

Virtue Theory

Lecturer: Cathy Mason

Email: MasonC@ceu.edu

Office: D404

Semester: Fall 2022

Date and Time: Wednesdays, 15:40 – 17:20

No. of Credits and no. of ECTS credits: 2 credits 4 ECTS credits

Prerequisites: None, though previous knowledge of ethics would be helpful

Course Level: MA/PhD (with higher requirements)

Format: Seminars

Course Description

What makes a life go well? What kind of person should you aim to be? How ought you to live? This course will look at one influential kind of response to these questions which focuses on the idea of good character or virtue. It will provide an overview of virtue theoretical thinking in ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics.

Recent decades have witnessed an increasing interest in virtue theory, and a widespread acceptance of it as a viable framework for normative theorising. With this resurgence has come a much-expanded sense of the kinds of question worth asking; ethical questions, for example, are no longer understood to be only those that are about good and right actions, but also those about kindness, justice, and generosity. This course will provide an in-depth study of different forms of virtue theory and explore virtue theory's potential to help answer concrete normative questions. Students will also consider the extent to which virtue theory is well thought of as a distinctive kind of theorising at all.

The course will be split into four parts:

Part 1 of the course will provide a historically focused introduction to virtue theory. Students will read parts of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, as well as contemporary texts.

Part 2 of the course will look at some core contemporary debates within and about virtue theory. Students will consider issues such as the relation between virtue and knowledge, whether the virtues are unified, scepticism about the traits underlying virtue, and some alternatives to neo-Aristotelian virtue theory.

Part 3 of the course will explore whether and how virtue theory can offer guidance in how to live. Students will look at discussions of some particular virtues such as intellectual humility and aesthetic snobbery as well as some applications of virtue theory to concrete ethical issues such as abortion and our treatment of animals.

Part 4 of the course will conclude by returning to scepticism about virtue theory as a distinctive approach.

Course Objectives

In studying this course, students will:

- Gain a deeper grasp of what virtue theory is, and a conception of what might make it distinctive
- Critically engage with some key debates within virtue theory
- Learn how to use virtue theoretical thinking to explore concrete normative questions

Requirements

- All students *must* read the core reading each week
- Attendance is compulsory. Please email me as soon as possible if you cannot make it to a class
- Students must participate in class discussions: before each seminar students should read the core readings, and consider a) what do I think the reading is saying? b) why

- do they seem to be saying it? c) does that seem right? d) are there things that seem unclear? e) are there issues raised by the text that you'd like to discuss?
- All students taking the class for grade must present once during the term

Assessment

For MA students:

In-seminar presentation: 15%

Participation: 10%

Short writing task: 25%

2500 word final paper due January 5th: 50%

For PhD students:

In-seminar presentation: 20%

Participation: 10%

3000 word final paper due January 5th: 70%

Late essays will be penalized unless there are special circumstances warranting an extension.

In this case, contact *me as soon as possible* to request an extension.

Students should discuss their final essay title and plan with me.

Assessment and Grading Criteria

Students will be assessed according to their:

- Understanding of the key issues and texts
- Clarity and nuance of expression
- Ability to answer the specific task set (e.g., explaining a view vs. assessing it)

Some good advice on writing philosophy essays can be found here:

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

Week by Week Schedule

Part 1: Introduction to Virtue Theory

Week 1: An Introduction to Virtue Theory

Core Reading: MacIntyre, A, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). Chs. 14 - 16

- Optional: MacIntyre, A, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). Chs 10-13

Week 2: Aristotle on Virtue

Core Reading: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* bk. 1; bk. 2, chs. 1-7

- Optional: Foot, P, "Virtue and Vices" in *Virtues and Vices* (Blackwell, 1978)

Week 3: Virtues in Epistemology and Aesthetics

Core Reading: Zagzebski, L, "Précis of Virtues of the Mind", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (2000)

- Optional: Goldie, P, "Towards A Virtue Theory of Art" *British Journal of Aesthetics* (2007)

Part 2: Debates in Virtue Theory

Week 4: Are the Virtues Unified?

Core Reading: Badhwar, N., "The Limited Unity of Virtue", *Nous* (1996)

- Optional: Toner, C, "The Full Unity of the Virtues", *The Journal of Ethics* (2014)

Week 5: Are there Traits of the Kind that Virtue Theory Requires?

Core Reading: Sreenivasan, G., "Errors about Errors: Virtue Theory and Trait Attribution", *Mind* (2002)

- Optional: Alzola, M., "The Possibility of Virtue", *Business Ethics Quarterly* (2012)

Week 6: public holiday (no class)

Week 7: Alternatives to Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Theory

Core Reading: Tiwald, J., "Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism", in *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue* ed. Snow, N.E. (Oxford University Press, 2018)

- Optional: Gupta, B., "Bhagavad Gītā as Duty and Virtue Ethics", *The Journal of Religious Ethics* (2006)

Part 3: Virtues and Their Application

Week 8: Particular Virtues and Vice – Intellectual Arrogance

Core Reading: Tanesini, A., “‘Calm Down, Dear’: Intellectual Arrogance, Silencing and Ignorance”, *Supplement to the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (2016)

- Optional: Whitcomb, D, Battaly, H, Baehr, J, and Howard-Snyder, D, “Intellectual Humility: Owning Our Limitations”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (2017)

Week 9: Particular Virtues and Vices – Aesthetic Snobbery

Core Reading: Kieran, M., “The Vice of Snobbery: Aesthetic Knowledge, Justification, and Virtue in Art Appreciation”, *Philosophical Quarterly* (2010)

- Optional: Patridge, S, “Snobbery in Appreciative Contexts”, *British Journal of Aesthetics* (2018)

Week 10: Concrete Issues – Abortion

Hursthouse, R., “Virtue Theory and Abortion”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1991)

- Optional: Kornegay, RJ, “Hursthouse’s Virtue Ethics and Abortion: Abortion Ethics without Metaphysics?”, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practise* (2011)

Week 11: Concrete Issues – Animal Ethics

Hursthouse, R., “Virtue Ethics and the Treatment of Animals”, in Beauchamp, T.L., and Frey, R.G. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics* (OUP: 2011)

- Optional: Kawall, J, “The Epistemic Demands of Environmental Virtue”, *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* (2009)

Part 4: Scepticism about Virtue Theory as a Distinctive Theory

Week 12: Is Virtue Theory a Distinctive Kind of Theory?

Core Reading: Nussbaum, M., “Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?” *The Journal of Ethics* (1999)

- Optional: Crisp, R., “Virtue Ethics and Virtue Epistemology”, *Metaphilosophy* (2010)