. Imagine the increase in quality of life if 90% of all marriages/families were happy and successful.

How different life would be if we were truly able to be virtuous. Virtue is essential for individual and societal happiness. Virtue has a key role in a healthy self-image. Finally, virtue has a huge impact on our health, our longevity, and our quality of life. Aristotle understood this more than two millennia ago. Aristotle wrote extensively about virtue and how to attain it. If he is correct, there is good reason to follow his advice.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 8.

CHAPTER 4

ARISTOTLE’S MORAL PSYCHOLOGY & HABITUATION

For it is pleasure that causes us to do base actions, and pain that causes us to abstain from fine ones. Hence we need to have had the appropriate upbringing – right from early youth, as Plato says – to make us find enjoyment or pain in the right things; for this is the correct education. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics

Credit Aristotle with the wisdom to provide a moral psychology as the basis of his ethics. In Aristotle’s works he offers an account of human nature through his description of what he calls the soul. This account provides a foundation for his moral psychology and his description of virtue. Although this account lacks contemporary scientific rigor, it offers very perceptive insights into human nature which are not easily refuted today and are, in fact, often embraced. The objective of this chapter is to describe and analyze Aristotle’s moral psychology and show how it supports his definition of virtue. It will include an examination of the role of habituation in virtue. According to Aristotle, habituation is the key to developing virtue. The adequacy of habituation rests on Aristotle’s moral psychology and the requisite social structures. It will become clear that Aristotle’s claims about human moral psychology and habituation are very compelling, but possibly flawed. His moral psychology assumes that habituation can overcome any problems generated by our inherent self-interest. That assumption will be challenged in the following chapter. It appears that most contemporary parents, educators, and ethicists are assuming Aristotle is correct. The focus now is on exactly what Aristotle has to say about our moral psychology and the route to virtue.

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Aristotle’s Moral Psychology: The Soul

For the ancient Greeks, to understand what it is to be a human being, especially an excellent (virtuous) human being, implies an understanding of the human soul. According to Aristotle, the soul is the governing principle of a living thing.\(^2\) It is the soul that holds the body together, gives it life, and determines what kind of being it is. “When the soul has left it [the body], it dissolves and rots.”\(^3\) The soul is responsible for all the characteristic activity of a living being. The soul is responsible for nutrition, growth, reproduction, motion, perception, all our mental faculties, our will, our appetites, desires, and wishes. To understand all the activities of the human soul is to understand the human being. Aristotle writes a small book, *De Anima* (On the Soul), about the workings of the human soul. But Aristotle only relies on portions of it to undergird his ethical writings.

In his ethical writings Aristotle addresses the soul to the extent it explains our moral psychology. Aristotle says there are two parts of the soul: the rational and nonrational.\(^4\) The nonrational part of the soul has two parts: the nutritive and the appetitive.\(^5\) The nutritive part of the soul is responsible for growth and is not responsive to reason. It has no role in our ethical behavior. However, the appetitive part of the nonrational soul is crucial to our moral behavior. The appetitive part of the soul includes our appetites and desires, our perceptions, our likes and dislikes, our sensations of pleasure and pain, to include our anticipation of pleasure or pain. Our

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\(^3\) Ibid., 411b8.


\(^5\) Ibid., 1102b29. The proper partitioning of the soul is not clear. Aristotle mentions more than one possibility (see *De Anima* 432a25 & 433b1). But the exact partitions are not critical. What is critical is that several nonrational functions of the soul can be, and must be, trained and governed by rational parts of the soul. The things we desire, the things we like and dislike, what causes us pleasure and pain, all reside in the nonrational part of the soul that is responsive to the rational part of the soul.
appetites and desires drive us to action, movement. Appetite (*epithumia*) cannot be shaped to respond to reason; it is always set upon pleasure (*hedone*). But the non-rational soul includes spirited desire (*thumos*) which is set upon pursuing the noble and beautiful (*to kalon*). It is the spirited desire that appreciates the noble when it experiences it and wants to pursue it. Spirited desire is the part of the human that wants to achieve the noble and maintain it. But this appreciation for the fine and the noble must be *forcibly cultivated* in order to overcome the appetite for pleasure. This is why young people need a strong social structure (family, mentor, school, community) that will require them to make good choices. They must be forced to make good choices for years and reap the fruit of those good choices before the appetitive and spirited parts of the nonrational soul become synchronized. While the nonrational soul is being synchronized to take pleasure in the noble, the rational soul is gaining practical wisdom by learning the benefit of good choices. The rational soul is capable of several intellectual virtues, but the one crucial to moral virtue is intelligence (practical wisdom). Aristotle appeals to the function of the human being in order to prioritize the activities and excellences of the human soul.

Aristotle claims that just as a craftsman, a musician, or a sculptor has a particular function, so the human being must have a function as well. And just as these other professions have a particular skill, so human beings have a particular skill, a unique capability. The human being’s unique capability is its rationality. Thus, the virtuous soul is one governed by reason, not

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7 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 1097b25.
by the functions and desires of the nonrational part of the soul. A virtuous person, therefore, will be one who uses all the soul’s faculties of reason excellently and who displays the appropriate relationship between the rational and nonrational functions of the soul. There are two important features of this argument to notice. First, Aristotle argues that “happiness is an activity of the soul expressing complete virtue.”\textsuperscript{11} Aristotle’s view is that happiness is the result of an excellently functioning soul. This excellence of soul is a mature and enduring state. When one achieves it, she will experience a life that goes well. Aristotle has a holistic view of happiness that includes the claim that virtue and happiness occur in the context of family and society.\textsuperscript{12} And its scope extends over an entire life.\textsuperscript{13} It is not simply a fleeting state of mind or a temporary run of good fortune. Happiness is the result of virtuous activity that persists over a long time and over all aspects of one’s life. This is a key part of Aristotle’s claims regarding the soul. Second, an excellent functioning soul is one in which reason plays the leading roles.

Reason plays the leading role in both virtue of thought and virtue of character.\textsuperscript{14} The two most important virtues of thought are practical wisdom (phronēsis) and theoretical wisdom (sophia).\textsuperscript{15} Practical wisdom is essential because without it one cannot have moral virtue.\textsuperscript{16} In fact, Aristotle says that once practical wisdom is attained, one has all the moral virtues.\textsuperscript{17} But

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{10}Ibid., 1098a8.
  \item \textsuperscript{11}Ibid., 1102a5.
  \item \textsuperscript{12}Ibid., 1097b10.
  \item \textsuperscript{13}Ibid., 1098a18.
  \item \textsuperscript{14}Ibid., 1103a14.
  \item \textsuperscript{15}Anthony Kenny, \textit{The Aristotelian Ethics} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2016), 161. Kenny spends a chapter discussing Aristotle’s use of phronēsis and sophia. He notes some inconsistencies in Aristotle’s use of the terms. However, in the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} the terms are used primarily as defined in this work.
  \item \textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 1145a1
\end{itemize}
even more important than practical wisdom is theoretical wisdom. Aristotle claims that theoretical wisdom, as expressed in contemplation, is the most divine element in us.\footnote{18} Although at one point Aristotle describes theoretical wisdom as an intellectual virtue of the soul, in the last chapter of the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} he says theoretical wisdom is part of a divine or transcendent part of our being.\footnote{19} He thinks the pursuit of theoretical wisdom in contemplation is the ultimate pleasure, a divine pleasure, and that happiness is complete when we have moral virtue, theoretical wisdom, and the leisure to enjoy contemplation.\footnote{20}

Despite the prominence of the intellectual virtues, none of them are attainable apart from moral virtue. A person with vices, or an incontinent person, cannot attain practical wisdom.\footnote{21} Although an individual may acquire wealth, education and leisure, without virtue, he will not appreciate theoretical wisdom, and thus desire contemplation. Consequently, a person without moral virtue will not be a happy person (have Eudaimonia). Her soul will be dysfunctional. She will pursue pleasures that are irrational and ultimately destructive of a life that goes well. Additionally, virtues like temperance, courage, or magnanimity, that ultimately do lead to a life that goes well, will seem painful to a person lacking moral virtue. Aristotle’s writings indicate

\footnote{18} Ibid., 1177a15. Theoretical wisdom (sophia) is sometimes translated understanding, learning or philosophical wisdom. Aristotle thinks that theoretical wisdom is the supreme element in us (1177a20). It is god-like. Moral virtue leads to happiness in a secondary way (1178a10). But theoretical wisdom and contemplation lead to supreme happiness, a divine happiness (1177b27).


\footnote{20} Numerous Aristotle commentators (Nagel, Ackrill, Rorty, Kenny for instance) note the apparent contradiction in Aristotle’s idea of happiness (Eudaimonia). Late in the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle appears to claim that the “dominant end” of human life is Eudaimonia understood only as the intellectual virtue of theoretical wisdom as expressed in the contemplation of the divine and eternal. On the contrary, the early \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} and the \textit{Eudemian Ethics} appear to endorse an “inclusive end” of human life that understands Eudaimonia to include all the moral and intellectual virtues. My reading of Aristotle favors the inclusive view of Eudaimonia. One reason for that is the obvious fact that the bulk of life takes place in the domain requiring moral virtue and the only persons likely to properly practice contemplation are the morally virtuous. That said, regardless of which view one takes, moral virtue remains extremely important for all persons in all phases of life.

that weakness of the will (akrasia)\textsuperscript{22} is a greater problem than noetic weakness. Even when the deliverances of reason recommend the right action, our reasoning can be corrupted by our desires, if we have a weak will. Training our powerful desires is why moral virtue is a prerequisite for intellectual virtue. Thelemic corruption (a weak will) can undermine noetic competence (practical wisdom). Aristotle is clear about the implications of lacking moral virtue.

\textbf{Vice & Incontinence}

To understand the challenge of becoming virtuous, it is important to consider what Aristotle has to say about pleasure and pain, and the role they play in vice and incontinence. Aristotle thought that being base or vicious was common. At one point he says, “The \textit{many} [emphasis added], base though they are … are full of regret.”\textsuperscript{23} It is easy to be less than virtuous. As Aristotle noted, “there are many ways to be in error … but there is only one way to be correct.”\textsuperscript{24} Being correct requires choosing the appropriate response in any given situation. Aristotle thought the appropriate response was typically a “mean” between two extremes (vices).\textsuperscript{25} But in many cases the extremes are attractive. The extremes typically offer a large amount of pleasure or a minimum of pain. So, a glutton may be attracted by an abundance of tasty food (lots of pleasure) or a coward may be attracted by safety (no injury or death). “It is on

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 1166b2 – 1166b25.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 1106b30.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 1106a27. The mean is not an arithmetic mean but an intermediate point between two extremes, both extremes being vices. The mean is not exactly the same for everyone, instead it is specifically chosen for the person in question. Additionally, not every action or feeling admits of a mean (1107a10). Some actions (adultery, theft, murder) and some feelings (spite, shamelessness, envy) are simply immoral. There is no right, or appropriate, way to do them. They are vicious. This qualification has no implications for my thesis.
account of pleasures and pains that we call men vicious, for pursuing and avoiding the wrong ones or in the wrong way.”

Aristotle said that moral virtue was largely about being trained to appreciate the right things and to despise the bad things.

We must take as a sign of someone’s state his pleasure or pain in consequence of his action. For if someone who abstains from bodily pleasures enjoys the abstinence itself, then he is temperate, but if he is grieved by it, he is intemperate. Again, if he stands firm against terrifying situations and enjoys it, or at least does not find it painful, then he is brave, and if he finds it painful, he is cowardly. Pleasures and pains are appropriately taken as signs because virtue of character is concerned with pleasures and pains.

Aristotle was well aware of our propensity to act based on the anticipation of pleasure or pain. The role of pleasure in his ethics is extremely important.

Besides, enjoying and hating the right things seems to be most important [emphasis added] for virtue of character. For pleasure and pain extend through the whole of our lives, and are of great importance [emphasis added] for virtue and the happy life, since people decide to do what is pleasant, and avoid what is painful.

Aristotle is clear about the importance of pleasure to virtue and happiness. He knows pleasure and pain are powerful motivators. He does not think that we can be virtuous if we have not been trained to experience pleasure and pain in the right things. The malleability of our desires is an essential claim of Aristotle’s moral psychology, the human being can be changed, and trained to take pleasure and pain in the appropriate activities. The key roles of pleasure and pain become obvious when Aristotle addresses incontinence.

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27 Ibid., 1104b4 – 1104b9.
28 Ibid., 1172a5.
Incontinence illustrates the power of our desire for pleasure and our aversion to pain. The incontinent is one who does the wrong thing knowing that it is wrong. Aristotle said, “the incontinent person knows that his actions are base but does them because of his feelings.” Socrates had taught that incontinence, so defined, was impossible. It was inconceivable to Socrates that one could truly know that something was bad and yet decide to do it. He thought instead that a person did a bad thing wrongly thinking that it was a good thing. There is great debate on whether Aristotle ultimately agrees with Socrates on this issue. The outcome of that debate is not crucial to our understanding of virtue. The point is that despite the power of reason and knowledge, people appear to do the wrong thing anyway. Socrates thought we were mistaken to think so. He said, “we two agreed that there was nothing more powerful than knowledge, but that wherever it is found it always has the mastery over pleasure and everything else.” But Aristotle’s response to Socrates’ position was that “this argument, then, contradicts things that appear manifestly.” In other words, he thought it was obvious that there were cases of incontinence, i.e. when a person did what she knew to be wrong.

On the traditional view, our desires are so powerful they corrupt our knowledge, making us act in ignorance. Norman Dahl attempts to explain this by claiming the incontinent has not “integrated her knowledge into her character” and thus succumbs to desire. The exact mode in

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29 Ibid., 1145b12.
30 Plato, Protagoras, 357 c-e.
31 According to Norman Dahl (Practical Reason, Aristotle, and Weakness of the Will) the “traditional interpretation” is that Aristotle ultimately agrees with Socrates (see page 139). Aristotle seems to argue that the incontinent’s ability to know he is doing wrong is short-circuited, so that in one sense the incontinent knows he is doing wrong, but in the “proper” sense he does not. Dahl ultimately disagrees with the traditional interpretation.
32 Plato, Protagoras, 357 c.
33 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1145b28.
which desire trumps knowledge is not as significant as the fact that it can. In our contemporary
culture, where we see all sorts of human dysfunction and addiction (smoking, drinking,
pornography, drugs, gluttony, gambling, sexual perversion, etc.), it appears commonplace that
people do what they know they should not do. Some of these things are simply base and admit of
no mean (adultery, theft, murder, drunk driving, unnecessary abortions, and drug addiction). Others are clear deviations from a healthy mean (chain smoking, alcoholism, pornography,
glutony, excessive gambling, etc.). Aristotle may have been mistaken in his description of how
incontinence happens, but he is certainly right that it does happen. He describes the incontinent
as a person who knows, at least in some sense of the word, that he is choosing wrongly. Aristotle
also appears to be right about the importance of our desire to experience pleasure and avoid pain.
It is the desire for pleasure, or to avoid pain, that corrupts the deliberative process. Aristotle’s
moral psychology states that pleasure and pain are of the utmost importance in ethics. Aristotle
says that learning to experience pleasure in the right things and to be pained by the wrong things
is the essence of a good upbringing. This is why habituation, including proper training starting in
early childhood and continuing throughout life, is absolutely essential.

Habituation: The Foundation of Virtue

In Aristotle’s moral psychology, moral development precedes the intellectual virtues, and
habituation plays an indispensable role in this moral development. Aristotle observed that young
people and untrained adults naively pursue pleasure and shun pain. Not having learned to pursue
the noble and fine things in life, they are short-sighted and uninformed in their pursuit of
pleasure. Worse, this condition cannot be corrected by mere instruction or argument. An

1985), 1107a9-17. Aristotle claims some actions are simply always wrong; they do not admit of a mean, an excess
or a deficiency. They are simply base.
untrained person must be compelled to choose the noble and fine in order to learn to appreciate it. Shaping what one takes pleasure and pain in can be done with children and youth, but is much harder, or even impossible, with adults.

Now if arguments were sufficient by themselves to make people decent, the rewards they would command would justifiably have been many and large… In fact, however, arguments seem to have enough influence to stimulate and encourage the civilized ones among the young people, and perhaps to make virtue take possession of a well-born character that truly loves what is fine; but they seem unable to stimulate the many towards being fine and good. For the many naturally obey fear, not shame; they avoid what is base because of the penalties, not because it is disgraceful. For since they live by their feelings, they pursue their proper pleasures and the source of them, and avoid the opposed pains, and have not even a notion of what is fine and hence truly pleasant, since they have had no taste of it.

What argument could reform people like these? For it is impossible, or not easy, to alter by argument what has long been absorbed by habit. 36

Here Aristotle restates the crucial first step in ethical education, learning by experience to appreciate the fine and noble. The truly civilized have “tasted” of the “fine” and thus know what is “truly pleasant.” This early, moral education is critical for shaping the non-rational part of the soul and for developing practical wisdom.

Notice some important observations that Aristotle makes in the above quotation. Arguments and instruction are only effective on the “young” and the “civilized.” Once a person becomes an adult, especially an older adult, habit is powerful. One would not only have to overcome habit, but the adult would lack the practical wisdom that would have accompanied experiencing the pleasure of doing virtuous things. Without habituation we lack the practical wisdom of knowing that virtue is really more pleasurable than vice and leads to a good life.

Proper habituation is what Aristotle means by being civilized. A civilized person has learned by

experience to appreciate the fine and noble in life. A young civilized person might respond to argument and/or education and choose to practice virtuous living. Sadly, Aristotle notices that the “many” are not in this situation. The many are not civilized. Hence, they only respond to painful penalties for choosing poorly. It is unlikely for an uncivilized adult to get on the path to virtue. The many must be governed by strict laws because they lack practical wisdom and are in the habit of simply seeking pleasure.

Analogous to learning virtue is learning music. An indispensable element in learning to be a musician is listening to music, hearing the tune, rhythm, beat, and harmony. Once the student has experienced various musical pieces and styles, then music theory makes sense. The appreciation of music begins with experiencing good music. Aristotle thinks virtue is learned the same way. Once a person experiences the pleasure of the noble, she is then ready to understand the argument for why the noble is good and should always be pursued. That is why Aristotle, in the previous quotation, thinks it is the civilized ones, the ones who love what is fine, who may respond to argument. The civilized ones are those who have been exposed to the noble and love it. They are now capable of appreciating an argument on behalf of the noble. But the many, who just know their appetites, are not able to appreciate an argument on behalf of the noble. They have no experience of the pleasure of being noble and doing what is fine. This is why habituation (ethismos) is absolutely essential. But habituation is just beginning when one is exposed to the noble and the fine.

37 Ibid., 14.
38 Ibid.
Aristotle does not think it is just one experience, or even several experiences, that makes a person appreciate virtue. Instead, it is the cultivation of habits and reaping the fruit of those habits that prepares one for virtue.

Arguments and teaching surely do not influence everyone, but the soul of the student needs to have been prepared by habits for enjoying and hating finely, like ground that is to nourish seed. For someone whose life follows his feelings would not even listen to an argument turning him away, or comprehend it [if he did listen]; and in that state how could he be persuaded to change? And in general feelings seem to yield to force, not to argument. Hence we must already in some way have a character suitable for virtue, fond of what is fine and objecting to what is shameful.39

A person does not discover the pleasure of honesty by telling one truth any more than one experiences the pleasure of being able to play the piano after one lesson. It takes years, maybe decades of being honest, of being loyal, of being hard working, before one appreciates and enjoys the benefits of these virtues. Just like it takes years, maybe decades, of practicing the piano and taking lessons before one can just play music and appreciate its qualities and enjoy playing it. The habit of practicing, in addition to the physical and mental habits that allow playing and reading music, are cultivated through years of discipline, much of it enforced. As one approached adulthood, which Aristotle thought was sometime after 21, then a person would have developed an appreciation of the fine and noble and the initial experiences that lead to practical wisdom.40 Once a person has the habit of practicing, and the habitually acquired skills to play, it becomes likely that an adult might now enjoy being a musician and appreciate it enough to continue practicing and playing. It is only after habituation that one can appreciate the intellectual case being made for the noble and how to attain it.

40 Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Politics*, 1336b22. Carnes Lord’s footnote on this statement suggests it is a reference to the age at which a young Spartan could join the common messes. At 1335a30 Aristotle suggests that men marry at, or just prior to, 37. It seems clear that in Aristotle’s view real maturity was not achieved until around 30 or later.
Just as the body is prior in birth to the soul, so is the irrational part to that having reason. This too is evident, for spiritedness and will, and furthermore desire, are present in children immediately on their being born, while reasoning and intellect develop naturally in them as they go along. Hence in the first instance the superintendence of the body must necessarily precede that of the soul; next comes that of appetite; but that of appetite is for the sake of intellect, and that of the body for the sake of the soul.  

The path to virtue must continue on through adulthood. This is why Aristotle not only insisted on a good upbringing, but on a society with proper social norms and a proper legal system.

Since virtuous citizens are the key to a successful society, Aristotle thought that the most important duty of the legislator was to ensure the proper upbringing of the next generation. “That the legislator must, therefore, make the education of the young his object above all would be disputed by no one.” Aristotle thought the community and the city should have important roles in training the young. You get an idea of the degree of their involvement when you see some of his recommendations to the legislators.

-the legislator should banish foul speech from the city more than anything else
-unseemly paintings or stories also must be banished
-younger persons [must] not be spectators either of lampoons or of comedy

Aristotle spent considerable time considering the role of music in a proper education. His initial thoughts are instructive. He thinks music is indeed important and says “nature itself seeks, … to be occupied in correct fashion but also to be capable of being at leisure in noble fashion. For this is the beginning point of everything.” When Aristotle talks about inculcating an appreciation for the fine and the noble, he includes every facet of life. For Aristotle, virtue is not just about

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41 Ibid., 1334b21-28.
42 Ibid., 1337a13.
43 Ibid., 1336b4
44 Ibid., 1336b14
45 Ibid., 1336b20
46 Ibid., 1337b30
what we commonly think of as moral issues, it is about a life that is going well in every respect. Once a person understands the fine and noble in every aspect of life, then one can appreciate practical wisdom. It is after appropriate habituation that the process of acquiring practical wisdom really begins. For young people in their 20s, there are likely still many more years of practicing virtue ahead before one could really be virtuous.

Developing a truly virtuous character, one that chooses the good because she recognizes it and wants it from a “firm and unchanging state,” is the result of a lengthy training process. Habituation is a process that begins under thorough moral training, especially from ages 7 to puberty and puberty to 21. Aristotle thought those years were the parts of youth the legislator should be most concerned with. But it did not end there. “It is not enough to get the correct upbringing and attention when they are young; rather, they must continue the same practices and be habituated to them when they become men.” There are important, distinct, elements of our soul that we must get in harmony.

There are three objects of choice - fine, expedient and pleasant – and three objects of avoidance – their contraries, shameful, harmful and painful. About all these, then, the good person is correct and the bad person is in error, and especially about pleasure.

The process of getting the fine, the expedient, and the pleasant to align requires both habituation and practice using one’s own practical wisdom. The expedient, also the good for the individual, is the object of mature reflection (practical wisdom). It will require many more years of practicing virtue before one has the experience, maturity, practical wisdom, and desire for the

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47 Ibid., 1337a39.
49 Ibid., 1104b31.
noble that make virtue a pleasure. Only after these years of being virtuous will it be possible to choose the good because one recognizes it as the good, wants it because it is good, and does so from a firm and unchanging state.\footnote{Aristotle, \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, 1105a32.} Becoming virtuous is something only accomplished when one’s parents and community are both virtuous and intentional about raising one to be virtuous. And even then, it is unlikely, unless one adopts their commitment to virtue and persists in it until maturity (somewhere around 30 or 40 years old). Virtue is rare because it also requires good fortune. One has to be materially successful, not suffer any serious illness or injury, not die prematurely, have a good family, and have the opportunity to contribute to a good community. Virtue is neither natural nor common, it is not easily attained, even when sought out.

\textbf{Aristotle’s Ethics – Some Praise and Some Questions}

Aristotle’s explanation of what virtue is, and how to get it, has many strengths. As previously discussed, Aristotle seems on the mark when he suggests that virtue includes recognizing the good, wanting the good, and choosing the good from a firm and unchanging state. There seems to be a consensus on the importance of good motives. Additionally, he is also on the mark when he suggests that a good upbringing, habituation, is critically important to becoming virtuous. The likelihood of a person recognizing what is virtuous and then choosing to persist in practicing it through their teens and 20s without the benefit of a good upbringing seems incredibly remote. Aristotle is certainly right when he says we all enjoy good food, good drink, and sexual relations, but we do not all enjoy them in the right way.\footnote{Ibid., 1154a18.} We all seek pleasure, but only those who have been trained know how to seek pleasure in noble and fine ways. A good upbringing, habituation, seems virtually indispensable to that project. Additionally, Aristotle
seems correct when he says the young must be compelled to develop virtuous habits. Our aversion to the difficult and painful and our preference for the easy and pleasurable is extremely powerful. Indeed, it seems like it will take many years of intentional training to develop good habits in the young. As Aristotle suggests, that will require not just parental input, but input from schools and the community. That said, Aristotle’s reliance on habituation to mold our moral perspective seems too optimistic.

Is Aristotelian Habituation Realistic?

Post Aristotle, how close has Western society come to achieving Aristotelian habituation? And is such habituation possible for contemporary society? When Aristotle wrote, only the wealthy elite of the Greek city-states could afford a good education. Most inhabitants of the world were considered barbarians and were not even candidates for virtue. Even the elites, like Aristotle, were not paragons of virtue by contemporary standards. Slavery was the norm and women were typically not educated and considered second class members of society. Humility and self-sacrifice on behalf of the poor and marginalized was not part of virtue. Justice as understood by Aristotle was likely very different from what we would consider justice. Ethical training today would purposely be very different than what Aristotle recommended.

About 800 years after Aristotle, Christianity swept through Western society and much of Aristotle’s ethics were merged with Christian virtues. As Western society progressed it became far more egalitarian then Greek society. So, today Western society celebrates human rights and equal rights before the law for all races and genders. Western society has some level of commitment to the poor and marginalized and it enjoys universal access to education. Perhaps most scholars would say Western society is ethically far superior to ancient Greek society and that contemporary Western children, on average, get much better ethical training than the vast
majority of children in Aristotle’s day. From that perspective, Western society has implemented Aristotle in a way vastly exceeding what Aristotle probably thought possible. Yet it is not clear contemporary society provides the rigorous ethical training Aristotle thought necessary for virtue.

It is not clear that the majority of youth in Western society really get rigorous training in moral virtue. Few children have the strong social structure (parents, school, community) required to instill the virtuous habits required to appreciate the fine and noble. This training would have to persist way into one’s 20s. This training would have to explicitly instruct in the virtues: bravery, temperance, generosity, mildness, truthfulness, and justice. In the U.S., there appear to be few family – school - community combinations that agree on what virtue is and are committed to teaching it. Possibly Amish communities, or orthodox religious families, joined to religious schools and associations, raise their children with the kind of habituation Aristotle had in mind. Their training would likely have to be completed at a religious college, military academy, or elite school with a strong focus on character (not our Ivy League schools). The majority of youth in Western society do not get rigorous moral training at school.

In *Can Virtue Be Taught?* Amelie Rorty notes that Western schools have severe limitations in regard to promoting virtue. She says, “since liberal democratic education confines itself to aims which all citizens can be presumed to accept, it leaves the education of the specific abilities required to realize diverse conceptions of the good to the private sector, to individuals

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53 It is problematic to provide a list of virtues. Few would agree with the list Aristotle provides, which included magnificence and magnanimity. The problem in Western society is that there is no agreed upon list. And though everyone might agree with “temperance” in general, there would likely be much disagreement on specifically what counts as gluttony or inappropriate sexual relations. How can a community or public school instill virtue if there is no agreement on what counts as virtue? The list I offered is a subset of Aristotle’s list in the Nicomachean Ethics.
and their associations.” Our public schools respond to the confusion in our society. In addressing the question, can virtue be taught? Elizabeth Minnich responds like many Westerners, “I would know, or think I did, whether virtue can be taught had I a philosophical position specifying what sort of thing it is that we wish to teach.” When it comes to knowing what virtue is, a lot of Westerners simply have no idea. Even when people think they know, contemporary society is so diverse in its ethical perspectives, that there simply is no social consensus on many important issues.

This lack of a social consensus is critical because Aristotle notes that social reinforcement is crucial for many years into adulthood. Some observers think our society can provide such reinforcement. In *Cultivating Conscience: How Good Laws Make Good People*, Lawyer Lynn Stout claims that unselfish, prosocial behavior can be encouraged by our social context. In particular she has in mind that tort, contract, and criminal law can be important contributors to such a social context. Stout has a good point that laws play an important role in identifying and encouraging prosocial behavior. However, her notion of “good” is far from Aristotle’s, and most people’s, notion of virtue. Keeping the law, while prosocial and “good” in some sense, is not synonymous with virtue. The traits that make one virtuous: courage, honesty, sexual prudence and fidelity, kindness, generosity, responsibility, industrious, etc. are not impacted by the law. Additionally, there are many laws that people break with little fear that they will be discovered: cheating on taxes, stealing from the office, failing to get a building permit for

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55 Ibid., 69.
57 Ibid., 236.
a renovation, violating copyrights on music and video, etc. Contemporary law is simply too easy to keep on the one hand, and too easy to break in some instances, to have a significant impact on one’s ethical development. If a person is going to pursue virtue in adulthood, it will take much more encouragement than the law offers. This makes the possibility of an Aristotelian habituation questionable.

In some aspects, today’s habituation of our youth is far ahead of Aristotle’s vision. Certainly, the fact that all children in the West are educated through secondary education, is far superior to what ancient Greek society accomplished. Access to college education is much more available today than in Aristotle’s time. Most historians would likely agree that Western political and judicial institutions are morally superior to those of Aristotle’s time. However, it is not clear that many of our children get the kind of focused ethical training Aristotle had in mind. This makes it hard to say how often, if at all, Aristotle’s recommendation for habituation is met in contemporary Western society. However, the real question is not how closely we approximate Aristotle’s specific vision of habituation. The real question is, can habituation of any kind, minus the help of God, really make us virtuous?

Would Aristotelian Habituation Work?

It is doubtful that habituation, even if acquired much like Aristotle recommended, would suffice to enable virtue. Aristotle acknowledged that habituation cannot change human nature. He said, “for if something is by nature [in one condition], habituation cannot bring it into another condition… Thus, the virtues arise in us neither by nature nor against nature, but we are by nature able to acquire them, and reach our complete perfection through habit.”

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eminently possible that the human psyche is inherently self-interested. Humans may be wired such that self-interest has a higher priority than moral obligation. It is not uncommon to see a young person raised in what appears to be an excellent environment, maybe the same one as a fairly obedient sibling, yet spectacularly fail to be virtuous. This raises the question of whether virtue requires another ingredient that Aristotle has overlooked. The simple parable of the prodigal son provides an illustration that is all too familiar to many of us. Apparently both sons were raised in a good environment by loving parents. Yet one son rejected all the instructions of his parents and led a wild life that squandered his wealth. The other son apparently lived according to his parent’s instruction, but was not virtuous, he was frustrated and ungrateful. A person Aristotle might describe as continent. The prodigal comes to his senses, experiences a radical spiritual and moral transformation, and returns home happy to live according to the instruction of his youth. We do not learn the future of the “continent” son, but it seems that without such a moral transformation, he will not become virtuous. Aristotle claims that habituation can change what a person takes pleasure and pain in and thus give them a desire for virtue. But is it true that if humans are innately self-interested creatures, that habituation can change that?

As stated earlier, it seems possible that we all innately value self-interest more than moral obligations. We certainly want to be virtuous. It is important to our self-image and to our reputation. But if self-interest and a moral obligation conflict, especially when the cost/benefit ratio highly favors the self-interest option, it appears the vast majority ditch the moral obligation. This claim will be examined closely in the next chapter. That chapter considers history and social science to note that virtue is astonishingly rare. Additionally, it is not clear that habituation is the key ingredient to virtue.
Habituation may not be the determining factor in becoming virtuous. Many adults testify to growing up without adequate habituation, but as adults experience a radical moral transformation. Possibly the world’s first notable autobiography, Augustine’s *Confessions*, is one of many such accounts. Prior to his conversion, Augustine lived simply as a man of the times. Those times were no more moral than ours, they included drinking, sex, and professional rivalries. At age 32, Augustine experiences a religious conversion that includes a moral transformation. He reads from Paul’s Epistles, “Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, spend no more thought on nature and nature’s appetites.” He goes on from there to become a Catholic priest and bishop. Fast forward from Italy, 386 AD to Philadelphia 2003 where Jon Kelly, inner city drug dealer, thief, and murderer is convicted and sent to jail. In solitary confinement he is given a New Testament which he is inspired to read for 18 consecutive hours. He stops “at Hebrews 3:15, If you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.” At that point, Jon experiences a religious and moral transformation. He pleads guilty to third degree murder and robbery. Jon is paroled after 6 years and is now married and planting a church in western Chicago. Over the course of history, examples like this likely exist in the billions. People who grew up without proper habituation, yet became virtuous. Aristotle thought that only habituation could mold our moral psychology towards virtue, but that does not appear to be true. Not only that, but Aristotle may be wrong about the ability of habituation to appropriately mold our moral psychology. These are the issues I examine next.

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CHAPTER 5
CRITUING ARISTOTLE’S MORAL PSYCHOLOGY & HABITUATION

Mankind’s history is the gold standard of evidence of the species’ cruelty and murderous constitutional predisposition. Steven James Bartlett The Pathology of Man

This chapter presents three criticisms of Aristotle’s moral psychology and habituation. The first criticism notes that Aristotle’s ethics seem unlikely, because he cannot explain why virtue appeared to be possible only in the Greek city-states. It is elitist. This made virtue entirely dependent on moral luck, i.e. the good luck to be born into a wealthy family in a Greek city-state. The second two criticisms are aimed at showing that Aristotle fails to account for the innate power of self-interest. Universal human behavior appears to indicate that when moral obligation requires actions not in our self-interest, we choose self-interest. Aristotle claimed that habituation provided the basis for virtue. But he did not account for the inability of habituation to change our innate commitment to self-interest. Consequently, the second criticism notes that Aristotle cannot explain the human historical record and contemporary moral decay. Aristotle did not foresee the continued universal problem of immorality in contrast to the continued scarcity of virtue. This happened, despite the fact, that Western society would thoroughly embrace his ethical teaching. Nor did Aristotle recognize that every society attempts to employ habituation to instill virtue in its population. Finally, the third criticism notes that Aristotle’s theory cannot explain why social science cannot detect many virtues in Western culture. Western culture largely accepted Aristotle’s ethics and attempted to use education and social mores to habituate the youth. Despite that, Western societies suffer from the same moral maladies from which all other cultures suffer. These criticisms undermine Aristotle’s claim that our moral psychology is

amenable to becoming virtuous through habituation. The first criticism points out that since Aristotle’s moral psychology is a universal claim about human nature, it only makes sense that all societies are to some extent pursuing virtue and happiness along the lines he recommended.

**Aristotle is Too Elitist, Making Virtue Reliant on Moral Luck**

Alasdair MacIntyre points out a paradox in Aristotle’s ethics; it claims to be both universal and parochial. Aristotle’s moral psychology purports to describe the psyche of all human beings. The excellent operation of the soul that produces virtue is necessary for all humans. The preeminence of rationality, the attractiveness of the noble if exposed to it, the desire for pleasure and ultimately for happiness, and the necessity of habituation, is presumably true everywhere for all time. Yet, according to Aristotle, virtue was only realizable, and being realized, in the Greek city-state. It seems highly unlikely that human beings across the globe, all with the same moral psychology, had little or no insight into virtue, happiness, and the importance of habituation. All people and cultures, according to Aristotle’s own theory, desire happiness. It seems axiomatic that people everywhere attempt to be virtuous in the sense Aristotle describes, i.e. to behave rationally, to be attracted to the noble, and to seek pleasure and avoid pain. To the contrary, Aristotle writes off non-Greeks, barbarians, slaves, and even the Greek lower classes, from the possibility of virtue. This was a mistake.

All human beings have a moral psychology that makes virtue possible. And it seems obvious that all cultures are pursuing happiness, some with more success than others, and passing down their formula for doing so through habituation of the young. After all, how many

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 149.
other means are there of training the young? Aristotle’s ethics are incredibly well thought out, well-argued, and provide wisdom on ethics and human psychology that remain pertinent to this day. Yet, Aristotle’s commendation of practical wisdom, moral character, and habituation are not unprecedented and not atypical of other societies. This is why Aristotle’s insistence that virtue was accessible only to Greek aristocrats is elitist and simply false. A corollary criticism of Aristotle’s claim is that, were his claim true, virtue would be purely a matter of moral luck.

Elitism Leads to Reliance on Moral Luck

A key component of virtue is choice; virtue is typically not considered a matter of luck. A theory that makes virtue dependent entirely on luck seems flawed. But that is exactly what Aristotle’s theory appears to do. Thomas Nagel identified four ways by which a person’s assessed virtue is determined by moral luck. He listed them as: 1) constitutive luck, 2) circumstantial luck, 3) causal luck, and finally 4) effects [results] luck.\(^5\) By luck he means that a person’s moral assessment is significantly affected by factors beyond their control. Constitutive luck has to do with the kind of person we are, our inclinations, capacities, and temperament. Aristotle’s notion of habituation is a prime example of constitutive luck. Most of habituation has to do with the moral training one receives prior to adulthood. This moral training affects the things we take pleasure and pain in, as well as our perspective on what a virtuous person (a person with practical wisdom) would do. Habituation changes who we are and how we respond to circumstances.

This critical early foundation of proper habituation is not the result of choice, but purely a result of the circumstances of one’s birth and upbringing. From an Aristotelian perspective, a

morally impoverished upbringing almost certainly condemns one to living in a state other than virtue. Aristotle did not think a young adult that lacked the appropriate moral training had much chance of choosing to gain practical wisdom or of choosing to emulate a mentor possessing practical wisdom. When you consider the investment the U.S. places in primary and secondary education, you can see that most Americans agree. The first impulse people have for solving poverty, unemployment, crime, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, etc. is to invest in primary and secondary education. A large number of people believe a good education is the key to a good life.

Yet we know that proper habituation is not just academic information. Proper habituation includes a work ethic, social skills (good friends & clubs), teamwork (sports, good coaches), and moral instruction (sex & drug education & much more). Early proper habituation (from family, community, schools, and church) is very important, but to a large extent imposed on the young. In that sense, it is the result of constitutive moral luck. From Aristotle’s perspective, the crucial difference between a barbarian and a virtuous Greek, or even a common Greek laborer and a virtuous Greek, was the family into which they were born. On Aristotle’s account, virtue is accessible only if one is lucky enough to be a male born into a wealthy Greek family that resides in a well-run Greek city-state. If habituation plays the key role Aristotle claims, then virtue is limited to those with constitutive moral luck. But, Aristotle recognized it took even more luck than that.

There are a host of life events (circumstances) that have a significant impact on our assessed moral status. These events constitute circumstantial luck. One such event is simply the
privilege of living long enough to amend errors and bad choices. Since virtue, under the best of circumstances, takes time, one needs the good fortune not to die young. How many people have driven a car while drunk and survived? Very lucky. Others did not get the chance to fix that mistake, because they did not survive. Another event includes our location or change of location. One’s access to good education, good friends, and good influences of various kinds (at work, in the community, good churches, good clubs, good mentors, etc.) are often the result of chance. Other events include inspiring experiences, recovering from a severe illness or accident, the death/funeral of a friend, a wedding, the birth of a child, a great book, the love of a friend, etc. Sometimes events can be destructive. Many attest to having their lives ruined by winning the lottery, or inheriting a fortune, or becoming famous. Circumstantial luck plays a key role in Aristotle’s ethics, because he thought a long life, good health, wealth, good family, and friends were an essential part of a virtuous and happy life. Obviously, much of the aforementioned is purely a result of circumstantial luck. But it is not clear that habituation in a wealthy Greek family in a well-ordered Greek city-state, and good luck are the primary ingredients of virtue.

Aristotle’s elitism and the relation of habituation to luck are mistakes; they reveal a blindness to the fact that other societies, other races, and other classes of people were also pursuing virtue and happiness. Other societies may not have articulated it in the same way, and they may have disagreed on the exact moral virtues to pursue, but they were on the same journey and using habituation to raise their youth. For this reason, the historical record of all societies is relevant to the truth of Aristotle’s claims. All persons and all societies share the same moral psychology. All persons seek happiness, and all societies want to be well-ordered and successful.

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All cultures strive to pass on their values to the next generation through a process of habituation. And, most cultures agree to a large extent on the virtues to pursue.⁷ Courage, truthfulness, temperance, and justice are not unique to the Greek city-state or to Western society. Given the universality of the pursuit of virtue, happiness, and a well-ordered society, it is remarkable that over the centuries following Aristotle, history demonstrated a severe dearth of virtue.

Mankind’s Historical Record – Plenty of Vice, Little Virtue

In the 2,000 plus years since Aristotle, the track record of human beings provides ample reason to question Aristotle’s moral psychology and the power of habituation. The historical record indicates that humans pursue self-interest over moral obligations. Humans will resort to whatever it takes, including violence, to get what they want. Our history is replete with examples of immoral individuals, immoral societies/countries, revolutions, civil wars, slavery, corruption and sexual abuse. And, to top it off, the 20th century featured two world wars and several genocides. The horrors of the 20th century occurred due to the behavior of the most enlightened, most well educated, and wealthiest societies in all of history. Aristotle would have expected much better from Western societies. These tragedies bring us to the present, where our culture seems as depraved as any. Our society is plagued with lying, cheating, stealing, sexual immorality, divorce, abortion, suicide, drug abuse, homelessness, and many other ills that progress was supposed to eliminate. This data contradicts what Aristotle, and many others, thought would happen.⁸ An increase in the human standard of living, increasing education, and a


⁸ Recall that both Kant and Mill, as late as the 1700s and 1800s, thought that human society was progressing. Most philosophers were disabused of that notion when confronted with the world wars and genocides of the 20th century.
more enlightened society should have ushered in more virtue. The evidence appears to indicate that modern persons are no more virtuous than the denizens of ancient societies. Most of those inhabitants, the “many,” Aristotle included among the barbarians. The historical record is so dismal that psychologist Steven Bartlett claims that human evil is normal, our psychological and cognitive constitution is pathological. It is perhaps possible to look at contemporary Western society and think that it is vastly superior to past societies because it is much more egalitarian and there is little risk of violence to the average person. War has not affected the inhabitants of most Western societies for the last 50 years. But that again appears to be moral luck more than anything else. There are good reasons to believe that Westerners are capable of as much violence and genocide as anyone else. If our psyche is fundamentally flawed (fundamentally self-interested), no amount of progress or habituation cannot overcome it. Violence, in particular war and genocide, is an unmistakable indication of moral failure. History indicates we are not eradicating it.

Pervasive Violence

Violence is one of the clearest indications of a moral breakdown. Yet, there are good reasons to believe that human beings resort to violence when important self-interests are threatened. This is true despite any kind of habituation. Whether one takes a Darwinian or a theistic perspective, both accounts of human nature and history include pervasive violence from the beginning. If the product of evolution, our nature is one shaped by the brutal and unavoidable truth that the fittest survive and reproduce. And for creationists, even a man created in the image

9 Ibid.
10 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 1985), 1103a20. Aristotle acknowledged that “if something is by nature, habituation cannot bring it into another condition.” Bartlett was hesitant to talk of “human nature,” but it is hard to interpret his claim any other way.
of God is depicted as a “fallen” creature as evidenced by Cain’s murder of his brother Abel. The eldest child of the two most perfect and informed parents in human history killed his younger brother out of envy. One could hope that a few thousand years of ‘civilization’ might have refined human nature, but there is scant evidence for that. Killing others for personal gain is clearly a moral failure, yet it is routine everywhere and at all times.

There are innumerable examples of unjustified human violence to cite, but perhaps one of the most interesting and compelling is the example of Genghis Khan and the Mongol empire. This is not ancient history; Temujin (later known as Genghis Khan) lived from about 1162 to 1227. This is well after the spread of both Christianity and Islam, both of which penetrated Mongol culture. Yet the Mongols, in pursuit of wealth and power, conquered more of the world than any empire in history (over 12 million square miles, from East Asia to Eastern Europe and the Middle East).\footnote{Staff of History.com. Genghis Khan – Facts & Summary. http://www.history.com/topics/genghis-khan. (accessed April 29, 2018).} It is difficult to know the extent of the loss of life and carnage caused by the Mongols, but many historians place it around 40 million deaths. They may have killed around 75% of the population of what is now Iran. Some think the world population decreased by as much as 11% due to their conquests.\footnote{Evan Andrews, “10 Things You May Not Know About Genghis Khan,” http://www.history.com/news/history-lists/10-things-you-may-not-know-about-genghis-khan (accessed April 29, 2018).} The Mongols were ruthless and brutal. If a besieged city surrendered, the killing might be limited to the men of the garrison. The city would nevertheless be plundered, women raped, and choice specimens enslaved. If the city resisted, upon defeat, all inhabitants (male, female, elderly, and children) would be executed. This procedure involved assigning three to four hundred persons to each soldier whose job it was to execute each of his
captives. This often included beheading.\textsuperscript{13} This is a tame description of the horror of the Mongol invasion. What is of interest here is how an entire society of people could be convinced to treat other human beings in such a cruel way for simply the purpose of self-aggrandizement.

With respect to moral psychology, the question is, what would lead a person and a society to do what the Mongols did? After all, the Mongols were not defending themselves from marauding invaders, revenging past injustices, or fleeing an uninhabitable homeland. They just wanted what other people had and did not mind taking it. Aristotle would simply write this off as the natural behavior of barbarians. He would say this has no implications for his understanding of virtue and simply illustrates the result of a complete lack of proper habituation. But it seems fair to say that philosophers post-Aristotle rejected the view that the male citizens of the Greek city-states were the only humans with insight into virtue, happiness, and proper habituation. And, let us not forget that Alexander the Great (possibly tutored by Aristotle) was a very aggressive conqueror himself. Mongol society did not achieve the intellectual level of the ancient Greeks; plenty of cultures fell short of that. But it is far from obvious that such an intellectual shortcoming should preclude any understanding of virtue and the moral obligation not to rape, pillage, murder, and destroy your neighbors. A much more plausible explanation is that human nature (specifically our moral psychology), not just Mongol nature, is quite likely to visit violence upon others if it can get away with it (i.e. our self-interest preempts any moral obligations). It does not take a PhD in history to realize that humans of all societies and cultures, persons of every kind, those raised with excellent habituation and those with inferior habituation, behave much like the Mongols. Just fast forward to Europe of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

Europe of the 20th century is the most advanced civilization on earth, it is well-educated and post-enlightenment, it has eliminated slavery, it is embracing universal suffrage and human rights, yet it is on the brink of two of the most bloody and barbaric wars in human history. World Wars I and II provide an irrefutable rebuke to any who think human nature and human society are either healthy or improving. The death, destruction and utter waste of human and material resources is astounding. The soldiers of World War I may not have personally executed men, women, and children, but that does not mean they were not brutal. Just read some of the accounts of life in the trenches, enduring an artillery barrage, suffering a gas attack, and charging across no-man’s land into barbed wire and withering machine gun fire. It boggles the mind; it seems unbelievable. Tens of thousands of men were killed in a day. And for what? Why did the well-educated, refined, aristocratic elite of Russia, France, England, Italy, Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottomans send a sizeable part of an entire generation of young men to horrific deaths? The causes seem to boil down to nationalism, imperialism, and economic competition. None of these justify the 40-some million who were killed (about 20 million) and injured (20 million). That does not even take into account the economic resources expended and the destruction that accompanied the war. Of course, hind sight is 20/20, but it is inconceivable that the leaders and populations of those countries could have thought that all the major powers of Europe would

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14 HistoryNet Staff, “Costliest Battles and Campaigns of World War I,” https://www.historynet.com/costliest-battles-and-campaigns-of-world-war-i.htm (accessed 5 May 2018). On 1 July 1916 at the Somme, British troops suffered their largest single day loss in history, approximately 60,000 casualties, of which about 20,000 were deaths. Those were just British casualties.


engage in a conflict and the losses in blood and treasure would not be exorbitant. The fact remains that a sizeable number of people in all those countries participated or contributed to the war effort in some significant way. It is hard to see how a war of this magnitude and horror squares with the idea that these countries had significant numbers of virtuous men and women. Where were the leaders, elites, or simple citizens trying to prevent this tragedy? Even more stunning is the fact that the generation that suffered the most in this war will be leading these same nations into World War II.

Less than one generation after the “war to end all wars” the very same nations that suffered the horrors of World War I embark on an even more horrible encore. What World War II lacks in the horror of trench warfare and gas attacks it will compensate for with genocide, treacherous amphibious landings, indiscriminate aerial bombardment, fire bombing, and the first use of nuclear weapons. World War II is likely the most lethal and costly war of all time. One of the more sobering truths about World War II is the incredible civilian (non-combatant) death toll.
Although death tolls vary from 55 million to over 70 million (the estimate below totals over 72 million), the shocking reality is that about two thirds of the deaths were civilian deaths.\(^\text{17}\)

Some of the civilian casualties are due to the genocidal treatment of Jews and the execution of Russian/Slavic prisoners of war. But there were horrific civilian casualties in China as well. Japan waged a brutal war with China that included the sort of atrocious behavior that occurred in the “Rape of Nanking.”\(^\text{18}\) The point here is that the violence and brutality, to soldiers and civilians alike, was not unique to the Nazis. Certainly, the Holocaust is an evil of unique historic proportions. But, as will be shown later, genocidal behavior is not unique to the Nazis. In addition to the Holocaust, there was plenty of other brutal, evil behavior. The killing, maiming, and abuse of civilians which occurs in all wars, occurred in World War II as well and in unprecedentedly immense proportions. Contemporary society can say all it wants about the “barbarian” Genghis Khan, but modern man has proved to be just as brutal.

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\(^{17}\) Alison Sturgeon and Gadi Farfour, eds., *World War II: The Definitive Visual History* (New York: DK Publishing, 2009), 334-335. Estimates of deaths and casualties in war are speculative by nature and vary considerably. This is a high estimate but the argument is not affected even if the actual numbers are 25% smaller.

\(^{18}\) The “Rape of Nanking” actually occurred in 1937, prior to the official start of World War II. The numbers cited in the figures above likely include deaths attributed to the Chinese-Japanese war (1937-1945). The numbers are likely impacted by the Chinese civil war which was basically on hold until the end of World War II.
When one considers the historical record, it looks like societies are becoming more violent and deadly. The chart below shows the increasing size and activity of the military in the major European powers from the 12th to the 20th century.

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The chart indicates that human relations are getting worse, not better. Despite the so-called barbarism of “primitive” societies, it is modern societies that appear less tolerant and more

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19 Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 548. under “Summary and Main Results of Study of War in the History of Europe,” https://www-taylorfrancis-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/books/9781351490603 (accessed April 21, 2018). These statistics are distorted by the role of Germany in the Austria-Hungary empire prior to 16th century and out of it afterwards. Thus totals are overestimated in the earlier centuries and underestimated in the later centuries. Of course the 20th century will show an even more significant increase once World War II is factored in.
deadly. This poses severe challenges to Aristotle’s theory on virtue and habituation. The societies of the 20th century responsible for the two world wars were the societies in which an Aristotelian would expect to find the most virtue. These were the most “civilized” societies, sporting the best educational systems, the highest commitment to basic human rights, the most economically and politically organized nations, the wealthiest nations with the most time for reflection and contemplation. The inheritance of many of these nations included a Christian tradition infused with Aristotelian ethics. These societies placed great value on character, wholesome homes, and education. Certainly, the ruling classes had access to most of the ingredients of virtue, to include proper habituation, as Aristotle conceived of it. Yet these very people led the citizens of Europe and North America down a trail of unparalleled death and destruction. Very few people resisted this trend. In fact, some of the most terrible consequences of the war (the deaths of Jews, Russian and Polish prisoners and civilians, and Chinese prisoners and civilians) happened due to the corrupted moral sensibilities of a large number of people.
The violence of man is not limited to what is done by militaries in conflict; it exhibits itself in genocidal attempts to simply eradicate entire racial or cultural groups. It is hard to imagine anything more inconsistent with virtue than to participate in, or tolerate, genocide. World War I included the Armenian genocide and World War II included the genocide of Jews now called the Holocaust. Some of the civilian deaths in World War I were the approximate 1 million Armenians killed by the Ottoman Turks. The Armenians were killed because they were suspected of being a disloyal population (Christian) in a Muslim country (Turkey). Likewise, the Nazis blamed the Jews for undermining Germany, indeed the whole world, in various ways. The

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defamation went so far as to label them sub-human and thus worthy of extermination. The Nazis killed around 6 million Jews.\textsuperscript{22} Most readers are familiar with the unspeakable brutality with which the Germans treated the Jews and others they deemed unfit to live.

The killing of Jews reflects a very widely based moral failure across most of Europe. It was not simply the work of a handful of wicked SS (protection squad) members. Rounding up millions of Jews from all over Europe, transporting them, and executing them took the active participation of large numbers of German soldiers and police, as well as the cooperation of the citizens of Germany, Poland, Italy, France, Austria, and numerous other countries. It is a mistake to think that wars and genocide are the product of a few “bad apples.” The fact is that Jews were turned in by their neighbors and other members of their communities. They were often arrested and turned over to the Germans by local police forces.\textsuperscript{23} Sometimes other Jews betrayed them.\textsuperscript{24} In all probability, millions of people, from many European countries, were complicit in the genocide of the Jews. The most sobering fact revealed by the extensive analysis of the perpetrators of war crimes is the finding that they are psychologically “normal.” Initial post war studies expected to find a psychopathic “Nazi personality.”\textsuperscript{25} Instead, what emerged after time was the disturbing fact that “Nazi leaders were not the rare and spectacular personalities of popular imagination. Such individuals roam the street of any city and can be found inhabiting

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{22} Staff of History.com, “The Holocaust.” https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/the-holocaust (accessed May 5, 2018).
\item \textsuperscript{23} Simon Levis Sullam, \textit{The Italian Executioners: The Genocide of the Jews of Italy} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 76.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 119
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
any profession deciding the affairs of business, government, and industry.”26 The most significant lessons we learned from the Nazis are that evil is real and that all of us can succumb to it in the right circumstances.

People we all would expect to be virtuous can be surprisingly immoral in difficult circumstances. This was convincingly described in Christopher Browning’s book *Ordinary Men*.27 Browning’s key point is that police battalions played a key role in the killing of Jews in Poland. These police battalions were not manned by highly trained and indoctrinated SS troops or German Army troops. The reserve police battalions were often manned by males too young or too old to be in the regular army or even the regular police battalions.28 These police battalions received full military training but were raw recruits with little or no military experience. In the case of Browning’s reserve police battalion 101, they were typically middle-aged family men of working and lower middle-class backgrounds from Hamburg Germany.29 They were sent to Poland not knowing what to expect and with no idea of, or preparation for, the task of killing unarmed civilians, elderly and children, male and female. The vast majority of these men, between 80% and 90%, simply followed orders when asked to murder innocent unarmed civilians.30

The question becomes, how is it possible that ordinary human beings, from whom we expect some measure of virtue, could so easily become cold-blooded killers? It is even worse

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26 Ibid. This was attributed to Kelley, D. M. (1946). Preliminary studies of the Rorschach records of the Nazi war criminals. Rorschach Exchange, 10, 45-48.
28 Ibid., 6.
29 Ibid., 1.
30 Ibid., 184.
than that. The men and women who ran concentration camps not only killed Jews, gypsies, Russian prisoners of war, and others, but they tormented them, starved them, beat them, and tortured them.\textsuperscript{31} Near the end of the war, when it was clear Germany would lose, they took their prisoners on death marches. They marched men and women barefoot through snow, starving, with inadequate clothes, sleeping exposed to the elements, and shot them when they could not keep up. Some of this was done even after orders from Himmler to stop killing the Jews.\textsuperscript{32} A variety of explanations are proffered: the heightened antisemitism in Germany, deference to authority, group conformity, desire to support one’s comrades in a difficult job, and reluctance to deliver a moral reproach.\textsuperscript{33} But it seems like ordinary human beings would have sufficient virtue to see that none of those reasons, or even all of them together, justifies killing a harmless person, let alone a child, an old woman, or an entire family. There is no reason enough, unless our moral psychology is flawed to such an extent that we devise rationalizations to overcome moral inhibitions and instead indulge self-interested desires. Indeed, that is what the recent historical record seems to indicate. Any society, any group of people, almost any person, can resort to genocide in the right circumstances.

The point of this brief glimpse of the history of the violence endemic to all human societies is that virtually all humans are capable of, and willing to perform, violence in certain circumstances. Fighting, killing, and murder are not limited to certain races, cultures, religions, nation states, or pathological persons. The human moral psychology is prone to violence, even

\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 356.  
\item Browning, \textit{Ordinary Men}, 184-185, 192-193. Daniel Goldhagen disputes the claim that there are multiple social-psychological factors leading to genocide. He claims that Germany had a uniquely virulent, exterminationist strain of anti-Semitism that infected all Germans. This made it possible for the vast majority of Germans and German institutions to willingly and enthusiastically participate in Hitler’s “final solution.”
\end{enumerate}
genocide, if it appears advantageous. Individuals who have never participated in a violent or murderous act may think they would never do so. But the historical record does not support that conclusion. The historical record indicates that humans caught up in social conditions that make violent behavior advantageous will engage in it with very rare exceptions. And contra-Aristotle, it does not matter if a person was brought up in the remote parts of Mongolia or Hamburg, Germany, she can be induced to murder. Violence is rare for most people, and people can easily conclude they are not that bad. But this is just a case of moral luck. Violence aside, our behavior in the temptations of every-day life confirm our commitment to self-interest, despite any habituation to the contrary.

The Banality of Lying, Cheating, and Stealing

Habituation to the effect that lying, cheating, and stealing are immoral is probably ubiquitous in our nation, and most nations. That does not seem to deter the vast majority of people. In a May 2017 Gallup poll, 81% of respondents rated the current moral condition of the U.S. as fair or poor and 77% (a recent high) said it was getting worse. There are lots of reasons to think so. The title of David Callahan’s 2004 book, The Cheating Culture, obviously indicates corruption is a cultural problem, not something limited to a certain segment of society. Many of his examples undercut Aristotle’s view that habituation enables us to overcome a propensity to make immoral decisions. Take Henry Blodget for example. Henry was the oldest of three children who grew up on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. His father was a successful banker and his mother an elementary school teacher. They sent Henry to an exclusive, elite boarding school, Phillips Exeter Academy, for his secondary education. Henry was an excellent student and tennis player and was accepted to Yale where he majored in History. After graduation, he taught English in Japan and then taught tennis as he worked on a memoir of his experience in Japan. He
hoped that would lead to a career in journalism. In 1997 he met his wife to be, an aspiring teacher, who graduated from Berkeley with a PhD in film studies. They have two daughters. Henry appears to have a good relationship with his father; at one time they were ranked nationally as doubles partners in the Super-Senior Father/Son Tournament.

When journalism failed to work out for him, Henry took corporate finance training and demonstrated a faculty for using technology. He was excellent at financial analysis, especially using and understanding spreadsheets. He became famous when he predicted that Amazon, which was then losing money, would see its stock price increase from $240 to $400 per share. Within one month of that prediction it was selling for over $500. Henry became seen as an internet oracle, and Merrill Lynch made him a star analyst with a huge reputation on Wall Street and television. And this is when Henry confronted some very difficult ethical decisions. Merrill Lynch was not only doing financial advising based on analyzing stocks, it was also deeply involved with investment banking, underwriting, and the sale of companies. Corporately, Merrill Lynch had a conflict of interest. It was ethically bound to give objective stock market advice. It was also facilitating the sale of companies and underwriting the purchase of companies based on their stock prices. So, Merrill Lynch had a strong interest in companies maintaining their stock prices, and continuing to sell shares, even when market reality was dictating a declining stock price. Merrill Lynch employees, like Henry Blodget, were pressured to hype companies and promote their stocks, even when they knew market forces dictated the opposite.

A clear example of Henry’s ethical dilemma and moral lapse involved the proposed acquisition of Go2Net by InfoSpace. In 2000, Merrill Lynch was representing Go2Net, which was hoping to be acquired by InfoSpace. For the sale to succeed, the share price of InfoSpace needed to remain high. However, InfoSpace was not succeeding, and its share price was
declining, and Henry Blodget knew it. In his private emails, Henry called InfoSpace a “piece of junk.”

Yet, Henry continued to promote InfoSpace to the public. Just one Merrill Lynch customer, Debases Kanjilal, lost $500,000 on InfoSpace stock when the NASDAQ cratered in 2000, because he held on to the stock based on Merrill Lynch’s and Henry Blodget’s recommendation. Normally, this is just the standard risk of playing the market. But, in this case, Merrill Lynch and Henry had clearly acted unethically by giving advice they knew to be inaccurate in order to protect Merrill Lynch’s investment banking interests. Merrill Lynch and Henry Blodget faced prosecution and settled out of court. Merrill Lynch paid $100,000,000 and Henry paid $5,000,000.

Henry clearly acted unethically despite what appears to be an excellent Aristotelian habituation. Henry came from a well-educated and intact family. He was given an elite education. Henry was a history major, not a business major. Henry did not leave Yale for Wall Street; he left Yale to teach English in rural Japan. Henry showed no signs of excessive ambition or greed. Henry’s success in finance made him less vulnerable to corporate pressure. He had a good salary, a good reputation, and he likely could have insulated himself from the investment banking side of Merrill Lynch. Yet Henry’s apparent possession of some of the best habituation our society can provide did not make him virtuous enough to avoid lying to millions of people. And these were not inconsequential lies. Some people lost hundreds of thousands of dollars, others lost their retirement savings. Henry lied when it gained him relatively little and cost lots of other people a tremendous amount. The point here is similar to the point of the book The

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Cheating Culture. David Callahan writes, “there was nothing uniquely immoral about Henry Blodget.” He was faced with significant temptations to cheat and he succumbed. There are many people who do not tell lies as consequential as those of Henry Blodget. But maybe that is not because they are not liars, but because they did not face the temptations that Henry Blodget did.

With respect to moral psychology, the key point that many authors make is that we will all lie, cheat, or steal in some circumstances. David Callahan is one of many to chronicle the pervasive lying, cheating, and stealing throughout society. Parents are diagnosis shopping for a psychiatrist that will say their child has a learning disability so they can get more time on their SAT. And there are psychiatrists that will do it. Lying on resumes is rampant; some estimate that 50% contain outright falsehoods. Doctors accept kickbacks for prescribing drugs. Professional sports are being corrupted by performance enhancing drugs (several professional baseball players estimated that at least 50% of their peers were using steroids). Numerous corporations (WorldCom, Enron, Xerox, Merrill Lynch, and Qwest Adelphia) and corporate auditors (KPMG, Arthur Andersen) are either bankrupt or suffering tremendous losses due to corruption. Retail firms lose $50 - $60 billion per year, mostly due to theft from their own employees. And amidst all the concern over deficit spending and debt, U.S. citizens cheat on

36 Ibid., 8.
37 Ibid., 8.
38 Ibid., 10.
39 Ibid., 74-76.
40 Ibid., 126-133. Also see pages 137-150.
their income taxes to the tune of almost half a trillion dollars annually.\textsuperscript{42} Most professors and students know that plagiarism is a major problem in academia. And there are significant concerns about the validity of research published in reputable journals. Regardless of where one falls in the debate over global warming/climate change, there is little doubt that the credibility of the scientific community has been called into question. The fact is that moral failures are so ubiquitous that we fail to notice many of them, especially our own. This cannot be explained by saying the vast majority of citizens in Western society suffer from inadequate habituation. On the contrary, the vast majority have parents, teachers, coaches, and other mentors that reinforce ethical norms. Yet self-interest prevails anyway. Perhaps our bondage to self-interest is nowhere more apparent than in the high failure rate in marriage.

\textbf{Lack of Love and Commitment}

If there is one place you would expect love and virtue to prevail, it would be in the context of marriage. The West still embraces the ideal of marriage for life. That is what our upbringing leads us to want and to expect. Most people solemnize marriage with costly weddings and take public vows, “till death do us part.” If there is any relationship in which love and virtue should flourish for a lifetime, it is marriage. There are plenty of good reasons to make marriage work. It is the safest place, physically and psychologically, to enjoy sexual intimacy. It is the best environment in which to raise children. Those who marry tend to be more social, healthier, better educated, and have more engaging jobs.\textsuperscript{43} Finally, those who marry are more satisfied than those


who remain single. As noted earlier, divorce statistics can be very misleading, and the probability of divorce varies greatly by education level, age at marriage, race and religion. Yet the data is clear that divorce is increasing and that by the time one hits 60 about 45% of your generation will have experienced divorce or separation. And interestingly, divorce is increasing most in the age group that Aristotle would likely least have predicted it, among the mature, ages 40 – 60. Although the divorce rate for those in their 20s is decreasing, this is not because they have more stable relationships. Instead, young people are declining to marry, and many cohabitate as an alternative. This does not lead to union stability, but to more instability. But that instability does not show up immediately in divorce statistics. It will show up later because promiscuous individuals and cohabitating couples tend to divorce more. The high divorce rate reflects a significant deficit of virtue and the triumph of unenlightened self-interest.

Divorce is not a moral peccadillo; it is one of the more significant moral failures possible. A divorce is not simply a failure to keep a mundane legal requirement, like failing to get your car’s required annual vehicle inspection. Divorce has significant moral implications for all concerned, especially if there are children involved. Divorce is clearly an emotional and financial trauma for the couple. Breaking up a relationship that was intended to be permanent is undesirable and costly. And the divorced individuals have a much higher chance of divorcing again. The impact on children is more severe. Children who experienced divorce typically have

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44 Ibid. See 4. Summary and Conclusions.
46 Ibid., 594.
47 Ibid., 596.
lower rates of university education and higher rates of unemployment.\textsuperscript{49} They are less often married and more often divorced or separated.\textsuperscript{50} Children of divorce are more likely to smoke daily and consume alcohol at a hazardous rate.\textsuperscript{51} These unfavorable traits persist well into adulthood.\textsuperscript{52} None of these unfavorable repercussions of divorce is surprising. Divorce is a moral failure because it harms all persons concerned and society at large. When a couple cannot make it work, at least one person, and likely two, has failed somewhere along the line to behave virtuously. But, just as in the other sections of this chapter, it is not clear that all those still in their first marriage occupy the moral high ground. Marriages stay together for a variety of reasons, many of which have nothing to do with the virtue of the participants. Marriages that are unhappy and dysfunctional stay together with many of the same repercussions as divorces. Some marriages succeed for cultural, religious, or educational reasons that have nothing to do with the virtue of the participants. Many of us are just plain lucky with respect to marriage. We could just as easily have married someone whose behavior would have overstressed whatever virtues we had, resulting in divorce. It is just not clear that many people are virtuous enough to avoid or withstand the circumstances that lead many to divorce. If more than 40\% of people cannot make marriage work, than there is good reason to believe that human nature is indeed flawed. The virtue deficit becomes even more apparent when we consider the absolute scarcity of self-sacrifice.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
Inability to Sacrifice Self

One of the most admired features of virtue is self-sacrifice, but few people can do it. For Kant and Mill, self-sacrifice was a necessary ingredient for virtue. Kant thought virtue required sacrificing one’s own interests in order to fulfill a moral duty. Mill thought virtue required sacrificing one’s own interest for the sake of the interest of all concerned, the greatest good for the greatest number. Even Aristotle acknowledged that “enlightened” self-interest included rejecting many selfish inclinations. Possibly one of the best indications of virtue in this regard is how an individual handles their time and money. It is one thing to express concern for the poor or needy, and it is quite another to give one’s time and/or money to alleviate that need. The United States is in several measures the wealthiest country on the globe. The poor in the U.S. enjoy a standard of living that most people in the world consider middle or upper class. Correspondingly, the middle and upper class in the U.S. enjoy a standard of living that is simply out of reach for the vast majority of the world’s population. Under those conditions, one might expect there to be a host of virtuous citizens in the U.S. that donate a significant percentage of their time and income to charitable causes. By the world’s standard, citizens of the U.S. are quite generous. But the world’s standard is a very low bar.

The fact is that Americans are not all that generous. It is hard to make the case that for the wealthiest people on the planet to give a penny or two on the dollar to charity is self-sacrificing. For many years, average individual giving as a share of disposable personal income has held pretty steady around 2%. That takes into account a significant share of Americans that give

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55 Ibid.
little or nothing and those few who give a lot. Some of those who do give may give a percent or
two more than 2%. The share of Americans who give 10% of their income or more is likely 5% or less.\textsuperscript{56} But, if you took them out of the equation, average giving goes from around 2% down to
about 1%.\textsuperscript{57} The point being that of those Americans who give, the vast majority give 2% or less
of their income to charitable causes.\textsuperscript{58} This has led some to postulate the “small world”
hypothesis that a large portion of prosocial behavior is due to a small proportion of the
population. One study found that 9% of Canadian adults account for 80% of volunteering and
18% of Canadians account for 80% of all charitable gifts.\textsuperscript{59} A similar phenomenon holds true for
the U.S.\textsuperscript{60} Now someone may say, Americans and Canadians give a portion of their income to
the needy through their taxes. True. But let’s remember that taxes are not voluntary; Americans
complain about taxes; Americans minimize their taxes; and a lot of Americans cheat on their
taxes. Self-sacrifice is what we do voluntarily, because we want to help somebody else. Most of
us pay taxes because it is a legal obligation, and we expect some benefits as a result.

Since an important aspect of virtue is one’s willingness to voluntarily sacrifice for
others, it becomes clear that the U.S., and all other countries, are remarkably short on virtue.

Statistics that have remained fairly steady for decades indicate that the vast majority of citizens

\textsuperscript{56} Russel N. James III & Deanna L. Sharpe, “The Nature and Causes of the U-Shaped Charitable Giving
Profile,” \textit{Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly} 36, no. 2, (June 2007): 228. https://doi-

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 230.

\textsuperscript{58} Paul G. Schervish & John J. Havens, “Wealth and the Commonwealth: New Findings on Wherewithal

\textsuperscript{59} Paul B. Reed & Kevin L. Selbee. “The Civic Core in Canada: Disproportionality in Charitable Giving,

\textsuperscript{60} Schervish & Havens, “Wealth and the Commonwealth,” 17.
of the U.S., and most wealthy nations, give very little to charitable causes.\textsuperscript{61} Certainly, some give a nominal amount, and some small number give a significant amount. But the number who give sacrificially is a very small percentage of the population. In many cases, those who give are incredibly wealthy; it is not clear they are making a sacrifice. After all, giving 10\% of your income when you make less than $50,000 a year is very different from giving 10\% when you make $5,000,000 annually. The amount of your income which might be considered “disposable” is very different. We have to remember that virtue consists in why people give, and how much they really want to give. Some people give for selfish motives, and some give because of social pressures. It is impossible to know what motivates a person, so there is no point in making judgments about those who give. But if some people do give significant amounts for the wrong reasons, then the number of virtuous people out there is indeed very small. Of course, Aristotle did not think self-sacrifice and helping the poor was a virtue. But Western society, influenced by Christianity, has long thought self-sacrifice and helping the poor was an important part of virtue. We live in a society where people like Mother Teresa are heroines. Americans chose Mother Teresa as the most admired person of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{62} Self-sacrifice is a virtue that is strongly encouraged in Western society. Yet, passing on this virtue through habituation seems to be very ineffective. Habituation has not put much of a dent in our pervasive self-interest.

This second criticism has noticed the lack of virtue in various important areas: human tendencies to violence (war and genocide); the ubiquity of lying, cheating, and stealing; the inability to make marriage work; and the absolute rarity of self-sacrifice. These represent a very

\textsuperscript{61} Brooks, \textit{Who Really Cares}, 120.

important, but small sample. Imagine the statistics on alcohol abuse, drug abuse, pornography, pedophilia, the sex trade, persecution of various minorities, etc. Certainly, some of this is due to poor habituation. But all societies deplore most, if not all, of the aforementioned vices, and attempt to habituate their youth to avoid them. Aristotelians cannot plausibly claim either that no one gets proper habituation, or that those that who do are typically virtuous. Lack of virtue is simply too pervasive. If some elite group of well habituated, virtuous people were out there, we would all know about them. No, the historical record is very clear. Human beings routinely resort to immoral means to procure their desires. The appearance of virtue is more often than not, the result of moral luck. Put any person in very tempting circumstances, like those of Henry Blodget or the men of the 101st Reserve Police Battalion, and they will likely fail morally. That is not only the historical record, but it appears to be the findings of contemporary social science as well.

**Social Science Struggles to Find Virtue**

The findings of social science have led many to conclude that Aristotelian character traits (virtues) rarely, if ever, exist. Numerous social science experiments seem to indicate that circumstances are far superior predictors of behavior than expected character traits. One classic example tested people’s response to a young woman in a mall who drops a folder full of papers directly in their path as they emerge from a phone booth. This test was conducted in a busy

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64 Ibid., 28-61. Many Situationists look at experiments like: The Milgram Experiments (electric shocks); The Stanford Prison Experiment; The Good Samaritans Study (helping behavior of theological students); Mood Effects Study (Isen & Levin’s Dime Finders); etc. Christian Miller (*Moral Character*) proposes “Mixed Character Traits” due to the social science evidence against virtue. His book also cites numerous experiments.

suburban shopping mall. In each case, the young woman, the paper dropper, was an experiment assistant. The callers were random people. The variable was that some callers would find a dime in the coin return slot of the phone booth and other callers would not. The experiment was designed to see the impact of finding a dime on whether the caller emerging from the phone booth would help the woman pick up her papers. The results were startling.

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<th>Did Not Help</th>
<th>Helped</th>
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<tr>
<td>Did not find dime</td>
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<td>Found dime</td>
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Simply finding a dime made a tremendous difference in whether or not people decided to help the young woman. If helping another person is the product of a virtuous character, then finding a dime should not have an impact on whether one helps or not. But if most people do not have a developed character trait for helping (or any other virtue), then circumstances will determine what a person does. It appears here that circumstances did dictate the outcome, and finding a dime made people feel “good” and thus helpful. This simple experiment is just one of a multitude that many social scientists look at as they attempt to verify character traits and virtue. This work has been going on for decades, and some have concluded that “there is a large body of experimental evidence which is incompatible with the widespread possession of folk moral virtues and vices.”

Situationists, like Gilbert Harman, think “there is no evidence that people differ in character traits. [Instead] they differ in their situations and in their perceptions of their

66 Ibid.
situations.” A slightly different perspective is held by philosopher Christian Miller. He thinks people have “Mixed Traits.” These traits are not consistent enough to allow attribution of virtues or vices. He claims that “most people have a variety of Mixed Traits as part of their character and not a variety of virtues or vices.” Miller, like Doris and Harman, is compelled by the empirical evidence to deny that most people are virtuous. Yet, he thinks it makes sense to talk about character and to cultivate a better character. My point is not to debate this issue, but simply to note that virtue is so rare that numerous social scientists and philosophers have concluded that virtues and vices, for all practical purposes, do not exist. Despite this dim view of our moral psychology, social science reveals some interesting facts about us.

Social Science and Virtue

Social science is extensively examining moral behavior and has identified numerous significant features of human moral psychology. Here are four of them with implications for virtue. First, and perhaps the most important finding, is that everyone wants to be virtuous. This feature of our moral psychology indicates that we are moral creatures and our virtue is very important to us. The vast majority of people operate under moral constraints, not just purely cost/benefit calculations. We care about our public reputation and our own self-image. Experiments indicate that even when we can lie or cheat with impunity, we will likely lie and/or

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69 Miller, Character and Moral Psychology, 45.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid., 227.

cheat to some extent, but few do so flagrantly. People constrain their lying and cheating, because they cannot justify flagrant immorality and maintain a healthy self-image.

This leads to a paradox, because while everyone wants to be moral, the second finding is that immoral behavior is ubiquitous. As noted previously, there is plenty of immoral behavior being committed by almost everybody. And do not be fooled by those who appear to be moral. We are all experts at hiding both our indiscretions and our motives. As we learned earlier, all of us are prone to behave very differently under different circumstances. It is easy to condemn a Tiger Woods or a Mickey Weinstein, but there are a lot of men out there who would do the same given the same circumstances and opportunities. So how can that happen if everyone is so concerned about their public image and self-image?

The third important finding of social science is our ability to rationalize our behavior and burnish our self-image. Since lying, cheating, and stealing are common, yet everyone wants to be moral, the trick is to justify, deny, or explain whatever lying, cheating, or stealing we do such that we maintain our moral self-image. Amazingly, “people can continue to feel honest, even when lying a lot, as long as they have a justification for their unethical acts.” This has led to the discovery of numerous strategies for justifying immoral behavior: describing actions

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73 Ibid.
74 Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Paul A. M. van Lange, eds., Cheating, Corruption and Concealment: The Roots of Dishonesty (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016): 1-2. Also see David Callahan’s The Cheating Culture and Dan Ariely’s The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty. The evidence that the vast majority of people lie, cheat and steal under a multitude of common circumstances is substantial.
76 Prooijen & Lange, eds., Cheating, Corruption and Concealment, 82.
ambiguously, self-serving altruism, moral licensing, and self-deception. To take just one example of self-deception, consider the case of Lance Armstrong.

Lance Armstrong was a superstar professional cyclist who won the Tour de France seven consecutive times from 1999-2005. Despite very numerous public claims of his integrity, Armstrong was banned from all sanctioned Olympic sports for life in 2012 for numerous offenses regarding performance enhancing drugs. He likely viewed his actions as not cheating, since it was widely known that the overwhelming majority of cyclists were doing the same thing. However, that does not change the fact that he was cheating and that his cheating led to a host of other immoral actions. He violated his contract with the U.S. Postal Service. He coerced his teammates, doctors, and support staff to cheat and facilitate his cheating. He lied to the world very publicly and boasted about his “innocence.” He berated, and harmed the careers, of those who got in his way. His desire to succeed in a sport that had a culture of cheating led him down a very ugly and immoral path.

Armstrong was likely able to justify this wicked behavior by deceiving himself. He likely told himself that he was justified in his actions because of what everyone else was doing. The important thing to note here is not how bad Lance Armstrong was. It is not clear he was any worse than the vast majority of other cyclists. He was simply the most notorious, because of his amazing success. Apparently, it was the rare, and consequently unsuccessful, cyclist that did not cheat. The vast majority of people in like circumstances to Lance Armstrong did just what he did; they just were not as good at it. For most of his career Lance Armstrong was a cheater, yet

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78 Prooijen & Lange, eds., Cheating, Corruption and Concealment, 98.
79 Callahan, The Cheating Culture, 77-80.
he cultivated an image of an honest, hard-working athlete. He was lying to us and to himself, a common mistake.

Another aspect of rationalizing our behavior and burnishing our self-image is that we come to believe our own rationalizations. Numerous studies indicate that “a substantial majority of individuals believe themselves to be morally superior to the average person.” Although self-enhancement is a common phenomenon, the magnitude of self-enhancement is greatest in the moral realm. Interestingly, this generous self-assessment does not extend to others. Although most of us think we are a paragon of virtue, we do not think other people are as virtuous. That makes our self-enhancement all the more irrational. On the one hand, we have a low view of the virtue of others, yet on the other hand, we view ourselves as an exception to that judgement. Typically, when we do not know another person well, we project on them our own characteristics. Thus, since we have a very high opinion of our own morality, barring other information, we should assume others are just as virtuous. But we do not. Instead, we maintain a high opinion of ourselves and expect much less from others. In practice, this makes sense since there is some risk in trusting the wrong person. However, when responding to a survey it does not make sense, since one would normally project onto others one’s own traits. In fact, that is what we do in areas like agency and sociability. But in the moral realm, we irrationally assume our own moral superiority. This illusion of moral superiority leads to significant errors in judgement.

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81 Ibid., 623.
82 Ibid., 624.
83 Ibid., 626.
Burnishing our self-image leads us to overestimate our ability to be virtuous in tempting circumstances. Overestimating our own virtue is why we tend to think what happened in Nazi Germany could not happen in our society. But there are numerous studies out there that indicate we do not have the moral strength we imagine. The famous Milgram experiment is often thought to demonstrate that what happened in Nazi Germany could happen anywhere. The experiment tested a person’s willingness to administer electric shocks to another person as part of study on learning and memory. The person delivering the shock was told that the shocks would increase in intensity and become extremely painful, but not cause permanent damage. The shocks increased in voltage from 15 to 450 volts by pulling one of 30 levers. The last three groups of levers were labelled: Extreme Intensity Shock; Danger: Severe Shock; and XXX. In reality, the person receiving the shock was acting when showing signs of extreme distress and subsequent unresponsiveness. The point of the experiment was to see when a person’s moral commitment to refrain from inflicting suffering on a helpless, non-threatening person would lead them to disobey the instructions of the researcher. Most people exposed to the Milgram experiment predict disobedience pretty early on.

The Milgram experiment starkly illustrates the disconnect between our moral predictions and our actual moral behavior. Prior to the experiment, 14 seniors in the Yale psychology major were polled on what they expected the results to be. These students predicted that only 3% of the subjects would continue to administer shocks after reaching 195 volts, Very Strong Shock. In fact, every subject persisted to at least 300 volts, Intense Shock. And 65% persisted all the way.

to 450 volts, XXX.\textsuperscript{85} Milgram also queried 110 respondents (Psychiatrists, College Students, and Middle Class Adults) as to how they thought they would respond to the experiment. Their predictions are shown in the following table.

\textsuperscript{85} Stanley Milgram, \textit{Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View} (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1974): 35, 60-61, 94-95 & 119. The 65\% refers to the baseline experiment. Milgram did 18 permutations of the experiment with results from 0 – 92.5\%. But the results typically supported his conclusions.
## Predicted Responses to the Demand to Shock “Learners”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shock</th>
<th>Description &amp; Voltage</th>
<th>Psychiatrists</th>
<th>College Students</th>
<th>Middle-Class</th>
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<td>Moderate Shock</td>
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<td>Strong Shock</td>
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<td>Very Strong Shock</td>
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<td>450</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean maximum shock level</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>9.35</td>
<td>9.15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage Predicting Defiance</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
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</table>
The five respondents (2 Psychiatrists and 3 Middle-Class Adults) in the Slight Shock row actually predicted they would decline to give any shocks. Only 25 respondents said they would give shocks over 150 volts. All respondents predicted they would disobey instructions to give shocks above 300 volts. But these predictions greatly overestimated the moral resolve of people participating in the experiment.

As previously stated, 65% of participants persisted to 450 volts despite moral doubts. In the baseline experiment #1 every single participant (40 participants) went to 300 volts. Subjects persisted through extreme nervousness and stress: sweating, trembling, biting their lips, and groaning. The difference between what we predict we will do, and what we actually do, is stark and shocking. The most surprising result of this experiment is the “sheer strength of obedient tendencies” exhibited by the subjects. The obedience persisted despite obvious moral qualms. People are typically highly obedient to authority of any kind, even when it is morally problematic. That is why many conclude from the Milgram experiment that what happened in Nazi Germany is possible elsewhere in relevantly similar circumstances. Despite our lofty estimation of our own virtue, social science experiments indicate that we are quite easily convinced to violate our moral standards.

Another experiment found similar results when testing our willpower regarding sexual temptation. This experiment asked participants (all male) a variety of questions in three areas: how appealing they found various sexual activities (for example sex with a minor); their

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86 Ibid., 35.
87 Ibid.
willingness to engage in morally questionable activities to obtain sexual gratification (for example slipping their date a drug); and their willingness to engage in unsafe sex (for example lack of any birth control). The questions were initially asked in a benign, clinical environment. The respondents were asked again, much later, under conditions that were both private and under sexual arousal (stimulated by pornography). The results were significant, although not totally surprising. When highly sexually aroused, respondents made very different choices. People who initially expressed a commitment to safe sex abandoned that commitment when sexually aroused. When aroused, moral commitments to respecting a date’s “no” response often evaporated, as did the conviction to not using excess alcohol or drugs to persuade a date. But the most significant result was that “people seem to have only limited insight into the impact of sexual arousal on their judgments and behavior.”

Although this experiment was limited to men, it reinforces the finding that we tend to overestimate our virtue. We think we are virtuous, i.e. that we have the willpower to live up to our moral commitments. But when faced with circumstances that include internal or external pressures to violate those moral commitments, we crumble fairly easily. Not only do we overestimate our virtue, but we underestimate the significance of our moral failings.

The fourth finding of social science is that what we consider peccadillos are in reality of great consequence. It is not the few bad apples that withhold tens of thousands of dollars from the IRS that harm our nation so much, it is the hundreds of thousands of people cheating the IRS

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90 Ibid., 95.
out of a few hundred dollars each.\textsuperscript{91} Widespread minor cheating not only adds up to more money lost, but creates a culture of cheating. We see this same phenomena in insurance fraud ($24 billion annually)\textsuperscript{92} and in employee theft ($600 billion annually).\textsuperscript{93} Those “small” ethical lapses result in major implications for society. It is the same with performance enhancing drugs in sports. Just a handful of cheaters is bad, but when players think everyone is cheating, it creates a culture in which cheating seems OK and necessary to be competitive. What Lance Armstrong experienced in professional cycling now seems to be taking over professional baseball. The common “small” ethical indiscretions can ruin a person’s life and can damage an entire enterprise (sport, business, tax policy, etc.).

Social science seems to confirm the following four findings: 1) everyone wants to be virtuous, but 2) immoral behavior is ubiquitous, which leads to, 3) people routinely rationalize immoral behavior and burnish their self-image, and finally, 4) we fail to see that “small” indiscretions have large impact. Social scientists have no problem discovering that we are moral creatures. We want desperately to be moral and go through significant mental effort to maintain a healthy self-image and reputation. But social scientists just do not find much evidence of reliable virtuous conduct. The power of circumstances to bring out our self-interest is amazingly ubiquitous and effective. And it is not clear that habituation overcomes it. Regardless of one’s upbringing, education, and training, self-interest preempts moral obligation in the right circumstances. This fact again raises the issue of moral luck.


\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{93} Mazar, Amir and Ariely, “The Dishonesty of Honest People,” 633.
**Moral Luck**

To a significant extent, one’s assessed virtue is dependent simply on the circumstances of life. How would my life have been different if instead of being a member of the U.S. military, I had been an officer in the German military of World War II? That is hard to answer, but contemporary research suggests I would have done just what most members of the German military did. I disagree with authors like Thomas Nagel and Robert Hartman who think the German citizens of the World War II era were uniquely evil as compared to citizens of other countries. Of course, they did vastly more immoral deeds when they participated in the Holocaust. But this was likely the result of circumstantial bad luck. It is not obvious that many, or even most, citizens of other countries would not have done the same in those circumstances. To the extent citizens of other countries would have done the same in those circumstances, indicates that they were not more virtuous, just morally lucky. The citizens and soldiers of Germany deserve the judgement they received. But contemplating the impact of circumstances should make us humble about assessing ourselves as more virtuous.

Moral luck is important because to a significant extent, many of us maintain a moral self-image or a moral reputation not because we are virtuous, but due to moral luck. Many who appear to be virtuous have simply been lucky to have a good upbringing, good circumstances, and little temptation. Had those circumstances been different, their behavior might have become

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Thomas Nagel, “Moral Luck,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes, 50 (1976): 145-146, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4106826 (accessed 9 February, 2019). Robert J. Hartman, “Moral Luck and the Unfairness of Morality,” *Philosophical Studies*, (September 18, 2018). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-018-1169-5 (accessed 9 February, 2019). I think Nagel and Hartman confuse perceived virtue with genuine virtue and also confuse legal accountability with moral assessment. Most people perceive the Germans of World War II to be less virtuous than other peoples; I think that perception is incorrect. I think lack of virtue is ubiquitous. Difficult circumstances reveal our immorality. The Germans were placed in a situation that revealed their moral frailty and they are morally and legally accountable for their actions. My point is that many people in the Allied countries would have done the same in their situation. The Germans were not uniquely immoral. What they did was unique.
very immoral. Social science has produced a significant amount of data that suggests few people are virtuous enough to withstand very tempting circumstances. Moral luck should not lead to skepticism about morality and virtue. It should make us skeptical of our own virtue. For individuals and society to flourish requires virtue. What we learn from moral luck is how frail we are and how vulnerable we are to yield to self-interest. The paradoxes of moral luck should make us even more wary of proclaiming our own virtue or anyone else’s.

**Analysis of the Human Moral Track Record**

The historical record and social science undermine Aristotle’s claim that virtue is achievable with good habituation. Aristotle acknowledges that habituation cannot change human nature, including our moral psychology. It looks like the human moral psychology includes a preference for self-interest over moral obligation, thus humans are prone to immoral behavior. Around the world, habituation, is the primary means of instilling virtue. No culture is busy raising liars, cheaters, cowards, murderers, gluttons and fornicators. Yet despite efforts in all societies to instill virtue, there is good reason to be skeptical about the possibility of achieving virtue. Sure, there are plenty of people who perform good deeds. Larissa MacFarquhar chronicles the stories of many of them in her book, *Strangers Drowning*. But in practically every case, it is clear the very people doing amazing good deeds are often very dysfunctional and immoral in other areas. They are not virtuous. Sure, there are plenty of people who appear to live decent lives. But, do they consistently do the right thing, for the right reason, because they want to, based on a firmly established desire to seek the good? Would the people who appear to be moral, really persist in virtue under very tempting circumstances? Considering the examples of Henry

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Blodget, Lance Armstrong, and the men in the 101st Reserve Police Battalion, it seems more likely that the vast majority of us would crumble if our purported virtue were really tested. If there really are a number of virtuous people out there, how do we explain the condition of the modern world, especially the culture of Western society: war, poverty, religious persecution, corruption, human trafficking, suicide, preventable diseases, crime, family dysfunction, evil regimes (Venezuela, North Korea, China, Russia, Iran, etc.), child abuse, pornography, lying, cheating, etc.? Even people who have avoided the obvious vices are not immune to more subtle ones. As illustrated by the statistics on giving of time and money, we know that the wealthiest populations in human history are making relatively insignificant efforts to help those in need, to include people in their very own communities. If virtue exists, and I believe it does, it appears to be rare, and even then, it is to a greater or lesser degree frail and inconsistent. It is not clear that the few that are virtuous are so mainly because of good habituation. It looks like Aristotle’s process for becoming virtuous is inadequate. It remains to consider what needs to happen for virtue to be possible.

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96 Ibid., 115. Adams writes a chapter on moral inconsistency and one on moral frailty. He agrees that any account of virtue must account for these shortcomings. I think the situation is more dire than he admits. But I agree with him that there is virtue and it is worth pursuing.
CHAPTER 6

MORAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE POSSIBILITY OF VIRTUE

*But God commands some things which we cannot do, in order that we may know what we ought to ask of Him.*

Augustine

Is virtue possible? And if so, how? Aristotle insists it is and that habituation and practical wisdom are the key. I have offered reasons to think that virtue is rare, and that habituation is inadequate. Aristotle would likely agree that virtue is rare. But his theory would lead us to believe that it is much more attainable than it appears. This chapter defends my claim that virtue, while rare, is possible. But it also explores how that is so given the inadequacy of habituation. If our moral psychology is flawed in a way that habituation cannot overcome, how is virtue possible? Aristotle fails to address the possibility of God accomplishing a moral transformation. Aristotle did not think God really acted in human matters, so he would not have considered that option. Apparently, he had not witnessed a “barbarian” being radically changed and becoming virtuous. Such transformation testimonies are common today, which indicates that moral transformation is possible, as is virtue. This chapter will chronicle the lives of four very famous people who experienced a spiritual and moral transformation. They will illustrate the problems with Aristotle’s theory of habituation and reveal the important role of a moral transformation. Of course, the claim that these four are virtuous people is debatable. The difficulties of defending that claim are discussed next.

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1 Augustine *On Grace and Free Will* XXXII
Why Virtue is Rare and Hard to Verify

Virtue is rare because we are morally flawed, and it is not clear that habituation can remedy that. Virtue is hard to verify for three reasons: one, no one is perfect; two, motives are hard to discern; and three, because what counts as virtue is controversial. When one tries to identify a virtuous person, you realize how rare they are and how difficult it is to “prove” they qualify. There is only one Jesus, everyone else makes moral mistakes. So, to begin we must accept human imperfection. The reality is that even a virtuous person had, and likely has, moral imperfections. For a virtuous person those are likely few and far between, but they still exist. So, the four individuals highlighted in this chapter are not perfect. What commends them is that they all eventually chose a life of service to others; they appear to have overcome self-interest. They also became persons who appeared able to love family, friends, and others. Whatever moral flaws they had seemed overcome for the most part. That is a good start, but what about their motives?

Since motives are almost impossible to discern, it takes a long, consistent track record to have any confidence about motives. Aristotle, and others, thought that virtue consisted of doing the right thing, for the right reason, because one desired the right outcome. Most people are careful to conceal selfish motives because they harms one’s reputation. This makes it extremely difficult to know whether a person is acting based on the appropriate motivations and feelings. Aristotle thought that virtue was only possible for the mature, probably someone in their late 30s or 40s. It is only then that we can tell if a person is consistent over the long term. Three of the four people highlighted in this chapter are historical persons. It is a matter of public record that they stayed true to their standards. Larissa MacFarquhar identifies several very dedicated,
idealists, people in her book *Strangers Drowning*. One very impressive couple is Julia Wise and Jeff Kaufman. Here is a young couple who have given away nearly 50%, anywhere from $68,000 to $168,000, of their income for 6 years. They are committed to making the world a better place and they are very intentional about giving to charities they believe will do that. Some of the ones they recommend are the: Against Malaria Foundation; Effective Altruism Community Fund; and the Schistosomiasis Control Initiative. Wise and Kaufman seem like virtuous people, but we know relatively little about them, and they are quite young. Are their characters stable and mature? Will their marriage last? Do they live by all the virtues? Will their current conduct last? When one attempts to identify a virtuous person, it becomes clear that it is very difficult to know. What we can know is that there are very impressive people out there doing amazingly virtuous things. But we would have to know a lot more, maybe know them very closely, probably personally, for some time before we could have much confidence in their virtue. Even then, my judgement of that might be very different from yours.

The third problem with identifying a virtuous person is that standards of virtue differ. It is interesting that Mother Teresa, despite being the 20th century’s most admired person, had detractors. Several academics from Canada criticized her for what they claimed were "her rather dubious way of caring for the sick, her questionable political contacts, her suspicious management of the enormous sums of money she received, and her overly dogmatic views regarding, in particular, abortion, contraception, and divorce." In fact, Western society is

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4 Ibid.

tremendously conflicted about moral-character training due to the tremendous confusion about moral norms. The book *Can Virtue Be Taught?* edited by Barbara Darling-Smith is a classic example. Here we have the collected wisdom of numerous respected philosophers who attempt, but fail, to be optimistic about moral education.\(^6\) Virtually all of them think virtue is real, attainable (they seem to think they have it), and can be taught, to some degree. Yet there is no consensus on how this might be possible and they express skepticism of the idea that any real content to virtue can be taught in the public realm.\(^7\) The book is a perfect illustration of the fact that Western society has no consensus about how to inculcate virtue.\(^8\) So you might not agree that the four people I have chosen are examples of people who became virtuous as a result of a moral transformation. But I think their record demonstrates that something quite powerful happened to them and the result was a life of consistent public service. That is a credible testimony. Before considering the four, a few words about a supernatural moral transformation.

**Why a Supernatural Transformation?**

If our moral psychology is inherently flawed, then a supernatural intervention is essential.\(^9\) If people, by nature, care more about self-interest than about moral obligations, then no amount of moral training (habituation) can change that fact. If virtue requires some measure of self-sacrifice, and such self-sacrifice is against our nature, then virtue is impossible. The claim that virtue requires us to do things that we are by nature unable to do is not a preposterous

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\(^7\) Ibid., 150.  
\(^8\) Ibid., 69.  
\(^9\) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 1985), 1103a20. Aristotle believed that virtue arose in us neither by nature nor against nature. Instead he believed we were by nature trainable (through habituation). But if our nature is flawed, say that we are naturally selfish and inclined to self-interest rather than duty, then virtue is against our nature and not possible.
Anselm and Duns Scotus develop this claim in a simple and clear way. They assert that the human will has two inclinations: an affection for justice and an affection for advantage. Humans have an affection for doing what is good and what is right, the affection for justice. This is what makes us desire to do something that is good for someone other than ourselves. Humans also have an affection for happiness, the desire to get what pleases them, the affection for advantage. This is what drives us to do only those things that benefit us. These affections reside in the human will. They imply a free will because we are not necessarily bound to do one or the other. Ideally, the affection for justice would prevail over the affection for advantage. This is what Anselm and Duns Scotus thought prevailed prior to the Fall of mankind. Anselm describes it as man preserving his “rectitude,” the ability to “will what God wills,” i.e. the good and just. Sadly, after the Fall, we lost our rectitude. We no longer have the power to follow the affection for justice reliably. That does not mean that we never do good/right actions. It simply means we do them when we think it is to our advantage to do them. Since it is often the case that ‘honesty is the best policy’ and keeping social mores is good for our reputation, we will often do good things. But we will not do them when they are clearly to our disadvantage. This problem is

10 Augustine, Anselm, Immanuel Kant and John Hare make claims of this nature as do all Christians who believe in the doctrine of total human depravity. See Augustine’s Grace and Free Will, Anselm’s De Concordia, Immanuel Kant’s Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and John Hare’s The Moral Gap. All state that virtue requires a moral transformation performed by divine intervention.


severe because once the priority of justice is lost, we do not have the power in ourselves to restore it.\textsuperscript{16} Once it is decided that advantage preempts justice, the affection for advantage has no affection in the will to put justice back in its place of priority. Rectitude, the ability of the affection for justice to preempt the affection for advantage, can only be restored by God.\textsuperscript{17} Although this description of human moral psychology comes from a Christian perspective, one does not have to be a Christian, or believe the Bible, to see that this seems to be a very accurate picture of human nature.

The history and social science previously reviewed align nicely with this view of human moral psychology. All humans strive to maintain a moral reputation and self-image. And people do good things to the extent it pleases them and allows them to maintain this self-image. The motivation for this stems from the fact that they have an affection for justice. We have a conscience; we recognize the good and right and have a desire to do it. However, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, our affection for justice is often preempted by our affection for advantage. Given the appropriate amount of temptation, the vast majority of us will choose advantage over justice. And habituation does not change this fact. That is why Aristotle’s moral psychology is flawed. Aristotle made two mistakes. One, he underestimated our commitment to self-interest (affection for advantage) and overestimated the power of habituation to overcome it. Two, he failed to take into account the role of God in restoring our “rectitude” (our ability to choose justice over advantage). There is ample evidence that God enables us to overcome the affection for advantage and thus progress towards virtue. Of course, it is


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
controversial to offer examples of moral transformation and virtue, but history is replete with them and the following four are particularly well documented.

The Most Famous Transformation - Paul

The Apostle Paul provides perhaps the most famous moral transformation example in history and also provides a challenge to Aristotle’s claims about habituation. Paul likely had an upbringing that meets Aristotle’s standard for a good habituation. Paul’s Jewish name was Saul, possibly after the most famous member of the tribe of Benjamin, King Saul. He was probably born around 1 A.D. in the city of Tarsus in a province then called Cilicia located in what is now Turkey. Saul’s family was part of the Jewish diaspora living among a non-Jewish population (Gentiles). Saul was raised by a strict Jewish household that belonged to a sect called Pharisees. The Pharisees were fervent about Jewish nationalism and lived in strict obedience to the Law of Moses. Saul was certainly circumcised on the eighth day after his birth, likely associated mostly with other orthodox Jews, and was well-educated, especially in the Jewish scriptures. We know this because Saul’s family were also Roman citizens. They were probably Roman citizens because they were prominent, wealthy residents of Tarsus. Saul’s father was likely a master tentmaker because that was the trade Saul also practiced. This wealthy, working, background accounts for Saul’s excellent education, work ethic, and practical insight.

Saul was not only offered an outstanding education, but he excelled in it. He spoke both Aramaic (a derivative of Hebrew), Greek, and some Latin.\(^{18}\) His synagogue taught him the Hebrew texts, and he learned to copy the scriptures perfectly onto his own scrolls. His father probably presented him with his own copy of the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the

Septuagint) since the readings in the synagogue were offered in the language of the culture (Greek). By his thirteenth birthday, Saul had mastered the Jewish scriptures and was ready for advanced education. Apparently, his father sent him to Jerusalem where Saul was instructed by the prominent rabbi Gamaliel. Saul was at the top of his class and soon became a member of the Sanhedrin. Being a member of the Sanhedrin was about as high as one could go in Jewish society. Members were the equivalent of judges, senators, and spiritual masters.\textsuperscript{19} The Sanhedrin was supreme in all religious matters and in what self-government the Romans permitted of the Jews.\textsuperscript{20} This was instrumental in Saul’s future since as a representative of the Sanhedrin he would spearhead the persecution of the new Jewish sect called Christians.

Saul’s upbringing is probably about as close as one could come in that day to what Aristotle would call good habituation. Saul was raised in an intact family, a home, a community, and a school dedicated to the highest order of moral, social, religious, and political behavior. This was a very structured environment that ensured only the best that society had to offer to Saul, and he embraced it with a whole heart. He excelled in every aspect of the requirements placed upon him. Saul says of himself, “If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness, which is in the Law, found blameless.”\textsuperscript{21} Saul’s credentials were impressive. Admittance at a young age to the Sanhedrin typically required an impeccable educational, religious, and social resume, including marriage. Saul had it all. But zeal for these things

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\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Phil. 3:4-6 (New American Standard Bible).
overcame his compassion for his fellow Jews. Saul says of himself, “I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure, and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.”

Saul was outraged by the “blasphemy” of the Christians and dedicated himself to their destruction even if that meant jailing them, torturing them, or killing them. The historian Luke tells us that at the stoning of the first Christian martyr (Stephen) the executioners “laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.” And, “Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.” Luke goes on to say that “Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.” Later, in Luke’s record of Saul’s defense before King Agrippa, he will quote Saul saying, “not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.” Attempting to force Christians to blaspheme probably included having them flogged, receiving the forty stripes save one. Or, Saul may have had them beaten with rods. These were incredibly painful and shameful punishments, usually reserved for hardened criminals. In any case, he was quite willing to exact very cruel treatment of both men and women. The people he was treating so cruelly were usually fellow Jews whose only crime was believing in Jesus. For the most part, these were otherwise observant Jews. As is typical of

22 Gal. 1:13-14
23 Acts 7:58
24 Acts 8:1
25 Acts 8:3
all of us, Saul rationalized his behavior as being not just acceptable, but morally praiseworthy. He surely considered himself a virtuous man.

On his way to Damascus to arrest more Christians, Saul discovers that he is not a virtuous man but, in his own words, is instead the chief of all sinners.\textsuperscript{26} According to Luke’s account, Jesus appeared to Saul and spoke to him saying, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”\textsuperscript{27} Subsequently Saul believes in Jesus, is filled with the Holy Spirit, and is baptized. This radically transforms Saul into Paul who is to become an Apostle. It is after this radical transformation that Paul is able to recognize that he was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent aggressor.\textsuperscript{28} Paul’s transformation is indeed miraculous. It is not just miraculous because of his encounter with Jesus, but because of the radical change in his beliefs, his occupation, his speech, and his conduct. His whole life is changed! Instead of defending Judaism against the blasphemous Christians, he becomes the most prolific promoter of Christianity. Instead of flogging and imprisoning Christians, he is beaten numerous times, flogged (5 times), stoned, and imprisoned for spreading Christianity. Paul proceeds to become the largest contributor to the New Testament (14 books out of 27).\textsuperscript{29} He makes three major missionary journeys establishing numerous churches in Asia and Europe.

In addition to his altered priorities, Paul has an altered attitude. He is not motivated by pride or anger. Instead, he is motivated by love for God and for people. Paul’s writings indicate his devotion to the people he ministered to; they do not reflect anger or pride. He was

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{26} I Tim. 1:15
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Acts 9:4.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} I Tim. 1:13.
  \item \textsuperscript{29} There is, of course, dispute over how many books of the New Testament Paul wrote. It is 14 only if Hebrews is included along with all the letters traditionally attributed to Paul.
\end{itemize}
unconcerned about his own welfare or status and was instead willing to suffer anything on behalf of Jesus and on behalf of the church. Paul writes, “but whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ.”\(^{30}\) Not only does Paul love those who become Christians, but he loves the Jews who now hate him. He says of them, “I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites.”\(^{31}\) These are the words of a man who has had a life altering transformation. How does one explain the transformation of a self-aggrandizing, Christian hating, 30-year-old Jewish zealot, into the seemingly virtuous Apostle Paul?

**Paul, Virtue, and Habituation**

Paul illustrates a challenge to Aristotle’s view of virtue and the role of habituation. On Aristotle’s account, Saul should have been a virtuous man. From a first century orthodox Jewish perspective, perhaps Saul was a virtuous man. There were no objections to the Mosaic moral code. But the treatment of Christians by the Jews was probably morally problematic, even by first century standards. Luke’s account of the trial of Stephen indicates that it ended in mob action, not an orderly verdict and sentencing. The torturing of men and women to get them to reject Jesus is not something sanctioned by the Mosaic Law. As Paul reflects on these things after his transformation, he is convinced that he was a violent blasphemer. Yet from Aristotle’s perspective, Saul was perhaps a classic example of good habituation and a man of practical

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\(^{30}\) Phil. 3:7-8.  
\(^{31}\) Romans 9:3-4.
wisdom. He was not only successful as an individual but was in a position of religious, social and political prominence because of that success. However, Saul had major moral flaws in his character: pride, anger, hatred, and violence. These character flaws manifested themselves in his passionate persecution of Christians wherever he could find them. Saul’s pride, hatred, and violence were not going to be eradicated by continuing down the path of “practical wisdom” and habituation as experienced in his religious community. Saul was only going to be morally transformed and go down a path towards true virtue as the result of a spiritual and moral transformation.

After his transformation, Saul’s character changes and he becomes someone now called Paul. Saul hated his enemies and zealously pursued them to torture and punish them. But when Paul thinks of the Jews who are now persecuting him, he is not angry. Nor is he interested in punishing or threatening the Jews. Instead, he says, “my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation.” Paul loves the very people who reject him, flog him, stone him, and put obstacles in his way. Nor is Paul proud. At times he appears to boast when he defends his apostleship. But he is frank about his sinful past and refers to himself as “the very least of all saints.” Saul was confident of his social and religious position. He acted as a representative of the chief priests and had the authority to arrest and punish Christians. But Paul describes himself as “afflicted in every way, … perplexed, … persecuted, … and struck down.” The pride, anger, hatred, and violence that characterized Saul is replaced by humility, patience, love, and self-sacrifice in Paul. This transformation could not happen on the path of habituation and “practical wisdom” that Saul was on. It took a supernatural spiritual and moral transformation to change

32 II Cor. 4:8-9.
Saul to Paul. A God-inspired transformation is something Aristotle never conceived of, and it is a major flaw in his ethical theory. Augustine’s story will reveal this flaw from a different vantage point.

**From Wisdom Cult to Saint - Augustine**

Augustine travels a very different path than Saul and presents a different challenge to Aristotle’s views of habituation and virtue. If Saul had what Aristotle might consider good habituation, Augustine’s upbringing was somewhat lacking. Born about 350 years after Saul (354 A.D.) in Thagaste, North Africa (modern Souk Ahras, in Algeria), Augustine’s parents did not share the religious zeal of Saul’s parents. Augustine’s mother (Monica) was a devout Christian and exposed Augustine to many Christian teachings. Throughout his life she prayed fervently for Augustine to embrace Christianity. Augustine’s father (Patricius) was not a Christian and had little interest in Augustine other than ensuring his education and upward social mobility. Monica and Patricius, believing that a classical education was the key to Augustine’s social and economic success, were totally committed to his secular education. Thus, young Augustine grows up with stern discipline regarding his education but little discipline regarding his moral life. In his *Confessions*, he says of his childhood

> Pilferings I committed from my parents’ cellar and table, either enslaved by gluttony, or that I might have something to give to boys who sold me their play, who, though they sold it, liked it as well as I. In this play, likewise, I often sought dishonest victories, I myself being conquered by the vain desire of pre-eminence.

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34 Ibid., 21.
He was sent to the near-by town of Madaura at about age 12 and spent 4 years there. It provided an excellent education, but also gave license to discover everything a pagan culture in a university town had to offer.\textsuperscript{36} He returned to Thagaste for a year at age 16 because his father was accumulating enough money to send him to Carthage to continue his education. Idleness for an adolescent is not a good thing, and this year proved problematic for Augustine.

Augustine reflects on two aspects of this year in Thagaste with sadness. First, he begins his bondage to lust. He describes himself as being “unable to discern pure affection from unholy desire.”\textsuperscript{37} This lust “dragged away my unstable youth into the rough places of unchaste desires, and plunged me into a gulf of infamy.”\textsuperscript{38} Second, Augustine succumbs to a desire to steal simply for the sake of enjoying the forbidden. He and his friends decide to steal great loads of pears from a nearby orchard. They eat some but throw most of them to the pigs.\textsuperscript{39} Upon reflecting on these events, Augustine seems to criticize his parents. They failed to discern his temptations and help him deal with them. He thinks they refused to consider marriage because they thought it would impede his education.\textsuperscript{40} Regarding his activities with friends, they just seemed to be oblivious. Yet Augustine admits that these moral failures were his own. They reflected his will and his desires. Despite Monica’s concern for Augustine’s spiritual life, she seemed unaware of the importance of moral education and discipline during his youth. Instead, Monica and Patricius pinned all their hopes on his secular education. As a result, at age 17, they sent him to Carthage for more schooling.

\textsuperscript{37} Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, II, ii, 2.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., II, iv, 9.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., II, iii, 8.
The next 5 years in Carthage would solidify Augustine’s bondage to lust and social success. His first major commitment is to a concubine who will be his partner for the next 13 years and bear his son. Augustine is quite honest that this was not a marriage; it was a concession to the flesh. In all his writings, he never mentions her name, and when the prospect of a ‘respectable’ marriage appears, he abruptly dismisses her. His second major commitment is to a sect called the Manichees. This religious commitment was preceded by a philosophical awakening spurred by the reading of Cicero’s *The Hortensius*. This book contained a strong, compelling exhortation to pursue truth and wisdom, otherwise known as philosophy. Augustine was so gripped by this message that he altered his career aspirations away from law and towards academic pursuits. At the time, philosophy and wisdom were often intertwined. Augustine considered the Bible as a possible source of truth and wisdom but rejected it. He found the scriptures to be too simple and crude. Instead, Augustine was impressed by the “wisdom” of the Manichees. Although the founder, Mani, considered himself an apostle of Jesus Christ, the Manichees had different scriptures and were not considered Christians. In fact, the Manichees were a small group shunned by pagans and Christians alike. When Monica found out Augustine was associated with them, she initially kicked him out of her home. Of the many different teachings of the Manichees, one was most helpful to a man struggling with various temptations. The Manichees thought that the evils associated with our bodies were caused by an evil force in the world for which we were not responsible. Thus relieved of responsibility for any moral failings, Augustine continued his pursuit of lust, academic success, and social status.

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41 Ibid., III, iv, 7.
42 Ibid., III, v, 9.
44 Ibid., 50-51.
For the next decade Augustine pursued academic honors, financial gain, and a respectable marriage, but found faith instead. Augustine gradually grew disillusioned with Manichaeism. He was selected a professor of rhetoric in Milan and there came under the influence of its bishop, Ambrose. Ambrose was able to convince Augustine that the scriptures contained much more wisdom and power than he had imagined. And although his mother was arranging a socially advantageous marriage, Augustine was being increasingly drawn to Christ. As Augustine reflects on this period of his life, he discusses the internal conflict in his heart. He provides a perfect illustration of the two inclinations of the will described by Anselm and Duns Scotus. On the one hand, he is continually drawn to faith in Jesus, to a renunciation of selfish desires, especially his lust. But on the other hand, he greatly desires the acclaim of men and the company of a woman. Augustine is torn and appears helpless to decide. At one point in the Confessions, he writes the following:

Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet. For I was afraid lest Thou shouldest hear me soon, and soon deliver me from the disease of concupiscence, which I desired to have satisfied rather than extinguished.45

But he continued to hear God calling him. In the midst of his conflict, he was told of the Egyptian monk, Antony. Antony accidently heard the scripture being read that says “Go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come and follow Me.” Upon hearing this, Antony was converted and devoted himself to Jesus and a monastic lifestyle.

Similarly, Augustine was weeping under heavy conviction of his lifestyle and heard some children in play say, “take up and read, take up and read.” Augustine felt led to go right to the

45 Augustine, Confessions, VIII, vii, 17.
scripture he had available and read the first passage he should find. It happened to be Romans
13:13-14, “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and
envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the
lusts thereof.” At this point Augustine writes, “No further would I read, nor did I need; for
instantly, as the sentence ended--by a light, as it were, of security infused into my heart--all the
gloom of doubt vanished away.” From that moment on, Augustine not only believed in Jesus, but
was given the power to pursue Him appropriately. “Within a few months, Augustine had
abandoned his marriage, his public position, his hopes of financial security, and social
prestige.” This spiritual and moral transformation gave Augustine the power to pursue a
monastic lifestyle of service to the church and its people. It initiated a journey that would make
him a popular bishop, a defender of the Catholic faith, and a prolific Christian author whose
works remain inspirational to this day. How did the self-centered, immoral, 32-year-old
Augustine transform into the seemingly virtuous bishop of Hippo and servant of God and His
people?

**Augustine, Virtue, and Habituation**

Augustine’s life presents another challenge to Aristotle’s view of virtue and the role of
habituation. From Aristotle’s perspective there was little hope, if any, that Augustine would
become a virtuous man and certainly not a celibate monk. His entire upbringing was designed to
make him a lawyer, a man financially and socially successful. Augustine was in bondage to lust
and the company of a woman since his teen years. He was proud and determined to achieve
financial security and the acclaim of men. These were the things his parents had driven him

46 Ibid., VIII, xii, 29.
47 Brown, Augustine of Hippo, 116.
towards for his whole life. Yes, his mother had always urged him to embrace Christianity, but he had rebuffed her, attached himself to a cult, and even lied to her to escape her presence.

Augustine dismissed the woman he had lived with for 13 years, and who had borne his son, at the mere prospect of marrying into a higher class. It was clear that his career and status were the overriding priority of his life. If, in his early 30s, Augustine has a well-developed character, it is one of unconstrained lust, as well as devotion to academic and social status for his own benefit.

His flawed character and vices do not mean that Augustine was a criminal or wicked in a host of socially unacceptable ways. In his time period, his behavior was quite normal. It is so today. But it is not virtuous. Augustine is miserable because he is convicted that his behavior violates what he knows to be right. To treat someone the way he treated his concubine, and mother of his son, is clearly immoral. This was not a minor, passing mistake. He used her for 13 years knowing all along he would dismiss her when she became inconvenient. Augustine had an inclination to justice, to treat his concubine and his son well, to marry, but it violated his stronger commitment to advantage. His academic success was driven by his desire for preeminence and upward social mobility. There is nothing wrong with a desire to excel or to be prosperous. But there is a problem when pride and envy motivate us, because then we tend to ignore any inclinations to justice that might prove un-advantageous. This is why Augustine remembers stealing from his parents, cheating at games, and stealing pears. These were very clear examples of violating his inclination to justice to satisfy his inclination to advantage. Augustine’s upbringing was void of the kind of moral training needed to attain virtue.

From an Aristotelian perspective, 30 years of this kind of behavior should have made a life of virtue impossible for Augustine. Yet Augustine’s life was transformed almost instantaneously. Augustine’s inability to live according to the inclinations to justice was
dramatically changed once he decided to follow Jesus. Augustine did not instantaneously become virtuous. But he did instantaneously have the ability to live according to the inclination to justice in ways that were impossible before. It probably took years for Augustine to be truly comfortable with celibacy and with the financial limitations of the priesthood. It also probably took years for him to develop the disciplines of serving the church. But these unselfish choices were now possible, whereas before they were impossible. Certainly, Augustine was now habituating himself towards virtue. He saw things with a wisdom he did not have before and he now had the power to follow the inclinations of justice. As a result, he was now developing ‘practical wisdom’ and learning the pleasures that come from living justly. This was something Aristotle never predicted, nor understood to be possible. Augustine had overcome a very deficient habituation without human coercion or long habituation in a different direction. Moral transformation made virtue a possibility for Augustine despite not having the ingredients Aristotle thought were essential.

The Power of ‘Amazing Grace’ - John Newton

Like Augustine, John Newton grew to adulthood without the benefit of good moral training. Unlike Augustine, John lacked even a good education. From an Aristotelian perspective, his eventual debauchery made virtue out of the question. He was brought up in the life of a seafaring man, which was largely destructive from a moral perspective. As in Augustine’s case, Aristotle’s moral perspective cannot really explain the amazing transformation of John Newton.

On July 24th, 1725 John Newton was born to Captain John Newton and his wife Elizabeth. Like Augustine’s mother, Monica, Elizabeth was a devout Christian. But unlike Monica, Elizabeth was well educated and dedicated to the spiritual and moral upbringing of her
son. Unfortunately for Elizabeth, her impact, though strong, was brief. She died of tuberculosis when John was just six. Captain John Newton was at sea when his wife passed and was at sea most of his son John’s life. Captain Newton quickly remarried and had three children by his new wife, Thomasina. This put son John on the fringe of the family, and he was largely on his own from a young age.\footnote{Jonathan Aitken, \textit{John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace} (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2007), 30.} Young John Newton was sent to boarding school at age eight, but his formal education was short lived as his father took him to sea at age eleven. Captain Newton’s influence was by his seafaring example and through giving his son John numerous career opportunities. Young John oscillated between religious interests and the coarseness of a sailor for much of his adolescence. But eventually bad company, his own rebelliousness, and selfishness led him towards a complete apostasy from the faith his mother had attempted to pass on.

John Newton discusses this oscillating journey in his autobiography \textit{An Authentic Narrative}. He says of his youth, “I had little concern about religion, and easily received very ill impressions. But I was often disturbed with convictions… I began to pray, to read the scriptures…[but] I was soon weary, gradually gave it up, and became worse than before: instead of prayer, I learned to curse and blaspheme, and was exceedingly wicked.”\footnote{John Newton, “An Authentic Narrative,” in \textit{The Life and Spirituality of John Newton} introduction by Bruce Hindmarsh (Vancouver, Canada: Regent College Publishing, 1998), 19.} Over time, John’s behavior became increasingly wicked and irresponsible. Despite his father’s efforts to place him in promising employment, John either failed to show up at all or behaved so rudely and irresponsibly that his superiors soon came to despise him. This poor judgement would cause him untold trouble. At age 19, he neglected to turn up to an important job appointment his father had arranged and instead remained at the home of a family friend. He stayed there because he was in
love with their daughter, Polly. However, while walking aimlessly near their home he met a British press gang and was immediately drafted into England’s navy. His father again interceded on his behalf, by getting him assigned as a midshipman, a sub-officer in training. This rescued him from the extremely arduous, dangerous, and harsh discipline of a seaman. But, in keeping with the pattern of his life to date, John ruined this opportunity.

Not only did John perform in a sullen and disrespectful way, but he was foolish enough to be absent without leave and finally to desert. These are the most serious crimes a member of the Royal Navy can commit and could have resulted in the death penalty. Instead, John was publicly flogged and degraded in rank. As if the flogging was not bad enough, being demoted to seaman ensured his life would be made miserable by the great number of seamen he had treated poorly when he was a midshipman. His brief career in the Royal Navy was a disaster on all counts. He proved to be a wicked and vindictive person, who estranged himself from peers and superiors alike. He was untrustworthy and unpleasant. He was by this point a confirmed atheist, a noisy blasphemer, and a careless and disobedient sailor. He says this of himself, “I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion: nay, I eagerly sought occasion sometimes to my own hazard and hurt.” But John Newton was not done, he would become even more debauched.

John Newton’s moral descent continued and before long he entered the slave trade. He was fortunately exchanged out of the Royal Navy to a commercial vessel. It took him little time to become despised by his new captain and peers. They were happy to be rid of him and allow

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50 A “press gang” was a legal, forced subscription into the Royal Navy. It was commonly used at the height of the British Empire when its Navy was its most powerful and crucial military force. This was a common event in England at the time, especially in times of imminent conflict.
51 Aitken, John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace, 46.
52 Newton, An Authentic Narrative, 35.
him to partner with a man in the slave trade in Africa. John initially became a slave trader, one who lived in Africa and made money by slave hunting, capturing, buying, and selling. This included developing a moral callousness toward the gruesome exploitation of slaves. They separated families, harshly punished any who resisted, and kept the slaves chained in cells. Traders exploited the female slaves sexually, i.e. raped them at will. Many traders, including John Newton, gained an interest in charms, necromancies, amulets, and divinations.\textsuperscript{53} The white traders enjoyed a life of wealth and moral license they could never have experienced in their home countries. At this point in his life, John Newton had few principles to keep him from taking the maximum advantage of the situation. He might have remained in Africa except for the providential encounter with a commercial vessel captained by a man with instructions from his father to bring John home.

John’s trip home on the merchant ship, Greyhound, proved a turning point in his life. Two events would set the stage. One, he was given “first-class” passage. This provided time to read. As fate would have it, one of the only books available was \textit{The Imitation of Christ} by Thomas à Kempis. Reading this had him in a more spiritual frame of mind when disaster struck. The second event was a terrible storm that so damaged and disabled the ship that it appeared ready to sink. At least one crewmember was swept overboard and lost, along with most of their cargo and supplies. The crew had to constantly pump water out to keep the ship afloat. As it became clear that their chances of survival were incredibly bleak, John’s mind turned to the prospects of meeting his maker. Despite his limited exposure to Christianity, he knew that he could not expect divine salvation. He abandoned atheism and began to pray and ask God for

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid. 46.
mercy. That mercy did not appear forthcoming. The Greyhound was still many days from shore, they could not survive any more rough seas, and they were nearly out of food. If a storm did not end them, starvation might. These fearful times led John to read the scriptures and to continue to pray. He was especially encouraged by the parable of the prodigal son. The parable clearly illustrated God’s mercy and willingness to forgive even the vilest sinner. So, John prayed for that forgiveness. This led to the spiritual and moral transformation that changed the course of John’s life. And, in what seemed like a miracle, the Greyhound made land.

John Newton’s transformation was in some sense immediate, but in another sense gradual. Some things changed immediately. He stopped swearing and started churchgoing. He began to study the scriptures and took Communion. But he also continued in some sins. He did not yet have any objections to the slave trade and took a position as first mate on a slave ship. This would expose him to temptations that he was not yet prepared to overcome. That said, John Newton now had a very powerful hunger for intellectual and spiritual food. He began to develop disciplines of reading and prayer that would build considerably on the transformation that had begun. Over the course of the next decade John Newton would marry, he would captain slave ships for 6 years, he would take a job on shore, he would grow spiritually and morally, be mentored by many Christian men, and finally resolve to be ordained. It would take him another 6 years to be ordained. During that time, he wrote his autobiography (*An Authentic Narrative*). It would be published the same year he was ordained (1764 at the age of 39). In the subsequent years, John Newton became a best-selling author, a much-loved pastor, a famous evangelical preacher, a leader in the abolitionist movement, and the writer of the most sung, most recorded,

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and most loved hymn in the world (Amazing Grace). “No other song, spiritual or secular, comes close to it in terms of numbers of recordings (over three thousand in the “United States alone), frequency of performances (it is publicly sung at least ten million times a year), international popularity across six continents, or cultural longevity (234 years old and still going strong).”

How did the reprobate John Newton become the seemingly virtuous John Newton whose achievements earned him a monument in Westminster Abbey?

**John Newton, Virtue, and Habituation**

The transformation of John Newton, a confirmed reprobate at age 23, is difficult to account for from an Aristotelian perspective. Young John spent the most formative years of his life lacking in both moral training and education. His seagoing life, ages 11 – 23, was completely destructive of moral principles. It is this period of life, from Aristotle’s perspective, when moral training is most crucial. John got some positive education and moral training, from birth to age six, from his mother. This training proved powerful and was, through much of his life, a part of his conscience, convicting him of his need for God and forgiveness. Nevertheless, it did not prevent him from embracing atheism, immorality, and eventually occult practices in Africa. Nor did his early training prevent him from being rebellious, vindictive, grossly disobedient, and irresponsible. John Newton had nothing going for him from a moral perspective when, at age 23, he found himself sailing for England on the Greyhound.

Although still young, from Aristotle’s perspective, he is an adult with none of the practical wisdom or habituation necessary to begin or sustain a journey towards virtue. Additionally, there is no external force: no school, no religious community, and no family, with

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55 Ibid., 224.
any authority in his life. There is nothing from a secular perspective that has any hope of redeeming John Newton from a morally bankrupt life. It is certainly true that marriage and religion are powerful motivators. But there is no reason to think either of them, separately or together, can account for Newton’s transformation.

John Newton had been in love with Polly and around the Christian religion much of his debauched adolescence and young adulthood. Polly was not a devout Christian in her youth or at the beginning of their marriage. There was nothing about their relationship, before or after his transformation, that motivated his newfound desire for the scriptures and Christian mentors. Despite various periods of religious activities during his formative years, Newton was never enthusiastic about a relationship with God. Prayers and scripture reading were part of a fleeting religious discipline, not the product of a grateful and worshipful heart. Religion, which merely reflects simple human inclinations, has no power to change carnal desires and a rebellious spirit. John Newton had no moral training as a young man that provided an experience of satisfaction from having done the right thing. He had no reason to think that pursuing an inclination to justice would simultaneously satisfy his inclination to advantage. Instead, all his experience was of pursuing his own self-interest (the inclination for advantage). Although his self-centeredness often had disastrous consequences, John had no reason to think that responsible or altruistic behavior would have a more pleasing outcome. Furthermore, pleasing himself was his major motivator. Aristotle thought that minus good habituation there was no probability of virtue in the future. As a result, the Aristotelian perspective cannot account for the radical change in John Newton.

Ibid., 104-105.
By the time he is ordained at age 39, the character of John Newton bears no resemblance to John Newton of age 23. He is in a happy, successful marriage. He has humbly been pursuing ordination for 6 years. He is humbled and elated to take a curate’s position in Olney. Instead of concerns for wealth, and disputes with superiors and peers alike, he is focused on his duties to his parish. He is embarking on a journey of over 40 years of service to parishioners, friends, the abolitionist movement, and the church at large. When he died The Times (of London) said of him, “His unblemished life, his amiable character both as a man and as a Minister and his able writings are too well known to need any comment.” Newton would offer a more candid appraisal in his own epitaph.

JOHN NEWTON
ONCE AN INFIDEL AND LIBERTINE
A SERVANT OF SLAVES IN AFRICA
WAS
BY THE RICH MERCY OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOUR
JESUS CHRIST
PRESERVED, RESTORED, PARDONED
AND APPOINTED TO PREACH THE FAITH
HE HAD LONG LABOURED TO DESTROY.

Despite his seemingly hopeless start, John Newton appears to have become a virtuous man. His own testimony is that it was only possible by amazing grace.

A Rebel Without a Cause – Franklin Graham

If anyone had everything going for them in terms of habituation, it was Franklin Graham. His parents, Billy and Ruth Graham were devout Christians of impeccable moral standards. Both were devoted to their children and provided for their every need as best they could. Although Billy would often be absent, Ruth was totally dedicated to the spiritual and moral training of

57 Ibid., 348.
58 Ibid., 350.
Franklin and his siblings, and Ruth Graham was a formidable mother. Daughter of medical missionaries in China, Ruth spent her first 17 years in Asia. “They were exposed to everything from monsoons, sandstorms, and epidemics to bandit attacks and civil war.”\textsuperscript{59} Ruth attended high school in Pyongyang, Korea (now North Korea). She met Billy at Wheaton College in Illinois. Ruth was a strong, determined, smart, well educated, capable woman. Billy, Ruth, their extended family, their church and ministry family, and their financial resources meant that Franklin would get plenty of moral, spiritual, and academic training. Aristotle could hardly have anything to complain about regarding Franklin’s habituation. But as we trace his life, it will be clear that it was not the excellent habituation that determined Franklin’s character.

William Franklin Graham III was born on July 14, 1952 in North Carolina. Being the first-born son of the world’s most prominent evangelist is both a blessing and a curse. Franklin was blessed to be part of a loving, well-to-do family. He had three older sisters and would later have a younger brother. His mother probably qualifies for sainthood. She loved, led, and protected the family in Billy’s absence. The curse was that everyone knew who Franklin Graham was and had high expectations of him, including following in his famous father’s footsteps. Such expectations are not only an impossible burden but are stifling. Knowing that Franklin, and all the children, faced incredible scrutiny, the Grahams did their best to maintain some privacy and raise their children well.

Billy and Ruth acquired 150 acres of heavily wooded mountain land outside Montreat, North Carolina that backed up into a thousand acres of Asheville reservoir’s watershed. Ruth supervised the construction of a large, log home on the property they called Little Piney Cove.

\textsuperscript{59} Billy Graham, Just As I Am (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 71.
Little Piney Cove provided a wonderful setting for a young boy to grow up in the outdoors; Franklin enjoyed hunting, fishing, and motorcycle riding. Although outdoor adventures may have been Franklin’s passion, Billy and Ruth had more important priorities. Church attendance was a given, as were evening devotions, prayers before meals and prior to leaving for school, and scripture memory. The Graham children were not required to become theologians, but they were certainly familiar with the Bible. They were trained to be polite, honest, and hard working. They were also expected to be good students. These were all good things, but of course not necessarily to Franklin’s liking.

Early on, Franklin rebelled against the plans his parents had for him. Franklin’s rebellion was not a total rejection of his parents and their values. It was more like an insistence that he could be his own person and that included doing some things of which they disapproved. One of the early, disappointing choices Franklin made was to smoke. His parents forbade it, and he knew that, but decided he would do so anyway. Smoking is difficult to disguise, so to make it possible Franklin also had to be a liar. Early in life, Franklin decided he would make his own decisions, and if that required disobeying his parents, his teachers, or the law, he really did not care. If doing so required lying, he did not mind that either. There were a couple of other areas where Franklin parted ways with his parents. One, he did not mind getting into a fight over what he considered an injustice and he also did not care much are about getting above average grades in school. As a result of his mediocre academic performance, his parents enrolled him in an elite Christian boarding school in New York: Stony Brook School for Boys.

The choice of Stony Brook tells us what Billy and Ruth were trying to do. The school was founded in 1922 with the motto, “Character before Career.” The school mission statement says it “exists to challenge young men and women to know Jesus Christ as Lord, to love others
as themselves, and to grow in knowledge and skill, in order that they may serve the world through their character and leadership.”⁶⁰ These were all things that Franklin probably agreed with, but he did not agree with leaving Little Piney Cove and having to put up with Stony Brook rules. As a result, Franklin’s grades were average, and he tried to stretch the rules as far as he could before getting reprimanded.⁶¹ He expressed his independence by covertly smoking and drinking, and although the staff suspected it, they were unable to catch him and expel him. Franklin suspected his days at Stony Brook were numbered, so he convinced his parents to withdraw him prior to graduation and send him to the public high school near Montreat. Being back in North Carolina did not change the rebellious spirit Franklin had developed. He got into fights. He crossed the law by speeding and fleeing from the police. He barely avoided expulsion from high school. Franklin’s rebellious behavior began to have consequences. The high school discovered he was one credit shy of what was required to graduate. Given his average grades and lack of a degree his father called on a friend to allow him into college. As a result, Franklin ended up at LeTourneau College in Texas in the fall of 1970 at age 18.

Again, Billy and Ruth were doing all they could to keep Franklin on the right path. LeTourneau was a Christian school dedicated to producing professionals who integrate their faith with their work. It also emphasized Christian virtue. Franklin brought his rebellious spirit with him, but met men there who were older, mature, and devout Christians. Franklin also took a summer job with his father’s ministry (Billy Graham Evangelistic Association/BGEA) leading tours to the Middle East. He worked with Billy’s friend Roy Gustafson. Roy was a dynamic

Bible teacher with a passion for mission work. Roy became a close friend of Franklin’s and introduced him to two amazing missionary women running the Annoor Sanatorium for Chest Disease in Mafraq, Jordan (Eleanor Soltau & Aileen Coleman). Franklin was drawn to the adventure of traveling in the Middle East and to the remarkable work and faith of the missionaries he met there. Although Franklin had not embraced the faith of his parents and continued his rebellious ways, he was developing some respect for the Christians he was meeting at LeTourneau and through the BGEA.

It was becoming clear to Franklin that he had to make a choice. He could continue his rebellious ways, or he could attempt to take the path his parents and other Christians he respected had chosen. Franklin says of himself at this key juncture, “The sinful life I was living was not satisfying me any longer. There was an emptiness – a big hole right in the middle of Franklin Graham’s life – a void that needed to be filled. The truth was, I felt miserable because my life wasn’t right with God.” But Franklin also recognized that it was not simply a matter of changing his behavior. The struggle he was having was much deeper, and he knew a passage of Scripture that captured his dilemma.

For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. … For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish. … I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good. … Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Romans 7:15, 18-19, 21, 24

Despite his upbringing, his education, the influence of family and friends, the social pressure of working for the BGEA, Franklin could not be virtuous. He needed help, and he knew where to

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62 Ibid., 83.
63 Ibid., 70-71.
look for it. One night, alone in a hotel room in Jerusalem, Franklin’s inner turmoil came to a head; he knelt by his bed and poured out his heart to God asking for forgiveness and help.\textsuperscript{64} God was pleased to transform Franklin’s heart; he now had the power to pursue God’s plan for him and the virtue associated with it.

Franklin’s transformation took some time, but the change was immediate. He gave up smoking first and gave up drinking later. He married, and he began seeking theological training and experience with humanitarian aid mission work. Franklin went on to become one of the founders and Director of World Medical Mission\textsuperscript{65}, the CEO and President of Samaritan’s Purse,\textsuperscript{66} and the CEO and President of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.\textsuperscript{67} Now he devotes his life to both humanitarian missions and the gospel mission. Despite a busy schedule, he maintains a happy marriage and his ministries have been scandal free. Critics complain about his wealth, but as the CEO of major charitable organizations with a world-wide impact, his compensation is not extravagant. Both he and his father could have built up much larger fortunes if that was their goal. People may debate whether or not Franklin Graham has become a virtuous man, but he does appear to be a viable candidate.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 123. This event occurred in the summer of 1974 when Franklin was 22.

Franklin helped start World Medical Mission which later became the medical mission arm of Samaritan’s Purse. World Medical Mission was started in 1977 to provide a means for surgeons to go on short term missions and provide medical services to distressed areas of the world.

Samaritan’s Purse was started by Bob Pierce in 1970 to assist Christians ministering to the most needy around the world. Bob met Franklin Graham in 1973 and thought he might be interested in the ministry. He mentored Franklin and the leadership of Samaritan’s Purse was passed to Franklin in 1979 after Bob’s death in 1978.

\textsuperscript{66} Samaritan’s Purse was started by Bob Pierce in 1970 to assist Christians ministering to the most needy around the world. Bob met Franklin Graham in 1973 and thought he might be interested in the ministry. He mentored Franklin and the leadership of Samaritan’s Purse was passed to Franklin in 1979 after Bob’s death in 1978.

\textsuperscript{67} The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) was founded by Billy Graham in 1950. It had a simple purpose, to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ around the world as effectively as possible and to equip the church and others to do the same. The board of the BGEA chose Franklin to be its CEO in 2000 and President in 2002.
Franklin Graham, Virtue, and Habituation

If one assumes that Franklin Graham is a virtuous person, the question becomes, was it a result of his habituation and the development of practical wisdom, or was it another factor, specifically a supernaturally inspired spiritual and moral transformation? Aristotelians might say Franklin was never really off the path leading to virtue. After all, he was hardly most people’s idea of the prodigal son. He was not squandering his family’s wealth and he was not involved with flagrantly immoral behavior (sexual promiscuity, drugs, drunkenness, gambling, crime, etc.). He had problems graduating from schools, but he was not a complete delinquent. The fact that he had a liking for tobacco and alcohol does not mean that either were causing him to be dysfunctional. Additionally, Franklin was working for the BGEA doing good things and hanging around with good people. Some might say that at 22 he was still young and simply had not arrived at virtue yet. But such an analysis would be based on an inadequate understanding of Franklin, habituation, and virtue.

Habituation requires being convinced to practice the right thing, developing both a liking for it and the judgement to recognize it. One is virtuous when one understands the right thing to do in the circumstances and chooses to do the right thing from a desire to do so. For much of Franklin’s life prior to 22, he had rejected many of the things his parents and teachers had told him. He saw little value in education, he became addicted to cigarettes, he became a regular liar to hide his disobedience, and had no desire to change those self-destructive habits. The fact that his behavior was well within the social norms of our society does not mean he was on the road to virtue. Until his transformation, he had absolutely no inclination to change his behavior and his personal and academic deficiencies made him an unlikely candidate to play a key role in any Christian mission organization. This was problematic since he lacked both the vision and skills
for any other particular profession. His character was not badly flawed by the prevailing social standards, but he was not on the path to virtue. Minus his transformation, Franklin would not be who he is today, and it is not clear whether he would have developed into a virtuous man.

Franklin’s plight prior to his transformation is a problem for Aristotelian virtue ethics. Given Franklin’s habituation, rebellion and disobedience should not have been a problem. By age 22, Franklin should have embraced his parent’s teachings on moral, social, and even spiritual issues and should have been pretty happy about it. Why not? Had he embraced all those things, Franklin would have had a much better relationship with his parents, he would have had a good college degree, he would have been learning about missions and evangelism, and had his choice of career/ministry paths. Plenty of people, organizations, and businesses would have been glad to give a sharp Franklin Graham a nice position. Instead, at age 22 prior to his transformation, Franklin’s future was anything but clear. Additionally, he had vices in his life that could have proven very problematic, especially in the circles he was working. As if that was not enough, Franklin was not happy. He was not even meeting his own moral expectations. To make matters worse, there was no obvious mechanism for changing this trajectory. Franklin had no educational or professional aspirations at this point. No persons or institutions were in a position to help Franklin change the rather bleak path on which he found himself. What changed everything for Franklin was not his habituation or any practical wisdom he had acquired during his youth, but a spiritual transformation that changed his heart. After that transformation, he had the ability to curb inclinations that were desirable in some sense, but not conducive to a life of ministry. Post transformation Franklin was busy helping others instead of “creating his own identity.” Interestingly, by pursuing his passion for helping others, he created his own identity. Not only did he create his own identity, but it has many of the marks of a virtuous man. Franklin Graham
is yet another example of how achieving virtue is possible, but the key ingredient is not habituation.

**Transformation, Virtue and Moral Luck**

The possibility of moral transformation changes the prospects for virtue and the implications of moral luck. A divine moral transformation is available to everyone. Such a transformation makes virtue possible for anyone. This goes a long way in defusing the claims about constitutive moral luck and circumstantial moral luck. A spiritual/moral transformation changes who we are and can overcome past experiences and training. Both Augustine and John Newton had upbringings/habituation that made them unlikely candidates for virtue. Not only had their temperament been shaped, but their experiences had shaped them in a way that made it unlikely they would have either the character or the practical wisdom to be virtuous. Yet both overcame their past to develop strong moral character and the wisdom to achieve great good.

John Newton’s circumstances placed him in the middle of England’s debate on slavery. Slavery was an issue his past might have crippled him from seeing clearly. Rather than justify his past actions or deny the evil of slavery, Newton was able to admit his own guilt and use his knowledge of the slave trade to expose its cruelty. A moral transformation can enable a person to withstand very difficult circumstances. Paul illustrates this as well. He had to endure incredible persecution for his Christian missionary work. It is doubtful that his upbringing was responsible for his courage and character in those situations. Although Newton and Paul faced challenging circumstances, they seem to have been infused with the strength to do the right thing. Both Paul and John Newton had been made able to overcome self-interest. The reality and power of transformation defuses much of the moral luck objection and skepticism of moral responsibility.
What about......?

There are two common objections to the claim that a spiritual/moral transformation is necessary for virtue. The first objection asserts that there are clearly virtuous people in the world that deny a spiritual transformation. There are several observations to make about this claim. First, that may be true. There are very few virtuous people out there, but it is possible that some of them have managed to arrive at that point on their own power. Interestingly, when it comes to giving a significant amount of one’s time or income to charity, the vast majority of people who do that are religious. But there are some, like Julia Wise and Jeff Kaufman that give sacrificially, but are not religious. Second, as previously noted, it is hard to tell if a person is virtuous. We are often unable to distinguish a “decent” person from a virtuous person. Motives are very hard to discern. Again, as previously noted, there is a significant difference between a person who does a good deed and a virtuous person. If it is the case that people are by nature selfish, then it is hard to see how that can be changed by mere habituation or will power.

In Larissa MacFarquhar’s book, Strangers Drowning, she offers short biographies of people who do amazingly good things. Yet, it is not clear that any of them are virtuous people. That statement does not deny how admirable their accomplishments are. It simply notes that a person can be extraordinary in many ways, yet still have significant character flaws and be unhappy. Doing some number of good deeds does not necessarily imply a life that is “going well.” Saul seems to fall in this category. He was doing things that his contemporaries and his social group really admired, yet he was not virtuous. It is not clear that many people, if any, can be virtuous without God’s help.

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The second, and more serious objection, regards the multitude of people who claim a spiritual/moral transformation, but are clearly not virtuous. Sadly, everyone has seen examples of this. In the press currently are truly depressing examples of leaders in both the Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist convention who are guilty of sexual immorality of the worst sort. How does this happen if they have been spiritually transformed? The first thing to consider is the possibility that they have not been spiritually transformed. There is a great distinction between belonging to a church and observing religious rituals and being supernaturally transformed. It is a grave mistake to assume that a religious person, or a person making a religious claim, has indeed been changed by a relationship with God. Typically, being transformed leads to belonging to a church and observing religious practices. But being religious is no guarantee of a spiritual transformation. Both Saul and Franklin Graham are examples of this. Both were religious, but neither was initially spiritually/morally transformed.

A second distinction to point out is that spiritual transformation is not just a single event. A transformation is a life-changing event, but its work is not completed at that moment. It took years of nourishing his spiritual life for John Newton to have his character altered. Similarly, Paul, Augustine, and Franklin Graham had to mature over years before they became the virtuous persons we know them to be. This maturation process is neither certain nor perfect. Virtue takes time and practice; Aristotle was right about this. Some people do not stay on the path to virtue and end up succumbing to vice. Even those who mature to virtue are not then perfect. All people remain fallible. The fact that some fail, or stumble, does not change the fact that many succeed. For a spiritual transformation to be successful, one has to constantly nurture one’s relationship to God. Failure to do so makes one vulnerable to the still active inclination to advantage. Remaining aware of and nurturing a spiritual/moral transformation is the key to attaining virtue!
CHAPTER 7
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A good man always knows his limitations.
Inspector Harold “Dirty Harry” Callahan, Magnum Force

This dissertation denies Aristotle’s claim, and the view in post-Aristotle Western society, that human beings have within themselves and their community all the resources required to attain virtue. Aristotle’s ethics state that proper habituation lays the foundation for virtue. Aristotle believed that our moral psychology was amenable to developing virtuous habits. Western society, to include contemporary education policy, embraces that view. However, despite the attempts of Western society, indeed all societies, to properly habituate the next generation, immorality appears to be the norm. Apparently, our moral psychology is “hard-wired” to prioritize self-interest (the inclination to advantage) over moral obligation (the inclination to justice). As a result, in circumstances where self-interest and moral obligation conflict, people are likely to choose self-interest. History, contemporary events, and recent social science appear to confirm that fact. Habituation cannot change our moral psychology. If our moral psychology is flawed in this way, it has tremendous implications for us personally and for society.

The Importance of Virtue

Aristotle thought virtue was eminently possible and absolutely indispensable to the flourishing of the individual and society. He appears to be right about that. The course of history,

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1 Dirty Harry, “Magnum Force,” 25 December 1973 (Clint Eastwood). Inspector Callahan (Dirty Harry) responds to Lt Brigg’s comment that he had served longer than Harry and never had to pull his gun. To this Harry replies that, “a good man always knows his limitations.” The implication being that Briggs was not competent with a gun and attempting to use it would have produced an undesirable outcome. The implication for this conclusion has to do with knowing whether one is likely to become virtuous and happy based on purely individual effort as opposed to being aware of one’s limitations and seeking God’s help.
the teachings of the most prominent ethicists, and the findings of science and social science confirm Aristotle’s view on the importance of virtue, especially moral virtue. As we review human history, we see that moral failures resulting in war, tyranny, genocide, gulags, slavery, and other horrors cause much more human misery than natural disasters and sickness. An illustrative example is the contrast between North and South Korea. What is the relevant difference between North Korea and a South Korea? North Korea is perhaps the most miserable place on earth to live, and South Korea is a thriving part of the modern world. The crucial distinction has nothing to do with geography, natural resources, race, or culture. The difference has to do with the moral perspectives of the ruling elite and the dominated citizens. Both have allowed self-interest to overrule moral obligations. There are completely understandable reasons for this. It is not obvious that any of us in those same circumstances would not make the same decision. But, the fact is that this is a moral choice. It illustrates the sad truth that when the stakes are high enough, we are generally not good enough to do the right thing. The results of such a moral failure are disastrous for all concerned. This is just what major ethicists predicted.

The importance of virtue and its connection to individual happiness and societal success is what ethicists like Aristotle, Kant, and Mill have long claimed. Although each of the ethicists had a different view of the nature of moral decisions, they all had very similar views of virtue. All of them thought that virtue was intimately connected both to individual happiness and to societal success. All of them thought that individual virtue was the basis of a just society. Aristotle thought that virtuous men were the proper ones to lead society and to legislate moral behavior. Kant thought that human injustice was the major cause of human misery and could be decreased by widespread virtue. Since Mill believed that virtue consisted of being impartially committed to the happiness of everyone, he thought the spread of virtue would alleviate most
human suffering. Virtue is important not just for its societal impact, but for its role in individual mental health.

Social scientists have long noted that we are moral beings and that a mentally healthy self-image includes a perception of virtue. If you doubt that, just try suggesting to an acquaintance that he is a bad person, that he is selfish, and that he treats those around him unfairly. That will cause a crisis in that friendship! Few of us think we deserve moral criticism. We all believe we are basically “good” and that we have a handle on what is right and wrong. Although we are likely universally mistaken about this, it is nevertheless important for us to think we are good. When good people make a mistake, they fix it. If we knew of a moral flaw, it would be incumbent upon us to correct it immediately, and we would be self-motivated to do so. To avoid guilt and depression, we must believe we are good and when we cannot conclude that, we must change something quickly. Although our moral psychology is complicated and fragile, the point is, we are moral beings and being virtuous is very important to us. It matters to our mental health and to our physical health.

Moral failings often have serious physical health implications. Whether it is drunk driving, smoking, poor eating and exercise habits, promiscuity, drug abuse, or marital discord, our moral weaknesses often lead to stress, physical complications, and even death. We are often in denial about the implications of our choices. This is again our tendency to think we are “good” and not blame ourselves for our choices. But denial does not change the fact that these choices often lead to very predictable bad outcomes. There is abundant evidence that the majority of premature deaths in our country are the result of personal moral decisions. If our society grasped the importance of virtue and pursued it, we could make significant improvements to individual and societal happiness. Such a pursuit might begin with understanding the definition of virtue.
A Definition of Virtue

Virtue implies possessing a well-developed, enduring inner state (what Aristotle calls the soul) characterized by a strong commitment to doing the right thing, having the ability to recognize the right thing, and finally having the desire and will power to do the right thing in all situations. Virtue is not simply doing the right thing. An important aspect of virtue is having the right motives. In the vast majority of the mundane moral decisions in life we do the right thing for self-interested reasons. Taking care of ourselves, our family, and those around us is to our advantage, and it is society’s expectation. Being polite, honest, and hard-working is typically to our benefit. It is normally right to do those things but doing them because they are to our advantage is no indication of virtue. Because actions do not always reflect motives, Kant said that our virtue could only be determined by the obstacles (natural inclinations) it overcomes.² Some think one’s virtue is determined by what one does when no one is looking. There is some truth to that. But actually, virtue is better revealed by what we do when lots of people are looking and they want us to do what is wrong. That is when we not only have to overcome our own inclinations, but societal pressure as well. Our behavior when there is tremendous pressure, internal (self-interest) and external (peer pressure), to do wrong, reveals our motives and our virtue. Because motives are so hard to discern, virtue is easily misunderstood and misread.

In the normal course of events in life, we rarely know if the people around us are virtuous. In fact, we do not even know if we are. We have little, if any, insight into actual motives. Plus, even if we tend to do virtuous things, it is not clear what we will do under duress. This is why the behavior of the police battalions described in Browning’s book Ordinary Men is

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so discouraging. These were men with families who were respected members of a community. They probably appeared virtuous and thought they were virtuous. No one expected them to become killers of innocent men, women, and children. Their lack of virtue was not evident until they were placed in a stressful situation. We think virtue is the possession of people with an ordinary upbringing and education (habituation), but it is not. The ability to recognize what is right, to desire it, and to do it unflinchingly from a determined character is a rare attribute. The difficult journey to virtue is why Aristotle thought virtue was reserved only for the mature who have had years of training and practice.

**Aristotle, Virtue, and Habituation**

Aristotle provides an account of our moral psychology to undergird his thoughts about virtue and the indispensable role of habituation. He accounts for rational and non-rational reasons for our behavior. Pleasure and pain reside in the non-rational part of our being. Aristotle recognizes that pleasure and pain are extremely important motivators. Fortunately, Aristotle thought our experience and expectation of pleasure and pain could be trained. Training our inclinations is the role of habituation. We must be trained to take pleasure in noble things and to be pained by ignoble things. So, we should be pleased with honesty and pained by cowardice. This moral training must occur during our youth. It has to be imposed on the young by parents, family, educators, and society. It is adults who are virtuous and can teach the young what is virtuous. Not only are the young practicing virtuous behavior, but they are developing practical wisdom so that they recognize the good and how to attain it. Those youths who have received proper moral training (habituation) may continue to practice virtue and grow in practical wisdom. Only adults who have become virtuous will then pursue intellectual wisdom and contemplation. When the various elements of the human being (rational, non-rational, physical,
and emotional) are all functioning correctly, then a person is virtuous and happy. Aristotle thought this blessed state could only be achieved as an adult after a full life.

The moral training Aristotle has in mind is quite rigorous, lengthy, and contingent upon being in the right social settings. To the extent being born into the right family and social setting is out of one’s control, “moral luck” is an essential part of Aristotle’s ethics. Aristotle sees that our character is shaped not just by experience, but by habit. In our youth we must be required to develop good habits. In the process of learning to play an instrument, we must practice regularly and long enough to experience the benefits of having developed skills and an “ear” for good music. No one becomes a proficient musician without years of practicing to play an instrument and years of listening to a variety of good music. Similarly, no one becomes virtuous without years of practicing good behavior and years of learning to recognize what is good and how to achieve it in various circumstances. Aristotle does not think that simply telling someone what is good will succeed in convincing them to behave in a good way. The good is often counter to untrained inclinations. Few, if any, people will act in a way that seems counter to their advantage and painful. If they have not been properly trained to see the good as both pleasurable and ultimately advantageous, they will not embrace it. The requirement to train our inclinations is why Aristotle thought that a person lacking a proper habituation had no chance of becoming virtuous. Conversely, a person with proper habituation should embrace virtue and continue to pursue it as a young adult. This would result in further moral growth and an increase in practical wisdom. Assuming a person continued this lifestyle, Aristotle believed virtue and happiness would be the result.

There are two very important claims embedded in Aristotle’s conception of virtue and habituation. First, Aristotle’s moral psychology claims that our psyche is malleable enough that
we can develop habits and take actions counter to our perceived self-interest. Second, is the corollary claim that proper habituation can develop good habits and motivate actions counter to our perceived self-interest. This is partly because Aristotle views moral behavior as ultimately in our self-interest. He thinks this is true in the long run, which is why he thinks habituation over many years is crucial. But good habituation does not change the fact that sometimes moral obligations run counter to what appears to be our self-interest. This is why plenty of people from good homes, with a good education, and members of civilized society, still fall short of virtue. As a result, an Aristotelian ethicist would likely have been surprised at what transpires in the next 2,000 years of human history, especially at what we see in contemporary Western civilization.

**Human Nature is Flawed and Habituation is No Remedy**

History, current experience, and social science reveal that human nature is flawed, and habituation is an inadequate remedy. Aristotle thought that habituation could program us to take pleasure in the noble and be pained by the ignoble. He was wrong about that. We all have an inclination for advantage that is strong and never silent. No amount of habituation will eradicate our preference to pursue self-interest. We also have an inclination for justice. But habituation will not make our commitment to justice impervious to our inclination for advantage. Indeed, it is unclear how to make our inclination to justice very powerful on our own. The historical record indicates that justice has seldom prevailed. The human record is one full of violence.

It is not just that horrific wars and genocides have occurred in history, but that human violence is a consistent theme across all times and all societies. Regardless of the quality of habituation, no person is immune to violent behavior, man or woman. We watch in horror as women become suicide bombers and accomplices in mass murder. Some mothers and fathers in
the Middle East teach their children to hate others and instruct them from childhood how to kill them. This is not unprecedented. World Wars I and II precipitated the killing of civilians on a scale modern society thought no longer possible. In the case of rounding up Jews from throughout Europe, this required the active cooperation of ordinary citizens, communities, towns, and cities. People, not just soldiers and police, in virtually every country in Europe participated. Brutal behavior occurred on all sides in all parts of the world. Violent behavior is not the work of a few psychopathic individuals; it flows from the conduct of “normal” men and women. The probability is that anyone in similar circumstances would do the same thing. Not only is violence pervasive, but it seems frequently unjustified. Although there are a multitude of reasons for war and genocide, we do not have to dig far before we find “national interest” as a justification. This “national interest” usually involves territory, natural resources, water, trade, taxation, or any number of things that boil down to enriching one group at the expense of another. The point is that our self-interest is quite strong, and it is powerful enough to induce us to violence when it suits us. War is not typically simply a matter of one group defending itself against an immoral invader. It is the result of a flawed human nature. This becomes obvious as we consider daily human behavior.

In our daily lives we routinely encounter less than virtuous behavior. Whether it is cheating on taxes, insurance fraud, employee theft, sexual indiscretions, gossip, slander, or lying, the banality of bad behavior is inescapable. This happens in mundane situations. It is even worse in the kind of situations that Lance Armstrong faced. Some of us live and work in circumstances where dishonesty is the norm, an essential ingredient to success. Some think that Western culture is descending into just such an abyss. The moral bankruptcy of our society reveals two significant facts. Culture is simply the stereotypical behavior of the vast majority of a particular
population. If our culture is corrupt, it is because the people are corrupt, not vice-versa. Second, if our culture is corrupt, it is because the vast majority of us are not virtuous enough to withstand the temptations we face. We succumb to self-interest because that is our priority, and because after all, it is everyone else’s priority as well. The simple fact is that virtue is rare, and it runs counter to the human psyche. This becomes even more plain when we look at the surprising frequency of divorce.

Marriage is perhaps the single most important human institution. It is the one institution that is almost universally celebrated by families, with a religious ceremony, and public vows. It is the relationship most associated with love, permanent love. It is the one place where love, devotion, and moral integrity are most expected. Adultery is still universally looked upon as a moral failure and an evil. Yet the number of marriages that fail exceeds 40% in the United States. That does not account for the marriages that are a failure, even though they remain intact. How do we explain the fact that nearly one in two people cannot make marriage work? Certainly, there are plenty of stresses on marriage. There are plenty of reasons marriages fail. But all these reasons boil down to the fact that two people could not love each other, treat each other graciously, and enjoy a healthy friendship and partnership. I am not suggesting that having a good marriage is easy or that those who fail are more immoral than those who appear to succeed. As already stated, most of us are not virtuous and cannot attribute what virtue we have to our own goodness. The point simply is that human nature is flawed. It is so flawed that making the most important human relationship we have succeed is often beyond our capacity. Another example of our frail moral constitution is our inability to sacrifice self.

Sacrificing one’s personal time and money to help others is one of the most admired signs of virtue. Since self-sacrifice is one of the surest signs of virtue, we know conclusively that
virtue is rare. Few people give up a significant portion of their personal time and money. Most statistics indicate that around 5% of the population give more than a percent or two of their time and money to charitable causes. This is true of the people with the highest standard of living, the most wealth, and most leisure time in human history. This is occurring at a time when there is still much poverty and sickness in the world. All the starvation and lack of clean water could easily be remedied. And much of the world’s sicknesses could be prevented or treated. The world community’s failure to deal with very preventable problems is not due to technological nor resource constraints. This is purely a moral failure. It says a lot about human nature. Aristotle would doubtlessly claim that our moral frailty is due to the fact that so many lack virtue for lack of habituation. But if the citizens of Western society are unable to produce virtuous citizens, then we have to question the possibility of good habituation and/or the adequacy of habituation. Both seem suspect in the light of history and experience. Social science seems to confirm those suspicions.

The findings of social science are somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand we all want to be virtuous and to have a reputation of virtue. On the other hand, we are quite willing to cheat to get ahead. We just do not want to get caught or deceive so much that we cannot rationalize our behavior. Because we have to rationalize our behavior, we totally underestimate the significance of our immorality. We underestimate the personal repercussions, like Lance Armstrong and Henry Blodget did. We underestimate the social impact, like the increasing U.S. debt, the increased cost of auto insurance, and implications of theft on corporate costs. We underestimate the catastrophe of creating a cheating culture. Possibly most significantly, we overestimate our ability to withstand temptation. We think we will behave honorably in the face of unusual sexual
or financial temptations. In reality, we will not, even if we have really good habituation. And we cannot take credit for having good habituation.

An interesting aspect of virtue is that we consider it a personal achievement, but if habituation is a necessary ingredient, we cannot take credit for virtue. Habituation, and many related ingredients of virtue, are the result of “moral luck.” No child got to pick their parents, their elementary and secondary schools, or their religious and cultural upbringing. Additionally, it was a matter of luck who their neighbors and classmates were, what significant events they attended (marriages, funerals), and what extraordinary events they experienced (near death experiences, accidents, sicknesses, etc.). These experiences likely had a major impact on their moral outlook. To a significant degree, what virtue we have is based on events entirely out of our control. Hopefully, as adults, we can begin to overcome, or build on, the moral foundation bequeathed to us. If we are fortunate enough to live a full life, much of our character may be attributed to our choices. Nevertheless, had Aristotle been correct, our early habituation would get most of the credit for our virtue. But neither luck nor habituation is likely to result in virtue. Virtue is most likely the result of a supernatural transformation.

**Moral Transformation & Virtue**

Aristotle, along with most of Western society, ignores the power and potential of moral transformation. This is particularly problematic if transformation is essential to virtue. Aristotle thought habituation and the associated development of practical wisdom were the key ingredients to virtue. On the contrary, this dissertation argues that habituation is inadequate and even unnecessary. It looks like a moral transformation is able to produce virtue, even without prior habituation (Augustine and John Newton). In the case of Saul and Franklin Graham, transformation was required, even though both had been blessed with excellent habituation.
Since human nature is fundamentally flawed and self-interest is preeminent, habituation is doomed to failure. Since human nature is flawed, it is beyond human resources to achieve virtue.

In all of the four examples explored, (Saul, Augustine, John Newton, and Franklin Graham) the individual was trapped in a less than virtuous position and only divine intervention was able to rescue them. The spiritual transformation each experienced led also to a moral transformation. The transformation was not instantaneous. None of them were immediately virtuous. John Newton continued slave trading after his transformation and succumbed to some degrading behavior. Yet transformation started each of them on a journey that led to the increasing subordination of self-interest to moral obligation. John Newton eventually became a champion of the abolitionist movement. Saul became Paul, a humble servant of Jesus, and servant of the church he had previously hated and persecuted. Augustine was able to put away his lust for women and prestige and become a servant of Jesus and His church. Franklin Graham was finally able to genuinely embrace Christianity and the ministry he had been rebelling against his entire life. These remarkable biographies may seem rare and unusual to those outside of Christian circles, but they are commonplace, indeed almost the norm, in Christian communities. They illustrate the inadequacy of purely human efforts to overcome our innate self-interest. Habituation is not enough. Something supernatural has to happen to give the inclination to justice priority over the inclination to advantage. In these cases, it was a spiritual transformation that included a moral transformation.

**Is Christianity Necessary for Virtue?**

This dissertation has not made the case that Christianity is necessary for virtue. It has argued that a supernatural moral transformation is necessary to overcome our inherent self-interest. I concede that virtue is rare and is very difficult to positively identify. As a result, there
is no basis for being dogmatic about who can and cannot achieve virtue, or who has or has not achieved virtue. Some would deny that the four examples offered are even legitimate examples of virtue. The point of this argument is that human nature appears flawed, so flawed that habituation is inadequate to achieve virtue. The inadequacy of habituation calls into question the common reliance on education and social mores to produce a virtuous person. If some supernatural assistance is required, then Western society should be reevaluating its attitude towards the role of faith. The evidence suggests that instruction in ethics that ignores the role of faith is fundamentally flawed. But the only faith that would work would be one that provides a relationship with God that results in a supernatural moral transformation and a supernaturally sustained journey towards virtue. There is evidence to suggest that a Christian faith could provide the necessary transformation. Whether or not other faiths might work has not been addressed.

Any religion, including Christianity, that fails to produce a relationship with God that results in a supernaturally changed life, leaves a person with a flawed human nature. Religion, minus relationship, can be very powerful. But religion, without a relationship with God, does not change the preeminence of our inclination for advantage. People are religious for a variety of reasons and may do some very good things as a result. However, practicing a religion does not necessarily imply a supernaturally changed life. Minus a supernaturally changed life, even a very religious person is likely to take actions ultimately motivated by self-interest rather than moral obligation. This is one explanation for the current scandals among religious leaders. Some of these religious leaders have used their religious status to abuse others to their own advantage. Sexually abusing others is certainly not a mark of virtue and probably indicates a lack of a spiritual/moral transformation. This dissertation argues that supernatural assistance is essential
for virtue. Christianity could be a source for divine help. To the extent Christianity is merely human rituals, it would not be a source for a transformation. Human religious practice can shape much human behavior, but it cannot change the preeminence of our inclination for advantage. We need supernatural help.

**Conclusion**

This dissertation began by noting the extraordinary difficulty of leading a truly virtuous life. Elizabeth Anscombe, writing in 1958, said there was no point in talking about virtue until we had a clear notion of human nature.\(^3\) Lacking a clear notion of human nature is disastrous given the importance of virtue. The vast majority of human problems are fundamentally moral ones. Whether we are dealing with war, genocide, hunger, poverty, crime, family breakdown, drug abuse, suicide, etc., each has an important moral component. Virtue is not simply important from a societal perspective, but from a personal perspective. Personal happiness, marital and family success, health and longevity are all dependent to a great extent on moral virtue. So, what does it mean to be a virtuous person? Virtue implies possessing a well-developed, enduring, character that consistently recognizes the good, wants the good, and does what is required to achieve the good. A virtuous person is wise enough to know what to do and good enough to do it, even when it is difficult. It sounds easy, but it is not. Aristotle thought that virtue was the result of many years of moral training beginning from a young age. His view of human nature was that it could be trained to be virtuous. Aristotle thought if we were forced to develop good habits in our formative years, we would learn to appreciate goodness and how to achieve it (practical wisdom). If we stayed on that path until full adulthood (late 30s or 40s), we would

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become a virtuous person. All this required good parents, good educators, and a good community with good laws. Habituation sounds like it should work, until we look at what happened in the 2,000+ years after Aristotle. Human history is a tragic tale of war, genocide, civil conflict, slavery, social injustice, divorce, family breakdown, crime, drug abuse, cheating, lying, suicide, and the list never ends. This is true despite the fact that every society attempts to train their youth to be virtuous. This was especially true in Western society which embraced Aristotle’s ethics. Societal dysfunction is not the plight of the immoral minority. It is the plight of all of us. Most of us who have avoided these problems have moral luck to credit, not our virtue.

Apparently, Aristotle was wrong. Human nature appears fundamentally incapable of becoming virtuous, even with good habituation. There just is not that much virtue out there, even in modern societies that should be capable of it. The number of people making genuine sacrifices to help others is probably less than 5% of the population. Humans need help. It turns out that a significant number of those people who might be virtuous (because they are self-sacrificing) have a relationship with God. These people appear to have become virtuous as a result of a supernatural transformation. Many of them became virtuous despite lacking proper habituation. This has important implications for how Western society views virtue. Since virtue requires a supernatural transformation, then faith is an important part of moral training. Seeking or maintaining a relationship with God should be an important consideration for every person, every family, and addressed as part of any good education. Since human nature is flawed and needs supernatural help, then the project of ethics and ethics education should take a radically different approach from what is now standard in Western academia. A relationship with God should be respected and treated as an important constituent of moral education. Elizabeth Anscombe was right. Ethics cannot proceed without an understanding of human nature. It is time
to acknowledge that Aristotle got human nature wrong, and we need God’s help if we really want to be virtuous.
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