

Cardinal Virtues as Moral Norms from a Philosophical Perspective

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Abstract

The aim of this research paper is to reveal that “Cardinal virtues can lead to perform what is good and how to act virtuous way in life”. It is widely believed that all cardinal virtues are intrinsic values and also instrumental values. The research question is that “Why every body needs to behave cardinal virtues to become virtuous person and build up a good society?” The descriptive and analytical methods were used to answer the research question. Virtues, as moral norms, play an important role in the field of ethics as well as in human society. If one neglects to behave cardinal virtues in his life, then an injustice and any defilement would beget. Indeed, cardinal virtue as an excellent character makes people to live peacefully, happily and safely as an individual and in society. This research paper tries to show that cardinal virtues are attitudes or a type of actions that are necessary for everybody to have a good character.

Keywords: Good character, Moral conduct, Ethical value

Introduction

Man wants to live in a new way of life that can give social, moral, political and environmental values. A cultural standard of living, however, determines to have human behavior to live good life.

In this current age, man and his cultural environment face a series of dramatic changes in science which is advancing very rapidly in everywhere. One comes to face with believing blindly one's account of what happened and what is true. It is true that modern life in itself is very difficult to define. The world is getting smaller, so that people are having greater access to each other, and communication barriers are fast disappearing. It is possible for people to know what happened everywhere in the world within a short time.

Nowadays, advances in science and technology have brought not only many benefits, but also new ethical and social problems. New social and moral rules have to found, and old rules have to change for preparation of harmony in that age. At present most of the people do not like to accept anything blindly.

It can be noted that the term 'ethics' is derived from the Greek word '*ethos*' which originally denotes customs, habitual conduct, usages and later, character. Likewise, the term 'morals' is derived from the Latin '*mores*' which signifies customs or habits. Morality means principles or standards of behavior based on right and wrong, good and bad. Ethics is concerned with moral judgments which are accompanied by moral sentiments. In fact, ethics investigates the nature of the moral ideal, or the virtue.

The term 'cardinal' derives from the Latin word *cardo*, meaning 'hinge'. There are four primary moral virtues which are called the cardinal virtues in Western sense. And also there are four cardinal virtues (*Brahma Vihara*) that are to be nurtured by all Buddhists in Eastern view.

Cardinal Virtues, as moral norms, play an important role in the field of ethics and the traditions of our society. People in the world today are seeking virtues for their smoothly

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survival. If people neglect to behave moral virtues in his life, then an injustice and unfair effect will be attained. Actually, one cannot always behave like a gentleman. Nevertheless, one tries to avoid evil deeds. The fact is that cardinal virtue is an important thing in individual and human society.

Aim

The aim of this research paper is to reveal that “Cardinal virtues can lead to perform what is good and how to act a virtuous way in life”.

Research Question

The research question is “Why every body needs to behave cardinal virtues to become virtuous person and build up a good society?”

Research Methods

The descriptive method was used to explain the fact that “cardinal virtues are able to express that a person is obligated or required to practice good deeds in everywhere and everytime. There are many cardinal virtues which everyone must practice in many ways. Then, the analytical method was used to point out that "cardinal virtues guide each person to behave gracefully towards his character and society".

Literature Review

The good traits of character are called the virtues. Hereafter, virtues are those qualities or habits of human character which men admire and value. They make for the survival of individual and the welfare of the society. A cardinal virtue is a habitual organization of impulses and desires around some idea or object. It is an attitude or a type of action that merits moral approval.

Cardinal virtue refers to acquire dispositions of mind. The virtuous man is one who has a steadfast habit of performing duties. So virtue denotes a good character for everyone. Every person has to uplift himself and other to promote his society.

It is true that cardinal virtue is excellence of character. Additionally, it is the excellence of the inner character. And also it is the habit of deliberate choice of right actions.

1. The Different Kinds of Virtue in Western Thought

The Greeks sought excellence of character that they accepted justice, wisdom, courage, and self-control as the fundamental virtues.

According to Socrates, 'virtue is knowledge'. For him knowledge constitutes the essence of virtue. Knowledge is virtue, and also ignorance is vice. To be temperate without knowledge is to be temperate by a kind of intemperance. To be courageous without knowledge is to be courageous by a kind of cowardice. If a person fully understood the nature of the good, he could not fail to pursue it. On the other hand, if a person did not fully understand the nature of the good, he could not be moral except by accidents.

If virtue consists in the knowledge of good, and vice consists in the ignorance of good, then a person is not accountable for his wrong actions. Because of they are due to his ignorance and only voluntary actions involving the knowledge of the good is the objects of moral judgment.

A person often knows what is right, and yet does what is wrong. Knowledge of the good does not always lead to the choice of the good. Knowledge and action are very often at variance with each other. Therefore knowledge does not constitute virtue, though it is an

indispensable element of it. In fact, virtue depends upon the knowledge of the good and a habit of willing the good.

The core of Socrates' ethics is a concept of virtue. Virtue is the deepest and most basic propensity of man. And this virtue is knowledge.³

Socrates(470-399 B.C) said that 'virtue is knowledge'.It is true that knowledge means right understanding of the true nature of things. One should survey it from all aspects. Right actions mean doing good deeds. A man of right actions must avoid all evil deed.Knowledge is both the necessary and the sufficient condition of virtue; without knowledge virtue is impossible, and its possession insures virtuous action. No man voluntarily pursues evil or thinks to be evil. According to Socrates, moral virtue is a kind of knowledge and vice is a kind of ignorance.

In correlating virtue with knowledge, Socrates was insisting that virtue requires wisdom. All people believe in right and wrong, good and evil in human life. It is clear that the good life with a well-controlled mind is always good for oneself, and also good for the human society.

Practically all the Greeks accepted justice, wisdom, courage, and self-control or temperance as the fundamental virtues. For Plato these are the four cardinal virtues.⁴

The cardinal virtues can be saidas basic moral virtues. Plato (427-347B.C.) began to discuss the cardinal virtues in the *Republic*.According to [Plato](#), there are four cardinal virtues, namely, [prudence](#), [courage](#), [temperance](#) and justice.[Prudence](#) is the ability to discern the appropriate course of action at the appropriate time. [Courage](#) is the ability to confront fear, uncertainty, and intimidation. [Temperance](#) is the practice of self-control, discretion, and moderation tempering the [appetition](#). Justice is the meaning of righteousness.

In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) said that the forms of virtue are justice, courage, temperance, and wisdom.Virtue is acquired by the habitual performance of duties. It is an acquired disposition due to the habit of controlling and regulating impulses and instincts by reason.To deal with the definition of moral virtue, Aristotle said that it is not only a state of character, but also says what sort of state it is.

For him, as for other Greek philosophers, virtue refers to the excellence of a thing and hence to the disposition to perform effectively its proper function.⁵

Virtue is a permanent acquired disposition or character in harmony with moral law. In fact it is not a natural disposition. It is congenital thing but it is an acquired disposition. It is a settled habit of willing in conformity with moral law. It consists in living habitually in the universe of right actions. It is a quality of character, determined by the idea of the highest good of the self as a whole. Besides, it is an excellence of character. A character which is not embodied in an activity is a mere potentiality. It might be assumed that a virtue is expressed in duties. Excellence of character is expressed in the performance of particular acts which are duties. The habitual performance of duty leads to the formation of virtue.

Cardinal virtue lives in the performance of duties. Thus virtue and duty are two aspects of the same thing. Cardinal virtue is the excellence of the inner character and duty is the external expression of a good character. Cardinal virtue is the settled habit of a good will; duty is an overt action in which the habit of good will is expressed. Duty refers to a particular kind of action that one ought to perform. A person is virtuous,he does his duties. Cardinal virtue

³ Marias,Julian.(1967). *"History of Philosophy"*. London: Dover Publication, Inc., p.40

⁴ H. Titus. (1957).*"Ethics for Today"* (Edition), New York: America Book Company Press, p.465

⁵ Nicholas P. White. (2002) . *"Great Traditions in Ethics"*.Belmont: Wadsworth/ Thomson Learning, Inc. P-21-22

apart from its expression in duty is a bare potentiality. It is always ready to express itself in duties. Therefore virtue is the quality of character as dynamical, or in action. The cardinal virtues bear a certain relationship to the values. But virtues and values are constructed on different principles.

2. The Different Kinds of Virtues in Eastern Thought

Confucius' philosophy is a humanistic social philosophy. Confucius (551-479 B.C) pointed out to improve personal character. In Confucius' ethics, there are four virtues such as Jen (human-heartedness), Yi (Righteousness), Li (Profit) and Chih (Wisdom). With regard to the virtues of the individual, Confucius laid emphasis on human-heartedness.

Everyone in society has certain things which he ought to do, and which must be done for their own sake, because they are the morally right things to do.⁶

Confucius' philosophy is based on the moral virtue of 'Jen' or human-heartedness. 'Jen' is a key term in Confucius' ethical thought. Besides, the idea of 'Jen', Confucius also recognized some other ideas as 'Yi', Li and 'Chih'. According to Confucius, 'Jen' expresses the idea of cultivating humanity. It consists in loving other and may also be expressed in the idea of 'Hsiao' (filial piety) and 'Ti' (fraternal love). The idea of 'Yi' is rather formal, but the idea of 'Jen' is much more concrete. The formal essence of the duties of man in society is their 'oughtness', because all these duties are what he ought to do. But the material essence of these duties is 'loving others', i.e., 'Jen' (human-heartedness). Confucius says: 'Human-heartedness consists in loving others'. So, Confucius emphasized the moral virtue of Jen (or) human-heartedness as a guiding principle of one's personal conduct as well as one's relation with others. Therefore, Confucius sometimes uses the word 'Jen' not only to denote a special kind of virtue but also to denote all the virtues combined.

Mo Tzu (470-391 B.C) taught the doctrine of all-embracing love. He accepted the Confucian idea of Jen and Yi. Jen and Yi signify an all-embracing love. The men of Jen and Yi are persons who practice this all-embracing love. So, Mo Tzu insisted that love should be alike for everybody. Everyone in the world should love everyone else equally and without discrimination.

So, for Mo Tzu, the principle of all-embracing love should be the universal standard of action. Indeed, ideal human society could be created only through the practice of all embracing love. With this principle of all-embracing love is connected the principle of non-aggression. Conversely, one who advocated non-aggression must love others. Therefore, Mo Tzu proves the principle of 'all embracing love' to be absolutely right. Then, his ideal world can be created by the practice of 'all-embracing love'.

There are four cardinal virtues (*Brahma vihara*) in Buddhism such as *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita* and *uppekha*. Loving-kindness (*Metta*) is a wholesome desire for the good of all beings. Compassion (*Karuna*) fills to pervade one direction with his heart. Sympathetic joy (*Mudita*) means a sublime nobility of heart and intellect which understands to help. Equanimity (*Uppekha*) is a perfect, unshakable and it frees from enmity and distress. The ultimate aim of attaining these *Brahma vihara* is practical conduct and appropriate direction of thought.

Indeed, knowledge is impossible without morality. It is true that knowledge can lead to a good life in society and also virtue can contribute to the good and welfare of the people.

⁶ Fung Yu-Lan. (1976). "*A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*". New York: A Division of Simon & Schuster Inc, P-145

Virtue and wisdom purify each other says Buddha. ⁷

Knowledge is both the necessary and the sufficient condition of virtue. So, virtue is impossible without knowledge. No man voluntarily pursues evil or that which he thinks to be evil. According to Buddha, the eight folds noble path removes ignorance and desire, enlighten in the mind and bring about perfect equanimity and tranquility.

Gandhi (1869- 1948) was no doubt to apply the concept of *Ahimsā* in practical life. According to Gandhi, non-violence (*Ahimsā*) is the most important virtue. In fact, the moral aspect of *Ahimsā* is nothing but tolerance and love. This concept gives the widest principle connotation by identifying with truth. With truth, Gandhi laid equal emphasis on the principle of non-violence. He said that a more important thing for a follower was to love others. Non-violence and love are identical meaning, according to Gandhi.

The basic principle, according to Gandhi, on which the practice of non-violence rest is that what holds good in respect of oneself equally applies to the whole universe. ⁸

Non-violence method can solve all individual and social problems without creating ill-will in the mind of anybody. In fact, Gandhi struck to the principle of non-violence, the philosophy of love for hate, justice for injustice, non-violence for violence. Gandhi was a pragmatist, he recommended the killing of an ailing calf, undergoing great agony, which could not be cured. To the question of what should do a mad dog, Gandhi replied the answer to kill a mad dog.

So, non-violence was a perfectly rational and practical method of dealing with day-to-day problems. Then, virtue and love are identical, and these are the ultimate good. Therefore, virtues mean what a person is obligated or required to practise.

Findings

In Plato's cardinal virtues, wisdom should include care, foresight and prudence. Courage should include both valour and fortitude. Valour is active courage which pursues its course in spite of the probability of pain. Fortitude is passive courage which bears inevitable suffering without flinching. Temperance includes resistance to all kinds of solicitation from pleasures, sensual or intellectual. Justice includes not merely the fulfillment of contracts but perfect honesty and fidelity in one's relationships with others. Justice should include love, benevolence, cheerfulness, courtesy, and good humour. All virtues are different forms of practical wisdom.

It can be briefly said that the ruler has wisdom, the warrior has courage, and the worker has self-control. Indeed, justice combines the other virtues into a harmonious whole. Thus, Plato's cardinal virtues may be accepted as the basis and adapted to the requirements of the modern society.

For example, the virtue of courage meant valour in battle in ancient Greek. But in modern society, it means not only physical courage but also moral courage. The kind of fortitude was required in Greek society for valour in a battle. It is somewhat different from the modern man of science, politician and scholar.

Aristotle said that virtue is a habit of choice and determined by reason by which the prudent man would determine it. Many virtues stand midway between two extremes (vices), one of which is an excess and the other a deficiency in the proper trait. So virtue is a moderation or middle state. The virtue of courage is a 'golden mean' between rashness and

⁷ Chatterjee, S.C & Datta, D.M. (1960). "*An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*". 6th Edit. Calcutta Calcutta University Press, P- 132

⁸ Bali, D.R. 1963 "*Introduction to Philosophy*". New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited. P-252

cowardice; the virtue of truthfulness about one's talents between boastfulness and self-depreciation; the virtue of liberality between prodigality and miserliness. Virtue does not consist in the choice of the absolute Mean, but of the Mean relative to the individual's ability, temperament and circumstances. The Mean lies at different points for different individuals. The courage of a soldier is more inclined towards rashness than cowardice, and is excited by particular occasions. Vice consists in excess or defect of that which, in its due measure, is virtue.

Cardinal virtues are desirable for human beings to cultivate very considerably with different times and places. They are to be cultivated in modern times and should be considered in relation to the function and requirements of the modern society. Virtues are not only relative to different times and different social conditions, but also relative to the functions that different individuals have to fulfill in society.

The essence of cardinal virtue lies in the harmony between reason and sensibility. It requires modification to suit particular circumstances. Sometimes it is a clear duty to feel the intensity of an emotion. To take the simplest example, when the country is invaded, the valiant person was summoned to ward off the enemy.

The Greek virtues can be found with one's own person and interests. Virtues such as self-control, courage, and wisdom are largely personal. So, philosophers have stressed different virtues in the different ages.

Thus the duties of a person are always determined by his function in society. There are no abstract duties; they are always relative to time, place, circumstances, and functions in society. Temperance, courage and fortitude are the virtues of individual life. The moral life is always a personal life but it is never an impersonal life.

In Western philosophical thought, both knowledge and virtue are essential for human beings, because Socrates said virtue is knowledge. In Myanmar Buddhist thought, virtue is purified by wisdom and also wisdom is purified by virtue. So knowledge and virtue are closely related both in the East and West.

The practice and development of cardinal virtues are essential to anyone's spiritual life. However, the old saying is that 'easier said than done'. People say vice and virtue cannot separate, since one cannot live without the existence of the other. Here vice, cruel deeds, tension, hate speech, fake news, rumours and unrest are very common in the modern society due to this discontented mind which misuses the senses. Then these senses also gradually start to weaken and collapse the human society. So, to promote happy and harmonious life of the individual and society abstain from evil deeds and purify the mind. The concept of cardinal virtue indicates that it is the basic need in order to have the survival of the society. Therefore, if one really wishes for the progress of his society, he must cherish in his hearts that virtue is a must.

Discussion

Philosophy is a systematic and reflective study of all the concerns and problems of man's life. Philosophy provides the necessary training for effective thinking to make evaluative judgment. Critical thinking is essential for survival, success and competition in order to live a good life.

The relation of philosophy and knowledge, Russell claimed in his treatise that philosophy is not mere search for factual knowledge, but a quest of wisdom in order to live a good life. The main task of philosophy is to ask fundamental questions of human life and to

solve these in order to live righteous way of life. Philosophizing is a self-conscious activity of a person when he is not satisfied with merely living his life.

Man is the significant person in the animal world. Man has character which is good or bad. Cardinal virtue is an attitude or a type of action that merits moral approval. It is necessary for everybody to have a good character.

The most important endeavour of man is to discover what is virtue? For Plato, there are four cardinal virtues. Wisdom includes all other virtues and every virtuous activity consists in acting wisely under particular circumstances. Courage and temperance are the two virtues that bear most directly on the life of the individual. Courage should be taken in the sense of resistance to the fear of pain, and temperance in the sense of resistance to the allurements of pleasure. These two virtues include all forms of opposition to temptation in the individual life. Temptation appears in the form of avoidance of some pain or attainment of some pleasure. Justice comprehends all social virtues.

The virtues and the vices seem to mirror each other as positive and negative moral attitudes which could conveniently set them against each other. People refrain from vice or evil deeds and nurture in accordance with cardinal virtue in every actions. Cardinal virtue may be defined as a habit of mind in harmony with reason and the order of nature. When a man can liberate themselves from anger, animosity, hatred, and ill will, he will feel the delights of '*Samthisukha*'.

Conclusion

Philosophers reflect on daily problems systematically and consistently and trying to look for satisfactory answers which will have a logical unity. Cardinal virtue is concerned with both morality and everyday problems. Cardinal virtue is moral norms that enable man to suggest many possibilities which enlarge his thoughts.

It can be shown that cardinal virtue makes people to live in this world peacefully and happily. If people act according to cardinal virtue by upholding their dignity, it can improve their own good right in this world. Cardinal virtue makes purity of the minds, not attach to worldly thing, will ensure a happy parting from this world. If people make harmonious combination of knowledge and virtue, they will get a good life. It is mentioned that human life does not run smoothly at all. Nevertheless cardinal virtue may change the meaningless life to a good life.

All people accepted that cardinal virtue is a moral norm which is most ancient and yet most modern. Besides, cardinal virtue provides a solid foundation for helping humanity towards building a better way of life. As a noble man in life, he must have true noble quality as virtue. It is meant that virtue can be guided from goodness to wickedness, justice to injustice, wisdom to folly, courage to cowardice. It cannot be denied that man by nature seeks consequences. Most of the people in the world today are seeking advantages, profits and consequences for their survival. But really the seeking advantage in the present life is not proper utterly. If people seek the advantage in secular life, then the injustice and unfair effect would beget.

The people who live in a moral life have implicit faith in morality. They believe in right and wrong, good and evil in every action. Man creates the highest role in living world because man has intellect and moral. Knowledge means right understanding of the true nature of things. Right actions mean doing good deeds and must avoid all evil deeds.

It is very important that the concept of cardinal virtue must be inculcated in the mind of everyone. If cardinal virtue is lacking, there is no chance to make the progress of society. In

brief, cardinal virtue is one of the most catholic and fruitful concepts that can lead to improve an individual's life and society.

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