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# Virtue Ethics and Emotions

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**Abstract:** The emotional dimension of virtues has long been marginalized and even entirely neglected, with too much importance having been attached to the rational dimension of virtues. Emotions constitute the fundamental basis of virtues, supplying endless inner driving force to the formation of virtues. By putting more stress to the cultivation of moral emotions, the effectiveness of moral education in the schools will be dramatically improved and enhanced.

**Keywords:** Virtue Ethics, Virtues, Emotions

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## 1. Introduction

Despite the inspirational and flourishing revival of academic interest in virtue ethics, there is still a long way to go, both academically and practically, for us to go before its full potential value can be profoundly tapped. The distinguished virtue theorists, from Aristotle to Alasdair MacIntyre, have mainly focused their attention on the rationality side of virtue ethics, largely ignoring the practical aspect of virtue ethics, especially in terms of the emotional dimension of it. However, what largely determines the moral decision and moral actions of the specific virtue agent is not the power of mind, but rather, the power of heart. It is the heart, or emotions of a person that provides the virtue agent with the fundamental motivating power of morality when it comes to the particular situation of morality. As a matter of fact, the perpetual and inevitable existence of emotions makes the allegedly impartial goal of values clarification almost impossible to be attainable. With regards to human beings born with the intrinsic emotional dimension, the so-called pure and absolutely objective, individual moral rationality simply does not exist. The rationality is internally directed towards a certain aim or purpose, the highest one, as Aristotle puts it, being happiness, while the power of non-rationality tends to be greater in determining whether we make the right moral decisions or whether we make the wise choice when the moral agents are put in the moral dilemma situation.

In addition to the above-mentioned analysis concerning the importance of emotions in the modern life of morality, emotions, essentially speaking, constitute the fundamental grounding of the solid rationality. When it comes to virtue

ethics, one of its most significant characteristics is the non-teleological nature of virtue ethics. According to Hursthouse, an action is right if it is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances. [1](p.10)What matters and counts most is not the ulterior motives or some good that are emphasized by the teleological view of virtue ethics, but the intrinsic or inner kindness of the virtuous agent. In other words, what constitutes the essence of virtues as well as the virtue ethics is not what the virtuous agents do, but who they truly are. To effectively transcend the predominant utilitarianism view of virtues, the emotional dimension of the virtuous agent definitely ought to be taken into consideration.

In spite of its tremendous significance and value to the cultivation of virtues, the emotional dimension of moral agent has long been marginalized and even entirely ignored. The fundamental reason why the emotional dimension of virtue ethics has not been paid enough attention is largely because the feminine or the caring, emotional side of the human nature has always been minimized and even forgotten, after all, so far, the overwhelming majority of the philosophers, whether they be from east or west, are males ones, who are more inclined to rational and logical.

In fact, not only do the emotions play the secondary or complementary role in the process of the formation of virtues, but also they constitute the essence or soul of the human beings in the real and complete sense. To put it another way, it is not merely the body and mind that make a person, but also the heart and spirit. "I think, therefore I am, likewise, I feel and I am touched, therefore, I am more of what I essentially am."

Apart from the above-mentioned aspects of emotions

regarding virtue ethics, emotions also serve as the moral motivation source of virtues. In fact, the emotional dimension is what significantly differentiates the virtue ethics and what the deontologists advocate. The reason why the moral agents choose to do the virtuous things is not always because they are right, but because of their willingness of hearts, or their sincere emotional inclination. In other words, they are in pursuit of virtues, not for the sake of virtues, but out of virtues. The emotional dimension of virtues constitutes the inner and natural driving force of virtues.

Moreover, another practical function of the emotional dimension of virtue ethics is that it enables the virtues to be flexible and humanitarian while being based on the basic virtuous principles, rather than be mechanical and dehumanizing. Compared with many contemporary ethical theories that hold that every act is either right or wrong, virtue ethics, on account of its adequate consideration of the emotional dimension virtues, allows for the possibility that between the two moral extremes of either being absolutely right or being undoubtedly wrong, there are a wide range of morally practical options. After all, in practical life, there is often no one absolutely right answer to whether some particular moral action or alternative is one hundred percent right or wrong. In a word, it is the diversified and various emotions that make the virtues or characters of the human beings complicated and colorful.

## 2. Lack of Emotions: The Major Problem Existing in Current Moral Education

The fundamental and essential, eventual aim of moral education is to produce better people or citizens, rather than better moral rules or principles. With this common point in mind, the significant question arises, namely, how we might more effectively carry out and implement the moral education so that we can indeed produce better people in the real sense. It is a common sense that reason, or rationality alone can not truly and consistently motivate the consistent moral action, let alone produce morally better people. Even though moral reasoning plays an indispensable role in the formation process of virtues, most of the moral agents seldom just turn to the cool and abstract moral principles alone for the practical moral guidance. Moral education, to be effective, can not be only dependent on the inculcation of our duties and obligations. Without the sound and necessary emotional basis, the moral education will be groundless and empty, which can only produce the morally hollow people.

### 2.1. Knowledge Alone Is not Virtue

Knowing what is right does not mean doing what is right, not to mention doing what is right consistently and sincerely. According to the first great moral philosopher of western civilization, Socrates, the unexamined life is not worth living. The question is: is the examined life alone worth living? The answer is definitely no. By reflecting and self-examination, the moral agents tend to know what is wrong with his or her

personality, but not what is the right and appropriate way of life. Just like Confucius said in the Analects: "Zeng Zi said, every day I examine myself on three counts. In what I have undertaken on another's behalf, have I failed to do my utmost? In my dealings with my friends, have I failed to be trustworthy in what say? Have I failed to practice repeatedly what has been passed on to me?" [2] After having asked the Hamlet ethical question of "to be or not to be", the following more significant moral question naturally arises: how to be and how to become? The second moral question inevitably involves the emotional dimension of virtue ethics. The relevant knowledge regarding virtues or morality is only the potential moral power, which requires the proper and corresponding emotions to actualize. It takes the morally emotional power to accomplish the mission of the actualization of the potential power of the knowledge about virtues.

As a matter of fact, the confidence in the power of virtues and virtue ethics has repeatedly been shaken or thrown doubts on due to the huge gap and distance between the high-flown ideals of virtue ethics and the down-to-earth expediency of the morality people practice in the real life. To effectively bridge the tremendous gulf and gap between what people are morally capable of knowing and what people are morally capable of practicing, the emotion is indispensable and should always be taken into account.

### 2.2. The One-Dimensional Moral Education and Its Consequences

According to Alasdair MacIntyre, nowadays, "We have-very largely, if not entirely-lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality." [3] Underlying the statement is the hidden meaning that the lack of emotional dimension of the current moral education has become one of the gravest problems facing us. Simply put, too much emphasis has been put on the teaching of reasoning about morality, not on the cultivation of specific virtues or the significance of practical reasoning. There is no doubt that four major stages of moral education constitute the complete and whole process of character education, namely, knowing the value and meaning of virtues, sincerely and personally feeling the value and meaning of virtues, being willing to practice the values, practicing the virtues in the practical life, respectively. And yet, most of the educational attention has been paid to the cognitive side of character education, ignoring the other three essential stages. Of the four stages, the formation stage of moral emotions is particularly important. True and genuine virtue, is a matter of the heart and not of the head, or at least, not only of the head. This point of view is vividly expressed by the French philosopher Pascal: "the heart has reasons which the reason does not know."

With most of the moral educational resources, both tangible and intangible, being concentrated on the cognitive preaching of moral knowledge, the cultivation of moral emotions has largely been neglected, directly leading to the general decline of morality among the young people. What's more, another grave consequence of the cognition-oriented

moral education is the inevitable ineffectiveness and hollowness.

### ***2.3. Some Misleading Interpretations of the Moral Emotions***

In spite of the fact that moral emotions can exert tremendous influence upon the healthy development of virtues, the investigation and clarification of the fundamental meaning of emotions is still an urgent task waiting to be done due to some of the common misunderstandings about emotions among the youth. Firstly, emotions are not exactly the same as moral emotions. Emotions, of themselves, are a double-edged sword, while the moral emotions are the updated and elevated emotions that serve as the ground of morality, that's to say, the moral emotions have been refined and purified. One more point to add is that moral emotions do not equal feelings or moral feelings, either. The feelings are changeable and can easily be altered, but the moral emotions are relatively stable and steadfast. Secondly, like everything else, emotions have also two sides, including both the positive emotions, such as sympathy, compassion, love, and the negative ones, such as fear, anger, despair, helplessness. Emotions alone, by themselves, can not naturally be transcended into the higher level of moral emotions. Nor can the neutral emotions directly serve as the basis of virtues. It is the proper combination of moral emotions and the practical wisdom of morality that can contribute greatly to the formation of virtues. Every individual or specific virtue, such as courage and integrity, has been formed by the combined efforts of both the emotions and the rationality. When it is properly handled, the emotional dimension of virtue can serve as the sustainable motivational power that can constantly strengthen the virtues, but when it is improperly handled, it can be so destructive that it can even ruin and destroy all the virtues. In this sense, virtues are somewhat like trees, which take more than one decade to grow up but only minutes to be cut down. Thirdly, emotions should be controlled. According to Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle has shown his appreciation to the moral agents whose desires are in complete harmony with their reason. These moral agents have the full virtue (arete), while most of the others have to control and discipline their emotions to maintain their relatively limited and partial virtue, the former being morally superior to the latter.[1](p.100)

## **3. Reviving Emotions: The Hope of Moral Education**

Emotions are the soul of virtues. The mark or symbol of the truly lasting virtues is actually the internal happiness or the inner joys brought about by acting virtuously.

### ***3.1. Emotions Constitute the General and Solid Foundation of Morals and Moral Education***

Undoubtedly, reason or rationality has long been commonly regarded as the general foundation of the morals

and moral education. Consequently, contemporary moral education has largely been dominated by the knowledge-oriented and exam-oriented teaching methodology. The ancient philosophers, such as Plato and especially Aristotle, though they often affirm, that the conformity to reason constitutes the basis of virtue, yet, generally, seem to regard virtues as deriving their formation from the sentiments and emotions. However, with the deepening of modern social division as well as the increasing professionalism of ethicists, ethics, including virtue ethics, has been degenerated into a dehumanized and deemotionalized discipline, with only the metaphysical reasonings and the most abstract moral principles as the characteristics. [4](p.186)

One of the most significant attractions of virtue ethics is that it respects the human nature and the human nature is based on the reality. To make the power of virtues sustainable and eternal, or at least stable, the virtues are supposed to be deeply rooted into the profound human emotions. If virtuous conducts and the moral deeds can not give the simple but pure pleasure to the lover of virtue or the virtue agents, or if the virtue agents do not really love and admire the virtues from the bottom of hearts, the virtues will be false and empty. The pleasure of virtue has little to do with the wealth or fame. In other words, the happiness originating from virtues is self-sufficient and is not dependent upon the tangible rewards or utilities. As the great traditional Chinese philosopher Confucius puts it: "If the gentleman forsakes benevolence, wherein can he make a name for himself? The gentleman never deserts benevolence, not even for as long as it takes to eat a meal. If he hurries and stumbles one may be sure that it is in benevolence that he does so." [4](p.53) The highest good of life or the highest happiness is not beyond virtues, but within virtues. The pursuit of virtues is not for the sake of happiness, but is happiness by itself. Throughout the process of the formation of virtues or characters, emotions constantly play the indispensable role. At the age of seventy, the morality level of Confucius has been so high that it is in complete harmony with his natural disposition and, as a result, Confucius was able to allow his mind to follow whatever it desired, yet everything he did was naturally right of itself. That means his actions no longer needed a conscious and tangible guide. With the moral mind being in entire harmony with the natural human emotions, the moral agent can act morally and virtuously without making the slightest rational efforts, representing the most matured stage of the formation process of a moral gentleman.[5](p. 380)

### ***3.2. Moral Emotions Enable Moral Education to Be Essentially Practical***

What exactly is the ultimate source of virtues, reason or emotion? To effectively answer this question, we need to go back to the origin of virtues. Without a doubt, virtues of mankind originated from the practical social life of mankind. Even though it can be said that man was created to be the political creatures, it can not be said that man was born to be the virtuous creatures. For instance, when there was no

sufficient amount of food, the ancient people had to share the extremely limited food to survive, therefore, the virtue of sharing and compassion was naturally produced. With the approaching of globalization and the amazingly rapid development of the modern communication technology, considerable and tremendous changes have taken place in the modern world, with the social structure getting incredibly complicated and the individual life becoming increasingly convenient, but increasingly isolated and lonely. As a consequence, the modern world has been turned into the one-dimensional society and the modern people have been alienated into the one-dimensional people. Emotions seem to be unnecessary and reason alone seems to move the whole world. Thus, virtues have become rootless and groundless. To revive virtues and to restore the happy pursuit of virtues, we should surpass the virtual world and return to the real life world by revitalizing and reliving the emotions of mankind. Emotions are the mirror of life and they reflect the life. It is just the emotions that make life lively and the virtues possible.

### ***3.3. Love of Virtues and Aversion to Vice***

The human beings were not born to be the creatures of rationality, but to be the creatures of emotions. Man was not born to know what is right and what is wrong, but to feel what is warm and what is cold, what is love and what is hatred. In fact, the tendency to love the kindness, beauty, truth and the inclination to dislike and avoid the sufferings and pains constitute the initial driving force of man's pursuing the virtues and the virtuous life. As Confucius said, "It is the benevolent man alone who is capable of liking or disliking other men." [5](p.51) Emotions are the fundamental driving force that motivate the moral agents to make the moral decision and to stick to it. Rationality is only part of what constitutes the whole virtue. Neither is there the distinct dividing line between the rationality and the emotions. Actually, rationality and emotion tend to be interconnected with each other. Immanuel Kant is more concerned with making the valid moral principle that can be binding upon all men, but the "all men" is only an abstract conception. In the final analysis, all the universally binding moral principles or core values and virtues must go down from heaven to get down to the moral choice of each imperfect and emotional individual, with each particular moral situation being diverse and different. While the philosophically-designed moral principles can be completely independent of all the subjective human emotions and the empirical human experiences, virtues and characters are specific and involve the mixed and complicated human feelings. The cultivation of one's emotions is supposed to be kept pace with the growth of one's mind, and in order to keep the proper balance between the growth of mind and the development of heart, the natural and spontaneous feelings should be duly respected and accepted.

### ***3.4. Quality of Emotions and Its Impacts upon the Moral Education***

The approach to the problem of emotions, when it comes

to virtue ethics, is supposed to be considerably more sophisticated and complicated. It is necessary to distinguish between higher and lower emotions. What matters most about emotions is not the mere quantity of emotions, but the quality of emotions, with the virtuous emotions being the highest and the impulsive but destructive feelings being the lowest. Morally speaking, it is the common sense that some forms of agreeable and noble emotions are intrinsically of a higher quality than others. That means the sound and moral emotions of the moral agent was not born to be so, but was carefully nurtured to be so. It takes the long process of self-examination and mental purifying to improve the quality of emotions.

As Seneca said, "To live happily, my brother Gallio, is the desire of all men, but minds are blinded to a clear vision of just what it is that makes life happy; and so far from its being easy to attain the happy life, the more eagerly a man strives to reach it, the farther he recedes from it if he has made a mistake in the road." [6] The quality of emotions plays, indeed, a significant role in determining whether we can achieve the ultimate aim of the moral education. Emotions, by themselves, can not constitute the basis of the virtues. As a matter of fact, emotions should be morally elevated before they can be turned into the basis of the eventual virtues. Just like Confucius put it, "Death has always been with us since the beginning of time, but when there is no trust, the people will have nothing to stand on." [7] Originally, trust is merely a form of natural feeling, but when it is accompanied by the corresponding practice of morality, it is transformed into a kind of essential virtue. Similarly, Chuang Tzu, another great philosopher of ancient China, also emphasized the importance of the emotions in cultivating the necessary virtues. "The perfect man has no self; the holy man has no merit; the sage has no fame." [8] In this sense, when the ordinary emotions are purified and elevated, they can then be extremely helpful to the cultivation of the specific virtues. In fact, the positive emotions profoundly constitute the fundamental motivational force behind the formation process of each specific virtue. According to Confucius, "In a hamlet of ten houses you may be sure of finding someone quite as loyal and true to his word as I. But I doubt if you would find anyone with such a love a learning." [9] The love for the virtuous life, by itself, is great emotional power that is instrumental to the development of the virtues. "Therefore, the gentleman honors his teacher, draws close to his friends, but heartily hates his enemies. He loves good untiringly and can accept reprimand and take warning from it." [10] Thanks to the existence of the high-quality moral emotions, the virtues can then be ultimately cultivated and gradually developed.

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