



ARTICLE

Utrum sit una tantum vera enumeratio virtutum moralium (*Whether There Is a Single Correct List of the Virtues of Character*)

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(Received 5 June 2024; accepted 13 June 2024)

Abstract

Virtue ethics tells us to ‘act in accordance with the virtues’, but can often be accused, for example, in Aristotle’s *Ethics*, of helping itself without argument to an account of what the virtues are. This paper is, stylistically, an affectionate tribute to the Angelic Doctor, and it works with a correspondingly Thomistic background and approach. In it I argue for the view that there is at least one correct list of the virtues, and that we can itemise at least seven items in the list, namely the four cardinal and three theological virtues.

Keywords: Aquinas; Aristotelianism; Aristotle; cardinal virtues; charity; courage; faith; flourishing; God; grace; heaven; hope; justice; love; scholasticism; temperance; theological virtues; virtue ethics; virtues; wisdom

[Readers should feel at liberty, if they wish, to translate the rest of this into 13th-century Latin, as well as the title]

It seems that there cannot be a single correct list of the virtues of character.

Objection 1 For any counting of items presupposes that we have a principle of individuation applicable to those items. But there is no one correct principle of individuation for the virtues of character. And, so, no single correct list.

Objection 2 For what is true in ethics is ‘what everyone or most of us or the wisest have always thought is true’, as Aristotle (*Topics* 100b23–5) and the Catholic Catechism both incline us to agree. But there is no single list of the virtues that has been accepted *semper ubique ab omnibus* (‘always, everywhere, by everyone’): different lists are found in Plato and Aristotle and St Paul and Buddhism and Islam and Confucianism and (implicitly) the Lonely Hearts columns and in many other places too. Therefore, there cannot be a single correct list of the virtues of character.

Objection 3 Moreover, if there were a single correct list of virtues of character then Aristotle or Plato or St Paul would already have discovered it. But Plato and Aristotle and St Paul all give different lists in different places; and Aristotle and St Paul present no *argument* for their lists, while Plato sometimes just assumes a list, as in the

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Protagoras, and sometimes presents an unconvincing argument for a different list, as in the *Republic*. So none of them discovered a single correct list of virtues of character. Neither then can we.

Objection 4 Moreover, the virtues are those dispositions of character that people admire. But what people admire changes all the time and includes many contradictions and perplexities. No stable single list can be founded upon this mutability, contradictoriness, and perplexity. *Ergo*, etc.

Objection 5 Again the virtues are those dispositions of character that are always beneficial. But no dispositions of character are *always* beneficial; social structures and environmental conditions change constantly, and we change with them. Therefore, there are no virtues of character, and, hence, no single correct list of such virtues, or indeed any list at all.

Objection 6 Again the virtues are those dispositions of character of which no one can make bad use. But there is *no* disposition of character that no one can make bad use of: a soldier who fights knowingly in a bad cause can be courageous; a burglar who incidentally passes treasures on his way to the burglary he intends can temperately ignore them; justice can be unloving through harshness; love can be unjust through partiality; faith, and hope can be sincere but misplaced. *Ergo* there are no virtues, and, hence, no list.

Objection 7 Again the virtues are those dispositions of character that promote or instantiate human flourishing. But human flourishing is an evolutionarily determined notion, and what promotes it is not only different depending on the human animal's environmental conditions but also sets a standard that is not so much an ethical one as, in Bernard Williams' words, *Ethics & the Limits of Philosophy* (p. 46), the 'ethological standard of the bright eye and the gleaming coat'. By this way, then, either the list of virtues of character includes such things as ruthlessness and cunning and dissimulation and promiscuity, *quod minime convenit* ('which is not at all fitting'), or else there is no list of virtues of character.

Objection 8 And the true virtues are those dispositions that *necessarily* express and promote the good of and for any rational creature. But if we were a different kind of creature then different dispositions would be virtues for us (see Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*, on wolves and bees and plants). Therefore, all of these dispositions only contingently express or promote our good; so none of them is truly a virtue. So, there can be no list of virtues of character.

Objection 9 Moreover, the virtues are deep dispositions in us, as Bernard Williams says in several places. But as Williams also says, it is impossible for us to state consciously and explicitly the depth of these dispositions without detaching ourselves from their motivational power. Therefore, if there can be a single correct list of the virtues of character, it is one we cannot state. Therefore, we must either speak knowingly falsely or say that we know of no single correct list of the virtues of character.

Objection 10 Moreover, a list of virtues implies a plurality of virtues. But 'virtue' means 'a quality of soul that resides in the will'. And the soul and the will are unities. So, therefore, is virtue. So, there is only one virtue, and unless a singleton 'list' is a list, there can be no *list* of virtues.

Objection 11 And while a list of virtues implies a plurality of virtues, Augustine says in *de Libero Arbitrio* Bk.1 – following Socrates and the Stoics, and followed by

Kant – that virtue means the capacity of the will that makes use of everything else including all other capacities. So, we have it on the authority of Socrates, the Stoics, Augustine, and Kant that virtue is a unitary capacity. So, there is only one virtue. So, no list of virtues.

Objection 12 And while a list of virtues implies a plurality of virtues, Aristotle says – following Socrates – that virtue of character is the knowledge of something specific: Socrates says knowledge of the good, Aristotle says knowledge of the mean. So, there is only one virtue. So, no list.

Objection 13 And while a list of virtues implies a plurality of virtues, John Lennon says – following the Epistles of St John and indeed most of the rest of the New Testament – that love is all you need. So, there is only one virtue. So, no list.

Objection 14 Again, the object of those lists of virtues that have typically been offered, as by St Paul or by spiritual directors, is not philosophical but devotional; St Paul in such lists as he offers in his letters aims to exhort his readers to live better lives; spiritual directors aim to get their dirigees to consider with compunction in what ways they might have failed to live up to the Christian standard. Such lists are simply *ad gregem aedificandam* (‘for the edification of the flock’) and have no bearing upon philosophical truth and do not imply that there can be a list of the virtues of character.

Objection 15 Again, the virtues are by definition the dispositions of character that we need to fulfil our highest destiny, i.e., to get to heaven. But St Paul and the Gospels say clearly that all we need to get to heaven is to be forgiven and redeemed. And to be forgiven and redeemed is not a disposition of character at all, but a work of grace in us. So there are no dispositions of character that we need to get to heaven. Hence, there are no virtues. And no list.

Objection 16 Moreover, the life of perfect goodness is what interests the ethicist. The life of perfect goodness is the life that we shall live in heaven; and supposedly, the life of perfect goodness is the life of the perfected virtues. But the virtues are, as St Thomas says, *circa difficilia*, (‘about what is hard for us’). And nothing will be hard for us in heaven. So, the life of perfect goodness will involve no virtues. So, even if there is a single correct list of the virtues of character, it is of no interest to the ethicist.

But on the other hand, St Thomas says, on the authority of the whole tradition including scripture, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, and innumerable many others, that the cardinal virtues are fittingly enumerated as justice, self-control, courage, and wisdom (ST 1a2ae.61.2) and that the theological virtues are fittingly enumerated as faith, hope, and charity (ST 1a2ae.62.3). This then is our list of the seven virtues of character.

I reply that what needs to be said is that the virtues of character are those permanently admirable and reliably beneficial dispositions of the will that always express our attachment and orientation to the good.

‘Permanently admirable’, because every virtue of character always has something beautiful (*kalon, pulchrum*) and something great about it, and it is the nature of admiration to fix on what is beautiful or great or both. Admiration is often misdirected, sometimes even by entire societies: as it can be directed to honour-killings of oneself or others, as it has been in Afghanistan or Japan; or to military violence, as it was by Homer’s heroes and is by many 11 year old boys; or to racial purity or racial

baiting, as it was in Nazi Germany and the Old (and alas not so old) South USA; or to the acquisition of fame and money and column-inches in *Hello!* magazine, as it most inexplicably (*unintelligibilissime*) is in Britain and Italy today. Yet the admirable is not what is admired but what most intelligibly *can be*, what *should be*, admired.

'Reliably beneficial', because the virtues do not in every case or inevitably benefit either their possessor or those around her; as when a person herself suffers or dies exactly because of her virtue, as Edith Stein and Dietrich Bonhoeffer did, or as when some great common good can only be achieved by some evil act which a virtuous person rightly refuses to do for the sake of that great common good – as Caiaphas should have refused, John 11.50. Yet the virtues are those dispositions that do *in most cases* and *reliably* benefit both their possessor and those around her. And they are those dispositions that will benefit us in these ways, irrespective of the differences between societies and individuals and times.

'Dispositions of the will', because every virtue of character is a habit of choice. A habit of choice means two things: first a way of putting the practical question what to do, and secondly a way of answering it.

By 'a way of putting the question what to do' I mean a particular kind of moral vision, a specific way of framing the alternatives between which we deliberate and choose that is distinctive and definitive of the good person. So a good person who is confronted by a fat man stuck in a cave-entrance will certainly think to look around for unguents, whereas it will not even occur to her to look around for explosives. And a good person who has been shipwrecked and is in a life-raft with no food or water and three companions will certainly think to hope and wait and pray for a shore or a rescue-ship, and to encourage and distract his companions, and to try his teeth on his leather belt and wallet, and to catch fish and seaweed and turtles and gulls and insects, and upturn his hat in order to pool rainwater, whereas it will not even occur to him to kill and eat the cabin-boy.

From this way of putting the practical question, our answers to it in various contingencies will almost immediately follow; or will follow perhaps not immediately at all and with the greatest imaginable difficulty, yet still *conveniens virtuti* ('in a way that is suitable for virtue').

And the virtues of character 'always express our attachment and orientation to the good', because to act out of virtue *per se* is always – however inchoately and unconsciously – to act out of allegiance to the good. It is expressive action with this force, that it states one's past and present commitment to the good, and one's future intention always to continue to be guided by and towards the good. This force can rightly be called *love of* or *loyalty to* the good; it is the force that Iris Murdoch has in mind in *The Sovereignty of Good*. And this is the sense, or one sense, in which every act that is *per se* out of virtue is always an act of love and an act of loyalty.

Now the virtues that always and in every case fit this description are at least these seven: faith, hope, love, justice, self-control, courage, and wisdom. Each of these is a single virtue, because it embodies a responsiveness to a specific kind of difficulty in life that is based in a specific group of the dispositions in us. Each of these virtues has subparts, but those parts are properly regarded as *sub-virtues*, not themselves as virtues, because of their ordering to the difficulties in life and the dispositions in us.

It is possible that there are not just sub-virtues but also wholly other virtues too that should also be listed. Possible in principle, at least.

It would be surprising for us to make a new discovery about this *now*, but we should always be open to future possibilities. If they seem remote to us now, this may simply be because they are *future* possibilities.

It is possible too that the division of the unity that is virtue overall into just these seven specific virtues could validly be framed a different way by a different philosophical culture or tradition from our own.

Notwithstanding these possibilities, these seven virtues will always be members of at least one possible correct list of the virtues of character. There can therefore be at least one single correct list of the virtues of character, though perhaps not one single *uniquely* correct list of the virtues of character; and we know at least seven of the items that it must contain.

So, to **Objection 1**, this objection could not show that there cannot be a correct list of virtues of character; only that there could not be a *single* correct list because there is no single correct principle of individuation for virtues. But the virtues are, as Aquinas says, *circa difficilia*; so they can be individuated if the needs and difficulties that rational agents are necessarily bound to face can be individuated. And this can be done: though of course more than one need can occur at once, the need for courage is one thing, the need for temperance quite another. Hence, it is possible at least to argue about how the virtues might be individuated; and this argument could have an outcome in a single list of virtues that reasonable interlocutors might accept as correct.

And on **Objection 2**, there may be no single list of the virtues that has in fact been accepted *semper ubique ab omnibus*, or even by most people, or most wise people, in most times. But that is not to say that there cannot be a single correct list of the virtues of character. For it remains possible that there is a single list that *deserves* to be accepted *semper ubique ab omnibus*, and that we can say something interesting and substantive about what this list might contain: as I have argued above.

And this also answers **Objections 3 and 4**. Aristotle and Plato and St Paul and many many others are labourers for the discovery of the truth, but we are co-labourers with them, and the task of discovery goes on, perhaps – indeed probably – for ever, both *in via* and in heaven.

As to **Objection 5**, it is not true that the virtues are those dispositions of character that are *always* beneficial; they are rather dispositions of character that are *reliably* beneficial.

And on **Objection 6**, while acts that proceed from the virtues *per se* necessarily involve love of and loyalty and allegiance to the good, there are also acts that proceed from the virtues *per accidens*, incidentally: these are actions that have the outward form and much of the dispositional structure of *per se* virtuous actions, yet with some disordering of the underlying inward prerequisites of love, loyalty, and allegiance to the good. In this sense there are indeed no dispositions of character that no one can make bad use of. Yet when courage, self-control, and so on take this incidental form, it is also right, as Philippa Foot observed in 'Virtues and Vices', to see a sense in which the corresponding acts are not truly actions *of those virtues* at all.

To **Objection 7**, it should be said that human flourishing is not an evolutionarily determined notion and that it is the genetic fallacy to think so. Evolution sets up and historically precedes the conditions within which distinctively human life and flourishing arise. To think that evolution, therefore, determines the nature of human flourishing is like thinking that, since human feet phylogenetically correspond to

flippers in one distant evolutionary ancestor of humans, therefore, human feet are still really flippers. Which is manifestly stupid (*quod patet stultissimum esse*).

On **Objection 8**, likewise, the apt comment is that at least the *principal* virtues will be the same for any rational creature, and that if there are characteristics of human life which we are inclined to call virtues, but which would not be shared by the life of some other conceivable rational creature, a Martian say, then what we should doubt is that *these* characteristics are virtues at all, or at the very least that they are *principal* virtues. And closer attention to examples confirms this. Thus, we can perhaps imagine a life of which the ability to put up with pain is not a necessary part because there is no pain. But it is impossible to imagine a rational creature's life – if it is to be a *life* – where there could be no scope at all for courage. Now the ability to put up with pain is a subpart of the virtue of courage. Courage then is the same good for all rational creatures, even if the ability to put up with pain need not be. So this way we do not prove that there can be no list of virtues of character; we prove only that the true list of virtues of character must rise well above the contingencies of any particular mode of life. But *that* we knew anyway.

As for **Objection 9**, what is impossible for us is to state consciously and explicitly the *full* depth of these dispositions without detaching ourselves from their motivational power. It does not follow that we cannot say anything at all about the depth of our guiding dispositions; if that were true we could not even be having the present discussion without that detachment, and we can. Nor, therefore, does it follow that we cannot state a single correct list of the virtues of character.

To **Objection 10**, we should reply that the soul and the will and virtue are all of them unities; but all *complex* unities. And moreover *ideal* unities. The complete unity and integration of the soul and the will and of virtue is never actually achieved by any of us, but is always the horizon towards which we aim. But even in its full achievement, there will still be a place for at least some kinds of complexity in unity, just as, in the apt image of Protagoras (*quasi a veritate coactus*, 'as if dragged to it by the truth itself'), the face is a unity by consisting of a mouth, nose, eyes, cheeks, chin, eyebrows, and forehead. So from the claim that the soul or the will is one, it does not follow that there is only one virtue; because that claim is false. Yet neither, from the fact that virtue is one, does it follow that there is only one virtue; for virtue, as said, is one by being a complex unity.

Objection 11 Likewise it is true that virtue means the capacity of the will that makes use of everything else including all other capacities; which does indeed imply that virtue is a unitary capacity. But again, the fact that virtue is one does not imply that there is only one virtue.

The same can be replied to **Objection 12**.

And also to **Objection 13**, regarding which we may add that the love that is implicit in all other virtues is love of and loyalty to the good, as is clear from what was said in the body of the article.

As for **Objection 14**, there is no reason why any list of virtues should not have both a philosophical and a devotional point. The best philosophy and the best devotion go hand in hand. Indeed, in the Beatific Vision they become the very same thing.

Turning to **Objection 15**, it is quite true that all we need to get to heaven is to be forgiven and redeemed; but the objection evinces a misunderstanding of what redemption and indeed grace actually involve. To receive redemption and grace is to

be transformed by the Holy Spirit's infusion into us of all the virtues; until this has happened – and it is only completed in heaven – the work of redemption and grace in us has hardly begun. So there are dispositions of character that we need to get to heaven, without which we are not fit for the life of heaven, and which God brings to being in us through the indwelling of His Spirit. And these are the infused virtues.

So finally on **Objection 16**, it is for one thing quite untrue that the life of perfect goodness is the *only* thing that interests the ethicist; our struggles on the way to that life are of the greatest interest to her, too. And for another, while we are still in the way we can know very little indeed of the life of heaven. But to say as the Objection does that 'nothing will be hard for us in heaven' is to suggest that spending the rest of eternity going deeper and deeper into the ecstatic contemplation of the infinite, aweful, and ineffable mystery, majesty, and love of almighty God will be *easy* and so will not call at all significantly upon our reserves of virtue. As suggestions go, it is hard to see how any could be more rash or unpersuasive than this.

Cite this article: Sophie Grace Chappell, 'Utrum sit una tantum vera enumeratio virtutum moralium (Whether There Is a Single Correct List of the Virtues of Character)', *New Blackfriars*, 105 (2024), 471–477. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2024.42>