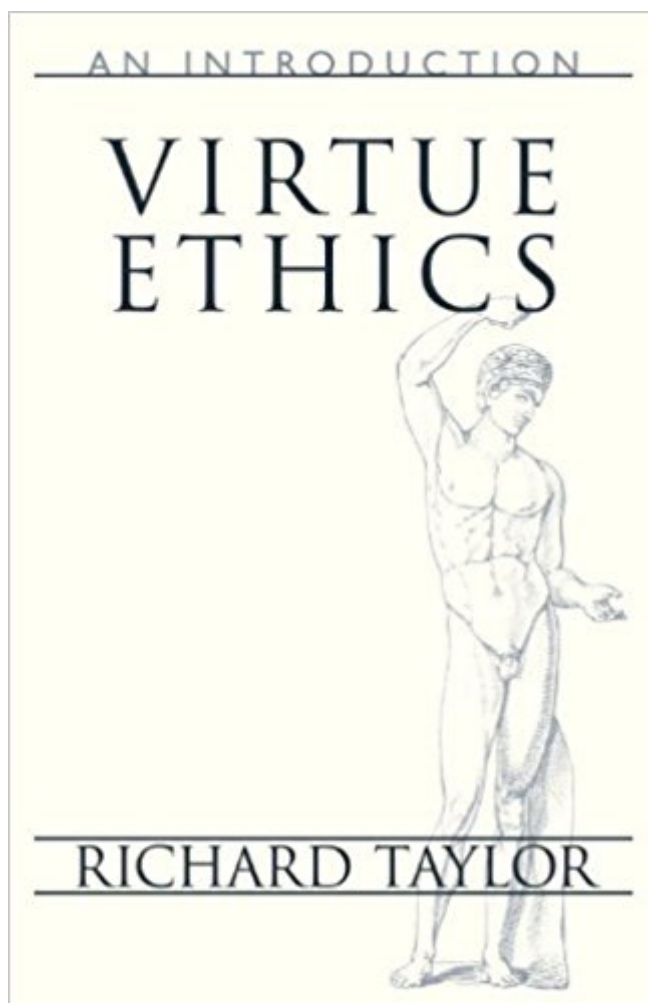


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# Virtue Ethics: An Introduction (Prometheus Lecture Series)



## Synopsis

In this fresh evaluation of Western ethics, noted philosopher Richard Taylor argues that philosophy must return to the classical notion of virtue as the basis of ethics. To ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, ethics was chiefly the study of how individuals attain personal excellence, or "virtue," defined as intellectual sophistication, wisdom, strength of character, and creativity. With the ascendancy of the Judeo-Christian ethic, says Taylor, this emphasis on pride of personal worth was lost. Instead, philosophy became preoccupied with defining right and wrong in terms of a divine lawgiver, and the concept of virtue was debased to mean mere obedience to divine law. Even today, in the absence of religious belief, modern thinkers unwittingly continue this legacy by creating hairsplitting definitions of good and evil. Taylor points out that the ancients rightly understood the ultimate concern of ethics to be the search for happiness, a concept that seems to have eluded contemporary society despite unprecedented prosperity and convenience. Extolling Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Taylor urges us to reread this brilliant and still relevant treatise, especially its emphasis on an ethic of aspiration.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

". . . will challenge, provoke, and instruct the student as no other book known to me can." -- Howard A. Harriott, University of South Carolina "...makes the challenges posed by the ethics of virtue accessible to introductory students." -- Greg Trianosky, University of Michigan

Richard Taylor (Interlaken, NY) has held professorships in philosophy at Brown University, the graduate faculty of Columbia University, and the University of Rochester. He is the author of *Restoring Pride*; *Love Affairs: Marriage & Infidelity*; and *Freedom, Anarchy, and the Law*.

This is a fantastic re-examination of Aristotelian and authentic Pagan ethics in light of the modern collapse prophesied by Nietzsche. While he does not mention Nietzsche explicitly, the trajectory is clear to anyone familiar with the late continentals' "return to Athens". Professor Taylor does hit a few false notes. His portrayal of the Stoics, while meant in a positive light, oversimplifies their view of positive emotions and drifts perilously close to the emotionless duty bound Christian neo-Stoicism of the 1600s. He also dismisses the spiritual and mythic component of Ancient philosophy as a mere rhetorical device intended to bring "intellectual" truths to a wide audience. In both of these things he betrays his training as an academic philosopher, who cannot see how Ancient philosophy embraced a far wider view of "reason" than the term means today. These, however, are minor niggles in what is otherwise a wonderful, clarifying, and potentially life changing book. If you want to understand what made the ancients great, and makes modern man weak, read this. If you have not read any of the Ancients this is a very good frame from which to understand them. If you have read the Ancients you will find Taylor's dichotomy of ethics clarifying.

The Preface of the book opens with: "This book is a reorientation of ethics, almost a complete reversal of it. It repudiates the debilitating egalitarianism of modern ethics in favor of the ideals of the ancient pagan moralists." Taylor traces the metamorphosis of archaic virtue-based ethics into Christian moralism with the emergence of Christianity, where divine law rather than individual rationality is to guide individual behavior. Put succinctly, with Christianity faith eclipses reason. Although Christianity acknowledged virtues, the set of virtues was revised to fit Christian dogma. Accordingly, the archaic view of virtue as aspiration was replaced by the Christian view of virtue as duty and more specifically, the archaic virtue Pride - that acknowledged the greatness of rational individuals - was replaced by the Christian virtues of Meekness and Humbleness. The metamorphosis of ethics was furthered by the work of Kant (categorical imperative) and Mill (utilitarianism) and their successors into a contemporary view of ethics. Although divine law is more or less absent in contemporary discourse on ethics, the moral questions of right and wrong behavior, rooted in Christian moralism and divine law, are still addressed. Without a universal law as a reference no universal answers to the moral questions can be provided (and little guidance can be

offered in real-world situations - the first to acknowledge this issue was Elizabeth Anscombe in her seminal paper from 1958). Taylor suggests a resurrection of archaic Greek virtue-based ethics, where individual character, virtue and aspiration towards excellence should take center-stage. The book offers a concise and useful summary of archaic Greek schools of thought and elaborates on Aristotelean ethics and in particular on the virtue of Pride, since this is the virtue par excellence that relates to the greatness of a rational individual. Taylor wants to use Pride as a sledgehammer against character-muting Christian virtues such as meekness, and humility and ultimately to attack egalitarianism. By basing his discussion on Pride on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, which contains a more rough and disdainful presentation of Pride than in the alternative Eudemian Ethics, and by extrapolating the ideas in Nicomachean Ethics a few steps further in his discussion on superior and inferior persons, I believed that Taylor over-reached in his pursuit against egalitarianism (although no mention is made of Nietzsche, the Pride person *la Taylor* resembles an unsympathetic and arrogant *la Nietzsche*). The book is accessible and contains a number of interesting insights and a useful summary of archaic Greek philosophers. This had been a solid 5-star hadn't it been the perceived over-reach on Pride.

While this book is ostensibly about virtue ethics, it is probably better read as part II of his previous work *Good and Evil* (Great Minds Series). There, he discusses the, as he argues, wrong turn philosophy made when it began treating ethics as if it were something discovered rather than invented, and as if its wellspring was reason rather than emotion. Here, he does much of the same. While the discussion is about Aristotle and virtue ethics, much of the time is spent comparing the Aristotelean ethical tradition (and other classical Greek traditions) with our modern view of ethics, the former held to be vastly superior to the latter. Virtue ethics, Taylor says, treats the primary ethical question as how to live a good life rather than how we should treat others, sees the latter question as a question of artificial custom, and is not hampered by the modern egalitarian view that everyone can achieve moral excellence. As the reviewers below note, this last piece may be the most controversial part of Taylor's present book. In a way highly reminiscent of Nietzsche, Taylor suggests that modern ethics went wrong with the start of the Christian religion and is largely engaged in the hopeless task of justifying essentially Christian moral positions without appealing to God. And one of these positions - one Taylor believes is quite wrong and that Aristotle and the Greeks never subscribed to - is the moral equality of people. Contra this view, Taylor regards it as obvious that if morality (in the Aristotelean tradition) is about achieving personal excellence, some will simply fare better than others. And worse still, one is morally excellent based on who one is not

necessarily what one does - even though the latter clearly pertains - so SOME factors which will make a person excellent are 'luck' factors like lack of disability, natural intelligence, etc.) Simply put, Taylor's interpretation of Aristotle's virtue ethics is elitist and while we may be off-put by this, Taylor's argument is nonetheless interesting (and probably quite true to Aristotle). About 2/3rds of this book is devoted to explaining why, in Taylor's view, modern moral philosophy has gone astray in treating matters of how we should treat others (matters of custom, essentially) as having truth content, and why Aristotle's ethic is a more fruitful path for moral philosophy. The rest of the book is devoted to explication of Aristotle's moral philosophy, discussing what the virtues are and what the very tricky concept of eudaimonia is (and how it relates to virtue ethics). Here's what this book will not be: Taylor is concerned with explicating, not arguing, the virtue ethic position. While he does argue that the virtue ethic is a more fruitful way to think about ethics, he does not work out areas that (is it just me?) seem very problematic and sometimes contradictory. One problem I have, for instance, is that virtue ethics is so vague as to border on vacuity. (How should I be in terms of generosity? Reasonably generous. Hmmm...) Second, there HAS to be an account of the virtues aside from looking at and identifying what virtuous people do (in order to get out of the circularity that comes from asking how we identify virtuous people if we do't ALREADY have an idea of what the virtues are). Of course, then there are the typical objections that would come from Taylor's very direct admittance that questions of how to behave toward others are questions only of convention. If that is the case, then why does it still make sense naturally to ask whether current conventions are right or wrong, and why do we make changes in our conventions at all? (And Taylor will have trouble explaining why religious conventions are wrong, as he implies many times throughout the book.) Taylor answers none of these and doesn't even try. This book is about explication, not argument. Those who are coming to it skeptical of the virtue ethic approach will likely not be convinced, because that is just not what Taylor is trying to do. For further reading, I'd recommend reading some other contemporary virtue ethicists - namely, John Kekes (The Art of Life; The Examined Life) and Julia Annas (Intelligent Virtue). Both have different takes on virtue ethics than Taylor and should be interesting for further reading.

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