

Introduction

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What is good character? What are the traits of a good person? How should good character traits—virtues—be cultivated? How should negative character traits—vices—be avoided? The history of Jewish literature is filled with reflection on questions of character and virtue such as these.

This volume explores that history, focusing on virtues. We understand virtues broadly, as good character traits, or “excellences of character.”¹ Virtues are dispositions that require refinement or cultivation, and for which it is appropriate to hold agents responsible should they fail to cultivate them. In the history that we explore in this volume, Jews have pointed to this sort of concept with Hebrew words such as *ma'alot*, *de'ot*, or *middot tovot*, Greek words such as *aretai*, Arabic words such as *akhlaq*, Latin words such as *virtutes*, German words such as *Tugenden*, as well as related words in other languages. Jewish thinkers have also written about “virtue” in the singular—excellent moral character in general. And they have written about many particular virtues, such as love, reverence, wisdom, humility, temperance, generosity, justice, courage, and holiness.

The thinkers discussed in this volume all see virtues as significant and essential. As such, their ethical approaches are all forms of “virtue ethics,” broadly defined as forms of moral thought wherein virtues are central to morality.² However, other elements—such as

laws, rules, and principles—may *also* be central to morality in Jewish thought. These different emphases have not been separated to the extent that they have been in contemporary moral philosophy. Some of the thinkers in this volume may well be characterized as deontologists or as consequentialists, and many of them see virtues and rules as working together in a mutually reinforcing way.³ But all of them see virtue as central to ethics, and so we are placing them under the rubric of “Jewish virtue ethics” in this broad sense.

This book covers thousands of years of Jewish literature, reflecting a wide range of contexts and influences. Though some readers may primarily think of Aristotle’s influence when they think of “virtue ethics,” ancient traditions about virtue that are invoked in this volume include not only Aristotelian traditions but also Platonic traditions and a wide range of biblical and rabbinic traditions. The medieval and modern traditions discussed within this volume typically look back to one or more of these traditions, although they also chart new paths and reflect many other sorts of influences. The volume points to the diversity of approaches to virtue throughout Jewish intellectual history, while also showing some common themes that have united many of these diverse approaches.

We feature thirty-five influential approaches in this volume, focusing on individual thinkers, while also considering some movements and bodies of literature. Chapter 1 introduces diverse perspectives from the Hebrew Bible itself, a body of literature that is foundational for the other thinkers and approaches in the volume. We then consider the Stoic approach taken by Philo of Alexandria (chapter 2), the politically focused approach of Josephus (chapter 3), and the Torah-focused models developed within classical rabbinic literature (chapter 4).

A number of the chapters that follow consider medieval examples of what is often called “*musar* literature,” literature that focuses directly on virtue and character, including the writings of Bahya Ibn Paquda (chapter 5) and Solomon Ibn Gabirol (chapter 6), both eleventh-century Spanish thinkers shaped by Neoplatonism and a range of Jewish and Islamic traditions. The volume then continues with a chapter on the twelfth-century philosopher Moses Maimonides (chapter 7), whose ethics reflect an Aristotelian framework. A number of subsequent chapters feature fourteenth- and fifteenth-century philosophers in Spain and France who engage with and respond to Maimonides, including Levi Gersonides (chapter 11), Ḥasdai Crescas (chapter 12), Joseph Albo (chapter 13), and Isaac Arama (chapter 14).

Other chapters focused on medieval thinkers consider alternative models, rooted in esotericism and mysticism. These models include those developed by Elazar of Worms in thirteenth century Germany (chapter 8), Naḥmanides in thirteenth-century Spain (chapter 9), the authors of the *Zohar* in thirteenth- to fourteenth-century Spain (chapter 10), and Moses Cordovero in the land of Israel in the sixteenth century (chapter 15).

The volume then transitions into the modern era with chapters on the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (chapter 16) and the eighteenth-century Italian kabbalist Moses Ḥayyim Luzzatto (chapter 17). Subsequent chapters consider ideas of virtue encouraged by leaders of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment): Moses Mendelssohn (chapter 18) in Germany and Menāḥem Mendel Lefin (chapter 19) in Poland. We also consider Eastern European thinkers steeped in Kabbalah and opposed to the Haskalah, namely, the Lithuanian traditionalist Ḥayyim of Volozhin (chapter 20) and one of the rabbis from the Hasidic movement, Naḥman of Bratslav, in Ukraine (chapter 21). Moving further south to Salonika, Greece, the following chapter considers the nineteenth-century Sephardi author Isaac Bekhor Amarachi, who wrote and translated musar literature into Ladino. We also include two chapters on early leaders of the nineteenth-century Musar movement, a Lithuania-based movement that emphasized the study of musar literature, Israel Salanter (chapter 23) and Simḥah Zissel Ziv (chapter 24).

Turning to figures who rose to influence in the twentieth century, we consider a range of influential figures who wrote extensively about virtues: the German neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen (chapter 25); the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Mandatory Palestine, Religious Zionist thinker Abraham Isaac Kook (chapter 26); the dialogic thinker Martin Buber (chapter 27); the American pragmatist Mordecai Kaplan, founder of the Reconstructionist movement (chapter 28); Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, scion of the Musar movement, who shaped contemporary Haredi Judaism (chapter 29); Joseph Soloveitchik, a major influence on centrist and modern Orthodoxy in America (chapter 30); the moral-political thinker Hannah Arendt, who aligned herself with a Jewish “pariah tradition” (chapter 31); the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, for whom ethics was fundamental as “first philosophy” (chapter 32); and the theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, who has had a profound influence on non-Orthodox movements in the United States (chapter 33).

The volume concludes with two approaches that emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century and have flourished in the twenty-first century: Jewish feminism (chapter 34) and Jewish environmentalism (chapter 35).

Each of the chapters in this volume addresses four common questions: (1) In what ways are virtues important to the thinker, work, or movement under discussion? (2) Which particular virtues, or kinds of virtues, are especially important to them? (3) How do they think that virtues can be cultivated, and are there exemplars of virtue? (4) How does their conception of virtue affect their interpretation of Judaism or of Jewish identity?

This set of questions provides a way into the analysis of the place of virtue across the range of Jewish moral thought; it also provides a common template for the various chapters. It is our hope that the chapters—and the thinkers that they treat—may be compared with one another, given their shared attention to the prompts.

We can see, from the chapters in the volume, that virtues may be important in a wide variety of ways. Some thinkers stress the importance of virtue for a community, while others stress how virtue leads to individual flourishing or transcendence. Some speak of immediate communities, while others offer a cosmopolitan vision. Some stress flourishing in this world, while some speak of rewards in the world to come, and others reject any talk of consequences for the self altogether. Some stress how virtues combat injustices on earth, while others stress how virtues strengthen the divine realm. Some stress how virtue leads to intimacy with God, while in other models intimacy with the divine does not seem possible, and in some models God plays little if any role at all. Some models focus on moderation, while others frame ideal virtue as a kind of extreme. Some stress the rational character of the virtues, while others are more suspicious of claims of rationality. And some reflect a negative assessment of human nature, while others offer a more positive assessment.

The chapters also point to the importance of a variety of particular virtues. Humility, justice, and love for others are singled out across a particularly wide range of chapters. Courage, fear (or awe) of God, generosity, and temperance (or moderation) also receive some particular attention. Love of God, friendship, holiness, piety, and wisdom are among the other virtues that are singled out in both premodern and modern contexts. But many other virtues highlighted in particular

chapters are mentioned nowhere else in the volume. Some are uniquely tied to particular thinkers: for example, the virtue of receptivity to God's goodness in the thought of Solomon ibn Gabirol (chapter 6), the virtue of dialogical responsiveness and openness in the thought of Martin Buber (chapter 27), or the virtue of realism in the thought of Hannah Arendt (chapter 31).

Both premodern and modern thinkers discussed in the volume see the performance of the Torah's commandments (*mitzvot*) as a means for cultivating virtue, though they often stress different aspects of the commandments, sometimes emphasizing the ways that virtue is cultivated through the performance of actions and sometimes emphasizing, as in the case of Bahya Ibn Paquda (chapter 5), "the duties of the heart."

Many chapters also point to practices of study, though these practices are often of very different kinds. Ancient rabbinic literature (chapter 4) often emphasizes how virtue is developed through the legal argumentation carried out by sages. Gersonides (chapter 11) stresses the importance of studying the Torah's narratives. Isaac Bekhor Amarachi (chapter 22) advises spending an hour each day studying musar literature. Israel Salanter (chapter 23) recommends ritualized, emotional study of musar literature within a particular sort of communal environment. We also find models of how storytelling shapes virtue, including the intergenerational storytelling found in the book of Deuteronomy (chapter 1) and Hannah Arendt's model of historically grounded storytelling (chapter 31). In Rebecca Epstein-Levi's discussion of Jewish feminism (chapter 34), we see practices of citation cultivating virtue.

Other chapters point to other sorts of practices. Elazar of Worms (chapter 8), for example, offers a model of seeking to embarrass oneself so as to develop greater modesty. Moses Mendelssohn (chapter 18) explains how poetry and music may foster virtue. Menaḥem Mendel Lefin (chapter 19) advances a system for focusing on one trait at a time and charting one's progress with that trait. Naḥman of Bratslav (chapter 21) requires submission to the *zaddik*. Simḥah Zissel Ziv (chapter 24) recommends visualization exercises that cultivate empathy. Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler (chapter 29) and Emmanuel Levinas (chapter 32) describe how acts of generosity and responsibility cultivate those virtues.

Many of the thinkers and works discussed in this volume also point to exemplars of virtue. Moses and Abraham are especially

well-represented, although different thinkers see these figures as exemplifying very different virtues. Even when they are associated with the same sort of virtue, these virtues are often imagined in very different terms: for example, the *Zohar's* model of how Abraham exemplifies justice (*tzedek*, in chapter 10) is very different from Mordecai Kaplan's model of how Abraham exemplifies justice (chapter 28). The volume also refers to a number of other exemplary biblical characters and rabbis, as well as other pious figures and philosophers, both those who are Jewish and those who are not (Socrates, for example, appears as an exemplar in four different chapters). Some thinkers also point to God as the ultimate exemplar of virtue.

The various conceptions of virtue in this volume are linked with various understandings of Judaism/Torah and Jewish/Israelite identity. Each thinker under discussion sought to advance certain ideas about identity and tradition, and these ideas shape and are shaped by the thinker's ideas about virtue.

Virtue ethics has been a burgeoning field of moral inquiry among academic philosophers in the postwar period. Although Jewish ethics has also flourished as an academic (and practical) field, attention to the role of virtue in Jewish thought has been underdeveloped. This volume seeks to illuminate its centrality not only for readers primarily interested in Jewish ethics but also for readers who take other approaches to virtue ethics, including within the Western virtue ethics tradition. It is our hope that the essays gathered here will provide hitherto unrecognized or unknown sources for philosophical reflection.

Notes

1. Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove, "Virtue Ethics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2018 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/ethics-virtue>.

2. For some approaches to defining "virtue ethics," see Julia Annas, "Virtue Ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 515–36; Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Martha C. Nussbaum, "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?," *Journal of Ethics* 3, no. 3 (1999): 163–201.

3. Alan L. Mittleman, *A Short History of Jewish Ethics: Conduct and Character in the Context of Covenant* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 7. For

a general treatment of this problem, see Onora O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).