

METAETHICS: REFLECTIONS ON VIRTUE

THE MEANING OF THE WORD *ETHICS*

Ethos, the Greek word for *ethics*, has a dual meaning: *character*, and one's *home range* or *abode*. Like the English *habit* and *habitat* (and the Germanic roots, *habe*, meaning *to hold*), there is a connection made between how one behaves and where one dwells, or what one possesses and is equally possessed by. We hear this dual sense resonating in Heraclitus' aphoristic saying (sixth century BCE): "character is destiny."

Activity: Discuss the meaning of Heraclitus' saying, written above. Why is this saying often used in commencement speeches? Compare this saying to the margin quote of Benjamin Disraeli on page 179 your textbook. Does Disraeli's quote suggest a similar or different idea than Heraclitus' quote? Explain your view.

PROTAGORAS' METAETHICAL RELATIVISM

Ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras argued that we acquire values or norms in the same way that we acquire our mother tongue: through enculturation. Protagoras is often considered the first ethical relativist, in part due to this statement: "Man is the measure of all things."

Question: Consider Protagoras' statement above. Did Protagoras mean that the individual person determines "reality," or that society establishes virtues through cultural values? Explain your view.

ETHICS AND VIRTUE IN PLATO'S DIALOGUES

Protagoras

In Plato's *Protagoras* dialogue, Socrates did not agree with Protagoras' ethics. Protagoras' views would make "the good" many instead of one. (Plato wanted a single or ideal form of everything, and this included virtue.) If Protagoras was right, then each city might have its own sense of what virtue is—that is, there would be more than one form of virtue. This would result in moral relativism.

Socrates wins his debate in the *Protagoras* dialogue, but we need not always agree with Socrates' conclusions. Not everyone finds Socrates compelling. For example, Ludwig Wittgenstein argued against Socrates' tendency of seeking the general instead of the specific case, as in determining what is knowledge in an absolute sense instead of finding the many uses we have for the term *knowledge*.

Meno

Socrates did not agree with the Sophists' approach to understanding virtue. The Sophists offered to teach virtue to boys from the wealthy classes. In Plato's *Meno* dialogue, Socrates asked the Sophists: If virtue can be taught, why do we not have teachers of virtue as we do for other subjects or arts? Why don't we offer courses or degrees in "honesty," if virtue is a form of knowledge (instead of, say, a divine dispensation or natural endowment)?

Activity: Read the "Making Connections" feature on page 223 of your textbook and answer the questions posed there.



BLM 8.2 Continued

The *Meno* Paradox

Plato's dialogue *Meno* revolves around this problem: How can we recognize what virtue is, and therefore strive to be virtuous, if we need first to have obtained virtue to know what it truly is?

Question: Do you have a solution to the *Meno* paradox? Explain your ideas.

ARISTOTLE'S PRACTISE-BASED APPROACH TO ETHICS

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle gives us a partial answer to the *Meno* paradox: We learn excellences such as honesty or justice by practising them—by *being* honest or *being* just, much as one learns to play the flute by *being* a flutist. Aristotle explains that virtues are not implanted in us (as being initially good or bad) by nature, like the senses, which are acquired first and used later; rather, we have a natural capacity for receiving the virtues, which we acquire by first putting them into use and then further developing them through habit. Habituation occurs through repetition.

Aristotle also asks: Are we morally responsible for our actions, if heredity and social circumstances largely make up our dispositions? Where have you seen a person's upbringing used as a defence (e.g., in judicial or criminal proceedings), or as a way of diminishing moral culpability? By analogy, Aristotle warns that the "instrument" we have been given—that is, our social circumstances and heredity—cannot be the cause of our virtuosity any more than we can credit the violin over the violinist.

GILBERT RYLE'S ASPIRATIONS TO VIRTUE

For Gilbert Ryle, "learning" the virtues is rather like learning the love of the game instead of learning the rules or specific moves of the game. Learning the virtues is "taught" through habituation, not by expert teachers. Character education, on this model, would not entail so much a *knowing how* or a *knowing that*, but an *aspiration to be*. (See pages 223 and 301 of your textbook for additional information on Ryle's views.)

Question: How do you know that you truly love "the game"—learning the virtues—and that you haven't been indoctrinated through early childhood socialization to like it? Explain your view.

Questions on Character Development in Your School Life:

1. How is the idea of character development integrated into your school curriculum and/or extra-curricular activities? Explain your view and give examples to support your ideas.
2. Can you relate character development in your school life to the ideas of the philosophers discussed on this handout or on page 223 of your textbook? Explain your ideas.

