

CARDINAL VIRTUES

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1. Core Definition and Distinction

The **Cardinal Virtues** constitute a set of four pivotal moral qualities recognized throughout Western philosophical and theological tradition, particularly gaining prominence during the medieval period. These virtues--**Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude** (or Courage)--are considered the foundation upon which all other human virtues depend, acting as the primary moral compass for practical, earthly life. They are fundamentally characterized as virtues **natural** to human beings, accessible through reason and practice, and applicable universally across cultures and eras, forming the intrinsic core of a well-ordered personality and society. The concept posits that mastery of these four virtues allows an individual to live a rational, ethical, and flourishing life.

This quartet of moral excellences is often discussed explicitly in contrast to the three **Theological Virtues**--Faith, Hope, and Charity (Love)--which are traditionally held to be supernaturally infused by divine grace and directed specifically toward God. While the Cardinal Virtues aim at promoting the good life within the earthly community (the **vita activa**), the Theological Virtues orient the soul toward eternal salvation and union with the Divine. The distinction is crucial: classical philosophers developed the Cardinal Virtues entirely independently of revelation, viewing them as achievable ethical goals, whereas theological thought integrates them by suggesting that grace perfects nature, allowing the practice of the Cardinal Virtues to be elevated and strengthened by divine assistance. This philosophical framework solidified the Cardinal Virtues as the indispensable moral bedrock for both secular and spiritual ethics, demonstrating their universal importance in moral formation.

In medieval philosophy, the structural importance of these four virtues became paramount, earning them the moniker "cardinal," derived from the Latin word **cardo**, meaning "hinge." This etymology underscores the idea that all other moral actions and secondary virtues hinge upon or flow from these four principal qualities. For example, honesty might be considered a secondary virtue flowing from Justice, while patience is a component of Fortitude. This systematic approach provided an organized structure for moral theology, allowing scholars like Thomas Aquinas to synthesize Aristotelian ethics with Christian doctrine, establishing a hierarchical and comprehensive moral system that dominated Western ethical discourse for centuries and continues to influence contemporary moral psychology and personal values systems.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of the four cardinal virtues predates their formal naming, tracing its deepest roots back to classical Greek philosophy, specifically to the teachings of Socrates and his student, Plato. In Plato's seminal work, the **Republic**, he systematically analyzed the nature of a just state and, by analogy, the just individual soul. Plato identified these four virtues (though he did not call them "cardinal") as essential components necessary for the functional excellence of both the polis and the person. He argued that the ideal state required wisdom (Prudence) in its rulers, courage (Fortitude) in its guardians, temperance (moderation) among all classes, and justice as the overarching principle that ensured each part fulfilled its proper function without encroaching upon others. This framework established the enduring philosophical basis for treating these four moral qualities as an integrated and essential set.

Following Plato, Aristotle further elaborated on these ethical concepts in the **Nicomachean Ethics**, shifting the focus from the ideal structure of the state to the practical attainment of human flourishing (**eudaimonia**). Aristotle viewed virtue as a "mean" between two extremes (vices of excess and deficiency). While he listed many moral virtues, those corresponding to the cardinal four--practical wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice--were given special prominence as intellectual and moral prerequisites for a virtuous life. This rigorous systematization by the Greeks established a robust ethical tradition that later permeated Roman Stoicism. Roman thinkers, such as Cicero, formally adopted and promoted these four virtues as the fundamental moral pillars necessary for civic duty and personal integrity, cementing their status within the Western philosophical canon.

The decisive integration of these classical virtues into Western theology occurred in the late antiquity and early medieval periods. Christian thinkers recognized the profound moral utility of the classical system, viewing the natural virtues as God's gift to humanity through creation and reason. Saint Ambrose (c. 339-397 AD) is often credited with explicitly listing and promoting the four virtues--Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance--and designating them as **Cardinal Virtues**, borrowing the Latin term **cardo**. This recognition was further amplified by Saint Augustine and ultimately formalized and highly detailed by Saint Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. Aquinas, synthesizing Aristotelian philosophy with Christian doctrine in the **Summa Theologiae**, established the definitive Catholic understanding that the Cardinal Virtues, while natural, are perfected and energized by the grace accompanying the Theological Virtues, thus bridging the gap between pagan philosophy and Christian morality.

3. The Four Cardinal Virtues in Detail

Prudence (Prudentia)

Prudence, often considered the charioteer of the virtues, is the intellectual virtue concerned with discerning the proper course of action in any given situation. It is not merely cautiousness or

timidity, but rather **practical wisdom**--the ability to deliberate well about what is good and evil, and to choose the effective means to attain a worthy end. Philosophically, Prudence ensures that the emotions and desires are governed by right reason, making it the necessary prerequisite for the successful practice of all other moral virtues. Without Prudence, courage can become recklessness, temperance can devolve into indifference, and justice can become rigid legalism. It involves careful consideration of circumstances, memory of past experiences, docility to instruction, and foresight regarding future outcomes, ensuring that moral intent translates into appropriate and effective action.

Justice (Iustitia)

Justice is the moral virtue that regulates relationships with others, dictating the constant and perpetual will to render to each person their due. This virtue operates on several planes: **Commutative Justice** governs fair exchanges between individuals; **Distributive Justice** concerns the proper distribution of communal goods and burdens according to merit and need; and **Legal Justice** (or General Justice) relates to the individual's duty to the community and the common good. Justice demands impartiality and fairness, ensuring equity in treatment and respect for inherent human rights and dignity. It is fundamentally concerned with ensuring order, rectifying wrongs, and maintaining balance within the social and political spheres, transcending mere sentimentality to establish a principled commitment to rights and responsibilities.

Temperance (Temperantia)

Temperance is the virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods. It is primarily concerned with regulating the concupiscible appetite--the desires for bodily pleasures such as food, drink, and sexual gratification. This virtue ensures that these natural desires, essential for survival and continuity, do not become disordered or dominating, leading to gluttony, lust, or other destructive excesses. Temperance cultivates self-control, sobriety, and moderation, allowing the individual to remain focused on higher rational goals rather than being enslaved by immediate sensual gratification. It is a necessary form of **inner discipline** that enables the mind to govern the body, thereby preserving mental clarity and moral freedom required for virtuous action.

Fortitude (Fortitudo)

Fortitude, often translated as **Courage**, is the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. It is the spiritual strength required to overcome fear of pain, hardship, and even death, standing firm against obstacles that threaten moral integrity. Fortitude has two main aspects: **attacking** difficult challenges to achieve good objectives, and **enduring** unavoidable pain or suffering without yielding one's moral conviction. It is distinct from rashness; Fortitude, guided by Prudence, assesses risks accurately and commits to action despite fear,

recognizing that some goods (like truth or justice) are worth struggling for, enduring hardship for, or even dying for. It provides the necessary resilience for perseverance and moral steadfastness over the long term.

4. Significance and Role in Ethical Frameworks

The enduring significance of the Cardinal Virtues lies in their capacity to serve as a comprehensive, naturalistic framework for assessing moral character, transcending specific cultural or religious dogma. By focusing on qualities inherent to rational human nature, they provide a stable ethical basis for both personal development and societal structure. Unlike ethical systems based purely on outcome (consequentialism) or duty (deontology), the Cardinal Virtues are foundational to **Virtue Ethics**, emphasizing not what one ought to do, but what kind of person one ought to be. They offer a holistic model of moral flourishing (*eudaimonia*), wherein a virtuous life is intrinsically good and leads to a fulfilling existence. This focus on character development has made the framework perpetually relevant, influencing education, law, and moral psychology across millennia.

In political and legal philosophy, the Cardinal Virtues provide the moral foundation for civic life. Justice is explicitly the aim of all legal systems, ensuring fair governance and social stability. Prudence is demanded of good legislators and rulers, who must exercise sound judgment in complex policy decisions. Fortitude is necessary for citizens to resist tyranny and uphold democratic principles, while Temperance helps control societal avarice and factionalism. The integration of these virtues into the Western legal tradition highlights the belief that a well-functioning society is not merely a collection of rules, but a reflection of the moral health of its citizens and leaders. When these virtues erode, the capacity for self-governance diminishes, leading to social decay.

Furthermore, the Cardinal Virtues serve as a crucial bridge between secular rationalism and theological morality. For thinkers in the medieval era, their natural quality provided common ground for discourse with non-believers, asserting that basic human morality was knowable by all rational agents, regardless of their religious affiliation. This universality allowed the virtues to be adopted by various philosophical schools--from Stoicism to Thomism--and later reappeared in the Enlightenment as grounding principles for discussions on human rights and constitutionalism. The continuing relevance of these virtues demonstrates the fundamental human recognition that certain character traits--wisdom in decision-making, fairness in dealing, restraint of desire, and courage in adversity--are universally essential components of individual and collective well-being.

5. Debates and Criticisms

While widely accepted, the framework of the Cardinal Virtues has faced various philosophical

debates and criticisms, primarily concerning their completeness, their hierarchy, and their relationship to other virtues. One central debate concerns the **primacy of Prudence**. Since Prudence is the intellectual virtue that directs all other moral virtues (determining when and how to be just, temperate, or courageous), some philosophers, notably Thomas Aquinas, placed it at the apex, viewing it as a **causa et forma** (cause and form) of the others. Critics, however, argue that placing an intellectual virtue above moral virtues risks separating thought from action or elevating mere calculation above fundamental moral goods like Justice.

Another significant philosophical challenge revolves around the question of **completeness**: Are these four virtues sufficient to capture the full spectrum of human moral excellence? Critics have often proposed additions, suggesting that virtues like patience, humility, mercy, or diligence warrant inclusion among the primary, foundational virtues. While supporters argue that these secondary virtues are merely aspects or "potential parts" of the four cardinals (e.g., patience is a part of Fortitude; humility supports Temperance), the debate highlights the difficulty in creating an exhaustive, non-overlapping classification of moral excellence. Furthermore, psychological and cultural relativist critiques question the universal applicability of these specific virtues, suggesting that what constitutes moderation or courage might vary drastically between different societies or historical periods, challenging the inherent naturalism of the concept.

Finally, within religious contexts, there is a recurring debate regarding the interaction between the natural Cardinal Virtues and the supernatural Theological Virtues. Some stricter theological views suggest that without the infusion of divine grace, the Cardinal Virtues are fundamentally flawed or incapable of achieving truly meritorious goodness (**perfecta virtus**), leading only to a form of "splendid vice" if divorced entirely from the ultimate end of God. Conversely, secular humanists and non-theistic ethicists criticize the necessity of integrating the Theological Virtues at all, arguing that the ethical framework provided by Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude is entirely sufficient for establishing profound meaning and robust moral order in the absence of divine revelation. These continuing debates underscore the dynamic philosophical tension between human reason and divine faith in the history of Western ethical thought.

6. Further Reading

[Cardinal Virtues \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Saint Thomas Aquinas: Moral Philosophy \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

[Plato's Ethics and Politics in The Republic \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

[Virtue Ethics \(Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)