

# Chapter II: Theories on the Cultivation of the Self

## 1. A Modern Concept of Virtue: Preliminary Clarification in the Midst of Virtue Ethics Discourses

In ancient moral philosophy, happiness, the art of living, and the question of what comprises the highest good were an essential part of ethical considerations.<sup>160</sup> Thinking about how to lead a good life was an integral part of philosophy. For many philosophers, the answer to the question of how a person should be in order to live happily is clear: be virtuous. Acting out of virtue was considered the highest goal of a good life. This is why thinking about virtue has traditionally been at the centre of philosophical ethics.<sup>161</sup> Since modern times, questions about the “good life” and individual behaviour have experienced a renaissance.<sup>162</sup> Nevertheless, terms such as *virtue* in particular continue to evoke unpleasant associations and connotations, even if these concepts and texts from antiquity first need to be contextualised in their historically-bound semantic world. It is well known that the meaning of old terms changes over time, along with changes in linguistic and cultural contexts. For example, it is a misinterpretation to understand *ars vivendi* (Latin, “art of living”) as the enjoyment of life and not as the transformation of character through the development of desirable qualities and the resulting gain of an appropriate disposition in life.<sup>163</sup> Furthermore, the concept of art is known to have been broadly defined in antiquity; for example, medicine was also referred to as *ars* (art) as well as *scientia* (science),

---

160 Cf. Christoph Horn, *Antike Lebenskunst. Glück und Moral von Sokrates bis zu den Neuplatonikern* (Munich, 1989), 9.

161 See Walter Mesch, “Die aristotelische Tugendethik und ihre Attraktivität aus heutiger Sicht,” in *Grundbegriffe des Praktischen*, ed. Thomas Sören Hoffmann (Freiburg, 2016), 229.

162 Cf. Fenner, *Das gute Leben*, 7.

163 Cf. Horn, *Antike Lebenskunst*, 9.

because dealing with medicine was also understood as part of the art of living. It is therefore important to clarify terms such as *ethics*, *morality*, and *virtue*, as much as possible in order to accurately explain those ancient ideas and theories of a successful and appropriate way of life, and to be able to extract aspects from them for a contemporary understanding of education.

*Ethics*, in the sense of the ancient Greek word *ēthos*, has several meanings. Used in its etymological meaning as a habitat and place of residence, in philosophical contexts, *ēthos* (ἦθος) can also mean custom, usage, habit. *Ēthos* can refer to both behaviour and certain collective practices as well as to a person's individual decisions, which can be traced back to their character, i.e., to their common behaviour and personal qualities, and to goals recognised as good (*agathōn*).<sup>164</sup> Accordingly, ethics refers to a person's character and nature on the one hand and to customs and traditions on the other hand. At present, ethically good actions are understood in this sense as the product of a corresponding character.<sup>165</sup>

*Morality*, derived from the Latin *mos*, refers to generally recognised norms, rules, commandments, and prohibitions as well as to the values of a community, and consequently has a reactive component that is used to regulate conflicts, differences, or contradictions.<sup>166</sup> Moral actions are therefore not only socially desirable forms of behaviour or the observance of commandments, which people reflexively check for correctness and on which they can take a stand, but they arise from a system of norms with an unconditional claim to validity.<sup>167</sup> In short, morality is a system of norms, whereas ethics is the theory or the reflection of morality.<sup>168</sup>

From antiquity to the early modern period, moral philosophy primarily aimed to guide people towards a good life, and “the

---

164 Cf. Dietmar Hübner, *Einführung in die philosophische Ethik* (Göttingen, 2018), 11; and Jan Rommerskirchen, *Das Gute und das Gerechte. Einführung in die praktische Philosophie* (Wiesbaden, 2015), 27.

165 Cf. Rommerskirchen, *Das Gute und das Gerechte*, 27.

166 Cf. Myron Hurna, *Was ist, was will, was kann Moral* (Wiesbaden, 2017), *passim*.

167 Cf. Larissa Krainer and Peter Heintel, *Prozessethik. Zur Organisation ethischer Entscheidungsprozesse* (Wiesbaden, 2010), 63, and Hübner, *Einführung in die philosophische Ethik*, 13.

168 Cf. Hübner, *Einführung in die philosophische Ethik*, 19.

acquisition of virtue was regarded almost unchallenged, albeit in quite different ways, as the decisive basis.”<sup>169</sup> In contrast to norm ethics, which poses the question of morally right and morally wrong behaviour, virtue ethics asks what a morally good action is based on; the attitude of the person acting, the moral constitution of a person or the good constitution of being a person are at its centre and aim at the development of a moral, solid character.<sup>170</sup> Thus, the ethical consideration of virtue ethics focuses on character traits and attitudes, behavioural dispositions, and a person’s way of life.<sup>171</sup> According to virtue ethics, good character is measured by whether a person is considered a good person and does good deeds, and not by whether a person correctly follows set rules and norms.

### 1.1 Philosophical Revival of Aristotelian Virtue Ethics in the Present Day

Aristotle (384–322 BC) is known to be the virtue theorist who had a decisive influence on Western intellectual and cultural history. He devotes himself to the observation of forms of life and ideas of ultimate happiness, and then poses the question of what is good for mankind.<sup>172</sup> Aristotle poses this question right at the beginning of his most important ethical work, the *Nicomachean Ethics* (henceforth, NE), because it examined ethical considerations on human beings.<sup>173</sup> Rather than starting from commandments and prohibitions for human action, he asks the question of how humans should be, thus shifting the focus to moral excellence. Even though much was thought and written about the good life and its prerequisites in antiquity, virtue ethics seems to have left hardly any notable traces in ethical discourse from the Middle Ages until the second half of

169 Mesch, “Die aristotelische Tugendethik,” 229.

170 Cf. Gerhard Marschütz, *Theologisch ethisch nachdenken*, vol. 1 (Würzburg, 2009), 162, and Bruno Keller, “Ethik – eine Annäherung,” in *Ethik und Moral in der Sozialen Arbeit: Wirkungsorientiert – kontextbezogen – habitusbildend*, eds. Ueli Merten and Peter Zängl (Opladen/Berlin/Toronto, 2016), 41.

171 Cf. Dagmar Fenner, *Ethik. Wie soll ich handeln?* (Tübingen, 2020), 163.

172 Cf. Volker Steenblock, “Glück, Lust und Seelenruhe,” in *Handbuch Philosophie und Ethik*, vol. II, 144.

173 Aristotle, *Nikomachische Ethik*, trans. and ed. Ursula Wolf (Hamburg, 2010).

the 20th century.<sup>174</sup> However, with a certain criticism of the prevailing trend in modern moral philosophy, Aristotle's ethics have been making a comeback for several decades, including in the German academic landscape.<sup>175</sup>

With the publication of the groundbreaking essay, "Modern Moral Philosophy," in 1958, the renowned philosopher Gertrude Elizabeth Anscombe initiated the theoretical discourse on virtue ethics as an alternative to utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, and the theory of the social contract.<sup>176</sup> She introduced her criticism with the thesis "that it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy."<sup>177</sup> She pointed to Aristotelian ethics and its central concept of virtue as a promising alternative. She thus initiated the renaissance of the movement of thought around the discredited concept of virtue and its ethics in moral philosophy, which was further developed by Alasdair MacIntyre around twenty years later.<sup>178</sup> In it, he encouraged the revival of Aristotelian ethics, through which "intelligibility and rationality to our moral and social attitudes and commitments" is restored.<sup>179</sup> Above all, MacIntyre is responsible for the fact that virtue ethics is more closely associated with communitarian thought, as a result of which, virtue ethics has also become widespread in political discussions.<sup>180</sup> The Indian philosopher and economist Amartya Sen, together with the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, developed

174 Cf. Ben Dupré, "Tugendethik," in *50 Schlüsselideen Philosophie*, ed. Ben Dupré (Heidelberg, 2010), 96.

175 Cf. Fenner, *Das gute Leben*, 7; cf. Christoph Halbig, *Der Begriff der Tugend und die Grenzen der Tugendethik*, Berlin 2013.

176 See Stanford's *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed 30 November 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/anscombe/>; Jochen Schmidt, "Critical Virtue Ethics," *Religious Inquiries* 3, 5 (2014), 35.

177 Elizabeth Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* XXXII (1958), 1.

178 Cf. Kurt Bayertz, "Antike und moderne Ethik. Das gute Leben, die Tugend und die Natur des Menschen in der neueren ethischen Diskussion," *ZPhF* 59 (2005): 116.

179 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, 1981), 259. In MacIntyre's recently published work, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity. An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge, 2016), a Thomistic Aristotelianism is recognisable. See also Martin Hähnel, "Alasdair MacIntyres Stein-Lektüre," in *Grundbegriffe und -phänomene Edith Steins*, eds. Harald Seubert and Marcus Knaup (Freiburg, 2018), 155.

180 Cf. Verena Weber, *Tugendethik und Kommunitarismus. Individualität – Universalisierung – Moralische Dilemmata* (Würzburg, 2002), 23.

Aristotelian ideas into a *capability approach* based on the theory of justice, which in short represents an explication of quality of life (standard of living) and an analysis of human well-being.<sup>181</sup> Well-being, or a successful practical lifestyle, corresponds to what people are and what they do. Nussbaum develops the *capability approach* with an empirical question about human nature and proposes an “objective list” of fundamental *capabilities*, “which she justifies as the basis of a fulfilled, flourishing life (‘human flourishing’) in terms of complex human states and behaviour.”<sup>182</sup> Nussbaum’s aim is to create the skills that enable us to lead a good life.<sup>183</sup> She is less concerned with moral character per se, even though she sees herself as a neo-Aristotelian.<sup>184</sup>

With other philosophers such as Philippa Foot, who, like Anscombe and others, referred to Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) in her descriptions and analyses of the cardinal virtues, the insistence on the indispensability of the concept of virtue led to its rehabilitation in the 1990s, first in Anglo-Saxon and then in German-language moral philosophical discourses, such as those of Michael Stocker, Christoph Halbig, and Christoph Horn.<sup>185</sup> In these new approaches,

181 See Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, *The Quality of Life* (Oxford, 1993).

182 See Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge, 2000). “The ‘objective list’ of basic human capabilities proposed by Martha Nussbaum includes the development of specific physical constitutions, sensory abilities, thinking skills and basic cultural techniques, the avoidance of unnecessary pain, the guarantee of health, nutrition and protection, the possibility and ability to bond with other people, other species and nature, to enjoyment, to sexual satisfaction, to mobility and finally to practical reason and the development of autonomy and subjectivity,” Hans-Uwe Otto and Holger Ziegler, “Der Capabilities-Ansatz als neue Orientierung in der Erziehungswissenschaft,” in *Capabilities – Handlungsbefähigung und Verwirklichungschancen in der Erziehungswissenschaft*, eds. Hans-Uwe Otto and Holger Ziegler (Wiesbaden, 2010), 12fn. 4, and 9.

183 Cf. Martha Nussbaum, *Gerechtigkeit oder das gute Leben* (Frankfurt, 1999), 95.

184 See Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 76ff.

185 See Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Los Angeles/Berkeley, 1978) and “Tugenden und Laster,” in *Die Wirklichkeit des Guten*, ed. Philippa Foot (Frankfurt, 1997), 116ff. Cf. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (eds.), *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford, 1997); Michael Stocker, “Die Schizophrenie moderner ethischer Theorien,” in *Tugendethik*, eds. Klaus P. Rippe and Peter Schaper (Stuttgart, 1998): 19–41; Halbig, *Der Begriff der Tugend*; Christoph Horn with various essays. Modern virtue ethics, drawing in particular on

it becomes clear that the virtues are by no means moral imperatives that must be followed conscientiously with an unrestricted sense of duty.<sup>186</sup> Whilst some, such as Foot and Hursthouse, follow Aristotle in emphasising the importance of virtues for a good and happy life, others, such as Michael Slote and Julia Annas, place the emphasis on individual aspects, such as character traits, the tolerability of virtues or their appropriation.<sup>187</sup>

A frequent criticism of virtue theory is that it alone cannot establish a complete moral concept. Virtues cannot claim the same self-sufficiency as established consequentialist or deontological moral theories.<sup>188</sup> On the basis of good character alone, a person cannot determine how to act in different situations in life and moral decision-making situations.<sup>189</sup> Yet, moral principles, which are mentioned in deontological approaches, often appear abstract in the face of practical life difficulties and do not extensively reflect the moral characteristics and dispositions of a person.<sup>190</sup> Furthermore, moral reasoning deals exclusively with the question of whether there are justifiable reasons for a certain action, but it asks too little of how motives for actions can be derived from reasons, and why someone should feel connected to these reasons in concrete situations of action. Accordingly, honesty, for example, not only describes the motivation to want to be honest but also contains moral judgements, such as, that it is morally right not to lie, to keep one's promises, not to cheat, etc.<sup>191</sup> However, in Kant's ethics, which is regarded as a prototypical example of principle ethics, the person also plays a role in that a person's *good will* is a prerequisite for acting according to maxims.

---

Aristotle's concept of *aretē*, attempts to make the character and virtues of people in concrete situations the basis of ethics and also of political philosophy.

186 See Elisabeth Göbel, "Der Mensch – ein Produktionsfaktor der Würde?," *Zf-WU* 4 (2) (2003), 175ff.

187 See Michael Slote, *Morals from Motives* (Oxford, 2001); Julia Annas, "Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association*, 78, 2 (2004), 61–75; see also Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge, 1996).

188 Cf. Halbig, *Der Begriff der Tugend*, 270.

189 Cf. Weber, *Tugendethik und Kommunitarismus*, 24.

190 Cf. Pauer-Studer, "Tugendethik," 79.

191 Cf. Dieter Birnbacher, *Analytische Einführung in die Ethik* (Berlin/Boston, 2013), 302.

Kant opens his *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*) with the following words:

It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation, except a *good will*.<sup>192</sup>

So, when we talk about someone being able to rely on a person, this is possible because they have developed certain ways of wanting and acting, on whose consistency and effectiveness someone can count under all circumstances and changing influences.<sup>193</sup> Consistent firmness and consistency of will and action therefore constitute character. Good will is, therefore, the ability to regulate characteristics and dispositions in situations in a way that reason recognises as practically necessary or good. In the second part of *The Metaphysics of Morals* (*Die Metaphysik der Sitten*), Kant also expands on his thoughts on the concept of virtue and understands virtue as “the strength of a man’s maxims in fulfilling his duty.”<sup>194</sup> The inclinations and dispositions recede into the background, and virtue consists in acting in accordance with one’s duty.

However, it seems to me that it makes little sense to draw an absolute distinction between principled ethics and virtue ethics. After all, even people of good character can sometimes act badly. In other words, there is a connection between ethical constitution, or moral character, and actions. The evaluation of character is therefore not only to be directed at dispositions and attitudes but also at actions.<sup>195</sup> Actions and the consequences of actions require precise analysis, provided that character and action are understood as a unit. Principled ethics and virtue ethics can thus be qualified as complementary to each other.

My attempt to understand virtue ethics as a central option, especially for educational matters, is not based on a similar critique of

192 Immanuel Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (GMS), in *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (AA), vol. IV, ed. Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin, 1903), with reference to the English translation (ET) *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, 1998), 7.

193 Cf. Theodor Elsenhans, *Charakterbildung* (Leipzig, 1908), 11.

194 Immanuel Kant, *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* (MS) in *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (AA), vol. VI, ed. Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin, 1907), 435.

195 Cf. Pauer-Studer, “Tugendethik,” 83.

Kantian ethics of duty or universally formulated rules of consequentialist provenance but on the desire to revitalise the human striving for unity and harmony with oneself and one's environment. To this end, a return to the following aspects of ancient Aristotelian ethics in particular (as well as Islamic ethics in the Middle Ages, as we shall see) helps: to place the person with their character traits in the foreground, to emphasise the importance of personal cultivation, and to understand reason as a context-sensitive awareness and a regulatory force.<sup>196</sup> Aristotelian virtue ethics also seems to me to be the appropriate moral theory because it is based on personal potential, and thus places the strengths and weaknesses of a person at the starting point of its consideration. This approach has in mind a person who rethinks and reflects on themselves and their motives for action, and is constantly trying to change their personal moral status quo for the better.

My attempt at revival, as Kleger formulates it with a view to a positive reception of virtues, is not aimed at a moralisation of life but rather at its civilisation of coexistence through the cultivation of personal character traits towards a culture of togetherness.<sup>197</sup> Thus, I understand virtue ethics as an approach to ethics that focuses on the cultivation and training of character, based on the assumption

that not all moral deficits can be attributed to social conditions and the political and economic framework, but that some moral mistakes are the responsibility of the individual.<sup>198</sup>

## 1.2 Virtue: An Ambivalent Word in Germany

Talking about character education in Germany today may sound daring, especially to the ears of German educators, given the historical experience of two totalitarian systems, National Socialism and the socialism of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The roots of the concept of virtue, as previously explained, are much deeper than German history, in which King Friedrich Wilhelm I

---

196 Cf. Bayertz, "Antike und moderne Ethik," 117.

197 Cf. Heinz Kleger, *Tugendethik ohne Tugendterror* (Potsdam, 2015), 92.

198 Pauer-Studer, *Einführung in die Ethik*, 103ff.



(1688–1740) proclaimed Prussian (secondary) virtues such as thrift, prudence, order, diligence, and modesty as his motto.<sup>199</sup>

While *character education* experienced a renaissance in education theory in the United States, England, Canada, and Australia, for various reasons talk of character (education) and virtue (education) almost disappeared from both everyday language and educational jargon from the 1950s onwards.<sup>200</sup> On the one hand, bourgeois virtues were perverted under National Socialism; they became mere catalogues of duties that prevented people's individual development.<sup>201</sup> Hitler's educational objective was to build character by strengthening certain qualities such as willpower and determination.<sup>202</sup> This was to begin in school education. In particular, poems and historical descriptions in ideologically distorted textbooks were intended to inspire boys with warlike and military virtues such as heroism and bravery.<sup>203</sup> School education was characterised as training for the cultivation of strong personalities in terms of character and intellect and as education to become masterful men and warriors.<sup>204</sup> On the

199 See Piper, "Preußische Tugenden im Zeitalter der totalitären Herausforderung." With regard to chastity, see Theodor Brüggemann and Otto Brunken, *Handbuch zur Kinder- und Jugendliteratur – von 1570–1750* (Stuttgart, 1991), 1011ff.; see also Esther Suzanne Pabst, *Die Erfindung der weiblichen Tugend. Kulturelle Sinngebung und Selbstreflexion im französischen Briefroman des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen, 2007). A renaissance can currently be found in the *Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat* in Germany: "The following booklet aims to shed light on the virtue of chastity from an Islamic perspective," Chaudhry Masroor Ahmad, *Keuschheit im Islam* (Frankfurt, 2016), 15.

200 Cf. Agnieszka Bates, *Moral Emotions and Human Interdependence in Character Education. Beyond the One-Dimensional Self* (New York, 2021), 5. In 1958, Otto Friedrich Bollnow published his book, *Die Ehrfurcht. Wesen und Wandel der Tugend* (Frankfurt, 1958). In it, he criticises the moral decline of society and the oblivion of virtues, and attempts a new historical and cultural localisation of various virtues.

201 Cf. Eykmann and Seichter (eds.), *Pädagogische Tugenden*, 7.

202 See Ramona Zürker, *Nationalsozialistische Leibeserziehung. Eine Analyse der Hintergründe und eine didaktische Aufbereitung für den Geschichtsunterricht* (Hamburg, 2015), 17ff.

203 For example, Friedrich Hölderlin, *Der Tod fürs Vaterland: Sämtliche Werke und Briefe in drei Bänden*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt, 1992); see Dietrich Orlow, "Die Adolf-Hitler-Schulen," *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* 13.3 (1965): 280–281.

204 Cf. Heinz Schreckenberg, *Erziehung, Lebenswelt und Kriegseinsatz der deutschen Jugend unter Hitler. Anmerkungen zur Literatur* (Münster/Hamburg/London, 2001), 88.

other hand, there was the danger of politically or ideologically functionalising bourgeois virtues. This was reflected in the school context of the GDR. Patriotic education and homogenisation were seen as the core of a moral education that was to be achieved through specific character development.<sup>205</sup> As a result, the concept of virtue—and virtues in general—were discredited in pedagogical discourse, especially after emancipation and the guiding principles of self-determination and self-realisation meant that any education in virtue was seen as repressive and an expression of “black pedagogy.”<sup>206</sup> The so-called anti-pedagogy<sup>207</sup> movement branded any education associated with any notion of virtue as harassment or “training terror” (*Dressurterror*).<sup>208</sup> Since the 1960s, virtue-based approaches have been replaced by approaches based on values education and social skills.<sup>209</sup> Since then, the concept of character has been avoided and replaced by the concept of *personality*, particularly in modern psychology.<sup>210</sup> Those who spoke of morality and virtue during that era quickly found themselves suspected of ideological bias.<sup>211</sup>

While concepts of virtue have changed in the Anglo-American world in the modern era, and character formation, based on Aristotelian virtue ethics and Kantian deontology, enjoys a certain boom in educational discussions, there has not yet been a radical advance

205 Cf. Winfried Marotzki and Walter Bauer, “Zur sittlich-patriotischen Erziehung in der DDR-Pädagogik,” in *Pädagogik und Erziehungsalltag in der DDR. Zwischen Systemvorgaben und Pluralität*, eds. Heinz-Hermann Krüger and Winfried Marotzki (Opladen, 1994), 68ff.

206 See Friedrich Koch, *Der Kaspar-Hauser-Effekt: Über den Umgang mit Kindern* (Opladen, 1995).

207 See Hans Berner, *Aktuelle Strömungen in der Pädagogik und ihre Bedeutung für den Erziehungsauftrag der Schule* (Stuttgart/Wien, 1994), 222; see Ekkehard von Braunmühl, *Antipädagogik. Studies on the Abolition of Education* (Leipzig, 2015), 75.

208 Cf. Klaus Horn, *Dressur oder Erziehung. Schlagrituale und ihre gesellschaftliche Funktion* (Frankfurt, 1967), 27.

209 Cf. Emanuela Chiapparini, *Ehrliche Unehrlichkeit. Eine qualitative Untersuchung der Tugend Ehrlichkeit bei Jugendlichen an der Züricher Volkshochschule* (Opladen/Berlin/Toronto, 2012), 15.

210 Cf. Karl König, *Kleine psychoanalytische Charakterkunde* (Göttingen, 2011), 9ff.

211 Cf. Ferdinand Buer and Micha Brumlik, “Bildung und Glück. Versuch einer Theorie der Tugenden,” *Organisationsberatung, Supervision, Coaching, Buchbesprechung* 2 (2004): 202.

or a similar positive return to the doctrine of virtue in German moral education discourses.<sup>212</sup> A contrary development can be observed in the discourses of specialised philosophy, action theory, moral psychology, and economics.<sup>213</sup> For Christian theology and religious education, it can at least be noted that after the anthropological turn, there was talk of character education and the passing on of values.<sup>214</sup> This concept of education is based on the assumption that a fulfilled and good life can be guaranteed by instilling virtues.<sup>215</sup> According to Jochen Schmidt, virtue ethics currently has more resonance in Catholic thinking than in Lutheran thinking.<sup>216</sup>

Max Scheler spoke of a serious distortion and over-moulding of the classical concept of virtue since the beginning of the Enlightenment, and a look at today's discourse culture gives the impression

- 
- 212 Cf. Daniel Lapsley and David S. Yeager, "Moral-character education," in *Handbook of Psychology: Educational Psychology*, eds. Irving B. Weiner, William M. Reynolds, and Gloria E. Miller (Hoboken, 2013), 289–348. Current examples include *The Character Project* at Wake Forest University and *Character.org*, which is launching character education in the United States. See also Hähnel, *Das Ethos der Ethik*, 52; cf. Hoyer, *Tugend und Erziehung*, 22. In the thirteenth century, Christian ethics in the West adopted classical Greek virtue ethics. While later rejected by the Reformation (and the problem of grace), virtue ethics as personal ethics has formed the backbone of Catholic ethics since the nineteenth century. Cf. Ingeborg Gabriel, "Personality/Personality Ethics," in *Handwörterbuch Theologische Anthropologie: Römisch-katholisch/Russisch-orthodox. Eine Gegenüberstellung*, eds. Bertram Stubenrauch and Andrej Logrus (Stiftung Pro Oriente, Vienna and Stiftung Russische Orthodoxie Moskau, Freiburg, 2016), 62.
- 213 Cf. Susanne Moser, "Tugend als Wert. Christoph Halbig und Max Scheler im Vergleich," *LABYRINTH* 18.2 (2016): 158.
- 214 Cf. Gottfried Adam, "Ethisches und soziales Lernen," in *Neues Handbuch religionspädagogischer Grundbegriffe*, eds. Gottfried Bitter et al. (Munich, 2002), 238; see also Hans-Joachim Höhn, *Das Leben in Form bringen. Konturen einer neuen Tugendethik* (Freiburg, 2014); Jennifer Herdt, *Putting on Virtue. The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago, 2008); Christian Feichtinger and Şenol Yagdı, "Tugendethik im christlich-islamischen Religionsunterricht," *Österreichisches Religionspädagogisches Forum* 28.1 (2020): 251–272.
- 215 Cf. Adam, "Ethisches und soziales Lernen," 238ff.
- 216 See Jochen Schmidt, "Die höchste Tugend ist: Leiden und Tragen alle Gebrechlichkeit unserer Brüder," *Luther* 86 (2015): 8; cf. Johannes Fischer, Stefan Gruden, and Esther Imhof, *Grundkurs Ethik: Grundbegriffe philosophischer und theologischer Ethik* (Stuttgart, 2008), 376.

that not much has changed.<sup>217</sup> The term *virtue* continues to be used and understood very inconsistently in wide circles and mostly only superficially, so that a deeper understanding of its meaning is impaired.<sup>218</sup> Some strongly associate the word *virtue* with a lack of freedom and with loyalty to a moral set of rules, warning against a “terror of virtue,” which is seen as an expression of an attachment to outdated moral concepts.<sup>219</sup> In colloquial language, this term is often used for ironic purposes, e.g., “guardians of virtue.”<sup>220</sup> Others regard it as a selfish individual ethic that only serves one’s own happiness.<sup>221</sup> Still others praise virtue as an essential happiness factor.<sup>222</sup>

I consider this bias in the German-speaking world to be one-sided and thus call for a reconsideration. A knife is an instrument that can be used for both positive and negative purposes. A person can use it to cut off a slice of bread or injure someone. Consequently, the instrument itself cannot be categorised as good or bad, *per se*. Against this background, the concept of virtue and character may have been perverted in a certain historical epoch and become the victim of an exclusive field of meaning, but this does not mean that the semantic “playground” has to lie fallow; rather, it can be replanted. Above all, however, this misuse naturally reminds us of the need to justify all ethical virtue ideals. To this end, it is first necessary to define what virtue can mean and to what extent this definition is suitable for outlining a workable understanding of virtue that can be operationalised for pedagogical considerations.

217 Cf. Max Scheler, *Zur Rehabilitierung der Tugend* (Zurich, 1955), 15.

218 Cf. Hähnel, *Das Ethos der Ethik*, 52.

219 See Thilo Sarrazin, *Der neue Tugendterror. Über die Grenzen der Meinungsfreiheit in Deutschland* (Munich, 2014). Cf. William Hoye, *Tugenden. Was sie wert sind – warum wir sie brauchen* (Grünwald, 2010), 9; cf. Anselm Vogt, “Sind Tugenden noch zeitgemäß?,” VHS Essen, 21 June 2015.

220 Martin Honecker, “Schwierigkeiten mit dem Begriff Tugend,” in *Tugendethik*, ed. Rippe and Schaper, 166.

221 Cf. Matthias Gatzemeier, *Philosophie als Theorie der Rationalität: Analysen und Rekonstruktionen*, vol. 2 (Würzburg, 2007), 206.

222 See Martin Seligmann, *Der Glücksfaktor. Warum Optimisten länger leben* (Bergisch Gladbach, 2005).

## 2. Virtue Ethics as a Reference Point for a Common Life

Under conditions of religious and cultural diversity, and therefore in more and more complex situations, it is becoming increasingly necessary and important to have qualities that are helpful for appropriate action. Although the constitutional state creates laws and specifies civic duties for the peaceful and non-violent coexistence of members of society, it cannot create the moral conditions required for cooperative coexistence.<sup>223</sup> In this context, approaches that attempt to bring communitarianism and a virtue ethics approach to morality into dialogue and assert the necessity of, for example, civic virtues should be classified.<sup>224</sup> A version of communitarian virtue ethics that sympathises with democratic republicanism is certainly justified in discourses that place high demands on the values of society's members at the centre of their thinking.<sup>225</sup> It is in this context that Alasdair MacIntyre made his appearance with his book *After Virtue*, in which he systematically explained the decline of virtue within a larger critical framework of modern moral understanding.

Even if ethics and politics are not considered to be linked in the same way today as they were for the ancient Greeks, the fundamental question of what constitutes a good and just state order is more topical now than ever.<sup>226</sup> I will not devote myself to these questions, which are discussed in particular in the field of political philosophy. However, I will instead focus my considerations mainly on educational theory: What morally desirable and excellent attitudes should be formed in people for a good life and coexistence in a pluralistic society?<sup>227</sup> What kind of person should someone be in order to create the conditions for peaceful, respectful, and just coexistence? As we are talking about the conditions for peaceful coexistence and moral constitution, we need to ask about character, as previously

223 Cf. Sandel, "Die Grenzen der Gerechtigkeit," 252.

224 Cf. Simone Abendschön, *Die Anfänge demokratischer Bürgerschaft: Sozialisation politischer und demokratischer Werte und Normen im jungen Kindesalter* (Baden-Baden, 2010), 63ff.

225 See Don Eberly and Ryan Streeter, *The Soul of Civil Society: Voluntary Associations and the Public Value of Moral Habits* (Lanham, 2002).

226 Cf. Walter Schweidler, *Der gute Staat. Politische Ethik von Platon bis in die Gegenwart* (Wiesbaden, 2014), 30.

227 This question also implies the answer as to which vices should be avoided at all costs.

noted several times; the concept of character will be defined below, as will individual traits in the sense of character virtues. This focus on the virtues of character (*aretē ethikē*), which can enable a person to react appropriately to social tensions and strive for a good and happy life with others, forms the core of the work.

I am thus continuing MacIntyre's thesis that "the exercise of the virtues is itself a crucial component of the good life for man" in a different direction.<sup>228</sup> At the centre of the efforts of Axel Honneth, Charles Taylor, and communitarians as a whole is the exploration of the cultural "conditions of freedom of human subjects" or the prerequisites of a successful personal identity and, thus, also the enabling conditions of a just society.<sup>229</sup> I share their point of view, as well as Aristotle's, that virtues can only be acquired in the context of society and community, as well as in their embedding in culture and ideas about the good and just life. "A certain measure of the moral qualities of societies stands and falls with the attitudes and behaviour of the members of society, not least their affective possibilities."<sup>230</sup> A virtue ethics approach calls for situational and context-related behavioural decisions. In comparison to the deontological and teleological ethical tradition, ethical virtue thinking places the critical weighing up of basic attitudes and a phronetic balancing of the proper centre of virtues at the centre of its thinking, which can give rise to possibilities for action.<sup>231</sup> For me, this leads to the conclusion that virtues cannot be acquired theoretically but rather in the process of intersubjective interactions. Another aspect that may lead me to this position is the mystical idea and metaphor that people are grindstones for each other and can only mature and grow in character *as tools sharpening each other*. I hold to this to counter a possible accusation that I am taking an egotistical approach to ethics. Processes of self-valorisation can hardly take place in a vacu-

228 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 184.

229 For this phrase, see Axel Honneth, "Posttraditionale Gemeinschaften. Ein konzeptueller Vorschlag," in *Gemeinschaft und Gerechtigkeit*, eds. Micha Brumlik and Hauke Brunkhorst (Frankfurt, 1993), 261. Cf. Hartmut Rosa, *Identität und kulturelle Praxis. Politische Philosophie nach Charles Taylor* (Frankfurt, 1998), *passim*; cf. Hartmut Rosa and Ulf Bohmann, *Die politische Theorie des Kommunitarismus: Charles Taylor* (Opladen, 2016), 66.

230 Pauer-Studer, *Einführung in die Ethik*, 104.

231 Cf. Jean-Pierre Wils, "Tugend und Strukturveränderung," *JCSW* 30 (1989): 37.

um but rather decisively in relationship with others, in view of the interests of others. At this point, it is worth mentioning and rejecting the frequently mentioned formal ethical objection to virtue ethics, namely the *accusation of egoism*, which reads as follows:

The virtuous agent is thus primarily concerned with her own virtue, and thereby with cultivating and maintaining it. But surely, it is thought, she should have as her primary focus such things as caring for friends, repaying debts because that is just, being a good parent.<sup>232</sup>

With Bernard Williams, however, the objection can be rejected: “The goal is the desirable good or an attitude that corresponds to the pursuit of the desirable good, and not virtue for its own sake.”<sup>233</sup> The virtuous person is the one who strives for what deserves to be called good and not for one’s own virtue.

Another disparate pretext that distorts the core meaning of virtue ethics is the *action-guiding objection*—the accusation that virtue ethics does not specifically tell the actor how to act, i.e., it does not provide any orientation for action.<sup>234</sup> Virtue ethics can also be defended against this objection. According to David Solomon, no theories of virtue offer algorithms or recipes for solving practical problems, i.e., virtues are not a mastery of the craft.<sup>235</sup> A final prominent criticism is the *right-but-not-virtuous caveat*, which states that an actor is not necessarily virtuous if they perform actions considered morally preferable, because they may not have acquired the corresponding virtue.<sup>236</sup> This criticism can be relativised by the fact that actors who are in the process of learning and acquiring virtues

232 Cf. Christine Swanton, “Cultivating Virtue. Two Problems for Virtue Ethics,” in *Cultivating Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Theology, and Psychology*, ed. Nancy E. Snow (Oxford/New York, 2015), 112.

233 As quoted by Jochen Schmidt and Idris Nassery, “Einleitung,” in *Moralische Vortrefflichkeit in der pluralen Gesellschaft. Tugendethik aus philosophischer, christlicher und muslimischer Perspektive*, eds. Schmidt and Nassery (Paderborn, 2016), 8.

234 Cf. Julia Annas, “Why Virtue Ethics does not have a Problem with Right Action,” in *Oxford Studies Normative Ethics*, ed. Mark Timmons (Oxford, 2014), 13, 33.

235 Cf. David Solomon, “Internal Objection to Virtue Ethics,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13.1 (1988): 432ff.

236 Cf. Christine Swanton, “Cultivating Virtue,” with reference to Robert N. Johnson, “Virtue and Right,” *Ethics* 113 (2003): 810–834.

already have a share in virtue.<sup>237</sup> Overall, formal ethical objections to virtue ethics can be rejected.<sup>238</sup> At the same time, a possible *accusation of conservatism* against virtue can also be rejected. This accusation holds that virtues are inherently conservative because they are continuously transported through cultures and societies. However, this does not necessarily mean that a person blindly adopts and imitates virtues into which they grow; rather it means that a person becomes competent, according to Annas, to the extent that they are able to criticise the virtues practised in a certain society.<sup>239</sup>

Aspects or personal forms of expression and self-centred assessments grow through the resolution of and dealing with conflicts, and through the experience of weaknesses, exclusion, or approval. Over time, repetitive patterns of behaviour and their underlying characteristics and basic attitudes shape the personality. The nucleus for improving and cultivating the personality, therefore, lies in inner forces in which the decisive factors for personality, will, and actions are based. Character is not only inferred from actions, but also from the mental processes from which actions arise.

It is therefore necessary to explain what is meant by a “good” character and what content a desired form of character must have in order to be desirable. Consequently, when I talk about the cultivation of character, I mean the formation and training of *secure, firm basic attitudes*, i.e., the formation and practice of lasting, good dispositions that are morally desirable character traits.

With the help of virtue ethics, the course should be set for breaking down forms of destructive behaviour in intersubjective relationships. This disruption also applies to habitus in Bourdieu’s sense, i.e., the break down of ossified social structures that have developed over the years as a result of consciously or unconsciously practised cultural chauvinism.<sup>240</sup> These would be those positions and social roles which, according to Bourdieu, are considered appropriate in the social space due to the connection between social practices and

---

237 Schmidt and Nassery, *Moralische Vortrefflichkeit in der pluralen Gesellschaft*, 8.

238 Cf. Schmidt and Nassery, *Moralische Vortrefflichkeit in der pluralen Gesellschaft*, 8.

239 Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford, 1993), 445ff.

240 Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Entwurf einer Theorie der Praxis auf der ethnologischen Grundlage der kabyliischen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt, 1976), 165ff.



lifestyles.<sup>241</sup> Any habitus arising from this should be questioned with regard to its suitability for a good life, for the realisation of the diversity of collective-individual ways of life and for a humane society.<sup>242</sup>

Our positions crystallise our self-relationships and our relationships to the world, or rather, they become performatively apparent through our attitudes. In light of Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue and the ability to relate to others, it is all the more pertinent to ask about the cultivation of appropriate basic attitudes and visual habits—particularly with regard to perception and personal characteristics—given that determine human relatedness can be determined by habitual activities.<sup>243</sup> A prerequisite for the perception and possible assumption of responsibility is the awareness mentioned at the beginning of these deliberations of being able to understand and *behave* as a human being.<sup>244</sup> Here, we can also find some of the characteristics of an ethics characterised by Emmanuel Lévinas, in which the claim of the *other* represents a variable that is able to critically influence one's own position.<sup>245</sup> According to Lévinas, the questioning of oneself takes place through the presence of another.<sup>246</sup>

Consequently, I understand the cultivation of character as a whole as a complex process of ethical self-development, and this is not only a philosophical question concerning the conduct of life but also a theological question. This also makes it clear that my philosophical

241 Cf. Albert Scherr, "Pierre Bourdieu. La distinction," in *Klassiker der Soziologie. 100 Schlüsselwerke im Portrait*, ed. Samuel Salzborn (Wiesbaden, 2016), 315.

242 "Social disadvantage in the critical developmental phase of childhood and adolescence is deeply imprinted on a person's character. Negative critical life experiences and the lack of opportunities in a stressful environment accentuate and consolidate unfavourable character dispositions that have already developed in the further course of life, instead of challenging new behavioural patterns," Helke Fiebig, "Leistungsmotivation bei sozial benachteiligten Jugendlichen im Verlauf eines Computertrainings" (diploma thesis, 2001), 7.

243 See NE 1103b 7–30; Martin Buber, *Das dialogische Prinzip* (Heidelberg, 1984), 8.

244 See Frauke Kurbacher, "Was ist Haltung?," *Lebenswelt und Wissenschaft XXI*. Deutscher Kongress für Philosophie, accessed 28 November 2017, <http://www.dgphil2008.de/programm/sektionen/abstract/kurbacher.html>.

245 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Jenseits des Seins oder anders als Sein geschieht* (Freiburg/München, 1992), *passim*.

246 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalität und Unendlichkeit: Versuch über die Exteriorität* (Freiburg, 1987), 51.

and (subsequent) theological reference to virtue ethics indicates, on the one hand, its topicality and relevance to the formation of ethical judgements, whereas, on the other hand, a reciprocal, enriching dialogue on the “cultural rootedness of social moral systems” can be opened up.<sup>247</sup>

### 3. Educating the Whole Person: Reviving Virtues Based on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics

In the NE, Aristotle places his doctrine of virtue in the context of the search for the comprehensive good (*eudaimonia*). In the first book of the NE, Aristotle explains the main features of his conception of the good life. He defines the orientation of human endeavour towards the highest good (*eudaimonia*) as the ultimate aim, for the sake of which one desires everything else. Aristotle describes the highest good as something perfect, at the top of the human hierarchy of goals. The philosophical word formation *eû-daímōn* expresses that someone has a *good spirit*, which means “that someone leads a well-adjusted, blessed, desirable and praiseworthy life.”<sup>248</sup> Therefore, a successful and prosperous life, or a good life, is the ultimate goal of human behaviour. The good life is that which is not sought as a means to something else but as an end in itself. According to Aristotle, one can attain this good through the excellence of their character.

“Virtue, then, is a state involving rational choice, consisting in a mean relative to us and determined by reason--the reason, that is, by reference to which the practically wise person would determine it.”<sup>249</sup> In the sixth book of the NE, Aristotle concretises virtue as the rational attitude of choosing, of deciding.<sup>250</sup> By this, he means choosing between two extreme attitudes—between excess and deficiency—and refers to it as the centre or keeping the cen-

---

247 Schmidt and Nassery, *Moralische Vortrefflichkeit in der pluralen Gesellschaft*, 11.

248 Horn, *Antike Lebenskunst*, 65.

249 NE II.6, 1106b 36–1107a 2; English translations from Roger Crisp, trans. and ed., *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge, 2000).

250 Cf. NE II.6, 1106b 36.

tre (*mesotēs*).<sup>251</sup> This right measure should be cultivated in action and ultimately produces virtue.<sup>252</sup> A position between two extremes should be sought, e.g., generosity as a value between wastefulness and miserliness, or bravery, which lies between foolhardiness and cowardice.

For Aristotle, virtue is an excellent and sustainable attitude (*hexis*) that is determined by reason and that a person can acquire through practice or education. A person is considered virtuous if they behave in an ethically excellent manner in a specific situation, ultimately to realise a value. “Therefore, to act virtuously means to be motivated in a special way for the moral value or the good as such.”<sup>253</sup>

According to Aristotle, fixed basic attitudes can be acquired or cultivated in order to lead a good life. This also includes the training of sensual impressions, emotions, and affects, i.e., the cultivation of *sensuality*. As we know, people are not criticised for being angry, as Aristotle exemplifies, but for doing it in a certain way.<sup>254</sup> How can habits be changed? How can people *readjust* their behaviour? How can they obtain and maintain fixed basic attitudes?

Basic attitudes are built on fundamental convictions based on the interplay of body, mind, characteristics, and emotional dispositions. The “human way of life is realised, differentiated and concretised in attitudes.”<sup>255</sup> A basic attitude is not the strict adherence to an ethical principle but rather a disposition, a capacity, or a power to act that develops in the course of a person’s life. A disposition of character is a good, firm, personal attitude, a constitution from which a person reacts appropriately to people and situations, i.e., a good disposition is a desirable personal attitude of the individual that has become a habit. It could be said that a disposition has become an asset when a person acts well out of this internalised capacity.

251 Cf. NE II.6, 1106b 16–1107a 8.

252 Cf. NE II.6, 1106b.

253 Stephan Radić, *Die Rehabilitierung der Tugendethik in der zeitgenössischen Philosophie. Eine notwendige Ergänzung gegenwärtiger Theorie in der Ethik* (Berlin, 2011), 61. At this point, the correspondence between values and basic attitudes becomes apparent once again with regard to the virtues.

254 NE II, 1106a.

255 Kurbacher, “Was ist Haltung?” For a theory of attitude that considers the relationship between person and person as interpersonality and interindividuality, see Kurbacher, *Zwischen Personen*.

The habitualisation process from which morally good basic attitudes arise is a decisive aspect of the self-cultivation process. Habitualisation is about the formation of attitudes and, at the same time, the training of the will (or *habitus* of will) (as well as the powers of the soul), with the aim of perfecting one's own personal dispositions.<sup>256</sup> Thus, habitual internalisation of good personal qualities enables people to react appropriately in complex contexts and to produce good actions most reliably from a firm basic attitude.

In an initial definition, I cited Christine Swanton's concept of virtue, which, following Aristotle, defines virtue as a disposition that enables people to respond in the best possible way to the things they encounter.<sup>257</sup> "A virtue is a good quality of character, more specifically a disposition to respond to, or acknowledge, items within its field or fields in an excellent or good enough way."<sup>258</sup> Being virtuous means thinking, feeling and reacting in a certain way in specific situations, which ultimately leads to a fulfilling and meaningful life.<sup>259</sup> In the following, this definition of virtue will be deepened and concretised.

However, a virtue is not simply a disposition:

The use of 'disposition' leads to the misunderstanding that virtues are habits. In contrast to habits, however, virtues do not express themselves in fixed behaviour patterns.<sup>260</sup>

In the NE, dispositions are translated as basic attitudes, characteristics, and behaviours.<sup>261</sup> For example, a disposition can initially be a natural disposition or a disposition acquired through practice and habit.<sup>262</sup> According to Aristotle (as well as Kant), a fixed attitude (*hexis*) is not given to humans as a biological disposition; thus, one

---

256 I will look at the soul and its genuine powers in more detail below.

257 Recall that there are different concepts and ideas of virtue. For Homer, for example, virtue enables individuals to fulfil their social roles, while for Thomas Aquinas it enables people to move towards achieving the specifically human *telos*. See Horst Afflerbach, Ralf Kaemper, and Volker Kessler, *Lust auf gutes Leben: 15 Tugenden neu entdeckt* (Gießen 2014).

258 Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, 19.

259 Cf. Radić, *Die Rehabilitierung der Tugendethik*, 61.

260 Friedo Ricken, "Kann die Moralphilosophie auf die Frage nach dem 'Ethischen' verzichten?" *ThPh* 59 (1984): 165.

261 NE II, 1108b 11–13.

262 Cf. Josef Schuster, *Moralisches Können* (Würzburg, 1997), 7.

is not determined by one's nature. *Hexis* is a certain basic attitude that can be expressed in both actions and emotions, i.e., attitudes as emotional dispositions are in turn related to dispositions to act.<sup>263</sup> For example, those who have a generous attitude spend money or other assets with joyful light-heartedness, and they give not just the bare minimum but even more.<sup>264</sup>

People certainly also act spontaneously, intuitively, and with recourse to (tried and tested) habits on a daily basis. A one-off, spontaneously performed morally good action out of *habit* is more likely to be characterised as mechanical, as it is blindly based on cultural codes and conventions. Thoughtless habits can mean a refusal to consider one's actions and a blanking out of consciousness.<sup>265</sup> This is because an activity, i.e., an ordinary action or morally welcome behaviour by chance, is neither a *hexis* in the Aristotelian sense nor can it be characterised as virtue. It also cannot be characterised as virtuous if it is good for the person acting, because they have considered it for themselves.<sup>266</sup> Acting out of unreflected habit is a thoughtless act, instead of a responsible and accountable ethical act. But if a habit has been developed through virtuous behaviour, then the currently unreflected consequences of such a habit can also be considered virtuous. An action is considered virtuous if it is based on a good firm attitude and is carried out on the basis of desirable motives.

Actions, then, are called just and temperate when they are such as the just and the temperate person would do. But the just and temperate person is not the one who does them merely, but the one who does them as just and temperate people do. So it is correct to say that it is by doing just actions that one becomes just, and by doing temperate

263 Cf. Eva Weber-Guskar, "Haltung als Selbstverhältnis. Am Beispiel der Würde," in *Was ist Haltung? Begriffsbestimmung, Positionen, Anschlüsse*, eds. Frauke A. Kurbacher and Philipp Wünschner (Würzburg, 2016), 186. Cf. NE II.4, 1105b 3ff.

264 Weber-Guskar, "Haltung als Selbstverhältnis," 186.

265 Cf. Ömer Demir, "Din Eğitiminde Alışkanlık Bilinci," *Sosyal Bilimler EKEV Dergisi* 18, 60 (2014): 77.

266 Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Der Verlust der Tugend. Zur moralischen Krise der Gegenwart*, (Frankfurt/New York, 2006), 202.

actions temperate; without doing them, no one would have even a chance of becoming good..<sup>267</sup>

Accordingly, both virtues and vices can be acquired through habituation. Ultimately, a vice is also a habit of character that has been acquired over time through corresponding, repetitive behaviour.<sup>268</sup>

Aristotle differentiates the virtues into intellectual virtues (*dianoētikēs*), such as wisdom, prudence, and perceptiveness, and ethical virtues (*ēthikēs*) or virtues of character, such as generosity, prudence, bravery, gentleness, and justice.<sup>269</sup> While virtues of the mind can be the result of teachings, virtues of character do not arise through teaching and instruction. Virtues of character can only be developed and acquired through familiarisation and practice, whereby both categories of virtue are interwoven.<sup>270</sup>

Through this habituation, the intellectual virtue of practical prudence, with its reflected determination of the proper centre, is transformed into the character virtue of the respective area of life, which from now on carries out the right action in an automated manner.<sup>271</sup>

According to Aristotle, virtues of character can be learned, among other things, from exemplary role models who act virtuously. However, practising virtues by blind imitation would undermine the self-esteem process. In other words, the practise of virtues is not rote copying nor training of subjects. The same could be said for unbridled instincts that ossify over time and become habitual. They then belong to the core of the character, which is difficult to change after a certain point in time, if at all, and hardly through teaching. This would likely only work for those who have learnt to influence themselves and constantly refine their character.<sup>272</sup>

---

267 NE II.4, 1105b 0–10.

268 Cf. NE II.6, 1106b–1107a and V.1, 1129b 1ff.

269 Cf. NE II.1, 1103a.

270 Cf. NE II.1, 1103a 15.

271 Hübner, *Einführung in die philosophische Ethik*, 122.

272 See Jule Specht, *Charakterfrage: wer wir sind und wie wir uns verändern* (Hamburg, 2018), on the changeability of personality traits even at an advanced age.

### 3.1 Character Virtues: Exploring the Best in Character

I understand character as a unique and enduring pattern of behaviour, perception, and emotion of the individual that leads to consistent reactions in different situations. It is, therefore, a complex overall structure of consistent characteristics, traits, attitudes, and behavioural skills over the course of a lifetime that characterises the individual.<sup>273</sup> Following Humboldt, the key question should be asked: *How does a noble personality show itself?*<sup>274</sup> Beauty, in the sense of goodness of human character, is what Aristotle calls *aretē* (Greek ἀρετή).<sup>275</sup> The possession of *aretē* constitutes *eudaimonia* and only comes about when a person uses their rational faculty correctly.<sup>276</sup> The outdated German translations of *Tüchtigkeit* (efficiency) or *Tauglichkeit* (suitability) for *virtue* sound, in my opinion, functionalist, possibly because they are based on the original meaning of the Latin term *virtus*, which denotes an aptitude of character and connotes meanings such as “manliness,” “martial prowess,” “social merit,” and “fame.”<sup>277</sup> If we look at a broader range of meanings, we can see that *aretē* is related to *agathē* and denotes a person’s goodness.<sup>278</sup> This allows us to distil a basic meaning, that of *excellence*.<sup>279</sup> If virtue as a basic concept expresses the ethical qualities of human beings, it can be heuristically formulated that virtuous behaviour, against the background of the ancient understanding, is to be understood as a manifestation of the beauty of human character or an expression of good character.

273 Cf. Klaus-Jürgen Tillmann, *Sozialisationstheorien. Eine Einführung in den Zusammenhang von Gesellschaft, Institution und Subjektwerdung* (Hamburg, 2003), 11; see Uwe Henrik Peters, “Charakter,” in *Wörterbuch der Psychiatrie und medizinischen Psychologie*, ed. Peters (Munich, 1990), 86.

274 Cf. Humboldt, *Schriften zur Anthropologie und Geschichte*, 238.

275 The meaning of the category of *beauty* will be explained in the next chapter.

276 Cf. Radić, *Die Rehabilitierung der Tugendethik*, 15, 18.

277 Friedrich Kluge, *Kluge: Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*. Edited by Elmar Seebold (Berlin/Boston, 2011), 934.

278 Cf. Radić, *Die Rehabilitierung der Tugendethik*, 15.

279 Cf. Otfried Höffe, “Art. *aretē*/Tugend,” in *Aristoteles-Lexikon*, eds. Otfried Höffe, Rolf Geiger, and Philipp Brüllmann (Stuttgart 2005), 76.

*A Brief Excursus: Aristotle's Concept of the Soul*

In Aristotle's conception, the soul (*psychē*), the life principle of all living beings, forms different faculties (*dynameis*). The soul is the active correlate of the passive body and causes it to move.<sup>280</sup>

We say that the soul is pained and pleased, is confident and further that it is angry and also that it perceives and thinks. But all of these seem to be motions. On this basis, one might suppose that the soul is in motion.<sup>281</sup>

Aristotle assigns a number of functions to the soul. It is the place of desires and drives, as well as the control centre for growth, nutrition, and reproduction.<sup>282</sup>

In contrast to Plato, who speaks of separate parts or powers of the soul in which the virtues ensure the harmony of those powers, Aristotle has a unifying, tripartite division of faculties.<sup>283</sup> But, with regard to the virtues, two faculties of the soul are decisive: the faculty of aspiration and the faculty of cognition.<sup>284 285</sup> Since Muslim philosophers and mystics strongly emphasise the aspect of the soul in their ethical virtue considerations, a few aspects of the Aristotelian concept of the soul should be mentioned. A faculty refers to the thinking-reasoning (*dianoētikon*) capacity, i.e., reason itself, which makes cognition and judgement possible, and to the sensual-striving (*aisthētikon*, perceiving) capacity. Instincts, emotions, and desires belong to the rational part of the soul, and personal virtues are attributed to it. The third faculty is not a bearer of virtue. Reason corresponds to the dianoetic virtues; perception corresponds to the character virtues. Since the human soul is not only characterised

---

280 Cf. Cathrine Newmark, *Passion – Affekt – Gefühl. Philosophische Theorien der Emotionen zwischen Aristoteles und Kant* (Hamburg, 2008), 37. See more on Aristotle's theory of movement in *De anima*.

281 Aristotle, *De anima*, I.4, 408a34–408b4. English translation from Christopher Shields, trans., *Aristotle: De Anima* (Oxford, 2016).

282 Cf. Christoph Horn, *Philosophie der Antike. Von den Vorsokratikern bis Augustinus* (Munich, 2013), 60.

283 Cf. Hübner, *Einführung in die philosophische Ethik*, 117. For more details on the soul and its faculties, see *De anima*, “On the Soul” by Aristotle, which is one of the most widely discussed texts in the history of philosophy.

284 Cf. Radić, *Die Rehabilitierung der Tugendethik*, 15.

285 Cf. NE I.13; II.1–6; VI.5.



by reason but also has an emotional realm, the rational part must gain control over the non-rational part of the soul and organise the conflict between the two parts in order to achieve moral excellence. This possibility of perfection and higher development of the soul characterises humans in particular.<sup>286</sup>

Striving for self-improvement also means perfecting the soul's faculties. Self-mastery and self-knowledge thus require a correct self-assessment, and this requires a conscious perception of one's own feelings, driving forces, inclinations, and affects. Self-related assessments grow through the resolution of conflicts and the reflexive handling of them, as well as through the experience of weaknesses, exclusion, and external approval. For example, I categorise stubbornness as a character trait that is inherent in thinking and acting in a stubborn manner, which should be based on a certain disposition that has developed and consolidated over time, but can be changed through reflection and redisposition.<sup>287</sup> In Aristotelian virtue ethics, it is also important to reflect on these personal characteristics and to learn how to deal with them consciously.<sup>288</sup>

According to Aristotle, a character virtue can develop successively with the application of prudence, especially if prudence is morally oriented towards the highest good. Prudence, as an intellectual virtue of the thinking-reasoning faculty of the soul, is the source of all morality.<sup>289</sup> If prudence misses the proper centre, a bad basic attitude can develop through habituation.<sup>290</sup>

A virtue can only become firmly established after a long process of familiarisation. The habituation to acquire an attitude is preceded by practical, performative realisation and practice. Theoretical knowledge of good attitudes or goodness alone is not enough to be considered virtuous, even if it is the first step in this direction. Only when the disposition to act has become an integral part of the character, i.e., has solidified as a character trait, can we speak of virtuous behaviour. Those who live virtuously out of conviction

286 Cf. Hübner, *Einführung in die philosophische Ethik*, 117ff.

287 Cf. Christian Miller and Angela Knobel, "Some Foundational Questions in Philosophy about Character," in *Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*, Miller et al. (Oxford, 2015), 21.

288 Cf. NE II.7, 1108a 30–35.

289 Cf. Hübner, *Einführung in die philosophische Ethik*, 122.

290 Cf. NE II.6, 1106b–1107a 10.

have constantly practised virtues. This practice leads to the development of firm basic attitudes and shapes a person's character; thus, the cultivation of character is therefore understood to mean the acquisition of dispositions for action and acting in accordance with them. Character traits are rooted in the soul and can therefore be changed. "Character means a person as a personal work of art that has a certain aesthetic appearance like a minted (!) coin."<sup>291</sup> Over the course of time, repetitive behavioural patterns and traits become deeply imprinted in one's character. Attitudes thus result from certain character structures, and, conversely, virtues refer to the character traits of an acting person.

### 3.2 The Deliberation Process as a Condition of Self-knowledge

According to Swanton, virtuous ethical behaviour is behaviour that requires people to assess and evaluate a situation adequately. Moral judgement, therefore, requires deliberative consideration. Habitualising a disposition requires getting used to sizing up and assessing a situation appropriately. Deliberation is based, in Hannah Arendt's words, on the ability to *think*.<sup>292</sup> Thinking is the conscious perception of oneself and the world. Accordingly, thinking in the sense of deliberation is an "inner dialogue."<sup>293</sup> Kant points out a very dicey danger: "Nowhere is it easier to deceive oneself than in that which favours a good opinion of oneself."<sup>294</sup> The existence of a counterpart seems very favourable for this purpose, and offers itself in order that people do not remain too entrenched in the blind spots of self-perception. Overall, it becomes clear once again that the world, society, and others—social interactions—are the right place to learn ethical considerations, whereas ethical principles can be considered secondary. Deliberation is, in my opinion, the decisive basis of moral judgement.

---

291 Jochen Schmidt, "Glaube und Charakter," unpublished manuscript (2016).

292 Cf. Hannah Arendt, "Das Denken," in Arendt, *Vom Leben des Geistes* (Munich/Zurich, 1998), 82.

293 I use the term inner dialogue in Arendt's sense; see Arendt, *Vom Leben des Geistes*, 191.

294 Kant, RGV, AA VI:68, Bettina Stangneth (ed.), Hamburg 2003, 88.

The appropriate response to a situation can be considered virtuous if it strikes the right balance between spontaneity and a considered decision, because if the virtue were pure spontaneity, the person's critical behaviour would be absent. Reflexivity is a binding premise of deliberation. Like all virtue ethicists, I understand the middle of two extremes, which constitutes the essence (*ousia*) of a virtue, as the appropriate and right attitude to a situation. In its performance, it aims to achieve the good for humankind as a morally desirable action. Aristotle separates this habitus of decision from desire. Decision-making is an endeavour in which a person has a goal in mind that motivates or moves them to make this or that decision. In addition to the previous definition of virtue, virtue is a disposition to act from the proper centre, as well as it is insight.<sup>295</sup> Desires and passions are to be restrained in accordance with reason. Aristotle calls the right way of dealing with desires *temperance*.

### 3.3 Prospering for a Successful Life

In her definition of virtue, Swanton borrows from the English virtue ethicist Rosalind Hursthouse and writes, "A virtue is a character trait that a human being needs for *eudaimonia*, to flourish or live well."<sup>296</sup> *Flourish/flourishing* in the sense of thriving, blossoming, or prospering means, on the one hand, the development of personal qualities in order to achieve the highest good, while on the other hand, it illustrates the processual nature of exercising a disposition. A morally well-conducted life, as well as a happy life in the sense of a subjectively well-adjusted life, testifies to the best possible character of a person. If a person is so disposed in their actions and speech to achieve and strive for the good, then they are on the way to fulfilling their *ergon*, understood as the characteristic achievement of a person.<sup>297</sup> This also means that there is a multitude of possible ways of acting if a person wishes to act virtuously. A good person is characterised by the fact that they make the right judgement in appropriate cases, i.e., they have recognised what is truly good in a

295 Cf. NE VI, 1144b 25.

296 Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*, 167.

297 Cf. Höffe, "Art. aretē/Tugend," 77.

specific situation and act accordingly.<sup>298</sup> Aristotle compares this to a healthy person, who is the benchmark for what is healthy,<sup>299</sup> because a healthy body shows what is truly healthy.

On the one hand, this establishes an objective standard by which we can judge what is truly good; on the other hand, it remains possible for someone to desire something other than what is truly good if their soul is not in the optimal state, i.e., in the state of the good person.<sup>300</sup>

Humans can achieve goodness insofar as they are rational. This ability to reason distinguishes humans from other living beings and also gives them a certain responsibility towards themselves and others. Humans reach perfection, their goodness, when they do justice *to being human*. Human *aretē*, being good, thus consists in one's *ergon*, i.e., in one's rational faculty or rational activity. "Since only that which is rational is pleasant for him, there can never be any motivation for him to seek happiness in a pleasure that is not rational."<sup>301</sup> By finding the centre, people find the way to the best moral and personal outcome. For example, being appropriately outraged, one pursues the just and good for all involved with a harmonious intensity.

Virtue ethics thus attempts to reconcile normative standards with self-interest and to show how people can lead a morally good *and* happy life through virtue. Virtue is not pursued so that people are virtuous but because of the values and goods that are realised in virtue. According to Aristotle, this has the consequence that people live their capacities in the best possible way, and thus ultimately achieve *eudaimonia*.

For Aristotle, the virtuous life also seems to be a blissful life, especially if the person's mental state is in balance.<sup>302</sup> For, according to Aristotle, the truly good is the happiness of humankind. For him, happiness is the highest goal of endeavour, although the definition varies: "They disagree about substantive conceptions of happiness,

---

298 Cf. NE III, 1113a 29–30.

299 Cf. Béatrice Lienemann, *Aristoteles' Konzeption der Zurechnung* (Berlin, 2018), 321.

300 Lienemann, *Aristoteles' Konzeption der Zurechnung*, 321.

301 Friedo Ricken, *Der Lustbegriff in der Nikomachischen Ethik des Aristoteles* (Göttingen, 1976), 99.

302 Cf. NE X, 1177a; Horn, *Antike Lebenskunst*, 73.

the masses giving an account which differs from that of the philosophers.”<sup>303</sup> Even if *happiness* is used as a translation for *eudaimonia*, it may not be understood in our modern sense. The feeling of happiness is very subjective, and people have different ideas of what happiness is.<sup>304</sup>

That term [*eudaimonia*] is usually translated “happiness,” but what it refers to in the hands of these philosophers is not the same as modern conceptions of happiness. For one thing, it makes sense now to say that you are happy one day, unhappy another, but *Eudaimonia* was a matter of the shape of one’s whole life.<sup>305</sup>

Does the ancient term actually mean more than just episodic moments of elation, namely the happiness that arises from moral excellence? Virtuous behaviour or actions thus bring to light the manifestation of happiness.<sup>306</sup>

For my focus, the connection between a virtuous attitude and happiness is irrelevant. Since Aristotle himself problematises how vague the idea of *eudaimonia* is, I would like to stick to the orientation towards the good. A virtue is therefore a solid, good basic attitude that enables a person to act constructively and appropriately in a situation by means of reason and with the right insight, which arises from the interaction of empathy, observation, the ability to assess circumstances and self-reflect, and thus to become and be a good person. Moral judgement is therefore conditioned by or requires the assurance of the good in deliberative consideration.

Aristotle counts not only external goods but also favourable external circumstances among the relevant happiness factors. Although these are not sufficient for happiness, their absence prevents someone from being called happy; they are therefore conducive to happiness. At this point, Aristotle agrees that many people are not happy through their character alone but are in need of other happiness factors to be so.<sup>307</sup>

303 NE I, 1095a 20–22; Cf. Horn, *Antike Lebenskunst*, 64.

304 See Philipp Brüllmann, *Die Theorie des Guten in Aristoteles’ Nikomachischer Ethik*, (Berlin/New York, 2011).

305 Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1994), 34.

306 Cf. Max Klopfer, *Ethik-Klassiker von Platon bis John Stuart Mill: Ein Lehr- und Studienbuch* (Stuttgart, 2008), 143.

307 Cf. NE I, 1096a 5–7.

There are forces in a personality that are part of the deliberation process and that can often disrupt the disposition towards goodness. Inner resistance or motives such as displeasure can hinder and impede the practice of character virtues. “By abstaining from pleasures we become temperate, and having become so we are best able to abstain from them.”<sup>308</sup> Aristotle continues, “It is because of pleasure that we do bad actions, and pain that we abstain from noble ones.”<sup>309</sup> Consequently, Aristotle agrees with Plato on the point that people should be taught in childhood to feel pleasure and displeasure about what educators want to strengthen or weaken, because that is the right education.<sup>310</sup>

### 3.4 Emotions as Relevant Dispositions of Moral Excellence

Virtue ethics, which aims to achieve a successful life that can also be regarded as happy, must be asked to what extent feelings are conducive or detrimental to a successful lifestyle. This is because feelings play an important role in the focused consideration of a person’s moral constitution and the change in personality. Feelings are part of the *conditio humana* (human condition), as humans are not only cognitive and rational, but also emotional beings. Thinking, feeling, and acting are interwoven and relate to each other. Since Hume, this strong dependency between reason and feelings cannot be denied.<sup>311</sup> Person-centred ethics places the whole person at the centre of its consideration, in which feelings play a decisive role as a motivational force of moral being and action.<sup>312</sup> Emotions, affects, and feelings have been known as mental phenomena and psychological arousal since antiquity, all of which are labelled with the same term: *pathos* (Greek, feeling; Latin, *affectus*).<sup>313</sup> Although Aristotle did not explicitly write about emotions, the question of an Aristotelian theory of

---

308 NE II.2, 1104a–1104b.

309 NE II.3, 1104b 10.

310 NE II.3 1104b 10–15.

311 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40) (Oxford, 1978), 153.

312 Cf. Fenner, *Ethik. Wie soll ich handeln?*, 232.

313 Cf. Marcel Humar, “Antike Emotionstheorien. Philosophische Erklärungen von Emotionen im Kontext der Eudaimonie,” in *Emotion. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, eds. Hermann Kappelhoff et al. (Berlin, 2019), 3. Unlike today’s

emotions has a long tradition.<sup>314</sup> According to Michael Krewet, a theory of emotions can certainly be recognised in Aristotle based on various works.<sup>315</sup> In *De anima* and the NE, Aristotle cites emotions as part of the soul's ability to strive.<sup>316</sup> Even though Aristotle does not provide any definitions in the narrower sense, the NE contains the longest descriptive list of the following emotions: desire, fear, anger, courage, envy, joy, love, hate, longing, zeal, and pity.<sup>317</sup>

As Aristotle's ethics are concerned with doing the good, i.e., becoming a morally good person, he also makes it clear that actions are primarily motivated by *affective* or emotional factors.<sup>318</sup> For Aristotle, however, the mere possession of feelings does not make a person morally good as long as these feelings are not linked to actions or considerations.<sup>319</sup> In principle, virtue can consist in feelings, only as the disposition to feel to the right extent following the correct situation-specific deliberation. A person in this described state could theoretically control and regulate their feelings and their representation. Emotional presentation is made by examining its situational appropriateness and can be morally evaluated, as a person has the power to give their feelings voice and manifestation, to control, defuse, or exacerbate them. For example, shyness, jealousy, and bashfulness are dispositions that can take on individual manifestations and characteristics, such as an increase in heartbeat, degree and location of blushing, or tone quality of voice, i.e., physical changes accompany feelings.

When a person is reluctant to speak in front of people or is exposed, their disposition to find something unpleasant comes into play. In this case, shyness has developed into a disposition to

---

terminology, antiquity made no distinction was made between affect, feeling, and emotion; I use all three synonymously.

314 Cf. Humar, "Antike Emotionstheorien," 5.

315 See Michael Krewet, *Die Theorie der Gefühle bei Aristoteles* (Heidelberg, 2011).

316 In Book II of *De anima*, he describes the striving faculty that keeps the soul in motion as being divided into three parts: desire, anger, and volition. Aristotle, *De anima*, II.3, 414b 1.

317 Cf. NE II.5, 1105b 21–24.

318 NE II.2, 1103b 27. Cf. Notker Schneider, "Vernunft und Gefühl," *IZPP* 1/2018, especially "Gefühl und Vernunft," 4.

319 Cf. Verena Mayer, *Die Moralität der Gefühle* (Berlin/Boston, 2002), 128; Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics and the Emotions," in *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader*, ed. Daniel Statman (Washington, 1997), 99–117.

react shyly in certain situations. But shyness is not a bad thing in principle. Shyness is the fear of being compromised.<sup>320</sup> It is a character disposition, or rather a virtue, only when a person is shy to the degree appropriate to the situation. This means emotions can influence cognitive thought and decision-making processes; above all, “according to Aristotle, emotions are cognitively mediated.”<sup>321</sup> This thesis has been taken further in the literature, and many hold the view that, according to Aristotle, feelings not only presuppose judgements, but that beliefs are the conditions for the emergence of feelings.<sup>322</sup>

Emotions can support and guide thinking, especially when it comes to personal and social matters.<sup>323</sup> In the reverse, however, behaviour can also trigger emotions, just as singing or dancing can evoke joy in people, or a certain trigger can provoke past experiences and feelings and put a person in an emotionally unstable situation, such as grief.

Emotions form the basis of interpersonal relationships. Cognitive behavioural therapy, for example, assumes that people do not display emotions because of *something itself*, but rather due to their subjective attitude and interpretation towards the person, thing and/or situation.<sup>324</sup> Let’s assume that someone becomes angry: a certain evil must already be perceived in order for anger to be aroused. Anger is only directed towards an object, situation, or person after the fact.<sup>325</sup>

By living—in an immense variety of reaction modes—the most diverse feelings such as love, hate, shame, guilt, embarrassment, amusement, serenity, melancholy, cheerfulness, pride, etc., we give ourselves and others an understanding of the specific position in which we see our-

---

320 Cf. Baruch de Spinoza, *Ethik* (Berlin, 2017), 128.

321 Humar, “Antike Emotionstheorien,” 5ff.

322 Cf. Martha Nussbaum, “Aristotle on Emotion and Rational Persuasion,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Rhetoric*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley, 1996), 309–312.

323 Cf. Antonio Damasio, *Im Anfang war das Gefühl: Der biologische Ursprung menschlicher Kultur* (Munich, 2017), II.8, *passim*.

324 Bärbel Ekert and Christiane Ekert, *Psychologie für Pflegeberufe* (Stuttgart/New York, 2014), 166.

325 Cf. Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik* Gesammelte Werke, vol. 2 (Bern, 1954), 270.



selves in relation to certain objects and how we evaluate these objects and our relationship to them.<sup>326</sup>

However, feelings, just like actions, can be reflected upon and changed if necessary. First and foremost, this requires the ability to introspect. This is because people have the choice to decide how they want to feel. It is well known that feelings can be influenced and generated by images, ideas, and thoughts.<sup>327</sup> For example, the feeling of anger can be transformed into calmness by mentally perceiving both personal and physical feelings or by reinterpreting the situation (that is, by *reframing*).<sup>328</sup> Aristotelian virtue ethics also implies feelings with a view to a comprehensive deliberation of one's own moral constitution and the respective situation. The perception of one's own constitution also includes emotional self-reflection, i.e., a process of reflection on one's emotional disposition.<sup>329</sup> According to Aristotle, this practical deliberation includes a far-reaching perception, weighing, and correct assessment of the individual aspects.<sup>330</sup>

A virtue is then rather the basic attitude from which a person has moral feelings to an appropriate degree. The appropriate measure or balance of the emotional reaction is determined by the *mesotes doctrine* and is intended to prevent the emergence of excessive feelings that exceed a reasonable level.

326 Micha Brumlik, "Ethische Gefühle: Liebe, Sorge und Achtung," in *Care – Wer sorgt für wen?*, eds. Vera Moser and Inga Pinhard (Opladen/Farmington Hills, 2010), 36.

327 See Udo Baer and Gabriele Frick-Baer, *Das ABS der Gefühle* (Weinheim, 2008), 105 ff.; Claus Haring, "Hypnose und Autogenes Training," in *Therapie psychischer Erkrankungen*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Möller (New York/Stuttgart, 2006), 24; cf. Aristotle, *De motu animalium*, VII, 701b 19–22.

328 The meaning attributed to an event, a statement, a behaviour, a belief, a trigger, or a stimulus has depends on the context or *frame* in which a person places it. Reframing means constructing a new context and thus giving the matter new meaning. For more information, see Hans J. Markowitsch and Margit M. Schreier (eds.), *Reframing der Bedürfnisse. Psychische Neuroimplantate* (Wiesbaden, 2019).

329 Emotional self-reflection holds a very high status in current competency discourses and dominant understandings of education. See Bernhard Sieland and Tobias Rahm, "Personale Kompetenzen entwickeln," in *Handbuch Schulpsychologie: Psychologie für die Schule*, ed. Thomas Fleischer (Stuttgart, 2007), 207.

330 Cf. Pauer-Studer, *Einführung in die Ethik*, 104.

... It will be clear also from what follows, if we consider what the nature of virtue is like. In everything continuous and divisible, one can take more, less, or an equal amount, and each either in respect of the thing itself or relative to us; and the equal is a sort of mean between excess and deficiency. ... by the mean relative to us I mean that which is neither excessive nor deficient.<sup>331</sup>

Finding *the middle ground in relation to ourselves* requires a special art or virtue, i.e., the performance of virtue requires an artistically practised skill.

In this way every expert in a science avoids excess and deficiency, and aims for the mean and chooses it -- the mean, that is, not in the thing itself but relative to us. ... and if virtue, like nature, is more precise and superior to any skill, it will also be the sort of thing that is able to hit the mean. I am talking here about virtue of character.<sup>332</sup>

Virtue is about expressing emotions and acting on them. Virtue is then the centre between feelings that are too strong and feelings that are too weak. However, it is not only a centre between two extremes on the scale of intensities of the same feeling but also a centre, for example, between too broad or too narrow extensions of a feeling.<sup>333</sup> For example, the virtue of bravery is a certain way of dealing with fear of dangerous situations.<sup>334</sup> For this, people need to develop a certain ability to perceive, which interacts with the wisdom (*phronesis*) to apply moral rules according to the situation or to react or act emotionally to the right extent. Inappropriate emotions can distract a person from acting virtuously. Thus, Aristotle relates the judgement of an emotion and its effect to the acquisition of prudence. Ultimately, learning to see morally is not just about the perception of life circumstances but also the development of multi-perspective perceptual competence.

For example, fear, confidence, appetite, anger, pity, and in general pleasure and pain can be experienced too much or too little, and in both ways not well. But to have them at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the mean and best; and this is the business of virtue. Similarly, there is an

---

331 NE II, 1106a; cf. NE II.5, 1106b 18–23.

332 NE II.6, 1106b.

333 Cf. NE II, 1108b.

334 Cf. Christof Rapp, *Aristoteles zur Einführung* (Hamburg, 2011), 26.

excess, a deficiency and a mean in actions. Virtue is concerned with feelings and actions, in which excess and deficiency constitute misses of the mark, while the mean is praised and on target, both of which are characteristics of virtue.<sup>335</sup>

Virtue is the ability to act correctly and at the same time to feel correctly towards circumstances, people and things in the world. Aristotle, therefore, does not reject the feeling of emotions but favours an appropriate way of dealing with them. Emotions are known to be very individual because they depend on a person's disposition.<sup>336</sup> A person who has a correct opinion about a situation can feel appropriately ("cultivated feeling").<sup>337</sup> "Only those who are able to adequately control their emotions and develop them in appropriate situations can recognise how to behave correctly in the respective situation."<sup>338</sup> Consequently, emotions play an important role in the cultivation of the self.

### 3.5 The Cultivation of Character

In correspondence with the concept of disposition, character is characterised by the fact that a person has a basic constitution to choose the appropriate action in a certain way, in a certain situation.<sup>339</sup> Frequent, repeated actions result in an aptitude or qualification, i.e., a character trait, a habitus of emotional characteristics and cognitive potentials develops through familiarisation. If a character trait is oriented towards the morally well-recognised, it is a virtue. According to Erich Fromm, this is possible neither by force nor by chance but only through freedom and free will.<sup>340</sup> Freedom of choice or freedom of decision enables the will to weigh the motives and

335 NE II.6, II06b.

336 Cf. Christof Rapp, "Aristoteles. Bausteine für eine Theorie der Emotionen," in *Klassische Emotionstheorien. Von Platon bis Wittgenstein*, eds. Ursula Renz and Hilge Landweer (Berlin/New York, 2008), 61.

337 Christoph Demmerling and Hilge Landweer, *Philosophie der Gefühle. Von Achtung bis Zorn* (Stuttgart, 2007), 176.

338 Cf. Humar, "Antike Emotionstheorien," 7; cf. *inter alia* NE VI.5, II40b II–20; NE VI.10, II42b 33; NE VI.13, II44a 29–b 1.

339 Cf. Ernst Tugendhat, *Vorlesungen über Ethik* (Frankfurt, 1993), 104ff.

340 Erich Fromm set an important accent in the development of psychology by stating in his research into the human will that what a person considers to be

aspects that affect people. However, this weighing also requires the person to recognise their existence; thus, active perception becomes constitutive. Only then does a person have the ability to say yes or no in their decision. If a person acts virtuously out of free choice, the soul feels pleasure and joy, not in what might come of it, but in the action itself. Then the will to shape oneself becomes a shaping of one's endeavours in accordance with the reason to moderate one's passions. Dealing with the limits and possibilities of the human will is important, as this is an essential prerequisite for moral decisions.

However, human beings can fail again and again (*akrasia*, called *weakness of will* by Aristotle); changing inclinations, instincts, or ingrained habits is a difficult endeavor.<sup>341</sup> It is precisely this human weakness that requires a process of ethical maturation. It implies the aspect that human dispositions, strengths, or potentials may not be sufficiently developed and that further effort is required in order to come close to ethical perfection or refinement. This process of habituation challenges the inner world of the human being immensely. Reflecting on oneself, behaving towards oneself, and guiding one's behaviour in accordance with appropriate basic attitudes and orienting oneself towards the highest good is a difficult and demanding process. This involves not only developing consistent, desirable basic attitudes but also training (action) intentions in advance. Intentions and feelings are in a kind of waiting room for decision-making processes. The character with which an intention and a feeling are set in motion is essential, thereby exerting a considerable effect on the form and execution of an action. If the character is negative, the probability that a morally desirable action will follow is very low. It is also known from everyday pedagogical experience that "knowledge of the moral good does not consequently lead to people doing the good—even if it were possible for them to do so."<sup>342</sup> Self-reflection does not necessarily lead directly to improvement, to moral goodness. However, it precedes the first step, whereby the first and most

---

a free decision of will can de facto also be an external compulsion. See Erich Fromm, *Die Furcht vor der Freiheit* (Frankfurt, 1972).

341 See Jens Timmermann, "Akrasia/Unbeherrschtheit, Willensschwäche, Handeln wider besseres Wissen," in *Aristoteles-Lexikon*, 21–23.

342 Claudia Gerdentisch, "Zur Aktualität von Herbarts Ästhetik. Ästhetische Erziehung und moralische Urteilskraft," in *Herbarts Ästhetik. Studien zu Herbarts Charakterbildung*, ed. Alexandra Schotte (Jena, 2010), 129.

difficult step is, as it seems to me, to be able to break habits in order to change them (in the longer term). Every virtue can be seen as an expression of its excess and its lack. These two qualities are the shadow of every virtue, and we need to take a close look at these excesses and shortcomings within ourselves. Gaining an overview of our complex inner world is a crucial first step in self-reflection, which can enable us to calculate and assess the context of a situation adequately.

A theological-Islamic perspective on personhood is now following this revival of virtues. Theological perspectives on virtue can make their own contribution to educational and philosophical discussions.<sup>343</sup> It will have to be discussed whether Islamic intellectual history provides further insights or other thought-provoking observations and perspectives for the development of the current concept of virtue. After all, Islam also has potentials and resources that have an effect on the moral and motivational constitution of human beings. This approach should not be understood as a turn towards a religiously based moral theory or, in this context, towards a new concept of virtue ethics. My concern is based on the idea that religious-ethical thinking today, as in the Middle Ages, was amalgamated with Greek thought but continued to be characterised by its own colouring. I would like to trace this colouring in an accentuated way, in order to make it fruitful and capable of speaking to contemporary educational thinking.

---

343 Cf. Nancy E. Snow, "Introduction," in *Cultivating Virtue*, 2.

