The Ethics of Character

Aristotle and Our Contemporaries

THE VILLAGE OF LE CHAMBON

The first big Nazi raid on the village of Le Chambon came in the summer of 1942. The villagers had already been warned about what would happen if they tried to hide Jews from the Nazis, and it was no surprise when squads of police descended on the village looking for the hundreds of Jews that were in fact hidden in the village and the surrounding countryside. The police vans were followed by a group of buses, ready to cart away the prisoners.

The villagers had prepared well. None of the Jews that had hidden were found for several days. Philip Hallie tells us what happened next.

Later in the week they captured an Austrian Jew named Steckler—he had made the mistake of going to a pharmacy without all of his papers. The police put him—their only prisoner—in one of the big buses. As he sat there, the villagers started gathering around the periphery of the square. The son of Andre Trocmé [the village pastor], Jean-Pierre, walked up to the window of the bus at which Steckler sat and gave him his last piece of rationed (imitation) chocolate. This started the closing of the circle of villagers. They brought their most precious foodstuffs and put them through the window into Steckler’s arms. Soon the quiet little man had a pile of gifts around him about as high as he sat in the seat.

When the buses left with their one Jew the villagers sang a song of affection and farewell to him. A few days later he came back—he was only half-Jewish, and at this
time he was legally classified as non-Jewish. He was pulling a cart with the presents on it as he came into the square. When the villagers gathered happily around him, smiling and nodding in their restrained Huguenot way, he wanted to give them back their gifts. They would not take them, precious as those foodstuffs were to them. Steckler wept. This is the story of the first big rafl or raid upon Le Chambon-sur-Lignon.

From then until the end of the war, the villagers of Le Chambon were responsible for saving the lives of thousands of innocent Jews, especially children.

When we look at the villagers of Le Chambon, we are not only struck by what they did but also by who they were. We are struck by what good people they were. Their goodness did not seem to stem from any Kantian test of universality or utilitarian calculus of consequences. It came from the heart—from who they were as persons. They did not follow some elaborate set of rules but rather responded spontaneously to the suffering of those around them. It is, first and foremost, a goodness of character. As we shall now see, there is an entire tradition in ethics that takes character as the central focus of ethics. Let’s look at that tradition more closely.

FROM THE ETHICS OF ACTION TO THE ETHICS OF CHARACTER

ASKING A DIFFERENT QUESTION

In our discussions of Kant and of utilitarianism, we looked at two different answers to the question of how we should act. Kant and the utilitarians answer this question in quite different ways. For Kant, the answer depends largely on our intention: always act for the sake of duty—that is, because it is the right thing to do. Moreover, act in such a way that the maxim behind your act can be willed as a universal law. The utilitarians gave a very different answer to this question. For them, the rightness or wrongness of actions depended on consequences instead of intentions. The right action was the action that produced the greatest overall amount of happiness or pleasure. Yet what both the Kantians and the utilitarians have in common is that they see ethics as an answer to the question, “What ought I to do?”

Aristotle approaches ethics in quite a different way. For him, ethics is primarily concerned with answering the question, “What kind of person should I be?” Ethics concentrates on character rather than action. Thus, Aristotle is principally interested in virtues and vices—that is, in those strengths and weaknesses of character that either promote or impede human flourishing.

The contrast between act-oriented approaches to morality (including both utilitarianism and Kantianism) and character-oriented approaches (especially Aristotle) raises some important philosophical questions about how these two approaches relate to one another and whether one of them is preferable to the other. Before pursuing these questions, consider an analogy between this controversy and our American criminal justice system.
A Judicial Analogy

To ensure justice, we as a country established a criminal justice system with two distinct dimensions. First, it is a system of *laws* (i.e., rules for acceptable behavior). Indeed, our system of laws has become increasingly well articulated, detailed, and complex. As we discover loopholes in the present laws, we add new laws in the hope of closing the gaps. Yet at the same time, there is a second element that we have built into this process: *people*. We leave the application of these rules to the good judgment of various people, especially the judge and jury. Both judge and jury have to use their own judgment in determining how to apply these rules. They temper the laws, applying them (as least in the best cases) with fairness, compassion, insight, and wisdom. The application is not automatic; human judgment has to enter into the process. Indeed, to ensure that the judgment will be as unbiased as possible, we have a number of people on a jury, not just one. To ensure that the judge is unbiased, we try to remove the selection process as much as possible from partisan politics and not make judges dependent on politics for their continued tenure. To ensure that the rules are paid sufficient attention, we expect that the judge will be very well versed in the law. The appeals process helps guarantee that the rulings of judges who ignore the relevant law will be overturned.

What can we learn from this example? Well, we see that as a country we have decided to rely on both laws and people, both principles and persons. We have built that dual reliance into our system of justice. We put our money on laws—that is, on our ability to develop a system of rules to determine what is acceptable or unacceptable behavior—but only up to a point. We also put our money on people—that is, on individuals who will have the good judgment to know how to apply the laws. Neither can exist without the other. Without laws, judges and juries would be free to decide arbitrarily about cases, and no one would have firm guidelines for their behavior. Yet without judges and juries, the laws could never be applied fairly. Their judgment, their insight, and their wisdom are necessary to interpret and apply those rules. As a country, we have shown the good judgment to depend on both laws and people.

Persons and Principles

Ethics is similar to the law in this respect: It needs both principles and persons. Both the Kantians and the utilitarians articulate principles that shed vital light on the moral life, and they are not to be ignored. Yet the application of those principles depends on people of good judgment and character, and this is precisely what virtue ethics hopes to provide. It is in this sense that virtue ethics offers the context within which both deontological and consequentialist moral considerations can be embraced. This is not to say that virtue ethics reconciles these two approaches within a single unified theory. Rather, it offers a way of understanding how we as moral persons can contain the creative tension that comes from the conflict between these two traditions.

Moreover, we are obviously not suggesting that there is no correlation between character and actions. Particular character traits lead to specific kinds of actions.
courageous person manifests his or her courage in courageous acts. Indeed, the acts
often are our best clues to what the person’s character is really like.

Nevertheless, there is good reason for giving virtue ethics a limited kind of
priority over act-oriented approaches. We have already seen one sense in which
virtue ethics has that priority: It embraces both Kantian and utilitarian
approaches. Yet there is another way virtue ethics seems to be, if not prior, at
least more desirable than deontological or utilitarian approaches. To show this,
let’s go back to Kant.

THE CONTINENT AND THE TEMPERATE PERSON

In Kant’s moral philosophy, when there is a conflict between duty and incli-
nation, between what you ought to do and what you feel like doing, duty is
always supposed to conquer inclination. However, there is relatively little
concern on Kant’s part to heal the rift between duty and inclination (i.e.,
between reason and emotion). Rather, he simply urges us to follow the path of
duty and reason, eschewing inclination and emotion. The alternative is to
suggest that we try to overcome this dichotomy—that is, attempt to reconcile
what we ought to do and what we feel like doing.

Here, Aristotle is particularly insightful. He draws a distinction between two
different types of persons: the temperate and the continent person (Nicomachean
Ethics [EN], Book 7). Temperate people are individuals who do what is right
because they want to. The continent person also does what is right but does not
really want to do so. Let me offer an example in regard to eating. My wife is a
temperate person: She eats in moderation and naturally chooses healthful foods as
the mainstays of her diet. She actually seems to enjoy celery and carrot sticks. Her
eyes light up at the thought of raw broccoli. I, on the other hand, am at best a
continent person in this regard. I may eat salads, fish, and whole grains, but there
is not a day that passes that I don’t want rich Brie cheese, red meat, and
cheesecake. I may not always eat these things, but I certainly want them. I think,
at least in regard to food, my wife has the better life.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the Kantian moral person seems in
greater danger of being the continent rather than the temperate person, and I
think this is a serious drawback in Kant’s ethics. For Kant, moral actions do not
have to come from the heart, only from the head. Yet I think our moral ideal
should be one of striving to have our actions come from both head and heart
(i.e., from both reason and feeling). Moreover, part of that process of recon-
ciling reason and emotion will involve educating the emotions, which has been
all too often ignored in the past.

A similar problem arises with utilitarianism. Motives count for relatively
little among most utilitarians, and emotions occupy a strange place in the
utilitarian calculus. Although emotions certainly count for the utilitarian, the
difficulty is that everyone’s emotions count equally. Indeed, if any emotions are
to be given less weight, it is the agent’s own feelings, for these are at least
somewhat under the agent’s control. Thus, utilitarianism also tends to promote
this split between the reasoning part of the self and the emotional side.
All other things being equal, an ethics that seeks to heal this split is preferable to one that perpetuates it. This was one of the most striking characteristics of the villagers of Le Chambon: They risked their own lives to save the Jews not from any externally imposed sense of duty but because they wanted to do so. They responded from the heart. However, we are not always able to do this. Temperate people have rightly ordered appetites, and for them, act-oriented moralities that emphasize the importance of rules will usually be of secondary importance. Intemperate people, on the other hand, do not have rightly ordered desires, at least in the areas in which they are intemperate. For them, it is important to have rules that govern and control their actions. Thus, act-oriented moralities that provide rules of behavior will properly have a more prominent place in the lives of intemperate persons.

CHARACTER AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

One of the principal attractions of Aristotle’s ethics is the way it encourages human flourishing. Indeed, Aristotle’s ethics is largely concerned with the question of what promotes human happiness or flourishing and leads to a fuller and happier human life. (The Greek word for happiness that Aristotle uses, *eudaimonia*, can also be translated as “flourishing” or “well-being.”) Virtues and vices are understood precisely within this context. Virtues are those strengths or excellences of character that promote human flourishing, and vices are those weaknesses of character that impede flourishing. Courage, for example, is a virtue because we have to be able to face and overcome our fears if we are to achieve our goals in life. Yet what, exactly, is human flourishing?

ARISTOTLE ON HUMAN FLOURISHING

Flourishing and Function  The notion of human flourishing or happiness is a notoriously slippery one, but Aristotle’s approach is helpful, even if ultimately incomplete. Two lines of argument run through his approach to determining what counts as human flourishing. On the one hand, flourishing is understood in a functional context. A hammer, for example, is a good hammer if it does what it was designed to do well—if it hammers nails well. A guitar is a good guitar if it is capable of making good music. Aristotle expresses it this way in Book 2 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

> every virtue causes its possessors to be in a good state [or disposition] and to perform their functions well; the virtue of eyes, e.g., makes the eyes and their functioning excellent, because it makes us see well; and similarly, the virtue of a horse makes the horse excellent, and thereby good at galloping, at carrying its rider and at standing steady in the face of the enemy. If this is true in every case, then the virtue of a human being will likewise be the state [or habit or disposition] that makes a human being good and makes him perform his function well.

Notice, however, that these are objects designed to meet a particular human purpose, such as hammering nails or making music. Human beings do not have
an obvious function in the same unproblematic way that hammers and guitars have functions.

(Of course, within certain religious contexts, human beings do have an obvious function or purpose, and this purpose is ordained by God. Within such a worldview, virtues have a much more obvious justification: They are those strengths of character necessary for us to fulfill God's plan for us. But such a view presupposes that we have been given a purpose by a divine being and that we can know what that purpose is.)

FLOURISHING AND UNIQUENESS On the other hand, Aristotle sometimes understands flourishing in terms of the exercise of unique properties. Consider a plum tree. Its unique characteristic is that it bears plums. Consequently, a good plum tree will be one that does this well. In a similar way, there is a unique characteristic that sets human beings apart from other kinds of beings: the ability to reason or think. Consequently, a good human being will be one who reasons well. Human flourishing is thus defined in terms of reasoning or thinking—for Aristotle, ultimately in terms of the contemplative life.
TWO CONCEPTIONS OF FLOURISHING  When flourishing is approached through an analysis of function, Aristotle tends to emphasize how happiness is related to practical wisdom. People of practical wisdom, Aristotle tells us in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, are persons who can deliberate well about what is good for their life as a whole, not just what is good for some part of it or what is expedient. Such individuals often find that flourishing has deeply social and political elements to it. According to this conception of flourishing, human beings are profoundly social by nature, and participation in the common life of the city-state, the *polis*, is an essential part of any happy life. Happiness or flourishing would be impossible without community. We can call this the *political conception of happiness*, but it is important to recognize that the word *political* did not carry negative connotations for the Greeks of Aristotle’s time. For the Greeks, the political realm encompassed virtually everything that is concerned with forging a common life together.

There is a second conception of flourishing in Aristotle’s thought that exists in uneasy tension with the first. This is the theory of flourishing that derives from the uniqueness argument. According to this account, flourishing essentially consists in contemplation of the good. Leisure is a necessary presupposition of such a view, for there must be some way of creating the time necessary for contemplation. This is the *contemplative conception of happiness*. Whereas the political conception sees happiness as residing at least partially in activity, the contemplative account stresses how happiness is found through a withdrawal from the world of everyday affairs.

A PLURALISTIC APPROACH TO HAPPINESS  Aristotle’s own writings suggest that he vacillates between these two accounts of happiness, and scholars have been divided about which represents his true view or whether the two accounts can be reconciled. If we were to extend our pluralistic approach to this issue in Aristotle’s philosophy, we could say that happiness itself can be understood pluralistically. Happiness in general may be seen as the satisfaction that comes with achieving one’s most important goals in life, but we can recognize that there is a wide range of variability in acceptable goals. Some of those goals may be located firmly within the social realm, and others may be principally contemplative. Yet we can also recognize that there are some minimal restraints imposed on these goals by both our social and our intellectual natures. Just as we cannot find happiness in complete isolation from other people, so we could hardly find it without some significant reflection on the goals we choose to strive for. Both elements are necessary to some minimal extent, but there is a wide range of variability in the relative weight we give to one over the other.

ASSESSING ARISTOTLE’S ACCOUNT OF FLOURISHING  ANTIREDUCTIONISM  There is much to be said in favor of Aristotle’s account of human flourishing, not the least of which is that it is antireductionistic. Aristotle does not try to reduce human existence to a single lowest common denominator. This is in stark contrast to theories that reduce human beings to
Holism

However, Aristotle does at times seem to go almost to the other extreme, apparently looking only for the highest common denominator. Because thinking is what makes human beings unique, he treats it as the only thing that makes them unique. As a result, at times he has a more intellectualistic and contemplative notion of human nature and of virtue than is warranted. His mistake in reasoning is a simple one, as we can see from another example. Imagine you have an MP3 player that is also a voice recorder. The voice-recording feature may make it unique, but its excellence still lies in the totality of its functions. Similarly with human beings: Their excellence lies in the totality of their functions and powers (including the ability to feel), not just in their ability to think. Aristotle, by sometimes overemphasizing the role of thinking in his conception of human flourishing, was not sufficiently holistic in his approach. I stress this because all too often the positive role of emotions and feelings in the moral life is denied or neglected. This is a danger to which Aristotle sometimes, but not always, succumbs.

Ethics for the Nobility

There is yet another drawback to Aristotle’s account of the virtues, which it shares with most other ancient and, to a lesser extent, medieval and modern accounts. It is an ethics for the ruling class—for privileged, free, adult Greek males whose main interests were domestic politics, war, and leisure. Such an ethics completely excluded women and most foreigners, many of whom were treated as slaves or as less than full moral persons. Yet the life that this privileged class enjoyed depended in large measure on the support of these excluded groups. Greek leisure, which Aristotle saw as the presupposition of philosophy, is based on these inequalities.

What are we to say about all this? Clearly, in important respects, Aristotle was on the right track. Just as clearly, we see that his vision at times was clouded or distorted, in part because of the era in which he lived. We can learn from Aristotle’s account of flourishing, but we can hardly take it as the final word.

Contemporary Accounts of Flourishing

Contemporary thinkers—psychologists, economists, and other social scientists as well as philosophers—have continued Aristotle’s task of understanding human flourishing. Broadly speaking, their approaches fall into two categories depending on where they locate the primary impediments to human flourishing. For those who see the main barriers to human flourishing as external to any particular individual, their account of a flourishing life will usually stress external, social factors. For those who see the main obstacles to human
flourishing as *internal* to the individual, flourishing is usually depicted primarily in internal, *psychological* terms.

**EXTERNAL APPROACHES** The external or social approach to human flourishing covers a wide range of different kinds of factors that affect human well-being. Some are obvious: Many people feel economic factors, for example, play a significant role in determining human flourishing. Here, flourishing or well-being can be described in terms of such objective factors as standard of living. Those who achieve a certain level of economic well-being are said to be flourishing, and those who fall beyond the minimum level are not seen as flourishing. Economists and social scientists are deeply concerned about this issue and seek to develop indices of well-being in a society. One of the more intriguing concepts, championed by Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone*, is the idea that societies have a certain amount of “social capital” that functions to make communities stronger and permits individual character to flourish more fully.

Other types of external factors may be less immediately obvious to most of us. Think, for example, of the relationship between architecture and human flourishing. The ways we structure our living and working environments both reflect and affect our interactions with other people. Workplaces with no common areas for employees encourage an isolation and separation from coworkers that is not found as readily in working environments that stress interaction. Homes in which all the chairs face the television reflect a different conception of happiness than homes in which the chairs all face one another.

Historically, utopian thinkers have often provided us with possible models of a social life that encourages human flourishing. Many such models presuppose that people will be happy (i.e., will flourish) if certain material and social conditions can be met. Many versions of both Marxist and capitalist social theories share this presupposition.

Once flourishing is specified in terms of external conditions, we have a clear path to increasing the amount or degree of flourishing in society. We merely have to increase the external conditions necessary to flourishing, whether these are specified in terms of income, health care, or some other objective factor.

**INTERNAL APPROACHES** Many theorists have linked human flourishing primarily with some *internal* state. Virtually all spiritual approaches to human well-being, for example, see flourishing primarily as a state of the soul that is largely (perhaps entirely) independent of external conditions. Similarly, many psychological accounts of flourishing emphasize the internal factors within the individual’s psyche that affect well-being. Some psychological approaches like Freud’s or Jung’s see the path to flourishing as *intrapyschic* in which the crucial question is about the balance among competing psychological factors. Other psychological approaches have looked even more directly at the question of human flourishing, especially at factors that affect peak experiences. The work of Abraham Maslow has been particularly influential in this area.

What is common to most of these internal approaches is the shared presupposition that we are often our own worst enemy and prevent ourselves from
having the very satisfactions we value so highly. We sabotage ourselves without even realizing what we are doing. The road to happiness primarily involves overcoming internal barriers to flourishing, and this is often a matter of spiritual discipline or psychological health. In this tradition, flourishing is primarily a state of mind rather than a state of matter.

THE STRUCTURE OF VIRTUES

We have already talked a lot about virtues without really defining what we, or Aristotle, mean by the term. Let’s remedy that situation.

THE DEFINITION OF VIRTUE

Virtue, Aristotle tells us, is (1) a habit or disposition of the soul, (2) involving both feeling and action, (3) to seek the mean in all things relative to us, (4) where the mean is defined through reason as the prudent man would define it (EN, 2, p. 6). Virtue leads, as we have seen, to happiness or human flourishing. Each of these elements in Aristotle’s definition is important, so let’s pause to examine each part of the definition.

HABITS OF THE SOUL

Aristotle tells us that virtue is a *hexis*, a disposition or habit. We are not born with virtues. They are not natural or inborn; rather, they are acquired, often through practice. Moral education for Aristotle thus focuses around the development of a person’s fundamental character, what Aristotle calls “soul.”

FEELING AND ACTION

Virtue, for Aristotle, is not simply a matter of *acting* in a particular way; it is also a question of *feeling* certain ways. Virtue includes emotion as well as action. The compassionate person not only acts in certain ways that help alleviate the suffering of others but also has certain kinds of feelings toward their suffering.

The inclusion of feeling in the definition of virtue is important to our concerns here, for as we saw in the previous chapter, the exclusion of emotions from the moral life (or at least their devaluation) leads to significant problems for Kantian, utilitarian, and egoistic moral theories. Aristotle’s account of the moral life in terms of virtue, with its emphasis on the emotive or affective character of virtue, allows us to set aside this objection.

SEEKING THE MEAN RELATIVE TO OURSELVES

A virtue, Aristotle tells us, involves finding the mean between the two extremes of excess and deficiency. Courage, for example, is that middle ground between cowardice (too little) and foolhardiness (too much).

In virtues that contain several elements, there might be several associated vices depending on which of the elements are in excess and which are deficient. Courage, when we examine it more closely, has at least two components: fear and
confidence. We can err in regard to either factor: We may have too much or too little fear, or we may have too much or too little confidence in ourselves.

Aristotle himself suggests that this tripartite framework may not always apply. The example he gives is murder. There is, he tells us, no mean in regard to murder. It is just an extreme. Yet I think Aristotle is confused on this matter, for murder is neither a virtue nor a vice. It is an action, not a quality of character. Indeed, the relevant quality of character would be something like respect for life, which is a virtue that can have extremes. On the one hand, there are those with too little respect for life. They kill and injure others with no regard for the pain and suffering they are inflicting. On the other hand, there are those who would never knowingly even step on an ant. One could argue that they have an excessive respect for life. Unfortunately, our society is plagued much more by the former than the latter.

DEFINING THE MEAN THROUGH REASON AND THE PRUDENT PERSON

Interestingly, Aristotle gives two ways for determining what the mean is: through reason and through observing the prudent person. This duality reflects precisely the point made earlier in this chapter through the judicial analogy: We need both principles and persons for the moral life. Rather than choosing one or the other, Aristotle chooses both because he sees them as complementary.

VIRTUES AND TYPES OF CHALLENGES IN LIFE

One of the common criticisms of Aristotle’s list of the virtues is that it is arbitrary. Certainly, it is culturally bound (i.e., shaped by the values of ancient Athens). Yet there are some universal elements, and Aristotle provides a good hint about how these can be established. There are, he suggests, certain spheres of existence that all of us have to encounter. We all have to develop an attitude toward the accomplishments and successes of other people: Envy, admiration, or belittling are some of the possible attitudes. We all have to develop an attitude toward the offenses and hurts that others inflict on us. Some people will be resentful and revengeful, others forgiving, and yet others will just be doormats. Correlatively, we have to develop an attitude toward our own offenses to other people. Again, there is a wide range of possibilities, ranging from being indifferent to overly guilty. Somewhere in the middle is the proper attitude of remorse and reparation.

Notice too that the emphasis here is not on individual actions but on character, which manifests itself in habits of perception and behavior. Take courage as an example. Aristotle’s question is not whether this or that particular action is courageous. Rather, he asks what a life without courage, or without courage in a particular range of situations, would be like. The focus is not on specific acts but rather on the patterns that reveal a person’s character.

There are a variety of ways we might summarize these various types of challenges in life. Here is one that I have developed, based on a similar outline by Martha Nussbaum.
### Type of Challenge in Life

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Thus, Aristotle tells us that virtue is the disposition of the soul through reasoning to find the mean in all things relative to us. The mean is that middle ground between two extremes—the extremes of excess (having too much of something) and deficiency (having too little). The mean is described differently depending on the particular sphere of existence in which we are seeking the mean. Certain spheres of existence are found in almost all cultures.

**Executive and Substantive Virtues**  Virtues, Aristotle tells us, are those strengths of character that promote human flourishing. Some of those strengths, later commentators have suggested, are strengths of the will. *Perseverance* in the face
of a difficult and lengthy task is a virtue of the will, what some have called an **executive virtue**. So too is **courage**, the ability to act in the face of one’s fears. These virtues of the will are largely independent of moral goodness. One can just as easily persevere in a life of crime as in a life of goodness; bank robbers may exhibit as much courage as the FBI agent who tries to capture them. Other virtues are more closely related to moral goodness, and we will call these **moral virtues**. **Compassion** is clearly a moral virtue, for it is directly tied to a concern for moral goodness in a way that perseverance and courage are not.

Let’s turn now to consider some specific virtues and their associated vices.

**COURAGE**

**The Everyday Need for Courage**

Think about the people you know who are afraid of something. Do you know anyone who is afraid to ask someone out on a date for fear of rejection? Do you know anyone who is afraid of saying something dumb and looking stupid—and consequently doesn’t ask questions in class? Or someone who is afraid to disagree with friends and consequently says whatever the friends want to hear? Do you know anyone who got into trouble but was afraid to ask for help from family or friends? Do you know anyone who is afraid to end a bad relationship because they’re afraid of being alone? Do you know anyone who was afraid to “just say no” to something they didn’t want to do because their friends would think less of them?

Think about those people. All of them are faced with something they fear, and their challenge is to overcome that fear. When Aristotle suggests that virtues are necessary to human flourishing, it is easy to see that this is the case with courage, especially if we think of courage as facing and overcoming our fears. If we are unable to overcome those fears, we will often be unable to obtain or accomplish some of the most important things in life. Take, for example, the person who is afraid to ask anyone out on a date. He will probably be lonely and feel unfulfilled. Or consider the person who is afraid to speak out in front of other people and especially to disagree with others. She will be unable to hold certain kinds of jobs that require leadership, and she probably will not be able to be a loyal friend. She certainly would not be able to defend her friends against the criticisms of others because she is afraid to speak out in disagreement. Moreover, it would be difficult for such a person to have close friends, for others would find it hard to get to know her. If she lacks the courage to disagree, then she will always present a pleasant and compliant face to others, and thus, they will never know her true feelings. She has to have the courage to stand up for herself or else she will never be able to be a good friend.

Courage, in other words, is a virtue of everyday life that involves facing and overcoming our fears.

**The Elements of Courage**

**Fear and Danger**  You may have been surprised by the preceding examples of courage, for we most often think of courage in a military context or in situations of great objective danger.
Let’s begin by considering what courage is a response to—that is, what sphere of experience it belongs to. At least two candidates immediately present themselves. Courage can be seen as a response either to danger or to fear. It’s important to distinguish between danger and fear, for one is objective and the other is subjective. Danger refers to objectively specifiable characteristics of a situation or to objects that threaten our safety or security in some way. A burning building is dangerous because, if we are trapped within it, we will be incinerated by the fire or killed indirectly through asphyxiation. Similarly, driving a car at high speeds on icy pavement is dangerous because the car could easily go out of control and result in possible injuries or death. Fear, on the other hand, is a subjective reaction that we have to certain objects or events. Certainly, some of the things I fear may be objectively dangerous. I may, for example, be afraid of driving very fast on icy roads. However, there are also lots of people who are afraid of things or events that are not in fact dangerous. Many people are afraid of snakes, even when they know that they are harmless. Some people are afraid of flying in airplanes, even when they know that the flight is probably safer than the drive to the airport. Other people are afraid of things that most of us never even notice. One friend of mine, for example, is very afraid of birds, even though the birds she encounters (sparrows, robins, etc.) are not dangerous at all.

This distinction becomes useful in understanding courage, for we get two different conceptions of courage depending on whether we see courage as a response to fear or to danger. If courage is a response to danger, then those who overcome their fears of things that are not actually dangerous will not count as courageous. Moreover, if courage is a response to objectively specifiable dangers, then a response to such things as psychological dangers will not count as courage. Finally, if courage is a response to danger, then those who do not have the good sense to be afraid of dangerous things will be counted as courageous. On the other hand, if courage is seen as overcoming fear rather than danger, this opens the door to admitting these three types of cases as legitimate instances of courage.

The underlying issue here is interesting, for what is really at issue is the question of rightly ordered fears. People who have the courage to go on picnics despite a deathly fear of squirrels may be courageous, but their courage does not exist within a context of rightly ordered fears. Their fears are not proportionate to the actual risk present in the situation. Similarly, the person who does not feel fear when thrown into a pit full of poisonous snakes does not have rightly ordered fears either, for that is a genuinely dangerous situation in which fear is an appropriate response. Paradigmatic or model cases of courage occur within a context of rightly ordered fears.

**CONFIDENCE AND RISK** Not only do we need to have rightly ordered fears to be fully courageous, but we must also have an appropriate level of confidence in our own ability. Self-confidence is grounded in our perception of risk—our own measure of our ability to deal with a specific type of challenge or task. The assessment of risk is based on two factors: the objective danger and our own
level of ability to deal with that kind of danger. Thus, the level of risk depends in part on our level of ability. It is much riskier for me to drive in a Grand Prix auto race than it would be for a professional driver, for the professional would presumably have a much higher level of ability. The lower one's level of ability, all other things being equal, the riskier the challenge or task becomes.

Courage, in its fullest sense, rests on (1) *rightly ordered fears* and (2) an *accurate assessment of risk* (i.e., one's ability to meet the specific kind of challenge presented). Differing levels of ability may make one person's action courageous, whereas another person's identical action would simply be an everyday uncourageous action. Imagine flying in an airplane when the pilot suddenly has a heart attack. I have no idea how to fly a plane, and for me to take over the controls and follow radio instructions on how to land the plane would be courageous. For my friend Norm, who can fly virtually anything with a semblance of two wings, to land the plane would be “a piece of cake” and require no courage on his part.

**THE EXTREMES** Aristotle suggests that courage is the mean between two extremes. One of these extremes is initially quite clear: *cowardice*. The cowardly person has a deficiency of courage. There are two ways of being cowardly: A person may have too much fear or too little self-confidence. We might call having too much fear *timidity* because the word *timidity* comes from the Latin word *timere*, which means “to fear.” On the other hand, one can have too much courage, and this is the other extreme. Aristotle suggests that there are two ways this can happen. First, individuals may have too much confidence in their own ability, and such a person Aristotle calls *rash* or *foolhardy*. Second, a person can have too little fear. (Aristotle says that we lack a name for such a person, just as we lack names for many other virtues and vices.) In a sense, this is the opposite of the example about the person who was afraid of harmless birds. Such people aren’t afraid of things that they *should* be afraid of.

**PROPER ENDS** Thus, courage involves at least two elements: *proper confidence* and *rightly ordered fears*. Yet proper confidence and proper fear are not the only two elements necessary for courage. We can imagine a scene in which someone is standing outside a burning building and wailing, “My baby is trapped inside.” A passerby realizes what is happening and courageously rushes into the building and saves the infant. We would, without hesitation, call this brave or courageous. But what if the person had been standing outside the building and wailing, “I left my hamburger inside”? If someone were to rush inside to rescue the hamburger, we—or at least I—would be inclined to say that he was a fool. The hamburger was not worth the risk, and it would have been easy to buy another one for a few dollars. This suggests another element to courage: *good judgment*. We need to balance the risk against the possible gains and be sure that the possible gains are worth those risks. In the case of the trapped baby, they clearly are; in the case of the hamburger, they are not. Thus, courage involves three elements: rightly ordered fears, proper self-confidence, and good value judgments about ends.
SOME DIFFICULT CASES

If courage involves rightly ordered fears, proper self-confidence, and good value judgments about ends, we are left with some perplexing cases that do not quite fit into the standard model. I will briefly describe two.

THE MOUNTAIN CLIMBER  In his book *Into Thin Air*, Jon Krakauer chronicles a disastrous attempt to reach the summit of Mount Everest. Eight people died in the attempt, several with spouses and children. What do we want to say about the mountain climber who has both rightly ordered fears and proper self-confidence? Is it the climber’s judgment about ends that seems suspect? A climber who completes a challenging climb to save someone’s life is clearly courageous. Our problem is with the one who does the same climb simply to get to the top. Does this show good value judgments about the ends being sought?

Clearly, if the point of mountain climbing is to get to the top, it’s silly. Why not just take a helicopter? (Even better, why not just stay home?) Yet it seems that, for people who regularly climb, the point is to continually reconquer their own fear. They need to climb for the self-knowledge it gives them. Yet I would still hesitate to see climbing as a full-fledged case of courage, for it does not seem to be in the service of particularly valuable ends.

It is also important to ask what kind of character a person develops when courage is that individual’s central virtue. The world then is seen in terms of potential challenges—occasions to prove one’s courage. Such opportunities are sought out and perhaps even created. Other virtues, such as compromise or compassion, may recede into the background to the extent that they conflict with proving one’s courage.

THE TERMINALLY ILL  Another set of difficult cases centers on those with terminal illnesses. What about their courage? What is their goal? The thing about their courage is not that they face death and the possibility of dying painfully but how they do so. It is not that they do so fearlessly. Indeed, fear seems quite appropriate in such a situation. Rather, it is how they manage to impress a meaning on their suffering that is most significant for our understanding of courage.

COURAGE AND GENDER

Aristotle is unabashed about it: Women can’t be courageous in the fullest sense. Aristotle’s model of courage is the warrior who intrepidly faces the possibility of death in war. Because women were not allowed to fight in wars, they cannot be brave. If they do succeed in performing brave acts, they will usually be acts that have traditionally been confined to male roles.

This view is not restricted to Aristotle or ancient Greece. Consider our own society, where, incidentally, women still had not been allowed in active combat roles as of 1992. On rare occasions, women’s courage in traditional male roles is recognized and valued. For example, Major Rhonda Cornum’s courage as an
Iraqi prisoner of war during the first Gulf war was certainly given wide publicity and praise. A flight surgeon, pilot, paratrooper, and biochemistry PhD, Cornum was captured when her helicopter was shot down in the Iraqi desert. With two broken arms, a badly injured knee, a shoulder shattered from a bullet wound, and a bad infection, Cornum’s only regret was that she wasn’t able to swallow her wedding ring before her captors got it. Yet this is the exception. In general, two points stand out. First, the courage of women is usually underrecognized and undervalued in our society. Second, courage is seen as much more integral to male identity than it is to female identity in our society. Let’s briefly examine both issues.

**THE UNDERRECOGNITION OF WOMEN’S COURAGE**

Women are no less courageous than men, but on the whole, the ways they exhibit their courage are less likely to be recognized and valued as courageous than are the ways men exhibit their courage.

Sometimes women exhibit a degree of physical courage in the face of physical dangers that is comparable to their male counterparts, but it often goes unnoticed. Consider the courage of both the Native Americans and the European pioneers in North America. The courage of the Native American men and the pioneer men who fought each other is generally accepted and valued, even though many of us have profound doubts about the morality of the goal of colonization. Yet the courage of both Native American and pioneer women is largely unrecognized and undervalued, despite the great dangers and hardships they faced.

Women also faced dangers unique to them, most notably childbirth. Prior to the development of modern antiseptic procedures and childbirth techniques, the danger of death was high, and the chances of great suffering were even higher. Yet women facing such danger intrepidly were rarely recognized for their bravery.

Not all dangers are purely physical. Consider those who have been sexually abused as children and confront their pain—and often their abusers—to heal. Most victims of such abuse are women. (We are, however, discovering a greater percentage of men were sexually abused than we had previously realized.) The courage they show in facing their greatest fears and overcoming them is remarkable, but we are more likely to recognize the courage of soldiers as the genuine article than to acknowledge the courage of individuals who overcome this type of fear.

Finally, consider the courage that some girls show in the passage from adolescence to adulthood. In *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development* (1992), Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan have suggested that girls face a developmental challenge requiring great courage as they begin to move into womanhood. Brown and Gilligan found that the transition from girlhood to womanhood was one in which girls typically found themselves increasingly interpersonally isolated, emotionally disconnected, and intellectually uncertain about the truth of their own experience. It took great courage for them to refuse to give up the sense of connectedness that they had developed in girlhood.
and to insist—often against prevailing social expectations—on retaining and enhancing their relationships with other people. So too did it take great courage—what Annie Rogers refers to as “ordinary courage”—to remain true to their own experience and to speak out on behalf of that experience.

**Courage and Gender Roles**

Courage is tied to the issue of gender in a second way as well in our society. We tend to see courage as much more integral to a masculine identity than to a feminine identity. If a man is not courageous, he is much more open to the charge of being less of a man than a woman is open to the corresponding charge if she is not courageous. Failing to be courageous is not usually seen as detracting from her femininity (except possibly in the area of defending her children) to the same extent that it is perceived as detracting from a man’s masculinity.

Most of us, me included, would be highly skeptical about this restriction of courage to men. But it raises important philosophical questions about the role of gender in ethics and the ideals toward which we are striving. We shall return to this issue in Chapter 10 in our discussion of the ethics of diversity.

**Compassion**

**Responding to the Suffering of Others**

One of the striking things about the villagers of Le Chambon was their ability and willingness to respond spontaneously and wholeheartedly to the plight of the Jews who came to their doors. It is precisely this responsiveness to suffering that is at the heart of compassion. Even the etymology of the word *compassion* highlights this element of compassion. It comes from the Latin words for “with” and “feel,” “suffer,” or “endure.” To experience compassion for someone is, at least to a limited extent or in some metaphorical fashion, to share their suffering with them. Yet the etymology only takes us part of the way, for compassion is more than simply “feeling with”; it also involves a disposition to respond to the other’s suffering in a caring way that seeks to alleviate that suffering or to comfort those who are experiencing it. Let’s look at both aspects of compassion: feeling and acting.

**Compassion and Emotion**

Compassion begins in *feeling* (i.e., in our affective relationship to the world). The compassionate person is not some type of utilitarian computer that infers or deduces the suffering that others are experiencing; rather, the compassionate person suffers with the other person to some extent. This is the heart-wrenching dimension of compassion. I remember watching my father in a hospital room fighting for his life after major surgery, and my heart poured out to him. Similarly, the villagers of Le Chambon responded to the Jews who came to their door by opening their hearts as well as their homes. At other times, we may experience compassion less intensely, but the basic affective response to the suffering of another person is the same.
There are at least two reasons this affective dimension of compassion is so important. First, without compassion, we will often fail to recognize the suffering of others as suffering. The compassionate person has, as it were, the emotional radar to detect suffering that would otherwise not be noticed as suffering. The Nazis did not perceive the suffering of the Jews as suffering but rather simply as what they deserved. Often, precisely to be able to treat other people inhumanely or to prevent our own lives from being disturbed by the suffering of others, we shut ourselves off emotionally from perceiving the suffering of other people as suffering. Think, for example, of how many of us shut out the suffering of the homeless, the aged, or those with AIDS. We don’t let ourselves feel anything for these people because such feelings may disturb our lives.

Second, those who are suffering often need precisely this affective dimension of compassion (i.e., the feeling of being cared about). A woman who had been saved through the village of Le Chambon commented on the difference between her experience and the experience of those who were saved by fleeing to another country. “If today we are not bitter people like most survivors,” she wrote, “it can only be due to the fact that we met people like the people of Le Chambon, who showed to us simply that life can be different, that there are people who care, that people can live together, and even risk their own lives for their fellow man.”

**COMPASSION, MORAL IMAGINATION, AND ACTION**

The relationship between compassionate feelings and compassionate action is a complex one. Compassion that never resulted in action would hardly be compassion. Yet we can imagine situations in which the compassion is genuine and yet, due to unusual circumstances, action is not possible. Compassion always involves the desire to do something about the situation, but it does not guarantee the opportunity to do so.

Even when the opportunity to act is present, compassionate feelings do not always tell us what the right course of action is. For compassionate feelings to be translated into actions, we need good judgment and often moral imagination as well. Recall the example of Le Chambon. For Jean-Pierre to bring a gift to Steckler on the bus, for the village to sing a song of affection and farewell to him—these were compassionate actions that showed an impressive amount of moral imagination as well.

It is precisely this element of moral imagination that traditional moral theories such as Kant’s or Bentham’s neglect. They seek to provide us with a set of rules for living the moral life, but moral imagination and creativity take us beyond the rules. We might liken this to the difference between painting by the numbers and painting one’s own composition. When I was a kid, we used to get these paint-by-number kits that contained a picture that was already outlined, and each space had the number of the color to be painted there. Some people hope that the moral life is this way: Your moral principles will tell you exactly what to do. My own view is that the moral life is more like painting your own picture: Ultimately, you have to sketch out your own picture and, based on your best knowledge and training, choose your own colors.
COMPASSION AND PITY

One final element in our definition of compassion is worth noting here: the difference between pity and compassion. The distinction centers on the issue of equality. When we pity someone, we look down on them and see them as less than we are. Pity is essentially a response that promotes inequality; it establishes the superiority of the persons feeling pity over those they pity. This is part of the moral ambiguity of pity: In the act of pitying someone, we both pull them up (by trying to help them) and put them down (by treating them as less than we are). It is little wonder that few people want to be pitied. When they are the object of pity, they pay a high price for the help they receive.

Compassion, on the other hand, presupposes a certain kind of moral equality. The villagers of Le Chambon did not look down on those they helped but rather realized that “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” This is why it is so much better to be the object of compassion rather than pity. If someone feels compassion toward you, they see you as an equal who happens to be suffering. Their emotive response joins with you rather than separates itself from you. You feel affirmed and supported rather than put down.

THE MORAL EXTREMES

If you recall Aristotle’s strategy for analyzing the virtues, you will remember that he suggests they can be bracketed between the two extremes of excess and deficiency. Aristotle doesn’t discuss compassion, probably because he did not see it as a virtue. (He does discuss well-wishing in Book 9 of the Nicomachean Ethics, but that is the closest he comes to something like compassion.) Yet compassion offers an interesting challenge to the general claim that there can be both an excess and a deficiency in regard to any particular virtue. Let’s look at this more closely.

MORAL CALLOUSNESS

There is relatively little difficulty with discussing what a deficiency of compassion would be like. It is a type of moral insensitivity or callousness, a state in which we fail to respond, either in feeling or action, to the suffering of other people.

In extreme cases, this lack of responsiveness may reach pathological dimensions. Sociopaths are individuals who seem to lack all feeling about the suffering of others, including that suffering that they may directly or indirectly inflict.

Other cases are less extreme either in their intensity or range. Some individuals may find that their level of compassion for anyone is low. Kant, in the passage cited in Chapter 6, talks of the man in whose heart “nature had implanted little sympathy.” Such people have a generally low level of responsiveness to the suffering of anyone around them. At other times, our lack of compassion is selective: Certain individuals, groups, or races fall outside the domain of those whom we are willing to perceive compassionately. In either type of case, we want to count this as a moral failing.

MORAL EDUCATION

The degree of compassion we are capable of feeling is not fixed and immutable, although it cannot be changed instantaneously by a sheer
act of the will. We have, I think, a natural disposition toward compassion, but whether that sense grows or atrophies depends on many factors, especially on childhood experience and education. Barriers to the growth of compassion may be mild or severe. A person’s capacity for compassion is often dependent on childhood role models, usually parents. If our parents showed little or no compassion for the suffering of others, or if their compassion systematically eliminated certain individuals or groups as undeserving of compassion, we will probably have a tendency to be like them.

There are various ways our capacity for compassion may be educated. The word education goes back to the Latin word, educere, which means “to lead out of.” Usually, moral education is a matter of leading us out of our narrowness and provinciality. Literature and the arts are especially powerful in accomplishing this task, for they develop both our understanding and our emotions at the same time. They help us see the world through other people’s eyes and understand the richness of their perceptions.

Sometimes the barriers to compassion are much stronger. Individuals who have been brutalized as children, for example, have often erected amazingly high and thick walls that prevent them from recognizing the suffering of others. In such cases, intensive psychotherapy is often the only way of dismantling those walls. Such therapy, when successful, liberates people from the walls that imprison them and cut them off from their own capacity for compassion. As such, it too is a form of moral education.

CAN WE HAVE TOO MUCH COMPASSION? The question of whether it is possible to have too much compassion may seem a strange one that only philosophers would ask. After all, an overabundance of compassion is hardly our major social problem. If anything, our society needs to find ways of increasing compassion; it does not have to worry about having too much of it. Yet there is a value in asking this question, for it rounds out our discussion by drawing our attention to two final points about compassion.

Indeed, we find that the charge of “too much compassion” is made in our society when we claim that someone is a “bleeding heart.” Those who make such a charge rarely explain what they mean, but we can outline two interpretations of the bleeding heart criticism that will help us understand compassion better.

First, to call people “bleeding hearts” may imply that they do not know how to act properly on their compassion. At times, our compassion for others’ suffering may lead us to act in ways that decrease those other people’s responsibility for their own lives. If, for example, we see an older man with shaky hands trying to pour a glass of milk, we may take the pitcher and pour it for him as an act of compassion. In the process, however, we may rob him of a sense of his own autonomy and dignity. This, then, gives us one interpretation of the bleeding heart charge: Bleeding hearts may be individuals who feel a proper amount of compassion but act on it in inappropriate, albeit understandable, ways. From this, we learn that it is not enough to feel compassion; we must also have the good judgment to know how best to act on it.
There is a second interpretation of the bleeding heart charge that gives us another insight into the nature of compassion. The charge might imply that the virtue of compassion has been given disproportionately great weight in either of two ways. First, our compassion for another’s suffering may outweigh our perception of other characteristics of the individual. Our compassion for the suffering of a prisoner facing execution may overshadow our perception of the atrocious character of the prisoner’s crimes. Second, and this is often a corollary of the first point, our compassion may outweigh other appropriate virtues, such as anger or justice. This suggests that we do not have to worry about having too much compassion as long as we are sure that it is balanced by other virtues. The answer is not to decrease the amount of compassion we have, but rather to increase the strength of the other virtues that balance compassion.

**Gender and Compassion**

In recent years, extensive work has been done on the relationship between gender and ethics, and much of it has centered around the role of compassion in women’s moral lives. We will be examining this issue in more depth in the next chapter, but several comments are in order here.

**Compassion, Courage, and Gender**

There is an interesting symmetry in the relationship between courage and masculinity and the relationship between compassion and femininity in our society. Just as an absence of courage counts against a man’s masculinity, so an absence of compassion often counts against a woman’s femininity.

There is another interesting barrier to the expression of compassion that may be encountered more frequently by men than women. Often, we encounter situations in which we want to show compassion, but we don’t know what to do. We see someone crying in grief, we see a homeless, lost soul on the street, or we might even see someone dealing with the frustrations of aging. Because we don’t know what to do and because we are uncomfortable with our own impotence, we often push away these feelings of compassion. We do this because we can’t stand the feelings of impotence and frustration that we experience when we cannot act on our compassionate feelings. This is more likely to be a problem for individuals who have been socialized into believing that they must always respond to situations through action. Insofar as men in our society are more likely to be socialized in this way, they are more likely to encounter this barrier than women are.

**Self-Love**

Until she met Shug, Celie—the central character in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*—was terrified. She never thought she deserved much, if anything at all, in life. So her treatment at her husband’s hands hardly came as a surprise. But the terror remained, for she feared each moment could be worse than the
preceding one. From her earliest days, she felt that what she wanted just didn’t count. Indeed, she hardly knew what she wanted. And then she met Shug.

Shug—short for “Sugar”—taught Celie what it meant to love yourself. Sometimes she taught Celie by telling her how to act or telling her that it was okay to feel certain things. But her most powerful teaching came through her life: She taught Celie how to love herself by the way she lived her entire life. *The Color Purple* tells the story of Celie’s journey toward self-love—and of her courage in persisting in this journey. And it is precisely this self-love, or proper pride, that Aristotle claims in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is the central virtue upon which all the other virtues rest.

**The Definition of Self-Love**

Self-love, like other virtues we have discussed, has both an emotive and a behavioral component. It involves having certain feelings as well as acting and knowing in certain ways. We can understand it initially by comparing it with love for other people.

**Loving Others** My wife and I love each other, and certain kinds of feelings and actions are typical of that love. We feel a real tenderness for each other, a sense of deep joy that we are in the world and that we are in each other’s lives. I cherish her, and I want her to be happy; she feels the same about me. We both want what is best for the other person. Love wants to see the other person flourish. These feelings come out in the way we act as well. Besides lots of hugs and other displays of affection, we do many things to take care of each other. If we’re working too hard, one of us may plan a vacation for us to get away and relax or just go out for a nice long, relaxing dinner or even prepare a nice hot bubble bath for the other one at night.

Of course, none of this is perfect. We have our disagreements and arguments. We don’t simply agree with one another: Love contains plenty of room for disagreement, criticism, and even disapproval. When I want to order thick-sliced bacon for breakfast, my wife doesn’t hesitate to remind me about cholesterol and calories. When she volunteers for one more committee, I don’t hesitate to remind her about leaving some time to have a personal life. We find a real peace and harmony in our love for one another, but we still have plenty of room for disagreement, criticism, and growth.

Our love for each other does not eliminate our love and concern for the rest of the world. For example, we both love our own families that we grew up in, and our love for each other does not eliminate our love for them. We love each other first and foremost but certainly not solely. Indeed, the other person whom we love is not an isolated being but someone in a network of varying relationships. The other person, at least to some extent, is these relationships, and thus loving the other person is also indirectly loving the relationships that comprise that person’s world.

Finally, it should be noted that love rests on a foundation of knowledge. One fundamental difference between love and infatuation is to be found
here: Infatuation is the feeling of love but the illusion of knowledge. Just think of the question we ask most frequently after the infatuation has passed: How could I have been so blind? Infatuation is the feeling of love without the substance. Genuine love, on the other hand, knows the other, and indeed, love itself illuminates the other. Conversely, being loved involves being known. Only those who can let themselves be known are able to participate in deep and reciprocal love.

LOVING OURSELVES We can understand the meaning of self-love by first looking at its similarities to love of another person. First, it involves having certain kinds of feelings toward ourselves of positive regard, respect, and concern. Notice that this does not preclude self-criticism. *Self-love is not unconditionally positive self-approval.* It may include rigorous self-examination, but it does so within the context of a deep concern for the genuine welfare of the self.

Similarly, self-love involves acting in certain ways toward ourselves. People who genuinely love themselves act in ways that promote their flourishing, even when that is difficult. Alcoholics who are clean and sober are acting in ways that show a genuine self-love, even though it might be extremely difficult for them to do so. *Self-love does not mean doing whatever you want to do.* Rather, it means doing whatever promotes your genuine flourishing.

Just as in loving another person, we also love that person as situated in the world and connected to others in a wide range of relationships, so too loving ourselves involves loving our larger social relationships and commitments. The “self” in self-love is not just some inner core but a self engaged in the world.

Finally, self-love demands self-knowledge. This is no easy task and certainly one that is never complete. From the Delphic oracle’s admonition “Know thyself” to Freudian psychoanalysis, the path to self-knowledge has always been an arduous one, but there is little doubt that this quest for self-knowledge is fundamental to self-love.

THE VICES OF DEFICIENCY

Recall the story of *The Color Purple*. Celie provides us with a striking example of someone who has too little self-love.

A deficiency of self-love manifests itself in various ways. Some people are *self-deprecating*, putting themselves and their accomplishments down whenever possible. Others are *self-effacing*, hiding themselves and their achievements from notice by others. Some are *servile*, making their own needs and desires subservient to the needs and desires of others. When they do this by trying to please the people around them, they are *obsequious*. Some are simply *unaware of themselves*, for they have never come to know themselves well enough to be certain of their own likes and dislikes, their own hopes and fears, and their own beliefs and doubts.

Usually, the behavior associated with these attitudes toward the self is easy to recognize. Yet sometimes it manifests itself in opposite ways. Someone with very low self-esteem may behave in straightforwardly self-effacing or self-deprecating
ways. However, they may compensate for their feelings of inadequacy by going
to the other extreme and acting in arrogant or conceited ways.

What, if anything, is wrong with these traits? Within Aristotle’s perspec-
tive, the answer is clear: They detract from flourishing. People who always put
themselves down, who hide their own accomplishments, and who put their
needs behind everyone else’s are less likely to flourish. They suffer from a kind
of anorexia of the spirit in which they starve themselves from the nourishment
of relationships of equality with other people.

THE VICES OF EXCESS

Excesses of self-love take many forms: Arrogance, conceit, egoism, vanity, and
narcissism are but a few of the ways we can err in this direction. (The richness
of our vocabulary here suggests that this type of vice is either more common
than the vices of deficiency or else we focus more carefully on this type when it
occurs.) In some cases, there is an excess of attention to the self, an absorption
in the self (narcissism); other cases involve valuing the self too highly (conceit);
some involve patterns of behavior that show little regard for the welfare of
others (arrogance); still others involve too great an attention to some aspect of
one’s appearance (vanity).

SELF-LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

One area in which the need for proper self-love emerges most clearly is
friendship. Aristotle suggested that it is difficult, if not impossible, to have good
friendships without proper self-love. There is good evidence to suggest that he
is right in this regard. Reciprocity and mutual concern are at the heart of
friendship, and either too much or too little self-love throws these factors out of
balance.

THE OBSEQUIOUS FRIEND

We have all seen people who are so desperate to have
friends that they will do anything for the other person. They give themselves up
to be accepted by the other person as a friend. Such friendships are usually
doomed. The obsequious friend is constantly vulnerable to abuse because the
friendship is often valued at all costs. Moreover, who would want that person
for a friend once the person’s true character is evident? One of the things we
depend on our friends for is to help us see things in our lives we may be missing
or misinterpreting. But the obsequious friend is unwilling to stand up to a
friend and articulate a different vision of reality. Obsequious friends simply
mirror back what they think we want them to see and say.

THE NARCISSISTIC FRIEND

The situation is hardly any better when friends are
narcissists, for this too upsets the reciprocity and mutual concern that are so
central to friendship. Narcissists are so self-absorbed that they cannot be
genuinely concerned for the welfare of their friends. An essential part of a good
friendship is being concerned about one’s friends for their own sake. This does
not mean that friends are purely altruistic, but it does mean that they are not solely concerned about themselves.

Both too little self-love and too much self-love destroy the balance between self-love and love for the other person that is the foundation of genuine friendships.

**SELF-LOVE AND MORAL TRADITIONS**

**ETHICAL egoism** As we saw in Chapter 4, ethical egoism had a very important moral insight: We ought to value ourselves. It fell short of the mark, however, on two counts. First, it failed to provide an adequate account of how we ought to act to value ourselves. Second, it mistook part of the story (valuing oneself) for the whole story. Aristotle, in stressing the centrality of the virtue of self-love, manages to capture the insights of ethical egoism without repeating its mistakes.

There are several prominent differences between the Aristotelian concept of self-love and the egoist's concept of selfishness or self-interest. Typically, egoism understands the self in much narrower terms than the Aristotelian tradition does, and very often, it fails to recognize the importance of the self's various engagements in the world. Second, most versions of egoism fail to include any affective dimension in this relationship to the self. There is no element of self-love; at best, it is a matter of self-interest. Third, although some conceptions of egoism refer to the self's interest, none of them contains a critical notion of flourishing like the one we find in Aristotle. Flourishing is not a matter of preference satisfaction or fulfilling our every whim but a much fuller, richer, and more critical notion. Finally, the egoist's self-interest is rarely understood to require self-knowledge in the way that Aristotelian flourishing does.

**SELF-LOVE, SELF-RESPECT, AND KANT** Kant's categorical imperative emphasized the importance of respect for oneself as well as for other people. That notion of self-respect, which contemporary Kantian philosophers like Thomas Hill have explored in fascinating detail, has important similarities to Aristotle's notion of self-love. Yet there are important differences that center in part around the more general differences between love and respect. Love contains a broader and richer affective component than respect does. We can respect a stranger we do not even care about personally; we can hardly love such a stranger without knowing him better or without caring about him. There is an intimacy to love that is not necessarily present in respect. Furthermore, love and respect result in different actions because love is much more active and concerned about the other person than respect is.

**THE PLACE OF SELF-LOVE IN THE UTILITARIAN CALCULUS** One of Bernard Williams’s principal criticisms of utilitarianism centered on the way it failed to give adequate weight to the individual agent’s fundamental projects. An ethics of virtue that makes self-love the cornerstone of the moral life avoids this trap. Self-love
involves giving a privileged place to one's own fundamental projects—to those hopes, dreams, and values that are central to one's identity as a person—for these are usually crucial to flourishing.

PRIDE, HUMILITY, AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION  Initially, one of the startling contrasts between the Aristotelian and Christian traditions centers on the question of what counts as proper self-love or pride. On the surface, the contrast is stark: Aristotle calls pride a central virtue, whereas Aquinas condemns it as a cardinal vice and the root of all other vices.

When we look below the surface, however, the disagreement is less clear-cut and more nuanced. In fact, Aristotle (and Greek society in general) has something akin to what Aquinas calls “pride.” For the Greeks, *hubris* was the overstepping of the bounds established by the gods. It is their equivalent of the Christian sin of pride. On the other side of the fence, Aquinas stresses the importance of the virtue of proper self-love. Part of the disagreement between Aristotle and Aquinas thus proves to be verbal. The same words (actually, the Greek and Latin equivalents of those words) mean different things. What Aquinas condemns as pride may be closer to what Aristotle calls hubris than what he calls pride. Indeed, Lucifer’s pride is quite close to Oedipus’ hubris.

But this is only part of the story. For Aquinas, humility is clearly a central virtue, whereas this is not true for Aristotle. This reflects a larger difference in worldviews. Humility essentially consists in knowing one’s place in the divine order and in not overvaluing one’s self and one’s achievements. One’s “place” is more clearly and firmly articulated in a Christian worldview than it was for the Greeks, and there has been a more elaborate institutional structure in Christianity to remind people of exactly what their place was. This does not, however, mean that the Christian idea of humility necessarily endorses the status quo; it entails acceptance of one’s place in God’s order of things, not necessarily in the human structures. St. Francis of Assisi was one of the most powerful examples of Christian humility. However, he did not hesitate to urge his followers not to bear arms. This certainly ran against the prevalent social order of thirteenth-century Europe. To encourage humility as a virtue is not necessarily to endorse unconditionally the current social and political order.

PRACTICAL WISDOM, ETHICAL PLURALISM, AND THE GOOD LIFE

At the very heart of Aristotle’s understanding of the moral life is his notion of *phronêsis*, which is variously translated as “wisdom,” “practical wisdom,” “prudence,” and even “intelligence.” Practical wisdom, although it has a paradoxical ring to it because wisdom is usually thought to be contemplative rather than active, is the most accurate translation. In discussing *phronêsis*, Aristotle is stressing two elements in this faculty of judgment. First, he is emphasizing the *practical* dimension of such judgments, which are essentially concerned with applying something general—a conception of the good life (i.e.,
of human flourishing)—to very specific cases. Second, by calling this wisdom, we are emphasizing the fact that it goes beyond the mere mechanical application of rules. In this way, Aristotelian moral judgments are distinguished from mere calculations of the type that we find in utilitarianism. Indeed, *phronēsis* is closer to art than it is to science. Let’s look at this more closely.

**PRACTICAL WISDOM**

Practical wisdom has several elements. It involves the reflective and affective application of a general disposition to right action of some kind (i.e., a virtue such as courage) to a particular situation (e.g., a threat by a mugger) in light of an overall conception of human flourishing. Thus, there are three principal elements: a virtue, a particular situation, and a conception of the good life or human flourishing.

Thus, practical wisdom consists in the application of a specific excellence of character to a particular situation in light of an overall conception of the good life. This application has both an intellectual and an affective dimension. It is a thinking process or act of reflection in which we take a general concept and apply it to a specific case. Yet it is accompanied by an affective process by which the individual has rightly ordered desires as well.

**WISDOM AND CLEVERNESS**

Part of wisdom is knowing the best way to achieve a particular end, and for this, there is no exhaustive set of rules detailing how to determine in any particular case what the best means are. Rather, it is a matter of what Aristotle calls cleverness. In discussing this issue, Aristotle makes an interesting and important point about the difference between wisdom and mere cleverness. The simply clever person, Aristotle maintains, knows the best means to any particular end but does not know which ends are worth pursuing. The wise person, in contrast, not only knows how best to achieve a particular end but also understands which ends are worth striving to achieve.

**THE RECIPROCITY OF THE VIRTUES**

Aristotle makes what appears to be a startling claim in his discussion of the virtues: You can’t have one virtue without having
the others. Yet given Aristotle’s conception of practical wisdom, this makes good sense. Virtues don’t exist in isolation; they are connected both to particular situations and to a general conception of human flourishing. If this is the case, then to fully have any one specific virtue is to see how it fits into the more general schema of a good life. And to do that, one must have the other virtues that are necessary to pursuing the good life as well.

This insight into the relationship between specific virtues and an overall conception of human flourishing allows us to resolve some of the difficult cases we saw earlier. Take courage as an example. Foolhardy and reckless individuals face great dangers for things of little value; they have failed to integrate their ability to face fear into a larger conception of human flourishing and, as a result, do not possess the full virtue of courage. A similar issue exists with compassion. The person we have called a “bleeding heart” is one who responds by giving help (or money) in an unreflective way and without a sufficient overall conception of the good life. The genuinely compassionate person will respond to the suffering of others in both a thoughtful and an emotional way and will do so within the context of a conception of the good life for both the compassionate person and the person in distress.

THE ELUSIVENESS OF PRACTICAL WISDOM

It is sometimes difficult to know how to respond to moral problems in a way that shows practical wisdom. Think, for example, of the problem of poverty in U.S. society today. The challenge that we face as a nation is how to respond to the great economic inequalities found in our midst, especially those inequalities that have little to do with ability or perseverance. Welfare and other programs for the poor were intended to respond in this fashion, and they were partially successful in doing so. However, programs were often developed and administered without a clear conception of human flourishing (i.e., the good life we are seeking to realize). As a result, steps were motivated by compassion but were not sufficiently guided by a conception of the good life. Think, for example, of the U.S. government’s program of Aid to Families with Dependent Children. This well-meaning program inadvertently created financial disincentives for fathers to remain with their families—hardly a model of clear thinking or of human flourishing. Or take the example of public housing projects. They were well intentioned in most cases but rarely successful in their goals. They created more alienated and isolated communities increasingly troubled by violence and a sense of hopelessness and were rarely guided by a realistic vision of the good life.

Learning to be compassionate well, which is what virtue is all about, is difficult. So too is learning to be an accomplished artist, a skilled physician, or a good parent. But the difficulty is no reason to abandon the attempt. If anything, it is a motive to try even harder.

ETHICAL PLURALISM AND PRACTICAL WISDOM

Aristotle’s account of practical wisdom also provides a useful insight into ethical pluralism. The virtuous person always acts in light of a general
conception of human flourishing. Each of the moral theories we have studied in this book contributes to our understanding of human flourishing, and the virtuous person of practical wisdom is able to balance these competing theories in particular situations, discerning which is most morally significant in a specific case.

Consider the example of telling the truth. The Kantian tells us that we must never lie, for to do so is an act of profound disrespect for the autonomy of the other person. The rule utilitarian looks to the consequences of everyone following a particular rule about lying, and the act utilitarian urges us to look at the consequences in each and every case before deciding whether a lie is justified or not. Ethical egoists simply urge us to act in a way that maximizes self-interest, and there is nothing intrinsically objectionable to lying as such. All these considerations are morally illuminating, and the challenge faced by virtuous people is to balance them in particular situations. The point is not to prove one set of considerations right and all the others wrong; rather, it is to admit that all are relevant at least to some degree and then to seek the course of action that best balances these competing concerns. Moreover, in the Aristotelian view, it is not simply a question of telling the truth or lying; it is also a matter of how the truth is told (with care and consideration about its impact or with crassness), when it is told, and to whom it is told. The virtuous individual uses moral theories to illuminate the moral landscape and to serve as a guide in navigating a path toward the good life.

THE ETHICS OF CHARACTER AND THE ETHICS OF ACTION

We can now see how this account of practical wisdom allows us to reply to some of Aristotle’s critics. One of the principal criticisms leveled against Aristotle’s approach to ethics is that it fails to tell us how to act. Despite all the illuminating things that Aristotle has to say about good character, we are still left without answers to the pressing moral questions of the day such as abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty, and the allocation of scarce medical resources.

There is much merit in this criticism, and this is a good reason for saying that virtue ethics is seriously incomplete without the moral traditions we considered earlier in this book. There is no doubt that an ethics of character must be completed by an ethics of action. We can cultivate the virtue of compassion, for example, but when we act compassionately, we must still be aware of the moral concerns raised by other traditions. When we act compassionately toward other people, we must also be aware of their rights, take into account the consequences of our compassionate actions, and treat other persons as ends in themselves. Good character, in other words, does not obviate the need for other types of moral consideration.

However, an ethics of action is equally in need of an ethics of character for at least two reasons. First, one of the single greatest difficulties that act-oriented moral philosophies face is in applying a moral theory to a particular case.
A morally sensitive character is more likely to ensure that we apply a principle with insight and creativity. Without good character, we will often only be able to apply moral principles in a mechanical manner, largely insensitive to the nuances of the situation. Second, as we have seen throughout this book, there are several different moral traditions that are relevant to our considerations of how to act. The virtue of practical wisdom consists, in part, of being able to balance such potentially competing concerns about rights, duty, and consequences. The wise person is the individual who is able to know when the concerns of one tradition take precedence over the concerns of the other traditions.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Recall your rating of Ethics Inventory **STATEMENT 36**: “Morality is mainly a matter of what kind of person you are.”
   a. After having studied several other approaches to ethics in addition to Aristotle’s, what do you think the main arguments against this statement are?
   b. Has your rating of this item changed after reading this chapter? If so, in what way? If your rating has not changed, are your reasons for the rating any different now from when you first responded to this statement?

2. Recall your rating of **STATEMENT 37**: “Sometimes courage seems to go too far.”
   a. Is courage a simple virtue or does it have several components? If it is complex, what are its constituent parts?
   b. If you agreed with this statement, give an example of when courage goes too far.
   c. Has your rating of this item changed after reading this chapter? If so, in what way? If your rating has not changed, are your reasons for the rating any different now from when you first responded to this statement?

3. Recall your rating of **STATEMENT 38**: “Compassion for the suffering of others is an important character trait.”
   a. In your view, can a person ever have too much compassion? Explain.
   b. Has your rating of this item changed after reading this chapter? If so, in what way? If your rating has not changed, are your reasons for the rating any different now from when you first responded to this statement?

4. Your rating of **STATEMENT 39** (“It’s important to care about yourself”) gives an indication of your views on the importance of self-love as a virtue.
   a. Explain what it means to care about yourself. Give an example of doing so and an example of failing to do so. How important a virtue is this?
   b. Has your rating of this item changed after reading this chapter? If so, in what way? If your rating has not changed, are your reasons for the
5. For Aristotle, virtues are those strengths of character that promote human flourishing. But exactly what is human flourishing? Address yourself both to the substantive and the epistemological issues that this question raises. Can you give any examples of someone who is clearly not flourishing? Are there any difficulties in knowing whether someone is flourishing? Are there many different legitimate conceptions of human flourishing? If so, how do you deal with these difficulties?

6. I have suggested that there are typically some gender differences in our society in regard to virtues such as courage and compassion. Based on your own experience, do you think this is true? Are there any other virtues in our society that exhibit gender differences? Are there any vices that are valued differently in men and women? Are there reasons virtues and vices should be different for women and for men?

7. Think about the place of forgiveness in a person’s character. Is it ever possible to be too forgiving? Not forgiving enough? Does not forgiving sometimes play a positive role in our lives? How does too little forgiveness detract from human flourishing? Why is it sometimes hard not to forgive another? If it is possible to be too forgiving, how could this detract from human flourishing? Why is it sometimes hard to forgive? How does forgiving—and not forgiving—youself relate to human flourishing? How does self-forgiveness differ from forgiveness of other people? Explain.

8. Aristotle said “count no man happy until he is dead.” What does this mean? Is it true? Why must virtue (and human flourishing) wait that long?

9. MOVIE The movies Glory and The Color Purple present quite different views of courage. Compare these two movies in regard to the relationship between courage and gender. What does such a comparison suggest about this relationship?

10. MOVIE Is Gandhi courageous? If so, what does that suggest about the relationship between courage and violence? How does this contrast with the picture of the relationship between courage and violence in Glory? Is the willingness to fight necessarily a sign of courage?

11. MOVIE In the movie Gladiator, we see plenty of examples of virtues and vices. Aristotle says that virtues are strengths of character that contribute to human flourishing and vices are weaknesses of character that prevent people from flourishing. In what ways do you see this exemplified in Maximus (played by Russell Crowe) and in Emperor Marcus Aurelius’s own son, Commodus (played by Joaquin Phoenix)?

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

The classic source for discussions of the virtues is Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics (abbreviated EN). It is available in a number of translations. For a list of Aristotle’s works


Further Information. For additional information about the issues raised in this chapter, see the page on Aristotle and virtue theory of my [Ethics Updates](http://ethics.SanDiego.edu/theories/aristotle/) site on the World Wide Web at ethics.SanDiego.edu/theories/aristotle/.