

From Eudaimonia to Existentialism: Reinterpreting Virtue in Contemporary Moral Philosophy

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Abstract: *This essay looks at how the idea of virtue has changed over time, from its ancient Aristotelian roots in eudaimonia to its new meaning in existentialist moral philosophy. Aristotle's virtue ethics, which is based on the idea that people can be happy and successful by developing good moral character, has long controlled the discussion of moral issues in the West. Existentialists like Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre, on the other hand, brought a very different view to the table. They said that moral responsibility lies in each person's honesty, freedom, and choice, not in fixed ideas of what is good. This study changes the traditional idea of virtue by looking at how existentialist philosophy questions and adds to traditional frameworks, providing a changing, situation-specific, and self-determined moral ideal. It says that existentialism stresses moral choice in a world that is uncertain and often makes no sense, while classical virtue ethics stresses teleological consistency. This paper adds to modern moral philosophy by suggesting a mixed model that recognizes the basic value of character while also defending the need for personal responsibility and ethical creativity in a society with many different kinds of people.*

Keywords: *Eudaimonia, virtue ethics, existentialism, moral philosophy, authenticity, freedom.*

1 | INTRODUCTION

Moral philosophy has a long history that includes many attempts to explain what a good life is and what ideals make it possible. In ancient times, Aristotle described eudaimonia, which is often translated as "flourishing" or "well-being," as the best thing that could happen to a person. He says that it could be reached by developing traits that satisfy a person's rational nature (Aristotle, trans. 2009). "The good for man is an activity of the soul in line with virtue," said Aristotle (Nicomachean Ethics, 1098a16). With this teleological view of morality, which was based on what it means to be human and what our purpose is,

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ethical excellence was defined by a stable, objective, and communal context. Modernity's existential crises, on the other hand, shook the certainties of classical virtue ethics. This led to existentialist philosophers' ideas of a more personalized, freedom-centered moral awareness. Existentialism, which included thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir, questioned the basic ideas of traditional virtue ethics. Existentialists believe that moral virtue is not following general rules, but rather having a lot of freedom, making real choices, and taking responsibility for oneself. Sartre's saying that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 2007, p. 22) changes the way we think about the ethical subject. We no longer see them as a being with a set goal, but as someone who makes choices in freedom that shape who they are all the time. When this happens, virtue stops being a fixed nature and starts being a psychological project that changes over time. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche goes even further to break down traditional morals. He calls for the "revaluation of all values" and the birth of the Übermensch, a person whose will to power creates new virtues (Nietzsche, trans. 2006).

This existential reinterpretation of virtue doesn't just reject the classical heritage; it forces it to grow into areas that are more open and varied. Taylor (1989) says that being moral today isn't about fitting into a global order, but about being true to one's inner voice and self-constitution. In this situation, modern moral philosophy has to deal with the conflict between the idea that eudaimonia is the goal of virtue and the idea that people have the right to freedom, uncertainty, and self-authorship. We need a way of thinking that takes into account both the richness of Aristotelian ethics and the moral importance of psychological authenticity. MacIntyre (1981) says that the lack of a shared story in modern times has made virtues loose. However, this problem also makes us think again about virtue in light of our own moral freedom. This essay places itself in this critical conversation by looking at the philosophical shift from eudaimonia to existentialism in order to rethink what virtue means in modern moral life. It looks at how existentialist thought, which is often seen as being at odds with traditional virtue ethics, can actually make it stronger by bringing back virtue as a lived, changing, and situation-based practice. This change not only shows how complicated modern identity is, but it also creates new ways to think about right and wrong that are open to confusion while still focusing on doing the right thing.

2 | EUDAIMONIA: CLASSICAL VIRTUE ETHICS

In Aristotelian ethics, the idea of eudaimonia, which is often translated as "flourishing," "happiness," or "the good life," is at the heart of classical moral theory. Aristotle thought that eudaimonia wasn't just a short-lived emotional state, but a long-lasting state that could be reached by developing moral and intellectual traits in a way that made sense. Aristotle starts his *Nicomachean Ethics* by saying, "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good. For this reason, it has been rightly said that the good is what all things aim at" (Aristotle, trans. 2009, 1094a). In this way, the good life is an activity (*energeia*) of the mind that shows excellence (*aretē*) through thoughtful consideration and consistent moral behaviour. Today, people think of happiness in terms of individuals or utilitarianism. But eudaimonia is objective and communal; it's not just about feeling good; it's about being good in a life lived in line with one's *telos*. With this teleological view of human nature, virtue ethics fits into a framework of human happiness that is both social and developmental. "The good life for man is the life spent seeking for the good life for man" (p. 219), as Alasdair MacIntyre wrote in *After Virtue* (1981), showing the deep connection between finding out about yourself and finding out what is right and wrong. Aristotle said that virtues like bravery, moderation, and fairness are not goals in themselves, but ways for the soul to become good. People develop these virtues over time by living in a polis where shared values and moral education help each other reach their fullest potential. Julia Annas wrote in 1993, "Virtue is a matter of developing the right kind of character in oneself." She stressed that this is "an ongoing process, a way of living and developing" (p. 20).

Aristotle's ethics is based on the idea that everything is connected: moral behaviour, rational thought, and community life. It fights against both moral relativism and strict absolutism by focusing on the nuanced and situation-specific use of reasoned reasoning, or *phronēsis* (practical wisdom). From this point of view, virtue is not a list of rules, but a way of living well in search of eudaimonia, which means reaching your greatest potential. The classical model says that a good life is not just one of joy, power, or wealth, but also one of moral purity and intellectual satisfaction. But as moral theory moved into the modern and postmodern eras, it became harder to use the Aristotelian framework. The rise of individualism, pluralism, and secularism, along with the fall of shared teleological worldviews, made the fixed metaphysical underpinnings that classical virtue was built on less stable. Still, the idea of eudaimonia is still strong, providing a balance to broken ethical settings. Philosophers today, like Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse, have looked back at Aristotle's ethics to show that virtues can still give us moral direction without needing philosophical essentialism. "Virtue ethics does not derive from a theory but rather from a tradition" (Hursthouse, 1999, p. 30), which shows that eudaimonia can be used in different situations. So, eudaimonia is still a very important idea in modern moral theory when it comes to rethinking virtue. It asks us to see ethics not as a set of rules that are put on us from the outside, but as a quest for excellence that comes from within. This is a vision of human happiness that is still very important today, even though the world is full of existential uncertainty.

3 | EXISTENTIALISM: MORAL PHILOSOPHY WITHOUT TELEOLOGY

Existentialism is very different from classical moral philosophy because it challenges the teleological assumptions that support traditional virtue ethics. In particular, it challenges Aristotle's idea of eudaimonia as the fulfilment of a fixed human nature. Existentialism in general doesn't say that there is a single goal or objective standard for living a good life. Instead, it starts with the idea that everyone is free to choose their own meaning in life and that life is inherently uncertain. Sartre for instance, says that people are not born with a nature or purpose already set out for them, but must make their own through free and honest choice (Sartre, 2007, p. 22). Jean-Paul Sartre famously said, "existence precedes essence." Existentialism replaces virtue as habitual greatness in relation to a natural telos with authenticity as sticking to the values you made up for yourself in a world where there are no metaphysical guarantees. Existentialist ethics is different from classical ethics, which focuses on happiness by developing stable values. It looks at the anxiety, uncertainty, and responsibility of making moral choices in a broken world. In 1948, Simone de Beauvoir said, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949). This quote emphasizes how moral identity is changeable and temporary (p. 283). This view says that moral value doesn't come from following eternal ideals, but from caring about one's own freedom and the freedom of others. Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity rejects both moral absolutism and relativism. Instead, it suggests a way of being responsible that is based on understanding one's own freedom and the shared sensitivity of human life.

Therefore, existentialist thought changes the idea of moral virtue so that it is not about achieving an external good, but about being truly involved with one's freedom in relation to others. Friedrich Nietzsche, one of the most important thinkers in the history of existentialist ethics, says that traditional morality is just "herd instinct." He supports reevaluating values by creating the figure of the *Übermensch*, who sets new values against social norms and metaphysical illusions (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 41). In this situation, virtue is seen as getting past oneself—having the courage to accept that life is silly and to live effectively despite nihilism. Through his philosophy of the absurd, Albert Camus supports this moral stance. For example, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he writes, "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart" (Camus, 1991, p. 123). Camus says that rebellion against meaninglessness is how meaning comes about. This means that moral character is about sticking with something even when it seems ridiculous. Existentialism doesn't believe in eudaimonia; instead, it believes in tragic dignity, which means that the good life isn't one of happiness and harmony, but of bravely facing the human situation over and over again.

Existentialism's criticism of teleology doesn't take away from moral concern; in fact, it makes it stronger by putting it in the immediate realm of human experience and existential freedom. Charles Taylor wrote in 1989 that "an ethic of authenticity" shapes modern identity, making being true to oneself the most important moral duty (p. 25). Being authentic, on the other hand, doesn't mean being self-centered; it means respecting the freedom of others and committing to unity in the face of existential insecurity. As we move from eudaimonia to existentialism, we see a deep change in virtue: it goes from being a stable attitude aimed at a community goal to an existential position of honesty, freedom, and duty. This change in philosophy forces us to rethink what moral virtue means in a post-teleological and diverse world, where we must search for meaning and live an ethical life without any set goals.

4 | REINTERPRETING VIRTUE: FROM THE UNIVERSAL TO THE EXISTENTIAL

The change in how virtue is understood from classical universality to existential particularity is one of the most important changes in the history of Western moral thought. Aristotle's idea of eudaimonia was the basis for the idea of virtue, which was the development of set moral excellences with the goal of a common human goal. According to this teleological view, reason and moral habituation that is in line with nature are what make people happy. Aristotle famously said that virtue is "a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean... determined by reason" (Aristotle, 2009, p. 1106b36). This suggests that virtue is measured against an objective standard that is based on what it means to be human. But when the existentialist movement started in response to the disappointments of modernity—like war, loneliness, and the idea that Enlightenment reasoning didn't work—it caused a major rethinking of what it means to be good. Existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir didn't think of virtue in terms of what people are inherently like or what the end of the world means. Instead, they focused on human freedom, chance, and moral duty in a world that doesn't have a set meaning. Sartre believed that "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (Sartre, 2007, p. 22). This means that virtue is not about following outside rules, but about making your own true self through choice.

This change from universality to existential particularity gets rid of the idea that virtue is something that stays the same over time and is objective. In its place, there is a dynamic, social, and deeply personal view of the moral life. Rather than having set rules for what is right and wrong, existentialists see virtue as being true to yourself and living your life according to your own freedom, even if that means facing stress and uncertainty. In 1948, Beauvoir wrote, "To will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision." This means that virtue is not a given, but an ongoing project of ethics (p. 24). In this case, virtue is tied to how a person interacts with their actual life and how they respect the rights of others. Friedrich Nietzsche is a key person in this new way of thinking about virtue. Classical ethics is challenged by his call for a "revaluation of all values." He wants to move beyond "slave morality" and create new values by the Übermensch to make life worth living (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 41). Nietzsche thought that a good person is not someone who passively follows the rules that they were taught, but someone who actively breaks down culture barriers to create their own moral identity based on strength, creativity, and a belief in one's own life.

This philosophical rethinking of virtue doesn't say that living an ethical life isn't important; it just means that you have to be more involved with it on a deeper level. This is what Albert Camus means when he writes in *The Rebel*, "the rebel...says no and yes at the same time." He says, "Man has a value that must not be broken" (Camus, 1991, p. 13). Rebellion itself becomes a virtue in this view, not because it follows a set standard, but because it shows loyalty to a moral core that fights dehumanization and upholds honour in the face of absurdity. In modern moral philosophy, this shift from the general to the existential makes it possible for a pluralistic and people-centered ethics that is based on real-life experience rather than abstract principles. In modern times, moral identity is formed by a "ethic of authenticity," which means that people try to be true to their inner voice instead of following rules set by others (p. 25). The meaning for virtue is very deep: to be good is no longer to meet a standard of perfection, but to bravely

and properly deal with one's freedom, relationships, and situated selfhood. So, the path from eudaimonia to existentialism changes virtue from a fixed ideal to a moral process that is based on freedom, responsibility, and being true to yourself. While it doesn't get rid of ethics, it changes them to fit a world that isn't magical and has many different kinds of people. In this world, meaning has to be made instead of discovered.

5 | BRIDGING THE GAP: NEO-ARISTOTELIAN AND EXISTENTIAL VIRTUE

There seems to be a big logical gap between Aristotle's eudaimonia and existentialist authenticity. This has made it easier for people in modern moral philosophy to try to find a middle ground. Neo-Aristotelian and existential virtue theories make a strong case for combining them. They see virtue not just as following set rules or completely breaking them, but also as a constant, situation-dependent moral striving that comes from both human nature and existential agency. This bridging effort recognizes that Aristotle's idea of human flourishing is still useful today while also including existentialist ideas about freedom, ambiguity, and the duty to build one's own morality. Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, especially the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Rosalind Hursthouse, brings back the teleological structure of classical virtue but places it in practices that are influenced by history and culture. Furthermore, MacIntyre (2007) says that virtues can only be understood in the context of "practices," which are social actions that have their own good points and standards of excellence. These practices give a person's life a storyline and help them live an ethical life in a community setting without taking away from the importance of personal choice. He says, "the virtues find their point and purpose in sustaining those forms of community which... enable us to understand ourselves as the bearers of a narrative tradition" (p. 233). In this view, eudaimonia is not a fixed ideal, but a way of life that is shaped by telling yourself a story that makes sense and doing things that are important.

On the other hand, existential virtue theorists stress how each moral person is unique and how they make decisions based on their circumstances. Existential themes like authenticity, angst, and refusing to be dishonest can fit with a virtue framework, according to Charles Guignon and David Cooper. They say that the moral value of living a life that is "truly one's own" and the focus on self-formation can make this possible. According to Guignon (2004), virtue is not following predetermined rules, but rather "existential atonement," which means staying true to your core beliefs while also being open to change based on your life experiences (p. 136). This adds morality to the area of personal identity, where being good is linked to being honest, involved, and self-aware. So, bringing these cultures together doesn't get rid of their tensions; instead, it sees them as dialectical. "Aristotelian flourishing and existential authenticity need not be seen as mutually exclusive," writes Kristján Kristjánsson (2007). He also comes up with a model of moral growth that includes both the story structure of a teleological life and the existential openness to revision and self-creation (p. 196). In this view, virtue is not a fixed state but a path of growth along which people achieve greatness by balancing their freedom with the needs of others, history, and themselves.

This combination is especially important in a diverse and postmodern setting, where strict moral rules don't always fit with people's complicated lives. Modern philosophers offer a more complex and adaptable view of virtue by accepting both Aristotle's idea that moral development requires practice, emotional awareness, and logic, as well as existentialists' view of human freedom, ambiguity, and personal responsibility. "We need an account of virtue that not only allows for but demands reflective engagement with our emotional and moral lives," Nancy Sherman wrote in 1997. This account would connect the internal and the external, the social and the individual (p. 3). So, bringing together the existential and Aristotelian points of view doesn't try to settle all philosophical arguments. Instead, it aims to make morality more interesting by understanding that virtue includes both teleological goals and existential truth. In this way, it confirms that a good life is one in which people, as free narrative agents, try to live a meaningful life within the limits and opportunities of their world.

6 | APPLICATION: VIRTUE IN A FRAGMENTED WORLD

In a world that is becoming more divided, diverse, and morally difficult, the idea of virtue—looked at through both classical and existential lenses—is an important way to stay moral. The change from Aristotle’s teleological eudaimonism to existentialist ethics, which is based on freedom, is not a break in moral thought; it is a necessary evolution. The loss of common values, the abundance of personal choices, and the breakdown of grand narratives in modern times make virtue cultivation not just an ideal but a requirement for everyday life. It lets people make their moral lives make sense without giving up on either dogmatism or nihilism. Today’s world is full of moral dislocation and fast-paced societal change. Because of this, we need a virtue that is both self-reflective and aware of the situation. According to Charles Taylor (1989), this is the “malaise of modernity,” a state in which people struggle with a lack of meaning and the difficulty of building a self in a world where different morals are valued. When you think of virtue as an existential and narrative project, it helps you make sense of your values, feelings, and actions in a world where morals are broken. It lets you do what Taylor means by “strong evaluation,” which means you can weigh your wants and promises against more important moral concerns (p. 19). In this way, virtue acts as a balancing force, helping people deal with unclear moral situations while staying true to their principles. People who believe in existentialism, like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, stress the idea that people must create worth through their actions in a world without set moral standards.

Sartre (1946–2007) said, “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (p. 22). For him, authenticity is not a thought, but a way of life. Using a virtue framework to go along with this focus on radical freedom means developing traits like moral clarity, courage, and sincerity, which are necessary for moral involvement in a world that is always changing and unpredictable. In the same way, Beauvoir (1947/1976) says that “ethics must begin in the world as it is,” not in idealized ideas of a better world. This means that virtue is based on real-life experience and duty in the present (p. 9). Nowadays, people who study virtue ethics have tried to make virtue more relevant to real life without changing its moral force. In 1990, Martha Nussbaum made the case for a “Aristotelian essentialism” that sees human happiness as a universal goal while still recognizing that people are different and cultural differences matter. She says, “we need to think about how a decent society can create the conditions for truly human functioning” (p. 232), stressing that virtue must be socially embedded while still meeting the wants of each person. Also, Rosalind Hursthouse (1999) builds on this idea by showing that virtues like honesty, compassion, and fairness are not old-fashioned ideas, but useful guides for how to live well when things are morally complicated.

In this situation, virtue ethics doesn’t just tell people what they should do; it also forms who they should become. According to Kristján Kristjánsson (2015), the focus changes from following rules to building one’s character, which lets moral agents react to new situations in a flexible and thoughtful way. He says that virtue theory is the best way to deal with ethical problems in modern times because it provides a flexible, story-based way to live an ethical life (p. 214). This is why, in a broken world, virtue is an important moral compass—not as a return to rigid moral teleology, but as a dynamic balance of duty, freedom, and the pursuit of moral greatness in daily life. By combining existential awareness with Aristotelian ideas, modern moral philosophy can provide a strong model of character that is highly personal, morally based, and socially aware. The search for the good life is still possible and important, even though the world is uncertain now, thanks to this new view of virtue.

7 | CONCLUSION

From classical eudaimonistic virtue ethics to existentialist views on virtue, there has been a huge shift in moral thought. This shift reflects how people are changing and the ethical problems we face today. Aristotle thought of virtue as the flourishing of the rational human being within a teleological framework. Modern reinterpretations of virtue take into account how moral life is broken up and unclear in a world

with many different kinds of people. Existentialism, which stresses extreme freedom, authenticity, and personal responsibility, challenges traditional ideas of set human nature and predetermined ends. This forces virtue ethics to rethink the foundations and goals of moral character. But this philosophical shift doesn't get rid of virtue completely. Instead, it opens the door to a dynamic synthesis that connects the universal desire for human happiness with the existential need for self-creation and moral action in the face of ambiguity. This unified approach recognizes that virtue isn't just about reaching a set standard of human perfection; it's also about developing the moral strength and practical wisdom needed to deal with an uncertain moral environment. It stresses how important narrative identity, self-reflection, and the ability to deal with moral problems without relying on absolute truths are. This new way of thinking about virtue ethics also fits well with modern concerns about moral diversity, social justice, and individual worth.

It provides a framework that is both strong in terms of norms and open to different life experiences. It gives agents the power to deal with ethical problems in a creative and responsible way by seeing virtues like courage, integrity, and kindness as ongoing projects rather than fixed traits. In the end, the change from eudaimonia to existentialism makes virtue ethics better by broadening its focus from traditional ideas of human happiness to a more flexible, situation-based view of moral life. This change not only keeps the lasting importance of character and virtue, but it also brings moral theory up to date for the complicated 21st century. The conversation between Aristotelian and existential views creates ways to create a virtue ethics that is both grounded and flexible, universal and personal. It also gives us a compelling vision for ethical agency that includes both the search for meaning and the realities of human freedom. This combination gives modern moral philosophy a fresh chance to encourage moral thought and good behaviour in a world that is broken up and changing quickly.

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