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Human Excellence

Past and Present

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The word *excellence* is derived from the Latin word *excellentia,* and it means the quality of being extremely good. Human excellences could be defined as those human qualities that make a person outstanding, exceptional, superior, or, in one word, the best of one's kind in any field of human activities. Frequently, it is synonymously used with the word *virtue,* narrowly meaning moral excellence.

Historical and Cross-Cultural Approach

In this chapter, the accounts of human excellence will be elucidated in the history of human thought, from the ancient Greek and Roman time, through the Medieval Age and Early Modern Age, to the Modern Age and contemporary civilization. The historical approach provides a survey of the various views and concepts on human excellence, which were changing in time. By exploring these concepts, one will find out that there are some constant themes in the considerations of human excellence, despite the shifts in the historical contexts and circumstances. A historical approach will be combined with the cross-cultural approach, which implies a comparison of the accounts of human excellence in different cultures. Further, a cross-cultural approach offers a comparison of the accounts of human excellence in the Western tradition to those of China, India, the Islamic world, and Russia.

Archaic Greece

The Greek word for excellence is *arête* (plural *aretai*), which functions as an abstract noun derived from the adjective *good,* and means the quality of being good. Originally it was not only attributed to human beings, but also to inanimate things, human organs, animals, and so forth. A thing has arête if it performs its characteristic function efficiently. The aretai do not designate any single human feature, but those features making a person excellent. Thus, it was contextualized to mean competence in any field of military, political, athletic, and ordinary life.

Although the word *arête* rarely appears in Homer's epics, he was the first Greek author to depict it. He talks of a variety of aretai: arête of gods, women, children, even animals and body parts. Nevertheless, the paradigm of excellence is a man, or more specific, a warrior. His qualities are primarily courage, strength, competitiveness, and cunningness. These excellences are manifested in the actions aimed at honors, glory, and social prestige. The moral aretai, like nobility, dignity, and being humane, are not attributed to the Greek heroes, but to Priamus and Hector, the king and the prince from the enemy side.

In two of Homer's epics, two different and central aretai are crystallized, and these are characteristic for the two periods of Greek history. Whereas courage and audacity are ascribed to Achilles, a hero of the *Iliad,* cleverness and curiosity are attributed to Odysseus, a hero from Homer's

The Odyssey. Therefore, at the same time, Homer describes the key excellence, courage, from the archaic period of Greek history, and indicates a new one, wisdom, which will be dominant in the new classical period.

Unlike Homer, Hesiod (ca. 700 BCE) portrayed arête of the ordinary people, both peasants and craftsmen. Their excellence is to work, and to be efficient and successful in performing that work. According to Hesiod, it is difficult to attain arête, and such pursuit always implies diligence and great effort. However, if attained after all, arête is connected with fortune, richness, and respect.

According to Pindar (ca. 522–443 BCE), excellence manifests itself primarily in athletic competition. It is most significant to have a competitive attitude, and happiness consists of being better than others, while the worst misfortune is to be defeated by someone. To become excellent, innate talents are necessary, but not sufficient. Their own efforts, with the help of the gods, will enable humans to fully realize their natural gifts.

Simonides (ca. 556–468 BCE) was the only Greek author who was skeptical in respect to attaining arête. In his view, being a good person is very hard, and being a good person for a long term is almost impossible, or at least beyond one's own influence. If someone is struck by a misfortune, obstructing the individual to do anything efficiently, then this person necessarily becomes a bad one.

The pre-Socratic philosophers, whose main concern was the physical world, did not pay much attention to the question of arête in particular, and moral issues in general. It is, consequently, only randomly mentioned in their works. A common characteristic could be noticed in their reflections on arête, and that is the priority given to intellectual over physical, athletic, and competitive excellences. The new model of arête is no longer a warrior, but a wise man. For example, Xenophanes (ca. 570–480 BCE), who takes political usefulness as a criterion for arête, thinks that the wisdom of poets can contribute to the well-being of the polis more than qualities of an athletic champion. Heraclitus (1987) also held that "highest arête" is the intellectual excellence: "sound thinking," which manifests in our saying, "what is true and acting in accordance with [the] real constitution" (pp. 64–65). In Democritus's philosophy, a specific moral use of arête emerges, which is dependent on knowledge and understanding. He also emphasizes the interior character of arête, apparent in feelings like shame, particularly in one's own eyes.

Classical Greece

In 5th and 4th centuries BCE, the question of arête became one of the central topics of Greek philosophy, and culture in general. The civic duties and obligations, especially in the Greek democratically governed city-states, imposed the questions of social and political aretai. The Sophists, professional teachers of arête to the young people, introduced this reversal of philosophical interests. The

Sophists were not teaching how excellence in some specific fields can be achieved, but how someone can attain the attributes that make one a good and worthy person. The greatest Sophist, Protagoras (ca. 490–420 BCE), understands the arête of a man as a political arête, since a human being necessarily lives in a political community. Therefore, in Protagoras's view, being a good person means being a good citizen, whose excellence is cleverness, both in private and city affairs. A person who is clever is also moderate and just, since this individual knows that justice and moderation enable citizens to live together in a community. Unlike Protagoras, Callicles defines the arête of a man as indulging his own urges and having power to gain the object that can satisfy his appetites. According to Callicles, justice and moderation are unnatural forms of self-restraint, invented by the inferior majority in order to have dominance over those who are superior in intelligence, courage, and manliness. Thrasymachus (ca. 459–400 BCE), a Sophist, also argues in an immoralist manner. According to Thrasymachus, injustice is a positive arête, which he describes as a pursuit of purely selfish interests, without paying any attention to the needs and interests of others.

Socrates (ca. 469–399 BCE) was a person who lived life according to his own reflections, ideals, and values. Unlike Calicles and Thrasymachus, Socrates considers excellences such as moderation, courage, piety, justice, and so on, to be fundamental if one wants to live a flourishing life. He equates arête with knowledge, which implies that one who really knows what is good and bad cannot act in a morally unjust way. Consequently, all unjust acts are merely due to the agent's ignorance. Being genuinely virtuous is, for Socrates, solely an intellectual matter.

Although Plato's (ca. 427–347 BCE) reflections upon ethical issues were highly influenced by Socrates, and is particularly noticeable in his early dialogues, in the *Republic,* Plato claims that wrong doing is due not only to ignorance, but also to emotional, irrational drives. In this dialogue, Plato articulated the eminent doctrine of four cardinal excellences, both personal and political, based on the analogy between the city and the soul. Plato's good *polis* consists of three classes: the rulers, the guardians, and the producers. Likewise, the human soul has three parts: reason, spirit, and appetites. Wisdom is an excellence ascribed to the rulers in the polis and to the reason in the soul. It consists in "consulting well" about the way the city-state as a whole should be governed the best, both in relation to itself and in relation to other city-states. Similarly, wisdom attributed to reason is knowledge of what is good for the soul as a whole, as well as for each of its "parts." Courage is an excellence of the guardians and it is defined both as true beliefs about the things to be feared and as the preservation of these beliefs under any circumstances. The spirited part of the soul is courageous, when, as an ally of reason, it protects our soul from the corruptive influences of our appetites. Moderation is the excellence achieved in the soul when the spirited and appetitive parts of the soul are in harmony with

its rational part and, in the polis, when the subjects obey their rulers. A polis, or a person, is considered to be just only when each of its political classes, or the soul's constituent "parts," performs its own work and does not meddle in the work of the others. Political and personal justice should harmonize our psychological and political activities, thus enabling us to lead a good and prosperous life.

The concept of arête also plays one of the most prominent roles in Aristotle's (384–322 BCE) ethics. According to Aristotle, the ultimate good for humans is a flourishing life (*eudaimonia*), which is the actualization of the soul in accordance with complete excellence. Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of excellence, which cannot occur apart: one of character and the other of the intellect. The character excellences embrace: courage, moderation, openhandedness, greatness of soul, mildness, wittiness, and justice. Character virtue is defined as a disposition of an agent to choose a mean between extreme alternatives, relative to abilities and stores of the agent and with regard to what is best. The intellectual excellence that guarantees a good choice is practical wisdom, which is concerned with what can be otherwise (i.e., with the variety of human situations). The highest excellence is, however, theoretical wisdom, which deals with the necessary and universal objects, such as the eternal being, the laws of nature, and mathematical numbers. By emphasizing the highest importance of theoretical excellence, Aristotle reaches the "zenith" of the classical Greek ideals, according to which knowledge, understanding, and insight into the objects of divine nature are considered to be something most valuable.

Hellenistic Age

One of the key ethical questions in Hellenistic thought concerns the role of arête in a flourishing life. To that question, Epicurus (341–270 BCE) and the Stoics gave entirely different answers. According to the Stoics, arête alone constitutes eudaimonia, while all other values, including wealth, reputation, and even health, are irrelevant for a truly flourishing life. Following Socrates, the Stoics argued that arête is a kind of knowledge through which one avoids outside influences and reaches eudaimonia, the total absence of outside influences. On the other hand, Epicurus argues that aretai are valued not for their own sake, but only as instrumental means for attaining pleasure, which he equates with eudaimonia. For example, a person strives for courage, not for the sake of being courageous, but because bravery is an instrument for defeating fear, which is one of the main causes of an unhappy life.

In Neoplatonist reflection on arête, the tendency toward systematization and harmonization between the classical and the Hellenistic positions is to be noticed. Plotinus's views (ca. 205–280 CE) on aretai are determined by his general claim that the intellectual life is the true and proper goal for humans. He distinguishes between political excellences, which are Plato's cardinal excellences, purgative excellences, and the paradigms of excellences at the level of the intellect. These form a hierarchy of excellences. While the lower excellences are always connected with the changeable conditions of earthly life, the higher theoretical excellences are accessible only in the state of complete freedom from everything material and emotional. The function of the purgative excellences is to reach the state like Stoic *apatheia,* in which the soul will be free from affects. Thereby, the soul will be prepared to perform its highest activity—the thinking of the intellect.

Ancient Rome

The Roman views on excellence were highly influenced by the Greek authors, particularly Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. It was the part of the Roman education to be acquainted with Plato's four cardinal virtues and with the Stoics's views on that subject matter. Nevertheless, the Roman practical and energetic spirit is always present in the reflections of their authors. They lived a very active life, and most of their efforts were focused on the organization of life. Therefore, one of the Roman excellences is discipline, which is an ability to bring things in order by obeying the rules and methods, and *ordo,* signifying both psychic and social order, based on well-founded laws and a powerful army. Since the Romans were a military nation, the military excellences were significant in their lives, and those were: *fortitudo* (bravery in dangerous situations), *labor* (endurance in accomplishing tasks), *industria* (zeal in efforts), *celeritas* (quickness in actions), and *consilium* (deliberative planning). Closely connected with their military mentality was one of the vital Roman excellences, *clementia,* meaning generosity toward the conquered from the position of superiority attained in the battlefield. For example, Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE) illustrated this virtue when he released his political enemies after he had conquered the city of Corfinium. Caesar was content with his deed, although his enemies, having been released, took up arms against him. In doing this, he confirms who he is (i.e., a noble and generous person). In time, the concept of clementia has acquired broader meaning, referring also to mercy and compassion in both public and private affairs.

Although the Stoic doctrine on virtues and vices was closest to his own views, Cicero (106–43 BCE) criticized their thesis that moral virtue is the sole good and, hence, sufficient for a flourishing life. Nevertheless, he considers that the virtues are not sufficient, but necessary for happiness. In his second speech *Against Catilina,* Cicero gave the list of virtues and vices. The typical Roman excellences are particularly represented in this list. The first on the list is *pudor* (i.e., decency and modesty), then *pudicitia,* meaning both chastity and shame in a narrow sense. While the first two excellences from the list refer to the private domain, the third one, *fides,* refers to the functioning of the Roman community. And, it is a significant notion with a variety of deeply connected meanings: loyalty, honesty, confidence, and also mutual trust between friends, the ruler and his subjects, and among different

people in the community of peoples. Along with fides, Cicero mentions *pietas.* In Roman life, this plays a vital function, referring not only to piety, but also to the respect toward someone who really deserves to be respected, like gods, rulers, or the head of a family. The next excellence on the list is *constantia,* which connotes steadiness or being firm and faithful to one's own ideals, principles, and purposes. It is presupposed that if a person is to be *honestas,* or to have an honorable attitude, decency, self-confidence, and respectfulness then it leads to general appreciation and public esteem. The *continentia* is a kind of self-control and self-discipline, and it is, to some extent, equivalent to the Greek arête *sophrosyne.* The next four excellences: *aequitas* (equity), *temperamentia* (moderation), *fortitudo* (bravery), *prudentia* (prudence) are of Greek origin. At the end of this list are excellences such as *bona ratio* (good reason), *mens sana* (healthy mind), and *bona spes* (good hope). The first two are intellectual, yet their intellectualism is more of a practical, rather than of a theoretical nature. This is a characteristic feature of the Roman *Weltanschauung,* which manifests itself not as much in the metaphysical treatises, but rather in the issues of organizing the state and codifying the laws upon which the state should be governed. The *bona spes* is a kind of intelligent optimism, which goes well with a healthy and quick mind as a contributor to attaining good goals.

For the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca (4 BCE–CE 65), the ultimate good consists exclusively in attaining virtues. He talks of the *virtus perfecta,* which through the knowledge of things, human and divine, is a precondition for leading a harmonious life. The plurality of virtues represents the various aspects of one perfect virtue. In addition to the four cardinal excellences, Seneca emphasizes *patientia* (patience), *tolerantia* (tolerance), *simplicitas* (simplicity or candor), *modestia* (modesty), and *humilitas* (humbleness). The prominent place in his work is given to the virtue *humanitas,* which signifies the sense of solidarity with others. With his humanist ideas, Seneca influenced important authors in Western culture for centuries to come.

Eastern Traditions

China

The core of Chinese thinking in regard to the human excellences lies in the teachings of Confucius (551–479 BCE), along with the contributions of Mencius (372–289 BCE), and Xunzi (298–238 BCE). Significant achievements of the Confucian philosophy are to be found later on in the works of Cheng Hao (1032–1085), Cheng Yi (1033–1107), Zhu Xi (1130–1200), and so forth. Although they developed ethical reflections in a conceptual framework different than the one we find in the Western tradition, the Chinese philosophers also view the virtues as excellences that enable a person to lead a flourishing life. Confucian ethics stress the concept of *junzi,* similar to Aristotle's notion of

phronimos (i.e., an ethically superior or paradigmatic individual). Later on, Confucius and Laoze (6th century BCE) were considered to be closest to the ideal of junzi.

De and *ren* are two interchangeably used words for virtue in the Chinese language, and both have a double meaning in Confucian usage. *De* represents moral "force" or "potency," as opposed to physical force, as well as "virtue" pertaining to the excellence of a character. The word *ren* signifies both the particular virtue of benevolence or humaneness and the sum of all virtues.

A large number of virtues have played a significant role in the history of Confucianism: aforementioned ren, *li* (often rendered in English as rules, property, rituals, etc.), *yı* (righteousness), *zhı* (wisdom), *zhong* (devotion), *xın* (faithfulness), and *xiao* (filial piety).

Bearing the highest ethical significance, ren is a fundamental virtue upon which all other virtues depend. It seems that already the etymology of the word *ren* disclosures its meaning. The combination of the radicals ren (person, human) and *er* (two) in this character implies that it is one's relation to others, rather than singleness and individuality, that constitutes what a person really is. What makes a person excellent in his pursuit of ren is a particular kind of relation one develops toward others, based on love and respect for one's fellows, and attained by overcoming one's egoism and self-interest.

As a virtue, *li* is a formed disposition of regarding and obeying the set of ritual rules, traditional customs, and other practices that are of no significance in Western ethics. Their role is to establish and maintain the harmonious social order in accordance with the prescriptions of reasons and humaneness (ren). If these rules become burdensome and unreasonable, then they should be revised, replaced, or even rejected.

Yi is a cultivated disposition to perform the acts that are just, right, and appropriate to the situation at hand. Like Aristotle and the Stoics, the Confucian philosophers also think that what is right depends on the agent's reasoned judgment. An individual must be led not by one's personal gain, but by the welfare of the entire community. In this case, a very important role is played by the virtue *zhong* (devotion), because it is a commitment to the interest of someone else, especially in cases where this conflicts with one's personal interests.

Generally speaking, *zhi* (wisdom) is a disposition to deliberate well about the best means to achieve given ends, and to determine the consequences of various courses of action. It is also an ability to evaluate the characters of others, as well as oneself.

Xin (faithfulness) is primarily fidelity to words. The most apparent aspect is faithfulness in the sense of honesty: doing what one says one will do, and not promising more than one can give. For Confucianism, faithfulness is of vast importance in interpersonal communication and state administration.

Chinese ethics attach wider significance to the excellence *xiao* (filial piety) than the Western tradition did or

does. It is a cultivated affection and respect that one should display to one's parents. The primacy of xiao derives from the natural feeling of love that each offspring has for the parent. It is fundamental for understanding and forming a society, in the way that social relations are to resemble the relation between children and their parents. They have to mirror its hierarchical structure based on natural and strong devotion. In addition, the Confucian thinkers profoundly remarked that the habitation and cultivation of each excellence began in the family, afterwards substantially influencing our conduct and socialization in general. Nevertheless, according to the Confucians, obeying one's parents is not to be applied absolutely and unquestionably in every situation, but only if it is in accord with what reason judges to be just and appropriate.

By stressing the role of reason, which should deliberate well about practical matters, taking into account the special characteristics of each case, Confucian ethics is similar to that of Aristotle, where practical wisdom plays a crucial role. Like the ancient Greek thinkers in general, Chinese moral philosophers, in particular Mencius, consider that overcoming the passions and instincts is the way one acquires virtues and becomes truly human. The uniqueness of the Chinese account of excellences lies in stressing the significance of family and society, our relations to others in cultivating our own nature. In fact, Chinese thinkers attempt to find a kind of social order in which each person is able to realize her full potential as a human being through mutually beneficial relations with others.

India

The human virtues and excellences in general were not prominent topics in the Hindu tradition. In Indian thought as a whole, there is a lack of reflection on the very essence of virtue, since it was understood as supersensible and thus not entirely knowable by unaided reason; one can get a complete account of it only from revelation. However, a step in the direction of knowing virtues is to identify the moral duties that one should perform, as well as the character dispositions guiding these duties.

In the old Indian text *Bramahas,* devoted to interpreting rituals, virtue is envisaged as ritual excellence, performed, for example, in the acts of sacrifices. This ritualistic concept of virtue is significantly modified in the "Treatises on Dharma" (*Dharmasastras*), composed around 600 BCE. The word *dharma* literally means "what holds together." With its connotation as a sum of all moral duties and our disposition to acquire them, the dharma becomes a basis for either social or moral order. Although the proper performance of rituals is still vital, the disposition for performing the highest rite, according to this text, is a disposition for "good conduct." The text describes caste society consisting of the *Brahmans* (priests and teachers), *Kshatriyas* (warriors), *Vaisyas* (tradesmen), and *Sudras* (laborers and servants). Each of the four castes is distinguished by the

characteristic excellences exhibited by its members: the spirituality of the Brahmans manifests itself in their purity, righteousness, and knowledge; the excellence ascribed to the soldier caste is valor, especially in battle, and lower castes are assigned the virtues of industrious labor. However, it is mentioned in the Hindu texts that along with the excellence of a specific caste, there are the virtues common to all orders. These are forgiveness, self-control, nonviolence to all living beings, self-control of the pleasures, compassion and patience, as well as freedom from anger, envy, and avarice. It seems that these excellences are treated as mere instruments to an end, that is, enlightenment or liberation (*moksa, nirvana*) from the cycle of rebirth.

Buddhism as a religious and philosophical tradition was born in India around 600 BCE, and spread over Asian countries such as China, Korea, Japan, and Thailand. The texts of Buddhism criticized some aspects of the ethical system of traditional Hinduism by recommending universal principles over traditional, caste-specific norms and stressing mental attitude over performance. For example, one should not only avoid taking what does not belong to him, but also avoid having greedy thoughts.

The catalog of fundamental virtues in classical Buddhism could be found in the Holy Eightfold Path, and the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths. These truths are that life is suffering; the reason of this suffering is the "birth sin" of desire; suffering ends only upon nirvana, the annihilation of desire; and nirvana may be achieved only by following the Holy Path. The components of the Eightfold Path have been divided into a three-step plan of action consisting of *sila* (virtue), *samadhi* (meditation), and *prajna* (wisdom). The third (right speech), fourth (right action), and fifth steps (right livelihood) involve virtue; six (right effort), seven (right mindfulness), and eight (right concentration) involve meditation; and one (right understanding) and two (right thinking) involve wisdom. A later Buddhist virtue catalog is given by the so-called Five Virtues or Precepts, which consist of abstaining from harming any living thing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxication. Eventually, there are the four universal virtues of Buddhism. These are also mentioned in different canonical texts, concern the practical aspects of Buddhism, and promote the ideals of humanity. They are *maître* (benevolence), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (joy), and *upeksa* (equanimity).

Unlike Western thought, the Indian traditional texts do not take into account the political excellences. Moreover, in contrast to Western accounts of excellences, in Indian philosophical and religious tradition, rituals and ceremonies do play a prominent role. Entire Indian thought views human excellences as belonging to the path of achieving liberation from the restraints of everything belonging to humans. By strongly appealing to almost absolute nonviolence, based upon the view of the interconnectedness of all living creatures, the Indian tradition traces presumably the most valuable account of universal mercy and charity.

Muslim Tradition

The core of the Muslim view of human excellences lies in the Koran, the traditions (*hadith*) of Muhammad, Sufi's writings, and in the scripts of Muslim philosophers like Ibn Sina (980–1037), Al-Ghazali (1058–1111), Ibn Rushd (1126–1198), and so forth. The essential Muslim excellences are those attributed to Allah (i.e., God himself). Primarily, Allah is the *ar-Rahman* (beneficent) and the *ar-Rahim* (merciful). Moreover, Allah is the *al-Mohaymin* (protector), the *ar-Razzaq* (provider), and the *al-Ghafur* (all forgiving). Secondly, Allah is also the *al-Adl* (just), representing the *al-Haq* (truth) and the *al-Barr* (source of all goodness). Since Allah deals with the weak and uncertain humans, he is the *as-Sabur* (patient).

As humans in their relations should emulate these divine attributes, they should accordingly be generous, merciful, benevolent, and just, as well as honest to each other. They should also be patient and wise in their life. The prophet Muhammad exemplifies these virtues, since he is the perfect man par excellence, whom the Koran calls an excellent model to follow.

Apart from moral excellences, the Islamic principles encouraging intellectual flexibility and rational choice are based on *ijtihad* (judgment), *shura* (consultation), and *ijma* (consensus). Clearly, rationality and man's own judgment play a significant part in arriving at decisions. In Islamic culture, the importance of *ilm* (knowledge) was highly appreciated. One of the Muslim ideals is to spend life in a pursuit of knowledge. Sufism, the most profound teaching of Islam, describes the path of attaining the illuminating knowledge of God, which presupposes the cultivation of excellences, spiritual excellences in particular. Although the virtues are human attributes, in their deepest sense, they belong only to God, and what belongs to humans is their "nothingness" before him. In this sense, the Islamic view of virtues distinguishes itself from the other traditions, particularly from the Chinese and Western ones, in which the virtues are attainable primarily in the active engagement of humans.

The ancient Greek philosophers also influenced the Islamic account of virtues. Al-Ghazali's view of happiness is a good example of how the Islam tradition could be creatively combined with Western philosophy. According to Al-Ghazali, happiness, as the highest good, admits two subdivisions, the worldly and the otherworldly. Otherworldly happiness, which is our ultimate end, cannot be attained without certain worldly goods. These include Plato's four cardinal virtues; the bodily virtues of health, good fortune, and long life; the external virtues of wealth, social position, and noble birth; and lastly the "divine virtues" of guidance, good counsel, direction, and divine support, all belonging to the Islam tradition.

Russia: Between East and West

There is no other nation that questions its own values and identity so deeply as the Russians had, thereby showing one of their virtues. This virtue is a profound self-awareness, which implies inquiring its own scope and merits, and longing for one's true self. In its long history, Russia has formed a unique culture based on the Orthodox Christian religion in the productive, although not always harmonic, dialogue with Western culture and its tradition. This dialogue was important in the formation of the greatest geniuses of the Russian culture, particularly such as Pushkin (1799–1837), Dostoyevsky (1821–1881), Tolstoy (1828–1910), and film director Tarkovsky (1932–1986). Inspired by Western ideas, they critically explored, denied, or creatively assimilated them, introducing, at the same time, something new and unique.

The uniqueness of the Russian view on excellences could be seen in the notion of *svecholovek* used by Dostoyevsky in his *Pushkin Speech*. Svecholovek is a person whose excellence is not proved by being superior to others, but by embracing and synthesizing the features of others. In one's attempt to know and experience other nations and cultures, *svecholovek* is both unique and universal. According to Dostoyevsky, such a completely universal person was Pushkin, who transformed and unified in his own spirit as "the spirits of foreign nations" (p. 56).

The Russians are very talented for exact mathematical and natural sciences, and they have had excellent results therein, both in the past and present. Nevertheless, the most prominent Russian thinkers and writers (e.g., Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Berdyaev) criticized the pretension of excellences in calculation and the rational sciences in general, to give a full and sufficient account of reality. In criticizing abstract, theoretical reasoning, Tolstoy pointed out the significance of a practical ability, similar to Aristotle's *phronesis,* to instantly grasp the unique features of each particular case.

The most appreciated moral excellence for the Russians is *chelovekoljubie,* meaning to have genuine love for each human being. In particular, this relation manifests itself in the empathy with the insulted and humiliated. There is no human, so miserable, handicapped, even wicked, who cannot and should not be loved. The Russian humanists did not pledge for an abstract humanism, but for one that should be proved in everyday life in terms of helping a concrete person.

As strikingly depicted in Dostoyevsky's novels, the Russian understanding of *vera* (faith) is also specific, since it is not to be grounded only in doctrine, but rather in the living experience of a believer, permeating one's entire life. The importance of *nadezhda* (hope) in Russian thought is expressed in its fundamental orientation toward the future, understood either as heavenly kingdom or communism or a better life improved by science. The most prominent political excellence in the Russian culture is an organic togetherness, as opposed, according to the Russian thinkers, to the Western self-centered individualism.

Medieval Ages

The Apostle Paul's faith, hope, and love from the New Testament became the most significant and unique Christian excellences. The church fathers variously discussed the ancient accounts of virtues and vices, often comparing them to new Christian ideals. Among the early Greek Church fathers, the most original and insightful notion of arête is to be found in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa (335–394). For him, Socrates is no longer a paradigmatic individual, as he was for the classical Greeks, but Moses, after whom his major work is entitled. Gregory of Nyssa endeavored to account for the place of arête in the spiritual and dynamic progress of the soul attempting to overcome the limits of its own nature. He used the word *epektasis* to signify this paradoxical process of how finite humans can exercise their excellence by progressing into unlimited perfection. According to Gregory of Nyssa, to be fully human is to be in an infinite state of *becoming* ever better or *more* perfect, without ever *being* best or perfect. This process of human divination was conceived by Gregory of Nyssa as the cooperation of God combined with the effort of a human himself. By the belief that the human side is very active in acquiring virtues, Gregory of Nyssa was closer to the Greek classical tradition than to Augustine and the later Christian authors, who considered that this process is sorely dependent on God's mercy.

Saint Augustine (354–430) critically discussed and eventually rejected classical Stoic and Platonic accounts of virtue as rational self-mastery, substituting instead an account of virtue as *ordo amoris,* "rightly ordered love." This right ordering of love reflects the divinely ordained hierarchy of nature, with God at the peak. Augustine defined the four classical virtues of courage, moderation, justice, and wisdom as forms of this love of God. By defining *virtus* in terms of correct love, Augustine made it into a divine gift, rather than a human achievement. This implies that there is a categorical difference between genuine virtue, based in God's "pouring" love into human souls, and the cardinal virtues grounded on any other love. Although it is certainly true that Augustine viewed pagan virtues as superior to pagan vices, such virtues remain always imitation compared with the authentic virtue of divine love in our souls.

Among the early Scholastics, two opposite views on human virtue are to be noticed. While for Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) the notion of virtue was of no significance, and even justice is not conceived as virtue, Peter Abelard (1079–1142) attempted to connect Aristotelian concept of virtue with the elements of Augustinian ethics, by claiming that the virtues are those qualities that make human life worthwhile. He productively developed Augustine's criticism of the Stoics's thesis that all virtues are equal.

Aristotle and the Neoplatonists, were an inspiration to Bonaventura (1217–1274) in his account of human excellences, as he attempted to reconcile them with Christian doctrine. In his view, human excellences participate in divine exemplars to various degrees. The cardinal virtues of wisdom, justice, moderation, and courage may be possessed at any of three levels. At the lowest level, they are "political" and belong to us insofar as we are political animals; at the next level, they are "cleansing" and belong to us insofar as we are fit for God; and at the next level, they belong to those already entirely cleansed. At all levels of the hierarchy, human virtues depend on the exemplars for their reality. The cardinal virtues likewise also depend on the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity to attain their perfection and achieve their ends. According to Bonaventura, the virtues are not only the products of God's grace, but are also rooted in *liberum arbitrium* (free decision). Thus, the cardinal virtues can belong only to the intellect and the will—those powers of the soul that share in free decision.

Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) was a great Christian synthesizer of the Medieval Ages. He combined the two lists, saying that there are four cardinal virtues and three theological virtues. According to Aquinas, the theological virtues, having God as their object, are prior to all other virtues. Due to the fact that God, as an ultimate end, must be present in the intellect before it is present in the will, and since God is present in the will by the reason of hope and charity, faith is prior to hope and charity. Hope is the theological virtue through which we trust that, with divine assistance, we will attain the ultimate good—the eternal enjoyment of God. In the order of generation, hope is prior to charity, but in the order of perfection, charity is prior to both hope and faith. While neither faith nor hope will remain in those who reach the eternal vision of God in the life to come, charity will endure in blessedness. It is an excellence that is infused into the soul by God and that inclines one to love God for God's own sake. If charity is more excellent that faith and hope, then through charity the acts of all other excellences are ordered to God.

Early Modern Age

The Renaissance

During the Renaissance, the virtues became the theme of poetic imagination, the question for philosophical thinking, and the subject matter frequently represented by the painters. For example, the Italian artist Antonio da Correggio (1489–1534) painted the three ancient moral excellences (justice, courage, and moderation) in his famous work, *Allegory of the Virtues.* Persons of distinguished excellences—both intellectual and artistic—represent the Renaissance, such as Marcilio Ficino (1433–1499), Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), and Michelangelo di L. Buonarroti (1475–1564).

The direct approach to the sources of the ancient Greek texts produced a huge diversity in the Renaissance, both in the accounts and evaluations of excellences. While Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) held that virtue is a cure for vicissitudes of *fortuna,* Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), in his

Intercoenales, represented virtues in confrontation with fortuna as helpless and inferior.

The Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457) decisively rejected the Stoic concept of virtue as happiness by revaluating the Epicurean views of instrumental nature of virtues. In rejecting the Stoic equation of virtue with happiness, Valla pointed out that apparently selfless, virtuous actions are in fact very often performed out of egoistic, self-interest reasons. By refuting the Stoics, Valla was affirming the insufficiency of humans to achieve happiness outside the Christian dispensation. He advocated the Christian pleasure that does not exclude the joys of life, yet its highest peak is heaven's delight. Although Valla's ranking of pleasure as the ultimate end has an Epicurean flavor, his equation of heavenly delights with pleasure is of a Christian nature.

Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527) created a novel political theory presenting how politics could be practiced outside the boundaries of morality and virtue, by redefining the very notion of virtue. According to Machiavelli, virtue is an excellence in achieving desirable goals, which are, however, not necessarily morally acceptable. The moral indifference of the ruler can help him in various struggles with the changeable circumstances of fortuna. The requirements for leading a country successfully are not traditional virtues, like piety, humanity, and honesty, but cleverness in making things useful and efficient. In sum, political excellence for Machiavelli presupposes power and intellectual excellences, but it is indifferent to moral ones.

Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), a French Renaissance thinker, held that each excellence, whether moral or intellectual, entails struggle and difficulty. He explained his assumption by stating that even-minded people with good intentions find it easy to act justly, while virtuous persons are those who are able to actively overcome the difficulties when acting rightly. Thus, he implicitly criticized the Aristotelian thesis that a virtuous person is recognized by the fact that he readily performs his virtuous acts, whereby he could be seen as a precursor of Kant's concept of "moral value" of each act.

Age of Discovery

In the European culture of the 16th and 17th centuries, the human mind's scope and limits were "discovered," and became the focal topics of the age. Rene Descartes (1596–1650), the "father" of modern philosophy, saw virtue as a firm and contestant determination to act in accordance with what reason judges to be the best. It is an unconditioned and supreme good, entirely dependent on our free will. Being a cure for the aberrations of passions, the key moral excellence is generosity described as a kind of appropriate self-esteem and as a the perfection both of the intellect and of the will.

Similar to the Stoics, Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677) considered that exercising one's excellence is acting according to the laws of one's own nature, guided by reason. Being in harmony with one's own reason is nothing but knowledge, which is both the major weapon against the misleading passions and the source of the highest happiness, since it is directed to God or the necessary order of nature. Spinoza distinguished between two classes of virtuous actions, both of which are in accord with reason: (1) those due to tenacity, aimed at preserving one's being; and (2) those due to generosity, aimed at helping and cooperating with others. According to Spinoza, a genuinely virtuous person does pursue his or her own interests, but also takes care of the well-being of others, acting always honestly, nobly, and altruistically.

For the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), virtues are those character dispositions that produce appropriate actions easily, without any resistance by reason. Due to the fact that there were no generally accepted standards in the prepolitical period, each person considered something different to be good and virtuous. Only in the civil society did laws impose standards, and virtue consisted in respecting such laws that ensure the stability of a society. Apart from political excellence, which Hobbes equated with justice, he also considered *caritas,* interpreted as a kind of solidarity among humans, to be a moral excellence.

Age of Enlightenment

In their pursuit of reason and liberation, the thinkers of the Age of Enlightenment very seriously questioned the generally accepted beliefs on values and virtues. In the French Enlightenment, the traditional views on moral excellences were sharply criticized. For example, F. de Rochefoucauld (1613–1680) held that egoism is a driving force of numerous seemingly selfless actions. J. O. de Mettrie (1709–1751) argued that virtue does not have any intrinsic value, since it exists exclusively due to social interests.

Ch. L. Montesquieu (1689–1755) viewed virtue as a political excellence that he understood as "the love of the laws and of our country" (1777, p. 67). It is a moving force in republics, honor in monarchies, and fear for despotic regimes. On the other hand, J. J. Rousseau (1712–1778) described virtue as something internal, as a "sublime knowledge of simple souls" (2002, p. 67). Its laws are inscribed in our hearts, and only if we turn to our true self and conscious, can we learn what it is. Nevertheless, the pure tendency toward exploring one's own conscious is not sufficient for attaining virtue, since it always requires strength and hard labor. While Rousseau thought that virtues could take the place of natural laws, Voltaire (1694–1778) was more skeptical about the status of virtue, by claiming that it is only a socially useful behavior.

Moral and intellectual virtues have a prominent place in David Hume's (1711–1776) philosophy, who is considered to be a representative of the Scottish Enlightenment. Hume's concept of virtue embraces not only moral virtues, but also excellences of all kinds, including intellectual talents and social virtues. He defined it as "quality of the mind agreeable to or approved of by everyone who considers or contemplates it" (1975, p. 261). Hume distinguished

the "natural virtues" (benevolence, charity, prudence, good sense, wit, temperance, courage, etc.) from "artificial" virtues (justice, allegiance, chastity, etc.). The former are rooted in our nature and based on our natural tendency to prefer and to approve, while the latter are dependent upon convention. All the artificial virtues arise from the circumstances and necessities of life, and they take different specific forms in different societies and historical conditions. They consist in conventions, generally accepted to be socially beneficial, like respect for traditional property, and "fidelity to promises." Contrary to the artificial virtues, the "natural" virtues are invariant across cultures; they always produce good outcomes.

Modern Age

According to Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), the founder of the modern ethics and philosophy in general, *Tugend* (virtue) cannot depend merely on a benevolent tendency, but exclusively on general and strict principles. Kant (1797/1996), therefore, thought that the traditional account of virtue should be redefined. Kant conceived a morally relevant virtue as a kind of strength of will to do what is right, and distinguished the duties of right and duties of virtue. Whereas the former are eternally imposed laws, which requires the coercive order, the latter are self-imposed and aim at self-perfection and the happiness of others. By introducing the duties of virtue, Kant developed the concept of moral excellence, which consists of the enhancement of one's dispositions of mind and certain moral duties of respect and charity. A rational agent with more or less excellence performs the duties of virtue. However, our duties to perfect ourselves and to realize the happiness of others are imperfect. While perfect duties of right allow no exception for one's inclination, the imperfect duties of virtue are circumstantial and sometimes dependent on one's preferences.

In modern utilitarian ethics, virtue is interpreted as an instrument in attaining an external end, such as benefit, power, or happiness. John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) had a more profound view of the role of virtues in one's life. He distinguished between desiring a thing as a "part" of our happiness and desiring it as a means to our happiness. Virtues are the constituent part of one's happiness, since they are also desired for the sake of themselves. In contrast to Mill, G. E. Moore (1873–1958) considered that virtues are not good as such; they are rather certain instruments for attaining the good. The evaluation of virtues depends on how efficient they are in accomplishing goals.

In his philosophy, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) gave priority to the excellences of all kinds over the traditionally conceived virtue, concurrently aiming at demystification and overcoming its double-faced morality. While compassion and charity are the most valuable virtues for Christians, Nietzsche believed them to be nothing but the sign of human weakness. He vividly portrayed an *overman* as a being equipped with everything best, with all the excellences like courageousness, great creativity, uniqueness, healthy, life affirming, and practicing self-reverence. The overman has to possess his peculiar virtue, belonging only to himself. He looks into the future and not to the past; his main task is to overcome his own self (i.e., to make his own self better, even almost perfect). Nietzsche's words about the future of morality and virtues were prophetic. He attached to them little power to inspire humans, and since they no longer represented great ideals, which can make people become more than what they are, he thought that in the 20th and the 21st centuries the civilization would be faced with an eruption of barbarism.

The flourishing of all kinds of intellectual excellences and human achievements in science, technology, and the arts distinguishes the 20th century. At the same time, this was the century of the most horrible wars and massive killings, the century in which humanity could have been destroyed. Perhaps that is why virtues were not the dominant theme in the previous century, neither in philosophy nor in culture in general. This, however, does not imply that they were not treated at all. In his material value ethics, M. Scheler (1874–1928) thought that virtue should be rehabilitated. According to Scheler, it is a vivid consciousness of good, the quality of a person as such, who is a bearer of moral values. On the other hand, M. Weber (1864–1920) advocated a utilitarian view of virtue in the manner of "the spirit of capitalism." On the example of B. Franklins, he showed that moral excellences, such as honesty, diligence, and punctuality are beneficial only because they gain profit.

In the mid-20th century, an almost forgotten virtue was revived in the works of E. Anscombe, A. MacIntyre, P. Foot, and B. Williams. As R. Hursthouse (1999) suggested, the virtue of ethics for these authors was initially endorsed to distinguish a position in normative ethics, which puts the emphasis on a person's virtues, in contrast to deontology, a theory which stresses duties and rules, as well as utilitarianism, which emphasizes the consequences of actions. The source of inspiration for these authors is ancient Greek ethics, Aristotle in particular. The central issues of their concern, although treated differently, are the following: the nature of virtue, formation of character, practical reason, moral education, and thereto connected feelings such as loyalty, shame, and guilt. The discussion initiated by these philosophers is still going on, showing that our culture, at least in the eyes of some intellectuals, is concerned with the fact that moral virtues are almost nonexistent in our lives.

Future Directions

It seems that our modern age is focused on the body, rather than the mind or the soul. In contrast to the previous centuries, intellectuals, state representatives, or even ideologies do not form our views of what is valuable today. The electronic mass media, though profoundly influenced by the political and economic powers, has the

key role in forming our evaluative beliefs. The excellences promoted by the media are excellences or perfections of the body rather than those of the soul or the mind. One of the ideals followed by many people is a perfectly shaped, young, and fresh body and the face of a model. Also, entertainers and athletes who prove their excellences in competitions are today's heroes, rather than scientists or philosophers. For instance, not many people know the name Z. I. Alferov, a Russian physicist and the Nobel prize winner in physics (2000), and even fewer people know that his invention, the heterotransistor, revolutionized mobile phone and satellite communications—but almost everyone is very well-informed about David Beckham, Brad Pitt, Madonna, and so forth.

Now, we face a kind of paradoxical situation where the excellences essentially enhancing our lives, such as scientific and technical expertise in the first place, do not seem to be the most esteemed in the system of values held by the majority of the population. Moreover, despite the fact that these excellences are not too popular, they truly contribute to the march of human progress. They presuppose the scientific exactness and application of skills connected with the inventiveness of their creators in all fields of human knowledge. What is missing, although not entirely, is a comprehensive, sufficiently systematic, and critical awareness of these fast processes, followed by the question of the meaning and the appropriate ethical evaluation of such development.

One step in that direction is transhumanism, an intellectual and cultural movement aiming at improving human mental and physical capacities, and thus prolonging human life by the use of science and technology. This movement attempts to find out how the emerging biotechnologies could be used in our struggle with human disabilities, diseases, and even death. By improvements of all kinds, including genetic improvement, it is apparent that the qualities of the human mind and character will be enhanced, too. However, we do not know exactly what will be the final result of such biotechnological processes: an improved human being equipped with all excellences, or an entirely new being belonging to another form of evolution yet to be created by ourselves. What remains open, regarding the latter alternative, is whether these excellences are in any way human. If not human excellences, then future science and ethics will have a delicate task to evaluate these excellences properly.

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