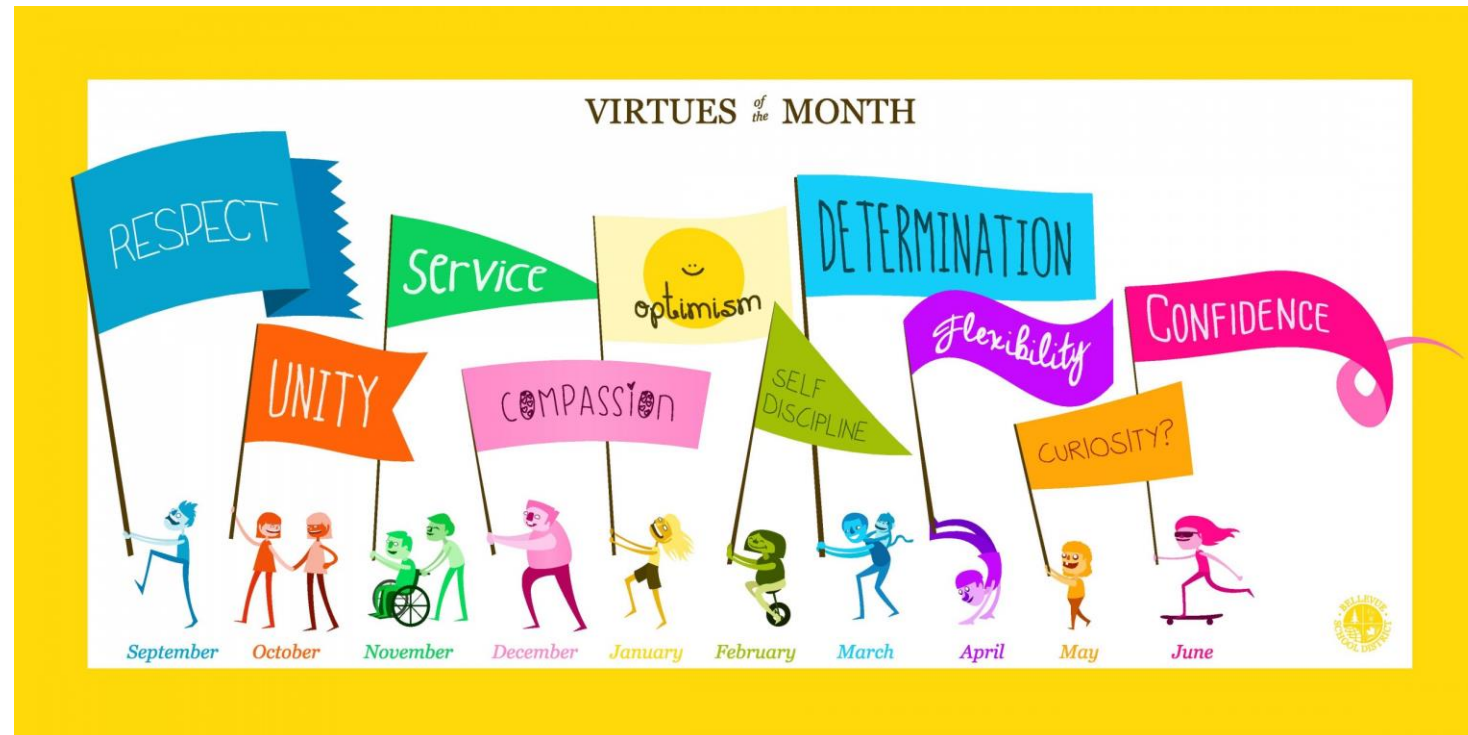


# Lecture 9 – Virtue Ethics

Aristotle – *Nicomachean Ethics*

Julia Annas – “Virtue Ethics”



# Agenda

1. Virtue Ethics
2. Aristotle
3. Eudaimonia
4. Moral Education
5. Doctrine of the Mean
6. Practical Wisdom
7. Objections to Virtue Ethics

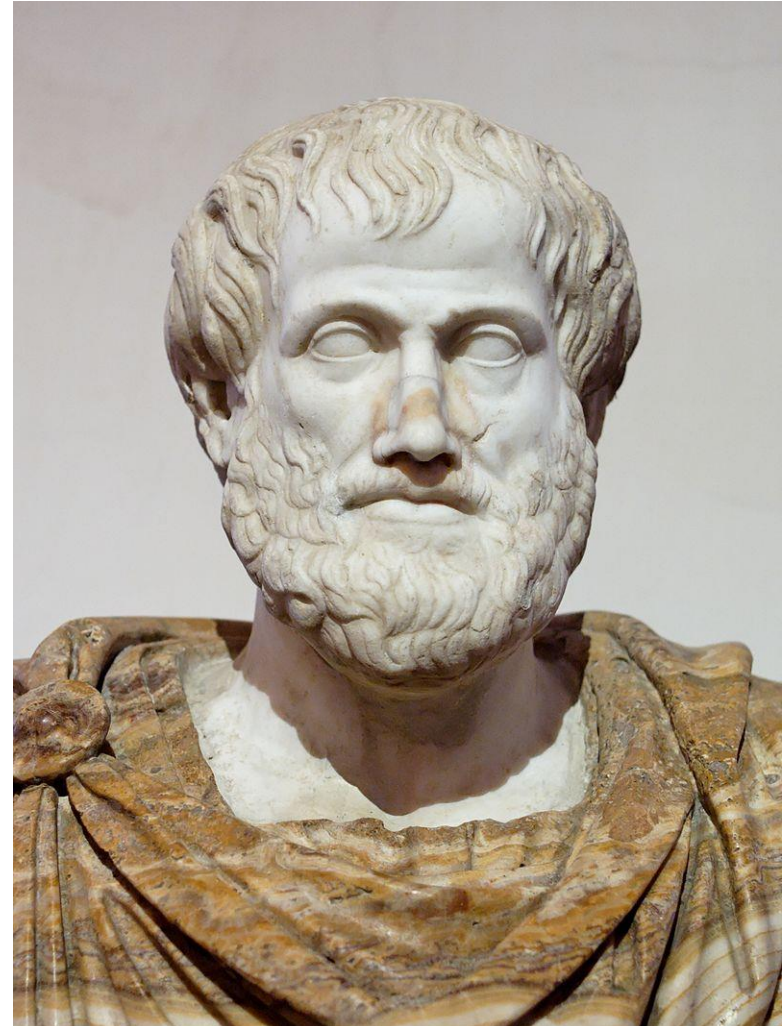
# Virtue Ethics

- Virtue ethics is often viewed as an approach toward moral theorizing that is distinct from deontology or utilitarianism.
- Virtue ethics does not focus on what rules (The Categorical Imperative versus The Greatest Happiness Principle, for example) our action should follow to be morally right.
- Rather, virtue ethics focuses on what *character traits* (virtues) one should have in order to be a morally good or virtuous person.



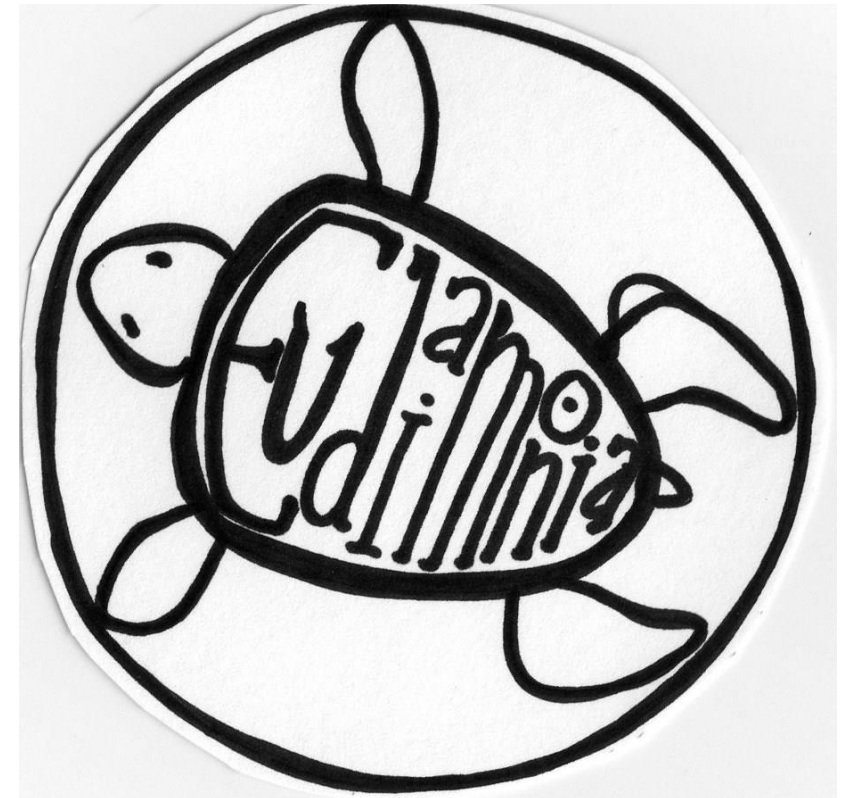
# Aristotle

- 384-322 BCE
- Student of Plato
- Teacher of Alexander the Great
- Wrote the *Nicomachean Ethics*
- Proponent of virtue ethics



# Eudaimonia

- “If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this),... clearly this must be... the chief good... Now such a thing [eudaimonia], above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else” (Aristotle 409).
- *Eudaimonia* is a Greek word generally translated as “flourishing.” Sometimes, it is translated as “happiness” though this can be interpreted merely in terms of feelings or subjective mental states. “Flourishing” or “living well” better captures the objective character of *eudaimonia*.

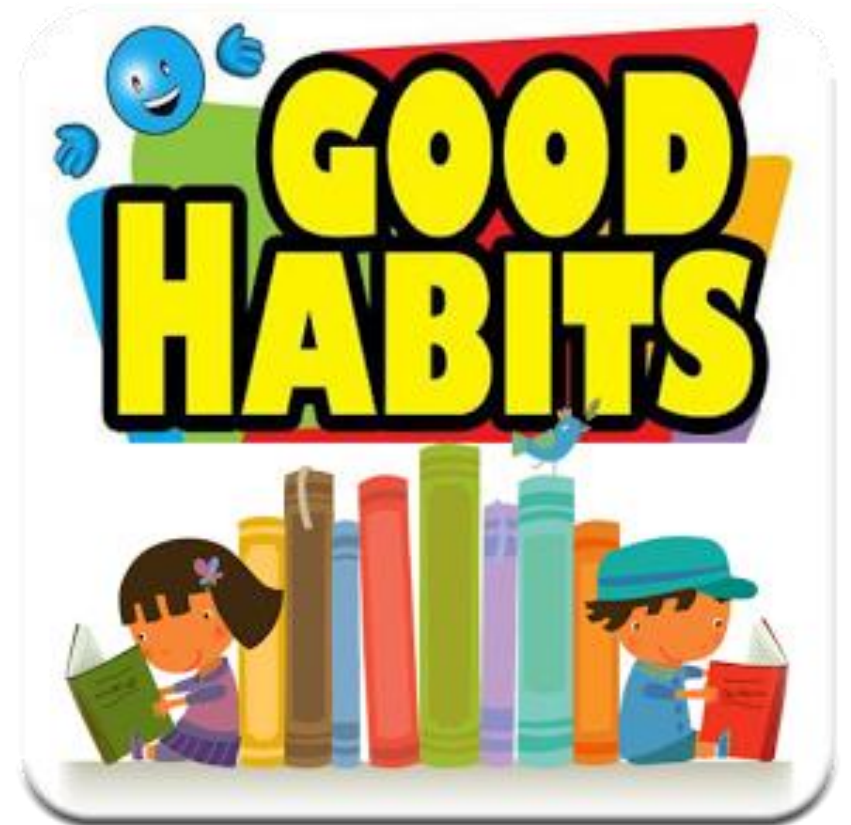


# Eudaimonia

- In order to provide an account of *eudaimonia*, we must look at the function of a person. A flute-player is good if she performs her function well (plays her flute well). Thus, a person is good if she performs her function well. What is the function of a human being?
- “If the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle, and if... any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence... **human good turns out to be activity of soul exhibiting excellence...** [excellence or, in other words, virtue]”
- “But we must add ‘in a complete life’” (Aristotle 409).

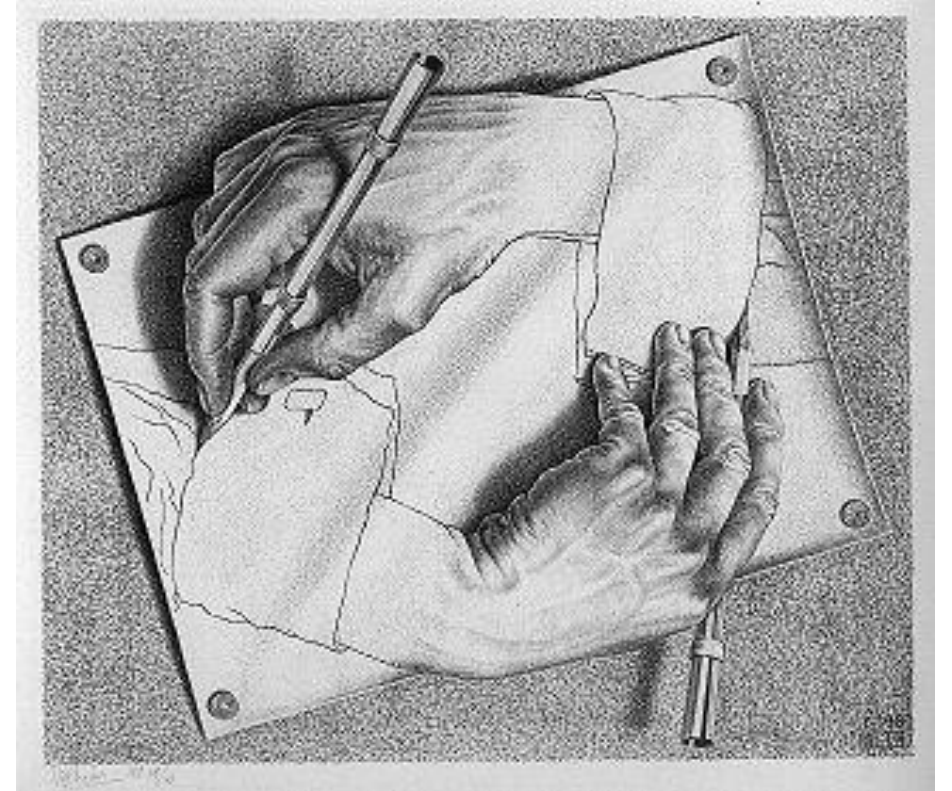
# Moral Education

- Virtues are character traits that good people have, as opposed to vices which are traits that bad people have.
- How do you acquire virtues and become virtuous?
- “Moral virtue comes about as a result of habit... For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g., men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts...” (Aristotle 409-10).



# Moral Education

- Becoming virtuous is like acquiring a skill.
- “There is a progress from the mechanical rule- or model-following of the learner to the greater understanding of the expert, whose responses are sensitive to the particularities of situations, as well as expressing learning and general reflection” (Annas 3).





# Doctrine of the Mean

- “For the man who flies from and fears everything and does not stand his ground against anything becomes a coward, and the man who fears nothing at all but goes to meet every danger becomes rash; and similarly the man who indulges in every pleasure and abstains from none becomes self-indulgent, while the man who shuns every pleasure, as boors do, becomes in a way insensible; temperance and courage, then, are destroyed by excess and defect, and preserved by the mean” (Aristotle 410)
- Virtue is the mean between excess and defect. What does this mean?



# Doctrine of the Mean

- “Both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue. Similarly with regard to actions also there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. Now virtue is concerned with passions and actions, in which excess is a form of failure, and so is defect, while the intermediate is praised and is a form of success; and being praised and being successful are both characteristics of virtue. Therefore, virtue is a kind of mean, since, as we have seen, it aims at what is intermediate” (Aristotle 412)
- Both feelings and actions need to be done and felt at the right time, in the right way, toward the right people and things, and for the right reason.

# Doctrine of the Mean

- “Mere performance of the right action still leaves open the issue of the agent’s overall attitude; virtue requires doing the right thing for the right reason without serious internal opposition, as a matter of character” (Annas 2).
- How does this compare with what Kant says about the moral worth of an action?



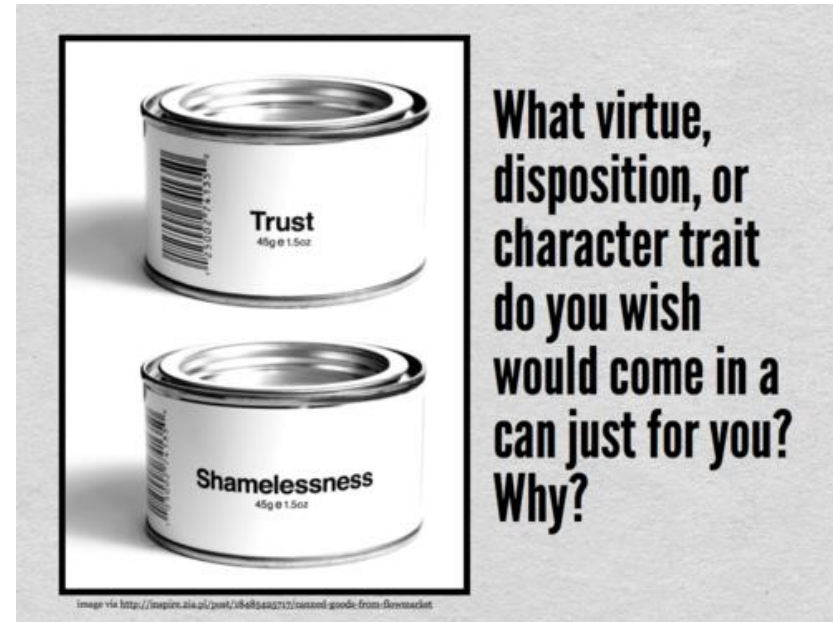
# The Virtuous Person

“If the acts that are in accordance with the virtues have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done justly or temperately. The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does them;

- in the first place he must have knowledge,
- secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and
- thirdly his actions must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character” (Aristotle 411).

# Practical Wisdom

“Some modern theories have thought that there is such a thing as a ‘theory of right action’, which will tell us which actions are right, or give us an account of what makes an action right, and can be used by anyone, at any stage of moral development, with any level of interest in being a good person. This would make ethical thinking about how to act like using a computer manual. As has been forcefully pointed out (Hursthouse, 1991, 1999), this is a completely unrealistic view of ethical thinking. It is not plausible to suppose that a bright eighteen-year-old could by reading a book become an ethically wise person, an excellent source of ethical advice as to what to do” (Annas 6).



# Practical Wisdom

- “The answer that virtue ethics offers to the question what is the right thing to do denies that there is any such thing as a ‘theory of right action’ in this abstract sense. In explaining what is the right thing to do, virtue ethics appeals to the idea of what would be done by the virtuous person... Working out the answer is complex... Obviously, no simple universally applicable formula will result from this” (Annas 7).
- *Phronesis* or **Practical Wisdom** is knowledge that enables you to make the right moral decision. Practical wisdom cannot be captured in simple straightforward rules. Instead, it is knowledge that is subtle, nuanced, and sensitive to particular circumstances (a kind of know-how, or skill).



# Practical Wisdom

“Someone hesitating over whether to reveal a hurtful truth, for example, thinking it would be kind but dishonest or unjust to lie, may need to realize, with respect to these particular circumstances, not that kindness is more (or less) important than honesty or justice, and not that honesty or justice sometimes requires one to act unkindly or cruelly, but that one does people no kindness by concealing this sort of truth from them, hurtful as it may be. This is the *type* of thing (I use it only as an example) that people with moral wisdom know about, involving the correct application of *kind*, and that people without such wisdom find difficult” (Rosalind Hursthouse, “Virtue Theory and Abortion”).

# Objections to Virtue Ethics

1. Virtue ethics leads to cultural relativism. Appealing to virtues and not building a systematic and coherent 'theory of right action' is likely to lead one to adopt the parochial values of one's society and time period.

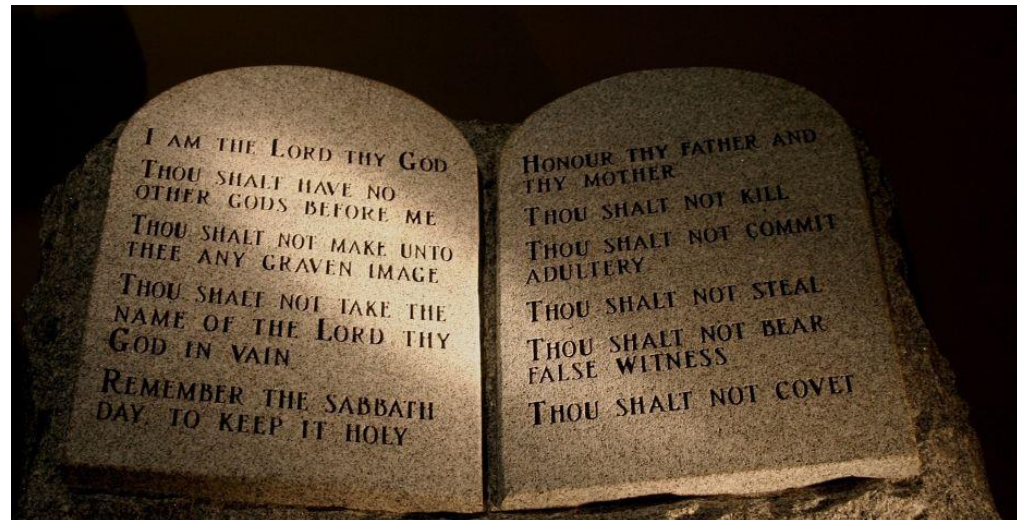
Response: some virtues have cross-cultural significance and will be significant for all people at all times. Virtues need to be important components for *eudaimonia* in order to count as virtues.



# Objections to Virtue Ethics

2. Virtue ethics is incomplete. There still needs to be rules for determining right from wrong.

- Does morality and ethics require rules?
- Rules ensure consistency and prevent hypocrisy. Rules also enable us to hold people accountable for their actions because they are clear and exact.



# Objections to Virtue Ethics

“It is true that when she discusses real moral issues, the virtue theorist has to assert that certain actions are honest, dishonest, or neither; charitable, uncharitable, or neither. And it is true that this is often a very difficult matter to decide; her rules are not always easy to apply. **But this counts as a criticism of the theory only if we assume, as a condition of adequacy, that any adequate action-guiding theory must make the difficult business of knowing what to do if one is to act well easy, that it must provide clear guidance about what ought and ought not to be done which any reasonably clever adolescent could follow if she chose.** But such a condition of adequacy is implausible. **Acting rightly is difficult, and does call for much moral wisdom,** and the relevant condition of adequacy, which virtue theory meets, is that it should have built into it an explanation of a truth expressed by Aristotle, namely, that moral knowledge—unlike mathematical knowledge—cannot be acquired merely by attending lectures and is not characteristically to be found in people too young to have had much experience of life” (Rosalind Hursthouse, “Virtue Theory and Abortion”).