The semantic development of virtue

Philosophical comparison

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B.A. Essay

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Abstract

The concept of virtue is everywhere to be found in societies, from the ancient scriptures of yoga philosophy to Plato and Socrates, to modern day scrutiny. It has caused religious traditions, anthropologists and philosophers to have carefully contemplated what the term entails, its different aspects and how to interpret the virtues.

The aim of this thesis is to illustrate and support the claim that the virtues are a part of the innate nature of human beings, and the key to happiness and prosperity in life. It examines the concept of virtue and its semantic development by studying and comparing the virtues of yoga philosophy, the yamas, to the ancient Greek philosophers, especially Socrates’s hypothesis of virtue being knowledge, and contemporary moral philosophy.

History reveals that the semantic development of the concept of virtue remains relatively unchanged. It is therefore a reason to believe that the virtues are a subject to continual study and interpretation of good qualities in various societies because they are an internal natural part of human beings. They appear to be dormant until systematically awakened through practice where the aim is prosperity and lasting happiness in life. Only through an inner journey of self-scrutiny and dedication, which will lead to sharp objectivity and the willpower to practice the virtues, will they be activated and rendered a part of a person’s prosperous life and lasting happiness.
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Introduction

Happiness is a multifaceted and ambiguous term. Everyone looks for it but few manage to cultivate it unless some external prerequisites are met. Happiness can be described as a mental state where one experiences joy and a feeling of contentment in the moment. But the state of being happy and peaceful in life is not a simple achievement. According to its fleeting nature, mind swings like a pendulum between one’s likes and dislikes. Furthermore, there is a dependency between outer circumstances, whether it being an action or biased thoughts that come out through speech, and this state of happiness.

At the age of seventeen the author of this thesis was asked to contemplate the key to happiness and prosperity. This unusual but significant request marked the beginning of twenty-five years of search and self-study in the arena of philosophy until an inevitable conclusion was reached. There is a fundamental difference between something achieved (like sought after occupation) which will cause an emotion of happiness, and the deeper enduring feeling of joy that is the cause of the experience of life falling into place. Lasting happiness cannot be realized through fame, worldly gain or fulfilling desires and wishes, but by comprehending the virtues and applying them to the best of one’s ability.

This thesis discusses the semantic content of the concept of virtue and its development from a philosophical point of view. It claims the virtues to be an innate nature of human beings by examining what scholars throughout the ages have written on the subject. It also emphasizes and argues for the relevance of virtues to a prosperous and joyous life.

Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English, Online Etymology Dictionary, and A Practical Sanskrit Dictionary along with The Oxford Guide to Etymology support the examination of the meaning of virtue, its English origin and related terms in chapter one. The bases for the discussion in chapter two about the ancient philosophy of yoga and its virtues, the yamas, are Bryant’s book The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, and Taimni’s Science of Yoga. Both stress the significance of ethical foundation for virtuous life by moderate use of sensory and motor organs. Consequently, Plato’s Meno and A History of Western Thought: From Ancient Greece to the Twentieth Century give insight into the moral studies of the Greek philosophers in chapter three. Especially Socrates’s argument of virtue being innate knowledge and how practicing the virtues is the road to self-sufficiency and contentment in life. Attention is then turned to contemporary moral philosophy in chapter four. The books On Virtue Ethics, How should
one live? Essays on the Virtues and A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good along with Virtue Epistemology, a website article in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy define and describe virtue ethics, virtue epistemology and agent ethics in relation to semantic development. The modern theories that emerged and evolved in the mid-twentieth century further support the claim that the virtues are a part of the innate nature of human beings. Other references give further insight into the subject.
1. The etymological meaning of virtue and English origin

The contemporary meaning of *virtue* echoes past endeavours to explain and interpret behaviour exhibiting high moral standards and desirable personal qualities (Soanes & Hawker, 2008). This unpretentious yet multifaceted English noun also contains a broad meaning closely connected to values of civilization. Within the definition is a relation to a predetermined act that will show specific moral standards of behaviour. Moreover, there are special qualities, mainly good or useful, within a person. Virtue can also be related to a good or useful quality of an object, as in “the virtues of village life” (Soanes & Hawker, 2008, p. 1161).

What constitutes high moral standards and good or useful qualities has been investigated throughout history, especially by philosophers trying to encompass the vast ocean of the concept’s significance. That will be a subject for inquiry in chapters two through four of this thesis. But *virtue* touches other areas of life and in its development to modern English it has kept its broad or comprehensive meaning. The Oxford Thesaurus (2008) makes the attempt to describe in more detail what these desired standards and good qualities truly are, by defining *virtue* in three different, yet related ways. The first lists what the word is supposed to contain within its being. These are the good qualities that human beings strive to acquire or activate, for example goodness, morality, integrity, respectability, nobility and worthiness. The second definition describes specific character qualities. Among these are asset, forte, attribute and strength. The third meaning is on similar grounds as the second, yet slightly more incisive, comprising for example merit, advantage and usefulness (Waite, 2008).

*Virtue* comes into the English language in the early thirteen hundreds as “moral life and conduct, a particular moral excellence” from Anglo-French and Old French *vertu* (Harper, 2014). Both Middle English, spoken roughly between 1150 and 1500, and Anglo-French were used side-by-side in English society. In 1066 England was conquered by the Norman invaders who came from a region in northern France. Communication between the Anglo-Saxons and French is known to have existed before that time. Yet there are very few borrowings from French to English before the conquest (Durkin, 2009). For the next three hundred years, the English nobility consisted largely of French aristocrats making French the written and spoken language, especially in professional and intellectual areas, such as legal and parliamentary, as well as other official institutions. Consequently there was extensive lexical borrowing from French to English (Durkin,
It is therefore a reason to believe the word to be lexical borrowing from Anglo-French, which developed in England after the conquest, due to language contact.

*Vertu*, which means “power, miracle, virtue, kindness”, comes from Latin *virtutem* (nominative *virtus*) which means “moral strength, manliness, valour, excellence, worth,” from *vir* “man” (Harper, 2014). The related term *virile* from late fifteenth century comes from Latin *virilis* “of a man, manly”, from *vir* “a man, hero,” through Old French *viril* (Harper, 2014). The noun *virility* from the late sixteenth century means “period of manhood”. The root of the word (marked with an asterisk) in The Proto-Indo-European (PIE), a reconstructed language from the Indo-European language family, is *uiHro* “freeman” and the Old English word is *wer* “man” (Harper, 2014). The comparative Sanskrit word is *vir*, which means “a brave or eminent man, hero, chief.” (Glashoff, 2005). However, it is worth to note that another PIE stem for “man”, is *hner* where the Sanskrit source is *nar-* (Harper, 2014) or *nara* (Glashoff, 2005). Hatha Yoga, the physical aspect of yoga calls one of its poses *Virasana*, literally translated as *The Hero Pose* in English (Ellsworth, 2010). *Asana* means “yogic posture” (Glashoff, 2005) or “sitting posture” in Sanskrit (Macdonell, 2010, p. 43).

Even though many of the origin words connect to manliness and qualities that have been termed as masculine, like strength, heroic and valour, the word has been used to mean something entirely different. An example of this and from the same Latin source *virtutem* but through Italian in the early eighteenth century, comes the noun *virtu*, sometimes spelled *vertu* like the Old French word, meaning “excellence in an object of art, passion for works of art.” (Harper, 2014). Another example is the attached suffix –ous on *virtu*. The adjective *virtuous* is from late fourteenth century and means “chaste” of women despite its one hundred years earlier use as “valiant, valorous, manly.” (Harper, 2014).

The virtuous woman has been a worthy subject to consider in various fields of study. In Christianity she is given a whole page in the Old Testament of the Bible. In Proverbs 31:10-31, her exceptionally many and exquisite qualities are listed, all from importance to the wellbeing of her husband, her relentless work at the home front, to her gracefulness, kindness and vitality (King James Bible Online, 2014). The listed qualities are truly a recipe for the paragon of women meant to inspire and be a model of the impeccability. The bible is a collection of works that are written during a long period of time. Nonetheless, the way the virtuous woman is described bears the mark of specific and unique qualities that have been the cornerstone throughout the ages.

2009).
Another special feature in Christian ethics is the seven cardinal virtues, which are divided into natural and theological virtues. This division has historical reasons. Evidence of the natural virtues, fortitude, justice, prudence and temperance is found in the works of Plato and Aristotle, and are postulated to be natural. Conversely, the theological ones, charity, faith and hope, are claimed to be divine, conveyed by God through Christ. They were added to Christianity by the Catholic Church in the early fourteenth century (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2014).

The adjective, virtual, is yet another word that derives from Latin virtalis, and equivalent to virtus, mean “excellence, potency, efficacy” even though its literal meaning was “manliness, manhood.” (Harper, 2014). It comes into the English language in the late fourteenth century, meaning “influenced by physical virtues or capabilities.” (Harper, 2014). In the early fifteenth century the meaning of “being something in essence or fact, though not in name” is first recorded, as in silence constituting virtual confession (Harper, 2014). But it is not until late twentieth century that it is confirmed to be used in the digital age as “not physically existing but made to appear by software,” as in virtual reality which in computer science which means “a system in which images that look like real, three-dimensional objects are created by computer.” (Soanes & Hawker, 2008, p. 1161). Hence the term’s two various meanings in modern times.

Virtue has in its historical development to contemporary English preserved its unique and extensive meaning although various qualities have been attached to feminine and masculine characteristic features. The word has become related to various cultural and religious pillars of society. This lends support to the claim that the virtues are a part of the innate nature of human beings because all have the search for high moral standards and good qualities in common with the aim of improving living conditions. Attention will now be turned to the earliest scholarly research of virtue that the author of this thesis has knowledge of, the yoga philosophy.
2. Yamas. The virtues of yoga philosophy

The yamas are special moral character traits that are practiced with the purpose of freedom from illusions and limitations of life (Bryant, 2009). Illusions of life refer to the thought process a person has developed through biased conclusions based on experiences. Cultivating virtuous attitude in thought, speech and action is of utmost importance for achieving freedom from illusions, and lasting happiness and peace. The study and application of yamas offers such a unique but sought-after opportunity. Today Yama is mostly known in Hinduism as the Lord of Death (Leeming, 2005). Yet, according to oriental mythology, based on the Indian Upanishads, literary work which extend further back in time, he is known as the Lord of the forefathers and the one who bestows ultimate knowledge upon those who strive for truth and good (Leeming, 2005).

The very heart of yoga philosophy is union of the individual soul with the supreme soul. Consequently, the thread between mythology and yoga philosophy is evident because that worthy aim cannot be reached without knowledge being bestowed upon a worthy subject, someone who yearns for it. The yamas are the first step in enhancing human beings’ ability to face their external environment unaffected by the confusion of the mind. Their objective is guarding peace of mind as well as searching for a virtuous life.

2.1 Dualism and history of yoga

Comprehension and awareness of the fundamentally different perspective in oriental and western philosophy is essential in understanding yoga with respect to the virtues. The difference can be demonstrated through the famous quote of Descartes, the French philosopher who strived to logically prove that he existed, “I think, therefore I am.” (Bryant, 2009). In Meditations, Descartes perceives the self to be a mental reality, the self that thinks, separated from the physical reality, the body (Bryant, 2009). This is also the subject matter of the contemporary philosophers until late twentieth century. On the other hand, dualism in yoga philosophy refers to purusha, the pure consciousness or soul, and prakriti, matter. So despite mind imagining itself to be the real self, it is considered to be a subtle inanimate matter while the animated consciousness is the actual life force (Bryant, 2009). The goal of yoga is thus to provide guidelines for realization of the purusha through mental and physical practices.
Yoga is translated as “union with the divine” (Bryant, 2009, p. xvii). The word literally means union and it comes into the English language as borrowed from Sanskrit yoga in the early eighteen meaning “union” or “yoking” (with supreme spirit), from the PIE root *yeug- “to join” (Harper, 2014). In yoga philosophy the meaning of the word is “follower of the Yoga system”, or “unity of the soul and nature.” (Macdonell, 2010, p. 247). As far as content is concerned, yoga consists of the techniques, systems, and paths of various practices aimed at realization of God but originally it is a cluster of methods that pervaded ancient India (Bryant, 2009). The Vedic era in Indian history is dated to the time period of 1500 to 500 B.C.E. It is referred to as such due to having the oldest preserved literature in India as well as in the Indo-European language family, the Vedas. Yet, the practice of yoga dates back to post-Vedic India and has greatly influenced philosophical discussions and religious practices, especially within what later became known as Hinduism (Bryant, 2009).

The first literary sources that can be related to classical yoga are from the late Vedic era in a genre called the Upanisads. It is a corpus of philosophical texts that focuses on understanding the ultimate truths of reality. However, archaeology has revealed the remains of an enormous and sophisticated ancient civilization in the Indus Valley (modern day Pakistan and northwest India) that date from three thousand to nineteen hundred B.C.E. The most famous one is of a seal representing a horned figure sitting in a distinctly yoga like pose (Bryant, 2009). Furthermore, the longest epic in the world, Mahabharata, dated somewhere between the ninth and the fourth century B.C.E., displays the transition between the origins of yoga and manifestation in the arranged practice as represented in the classical period by Patanjali. It includes Bhagavad Gita (circa fourth century B.C.E.) that devotes a significant portion to the practices of yoga by Krishna presenting himself “… re-establishing yoga teachings that had existed since primordial times”. (Bryant, 2009, p. xxiii). Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras are one of the most important classical texts, in Hinduism as well as oriental philosophy. Along with Bhagavad Gita, the eternal song of God, it has received a lot of attention and interest outside of India, but both of them are renowned scriptures.

There are references to yogis on the Western landscape as early as Greek classical sources but the initial introduction to the West in modern times took place at the end of the nineteenth century (Bryant, 2009). Today, Western yoga practice concentrates on the physical aspect of the system of yoga called asanas aiming at physical health and well-being. Bryant (2009) calls attention to the fact that neither the Upanisads nor the
Bhagavad Gita mention posture in the sense of bodily poses (p. xxx). The latter literary work uses the term in its sense as a physical seat, and Patanjali himself dedicates only three brief sutras out of his 196 to this element of practice.

2.2 Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, which later came to be known as the foundation of one of the six classical schools of Indian philosophy, are the primary source for yoga today. According to Patanjali there are eight steps or limbs to enlightenment. They are *yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana* and *samadhi* (Bryant, 2009, p. 242). Patanjali did not create yoga. He accumulated and systematically presented yoga, but in such a clear, concise and precise manner that it became authoritative for subsequent practitioners. These sutras have become the seminal texts of yoga discipline.

There is not much known about his person but some scholars consider him to be the same Patanjali who wrote both the primary commentary on the famous grammar by Panini, and the treatise on Ayurveda, a traditional and organised health care system (Bryant, 2009). *Ayur* means “life” and *veda* “sacred knowledge” (Harper, 2014; Macdonell, 2010, p. 298). According to Bryant (2009) the date of writing can only be determined from the sutras themselves but ancient classical Sanskrit texts cannot be accurately dated. Most scholars place the sutras in the first or second century A.D. but they have been dated as early as the sixth century B.C.E. and as late as the fifth century A.D. (Bryant, 2009). Here it is important to recognise that the renowned Indian scholar, Vyasa, who is the main commentator on the sutras, is assumed to have lived between 1800 and 1500 B.C.E. Therefore, it is logical to presume Patanjali writing the sutras while Vyasa lived or even before his time. This will date the sutras before 1500 B.C.E.

The word *sutra* means “thread” (Macdonell, 2010, p. 357). Here thread refers to a statement in which the maximum amount of information is crammed into the minimum number of words (Bryant, 2009). This way of writing which is commonly used by the philosophical schools of ancient India, can make the sutras mysterious and esoteric, even incomprehensible. They are actually aphorisms containing only content words and intended to be studied with a scholar’s commentary. Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras are not sectarian in any way because they do not promote a particular type of worship. Thus they have been an object of interest in both the religious and philosophical arena (Bryant, 2009). Patanjali’s teachings focus on the realization of the *purusha*, the innermost
conscious self, which is equivalent to the soul in Western traditions. He does not give emphasis to the physical body, but focuses primarily on meditation and various stages of concentration of the mind.

According to Patanjali, for pursuha to realize itself and the soul to reach freedom and enlightenment, the practitioner needs to go through the eight stages or limbs of yoga, each a vital contributing constituent part. The first and very important step is called yama. Some scholars propose that yogic accomplishments remain limited and the ultimate goal of yoga remain unobtainable until the yamas are internalized and practiced on a regular bases (Bryant, 2009). Others claim that the sequence of the eight limbs is not important because they all develop simultaneously and have the same goal (Desikachar, 1995). To reach union with the Supreme soul one needs to take on an internal journey. Consequently, it is essential to develop an undisturbed mind and externally peaceful life. The virtues address the issue of how to live peacefully and lovingly while relating to the external environment. Therefore it is imperative to start with the first step, even mastering it to a large degree before moving on to the next.

If the goal is to remove consciousness from identification with body and mind, sensory organs and organs of action must be curbed. This means basically that reasons for acting need to be contemplated beforehand by increasing the awareness of these organs with the purpose of becoming a more virtuous person. This is the reason for the translation of yamas into English as abstention or moral restraints (Bryant, 2009, p. 242). At first glance they seem simple, yet they represent a set of serious and complicated ethics that are designed to slowly reduce the mental and emotional disturbances that characterize ordinary life of human beings (Taimni, 1961). Another interesting view of perceiving the yamas is in the commentaries to be found in the commentaries on the sutras by Gunnar Dal (1962), an Icelandic philosopher. Gunnar emphasizes the fact that without practicing these commandments one cannot cultivate virtue or become virtuous because their aim is to strengthen the necessary ethical foundation for happiness and well-being, along with self-realization (1962).

2.3 The five yamas of Patanjali
The five yogic virtues are listed in sutra thirty of chapter two of Patanjali Yoga Sutras in Sanskrit: “ahimsa-satyasteya-brahmacaryaparigraha yamah,” translated as: “The yamas
are nonviolence, truthfulness, refrainment from stealing, celibacy, and renunciation of [unnecessary] possessions.” (Bryant, 2009, p. 243).

The first *yama*, *ahimsa* or nonviolence, has often been singled out by yogic scholars to be the most important one (Bryant, 2009). *Himsa* means “violence” (Glashoff, 2005). *An-* is often used as negation prefix before vowels (Macdonell, 2010, p. 1). Glashoff gives the English word “non-violence” for *ahimsa* (2005). Therefore it is logical to conclude that *a-* in this context means “non”. The aforementioned famous Indian scholar, Vyasa, who is assumed to have divided the Veda into four parts, defines nonviolence as “not injuring any living creature anywhere at any time.” (Bryant, 2009, p. 243). This is based on the recognition of the underlying unity of life that is the foundation of yogic philosophy. This means that every situation in life is a unique opportunity for a new approach and evolving knowledge. A person who practices nonviolence is compassionate towards other living beings and does not consciously inflict acts of violent nature. Likewise, the mind being a subtle matter, intent is important so the one who is striving to become a virtuous person would also follow *ahimsa* in thought, emotion and word (Bryant, 2009). The degree of violence is determined by intention. Thus, malice and negative thoughts, like judging and criticizing in a negative manner constitutes as violence according to this.

There are some well-known examples in modern times that have *ahimsa* as their principal foundation. In her unrelenting campaign for peace, mother Teresa, who refused to participate in protest-marches against war, would always be prepared to march for peace. Gandhi based his non-cooperation on this principle by refusing to fight the authorities.

According to Vyasa, the second *yama*, truthfulness, occurs when one’s words, thoughts and deeds are in alignment with truth (Bryant, 2009). This means that when knowledge is transferred to others through speech, it should be valuable and beneficial, not misleading or deceitful. Yet, given the fact that the other four *yamas* stand on the shoulders of *ahimsa*, truth must not cause harm. This supports the analyses of Vyasa that if there is a conflict between the five *yamas*, then *ahimsa* must be valued first (Bryant, 2009). Taimni (1961) elaborates on the importance of being truthful by claiming that untruthfulness in all its various forms creates disturbance in the mind and emotions, as well as unnecessary complications in life. For example one lie will lead to another to support it and keeping up false appearances will put one in undesired stressful circumstances (Taimni, 1961, pp. 212-213). One cannot go into the jungle at night without
having a light for guidance. Another metaphor is stating that truthfulness is like the warrior’s armour protecting him from illusion.

Refraining from stealing, the third yama, also has a mental and physical angle. Action has its initiation in the mind by longing or desire to acquire something. By refraining from stealing, one does not take what belongs to others. But he also does not have the desire to do so (Bryant, 2009). This yama might also be construed as abstaining from misuse of any kind, for example taking credit for something that is not one’s own, or promoting oneself at the expense of others.

The fourth yama has been translated as celibacy. In modern times celibacy is meant as abstaining from or not engaging in sexual activities (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2014). This is not the meaning of the fourth yama in yoga philosophy. Sexual energy is one of the most powerful drives in human beings. But it is considered a worthy endeavour to practice moderation in sexual activities and control one’s sexual organs. Gunnar (1962) defines it as moderation that is essential to increase one’s vital energy. Another way of describing the yamas is ethical observances on various levels, in thought and emotion along with action. Bryant (2009) refers to Misra, another Indian philosopher from the ninth century who wrote a commentary on the Yoga Sutras (p. 247). Misra presents different kinds of sexual indulgences as object of desire; for example thinking, talking, joking about sex and attempting to engage in sexual activities. Taimni (1961) describes this yama in its wider sense to also include practicing “freedom from cravings for all kinds of sensual enjoyments.” (p. 214). Modern western society encourages the pursuit of sensual pleasures as a part of normal daily life through the sensory organs and organs of action. Whether using scents, enjoying movies or art, wearing specific clothes, or eating tasty food, one’s attention is constantly extroverted, and centred on various sensory objects. Here the challenge is not to give up sensual pleasures, because enjoyment is a result of having sensual organs which is a part of being human. When food is eaten it comes in contact with the taste-buds and arouses certain sensations. It is the attachment to sensual objects, the craving for the repetition of pleasurable experiences, which creates a potentiality for mental disturbances (Bryant, 2009). Hence, moderation as a part of virtuous life is of utmost importance, because desire in sexual or sensual pursuits can lead to attachment which can lead to addiction and subsequently obsession. Therefore, there is a need for celibacy in the yogic sense for a peaceful mind. One can and should enjoy what life has to offer without being dependent on it or attached to it.
The fifth and final yama is renunciation of possessions that one does not need. Vyasa explains this eloquently when he speaks of “the ability to see the problems caused by acquisition, preservation and destruction of things, since these only provoke attachment and injury.” (Bryan, 2009, p. 247). This helps the person to know the importance of being satisfied with basic needs without craving for other things he or she would indulge in. Moreover, it will reduce attention to material things, possible greed and worries. Taimni (1961) claims that although there are essential things human beings need for survival, the tendency to accumulate material things is so strong that it can almost be equated with basic instincts. Yet, this instinct does not have any relation with reason because one is not satisfied with necessities of life but must have the so-called luxuries (Taimni, 1961). In modern times, all kinds of material things are available to increase comfort and give pleasure, and there is no limit to the ability to gather wealth, at least in Western societies. But it takes time and effort to accumulate things, preserve and protect them. The possible anxiety of losing them presents itself as well. Nevertheless, as with the other yamas, it is not the actual material wealth that is most significant, but the attitude towards and attachment to it. A person can have unlimited material wealth, yet be free of the feeling of possession. Likewise, one can have few things but feel very much attached to them (Taimni, 1961). Hence, there is the need to cultivate this virtue by decreasing disturbance of mind. This will unlock the inner knowledge that true happiness does not depend upon financial belongings or other external objects.

According to yoga philosophy these now mentioned virtues are like a fine art which one practices with the aim of greater refinement in the application of moral principles vis-a-vis the challenges one faces in daily life. This is a unique view on the virtues where human beings are encouraged to turn their attention to restraining their sensory organs and organs of action. The yamas are practiced to examine the consequences of behavioural and habitual attitude. Thus, providing an adequate moral foundation for progressing a virtuous life. The individual is the laboratory where the yamas are the map and experience the compass to keep one on the right course. It is with experiential knowledge of the virtues that lasting happiness, which is not dependent on ever changing prakriti, matter, can be sought and found.
3. Greek moral philosophy

3.1 Arête and Socrates

The important term *arête* in Greek philosophy, means “habitual excellence”, literally “that which is good”. The comparative form is *areion*, the superlative is *aristos* as in *aristocracy* (Harper, 2014). The Greek answer to living a happy and complete life is through virtue or *arête*, excellence, but as with the yoga philosophy, virtue is many-sided and complex. It is not used in a narrow ethical sense, for example in the meaning of avoiding certain actions, but rather as an encouraging concept according to which a person living in a society strives to achieve one’s true potential (Gilje & Skirbekk, 2001). Therefore, the meaning of *arête* is joined with the idea of excellence. It could be the already recognized and accepted theme of moral excellence, for example from practicing the virtues that have been subject of analysis throughout time, like courage or justice. But it could also be excellence which comes from performing duties to the best of one’s ability in any given situation.

Socrates (ca. 470-399 B.C.E.) is among the famous Greek philosophers who has influenced and inspired contemporary Western philosophy. He was primarily interested in epistemology which is the study of knowledge within philosophy (Soanes & Hawker, 2008). In dialogues written by his student Plato, he debated ethical and political questions, and defined concepts for clarification of terms (Gilje & Skirbekk, 2001). It was imperative for Socrates that a person could find and realize the answer from within. This required the answer to come from some kind of personal and experiential knowledge which he attempted to initiate by frequently answering questions with his own counter-questions. His aim was to get people to contemplate their own situations and perspectives that guided their words and actions.

Socrates distinguished between two techniques of debates. The former was a debate with predetermined opinions where the debaters tried to convince others of their truth. The latter had the goal of everyone learning about the subject to reach an opinion compliant with the person’s truth at the time (Gilje & Skirbekk, 2001). He was against the former technique because according to it, truth of the subject was not under discussion but persuasion of established opinions. That could not facilitate open debate which would possibly result in an increased insight into the subject. Only the latter type of discussion could lead to growth for all involved (Gilje and Skirbekk, 2001).
3.2 Plato’s Meno and knowledge

One of Socrates’s well-known and celebrated dialogue supposedly taking place in Athens in 402 B.C.E. is recorded in Plato’s Meno. In the conversation, Socrates and Meno attempt to determine the definition of *arête*. It starts with Meno asking if virtue can be taught, attained through practice, or if it arises in people by nature or by other means (Bluck, 1961, p. 199). When Socrates asks Meno to define the term, he confidently claims that different virtues are needed depending on social roles, especially gender roles. But Socrates quickly points out that true virtue must be common to all people young and old even though he does not know what it is. Here it is worth to note that sutra thirty one in chapter two of Patanjali, claimed to be written over one thousand years before the time of the Greek philosophers, states the *yamas* to be universal, without exceptions of time, place, class or circumstances (Bryant, 2009). This further supports the theory that there is a natural latent knowledge within every human being that will be activated with the appropriate stimulation. It is the universal truth within everyone.

Meno then speculates how one can look for something one does not know or recognize if he finds it. Socrates proposes the theory of recollection which discusses the possibility of learning being recollection of knowledge acquired before birth due to the soul’s immortality (Bluck, 1961, p. 4). Thus, it is possible to have latent knowledge which can be elicited into our consciousness by collaboration of ideas. Bluck (1961) asserts, that according to Socrates the theory is not based on former life experiences but rather on the fact that the soul is in a perpetual state of knowledge all the time (pp. 8-10). This is in accordance with Plato’s belief that “self-knowledge can be obtained only by looking into the mind and virtue of the soul, which is the diviner part of a man, as we see our own image in another’s eye (Plato, Alcibiades. I.133 as in Harper, 2014).

As the dialogue unfolds, Socrates’s main ideas about ethics reflect the conclusion, mainly the hypothesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge (Bluck, 1961). Socrates divides knowledge into three parts. First it is knowledge about one’s circumstances and inner condition at any given time. This he does by analysing concepts such as courage. Secondly, the virtuous person needs to have knowledge about how things should be. This means: having insights into values and norms of what is good, which is not necessarily based on experience or formal studies. Thirdly, “knowledge must be “one” with the person; it must be the insight the person truly represents, not what the person says he or she represents.” (Gilje and Skirbekk, 2001, p. 40). According to the second part of knowledge, there is universal good and people can have insight into it by analysing
different concepts through dialogue, like virtue and truth which are unchangeable (universal) and imperative for ethical behaviour. This will lead a person into what is good (virtuous) and right, which will then result in actions that are in harmony with the inner knowledge. Thus, the good is a universal concept common to all people, and in order to be able to act from that point of view, one needs to have knowledge of what the ethical universal concepts represent.

Socrates’s hypothesis of knowledge corresponds to yoga philosophy. In order to reach the goal of yoga one must first develop awareness, which is the beginning of an inner journey of self-scrutiny. Then a person must have guidelines as how things should be. The *yamas* are the map of the journey. At last, by practicing and cultivating the virtues one develops experiential knowledge which will lead to the state of being one with the universal knowledge, the divine knowledge that is innate to every human being.

But interpreting *knowledge* leads to another important idea of Socrates’s: “Knowledge of the right leads necessarily to right actions.” (Gilje and Skirbekk, 2001, p. 43). Here logic is the essence where Socrates subscribes to common sense by believing reason to take precedence over will and feelings. It is reason that first recognizes the good and uses the will to reach what reason is pointing to, instead of will wanting something that is good and reason finding the means for reaching it through justification (Gilje and Skirbekk, 2001). This makes sense when we are talking about knowledge that is a part of our nature as human beings. Someone who has true personal knowledge or insight into what is right must also be just or ethically right. It is illogical to assume that one who has understood what is right and good would not act on it. It is logical to conclude that right actions reflect personally acquired knowledge.

### 3.3 Virtue and happiness

Socrates’s third thesis entails that right action results unavoidably in happiness which for him is closely related to inner peace and self-respect (Gilje and Skirbekk, 2001). Here happiness is related to identity, integrity and virtue. But happiness and virtue are also connected to true knowledge and insight into right actions. Consequently, a person who does not depend upon other external circumstances will practice and develop a truly virtuous life. Here Socrates combines in his artistic manner ethical reason with divine insight that he believes human beings to be capable of.
Some Greek moral philosophers did not agree with Socrates, despite rejecting common sense claims that later philosophers from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century did (Crisp, 1996). The theory of the supreme status of the virtues mirrors Aristotle’s understanding that “the virtues arise in us neither by nature nor contrary to nature; we are naturally receptive of them but we are completed through habit.” (as cited in Crisp, 1996, p. 40). This requires practicing the virtues because only through habit can they be reached. Possessing them will not guarantee the right use. So virtuous actions are an expression of personal skill at living a good human life in which the aim is a conception of happiness because happiness is something that makes one complete and self-sufficient.

Greek philosophers agreed that the goal in a human being’s life is personal happiness. Aristotle supports this by stating that people organize their life around that which they care about. So life is shaped around certain conceptions that express certain views and their connection. Furthermore, he claims that happiness should be something to make a person whole and complete. According to Greek moral philosophy nothing can improve the person’s level of happiness and well-being more than a virtuous action (Crisp, 1996). Plato and Aristotle claim that the relationship between virtue and happiness lies in the person choosing virtuous actions because of the action itself, not with the motive of specific outcomes. This is called a complete action because the success does not depend on external circumstances and results, but is always appropriate if one acts from the right or the virtuous state of mind. Therefore, well-being and virtuous life are founded on “acting reasonably in the selection of things according to nature and by living completing all the appropriate actions.” (Diogenes Laertius 7.88, as cited in Crisp, 1996, p. 44). This shows the essence in the teachings of the Greek moral philosophers in relation to virtue: the key to happiness and fulfilment in life lies in activating the universal knowledge from within, and through habit making the virtues a part of everyday life.
4. Contemporary moral philosophy

Attention will now be turned to modern Western philosophy that took up common sense as a subject of inquiry in the in seventeenth to nineteenth century. According to it, neither do the virtues necessarily have to be identified as good for the person, nor do they require knowledge or intellectual understanding only. They are supposed to be practiced with moral training and with the aim of achieving the right intuitive response (Crisp, 1996, p. 39). This was a turn-around from the yogic philosophy and the Greek philosophers. The approach to the concept was moved within the arena of mind, which is perceived to be the person. Nevertheless, in the late twentieth century the Aristotelian views were revived and new theories have been slowly evolving, albeit through reasoning, back to the idea where virtues are an integral part of human being and the path to well-being in life.

4.1 Moral theories in the twentieth century

Contemporary moral philosophy deals with the principles of morality or ethics. It is the branch within philosophy that investigates how to act according to certain moral standards for determining between right and wrong conduct (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2014). It does not describe how one acts in daily life but prescribes how one should act. Up until thirty years ago philosophical ethics was broadly speaking divided into two theories, Deontology and Utilitarianism, both of which mainly emphasized the virtuous or the right actions rather than the person behind these actions (Greco & Turri, 2013). Deontology is based on the idea of obligational or duteous act. It started with the German philosopher Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century. Kant’s Doctrine of Virtue states that morally worthy actions are only based on duty, not on a tendency or feeling (Lake, 2008, p. 101). This means that a virtuous person is defined according to his or her actions which are not motivated by what one feels is the right thing to do but the duteous. The actions have no specific aim and they are not dependent on a certain success. Thus, there is a difference between doing what is right and what is good, and Lake states that according to Kant one can act from duty without being a virtuous person. Lake (2008) strongly disagrees with Kant: “Since one can act in accordance with duty without acting from duty, one’s act can be morally right yet lack moral worth.” (p. 98).

The other acknowledged theory, utilitarianism, originated in the late eighteenth and emphasized the consequences of actions rather than motive. The two most influential contributors were Mill and Bentham, who claimed that an action is right if it promotes
happiness for all touched by it (Greco & Turri, 2013). An act could therefore be right even though the motive is questionable. Both of these theories assume morality to be “as a law like set of principles which binds us to perform or not to perform certain actions.” (Crisp, 1996, p. 1). So when helping somebody in need a deontologist would act in harmony with a moral rule while the utilitarian will act in accordance with the utmost well-being, or producing the most overall good. If one is to act in harmony with moral rules or common good in mind, the concept of virtue would vary according to society and time. However, history reveals that not to be the case. Yet, these were the prevailing theories for two hundred and fifty years.

In 1960s these legalistic and traditional views were challenged by Anscombe, who suggested advancing the concept of virtue into studies of ethics. She claimed that returning to the Aristotelian view of ethics would be significant for moral philosophy because of Aristotle’s concept of human flourishing with virtue as the focal point of ethics (Crisp, 1996). This challenge was accepted by many philosophers and resulted in the emergence of virtue ethics or virtue theory: a third approach and a late twentieth-century development in the field of moral philosophy. Moreover, another interesting field of study was developing at the same time, virtue epistemology, which made a distinction between intellectual and moral virtues.

4.2 Virtue Epistemology
As within the arena of moral philosophy, virtue epistemology makes an attempt to define and expand on the concept on virtue. In contemporary virtue epistemology (VE) the nature of intellectual virtues, as opposed to moral virtues, is the main subject for inquiry (Greco & Turri, 2013). Inspiration is drawn from various historical philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle and Descartes, but it was not until the 1980s that Sosa, an American philosopher, introduced the term to label a development in the analytic tradition. Intellectual virtues are in essence characteristics that promote intellectual prosperity but there are two approaches for characterization. The first approach includes “faculty-virtues”, eg. perception, intuition and memory, and the second one “trait-virtues”, such as conscientiousness and open-mindedness. Yet all of these traits seem to be necessary for intellectual prosperity, in addition to the five primary questions of analysis used in this field, one of them being whether the virtues are natural or acquired (Greco & Turri, 2013).
Further supporting the requisite of a wide interpretation of virtue is the Neo-Aristotelian theory, introduced in the most systematic and detailed manner by Zagzebski, a pioneer in this field. Aristotle had made a distinction between moral and intellectual virtues but Zagzebski unifies them by analysing right action in terms of a virtuous character, instead of vice versa. She argues that “the concept of a right act derivative from … some inner state of a person that is a component of virtue …” (Zagzebski 1996, p. 79, as in Greco & Turri, 2013). Moreover, she claims intellectual virtues are best understood as a subcategory of moral virtues based on the Aristotelian model which states that moral virtues are acquired characteristics with both a motivational and reliable success component. Therefore, just as the motivation for all moral virtues is something good, “the intellectual virtues have a motivation for knowledge and other high-quality cognitive contact with reality.” (Greco & Turri, 2013). As an example she takes intellectual courage where the person’s motivation is preservation in his or her own ideas, along with being reliably successful. Yet, as with the moral virtues, conflict between the intellectual virtues can arise, for example: doing the intellectually courageous thing might be in opposition with the intellectually humble thing. Zagzebski solves this dilemma by presenting practical wisdom, meaning the practically wise person who can evaluate the demand of the relevant virtues in a specific situation and direct her cognitive activity properly (Greco & Turri, 2013).

4.3 Virtue Ethics

According to the theory of virtue ethics, the virtues are qualities of a person in addition to actions. The theory resembles deontology in accepting morally right actions not only to be means to an end, and holds the utilitarian view that morally right or wrong actions have an inherent value in relation to their consequences (Hursthouse, 1999). Yet, the essence is studying character traits with the aim of human prosperity. Thus, virtue ethics moves the focus from the actions to the person by emphasizing the role of one's character in order to evaluate ethical behaviour (Hursthouse, 1999).

At the turn of the century, Hursthouse challenged these values by claiming that they can be unified, in her book On Virtue Ethics (1999). What is of interest here is first that she supports the Neo-Aristotelian theory and refers to human nature by claiming that “human beings need the virtues in order to live a characteristically good human life” (Hursthouse, 1999, p. 20). She agrees with Anscombe by insisting that modern moral
philosophy has found it necessary to revive the ancient approach of virtue ethics. Moreover, by examining the content of the character traits, she asserts that they both need to benefit the possessor and enhance his or her life (Hursthouse, 1999). Thus human beings need these qualities to live a good life, bringing together state of mind and emotions, and actions performed. She proclaims that these character traits need to provide guidance as to what kind of act should be performed. Emotions must also play a part in reason because they motivate the agent morally. Aristotle stated that virtues are connected with both actions and emotions, but they should be morally significant as well. Hursthouse agrees (1999, p. 108). Moving the focal point from actions to people is a significant contribution to the claim of the innateness of the virtues. It does not prevent discussion and debate on actions because everyone acts in accordance with his belief. But it supports Socrates’s hypothesis of virtue being universal knowledge by placing the emphasis back to the person.

Actions are a consequence of an inner state of being. So these three dominant theories might all advocate the same act but give various reasons for performing it. Thus, the criterion of right action or morality, is essential. For example, the deontologist might claim that truth-telling is in accordance with the accepted moral law, the utilitarian could suggest that it maximizes utility, and the virtue ethicist will refer to the virtue of honesty (Hursthouse, 1999). Nonetheless there is a reason to believe that virtue ethics is a more open approach than the other two in the way that it “allows the virtues to ground at least some reasons, perhaps alongside other moral reasons or non-moral reasons grounded in the good of the agent.” (Crisp, 1999, p. 7). Aristotle believed that the nature of human beings would be perfected by exercising the virtues rationally. Anscombe considered this to be a possibility, despite difficulty with advancing such an argument, which would depend fundamentally on the definition on human nature and well-being.

4.4 Being for the good
The most recent contribution to moral philosophy is agent ethics, which makes an ethical difference between the agent and the act. An interesting approach to virtue is formulated by Adams in his book Excellence in Being for the Good. Adams claims that virtue is about moral life, not moral decision-making because it is about character traits (2006). Adams distinguishes between ethics of character and ethics of right actions. He asserts that ethics of right actions has received all the attention throughout the twentieth century
with the question being about what one should do. Yet, in the last forty years the attention has moved to moral character as an important subject matter of exploration (Adams, 2006, p. 4). Choice of actions (and doing the right thing) is a very important part of having a virtuous character and it will also mirror the character traits. However, being a virtuous character is neither necessary nor will it ensure right action, because the field of virtue is larger than simply that of an action. It will include appropriate emotions as well as motives and beliefs that will form the action. This means that “the virtues are not chiefly about the ethical classification and evaluation of actions performed, but rather about the ethical significance of what lies behind our actions.” (Adams, 2006, p. 9).

In addition, Adams claims virtue to be best understood as something that is good rather than right (Adams, 2006). Anscombe initiated a renewed interest in virtue ethics in her well-known paper on *Modern Moral Philosophy* in 1958, by her significant interpretation of Aristotle’s ethics which states that actions should identify with emotions, right ends and decisions that are approved by practical rationality. Adams disagrees and asserts that if virtue is viewed as goodness instead of rightness, it will be easier to understand how different actions can be considered as genuinely virtuous (2006).

Adams’s theory of virtue defines moral virtue as “persisting excellence in being for the good.” (2006, p. 14). It emphasizes excellence of character traits but due to human virtue being fragmented and dependent on every day conditions, it is beyond voluntary control of the person. He claims that “the central idea that virtue is an excellence has never been seriously questioned.” (as cited in Adams, 2006, p. 14). Yet, not all kind of excellence is considered to be moral virtue. A morally good person would have some kind of internal and inherent excellence which is worth possessing for its own sake, not for external benefits, and for Adams (2006) this is the fundamental condition to human flourishing and well-being, and a key component in his theory (p. 15).

There are three concepts within the theory of virtue. *Being for something*, the first part, is widely interpreted. It can mean everything from loving or respecting, wishing for and appreciating, to thinking highly of something. The second concept is *good* where the good that virtue is for is considered. *Good* is a many-sided term understood as including all good that a person can demonstrate. The third part of the definition is *excellence as*
criterion of virtue (Adams, 2006). Here excellence is a kind of goodness, something worth honouring for its own sake, not only because of specific results one notices afterwards. Excellence is also some kind of internal goodness within a person. So there is an interdependence between the morally virtuous person and his or her actions, for example helping others for the sake of helping, which is a valuable internal thing in a person’s life. Moral virtue is thus the human being’s way of contemplating what kind of person he or she wants to be (Adams, 2006). This is a rational contribution to contemporary moral philosophy with regard to the yamas in yoga philosophy and Socrates’s hypothesis that virtue is knowledge. Refining one’s character traits and aiming for excellence, is the key to lasting happiness through activating the universal knowledge within, which will be reached through practice of the virtues and purpose of improvement.
5. Conclusion
Looking for freedom from illusion, excellence or prosperity and lasting happiness in life requires inner scrutiny and awareness. This can be cultivated through goodness, restraint of the sensory organs and organs of action, defining knowledge or centring on the action, agent or both. History confirms that the semantic development of *virtue* has comparatively remained the same due to the virtues being a part of the innate nature of human beings.

The concept of virtue has been an endless source of speculation and studies among scholars regarding good or moral character traits. The contemporary meaning of virtue relates to high moral behaviour and good or useful personal qualities. The word came into the English language in the early thirteen hundreds through Anglo-French from Latin, but extensive contemplations are to be found in various fields of society. The five *yamas* enlisted in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, the yoga philosophy, are practiced by increased inner awareness. Furthermore, the disturbances of the mind are reduced with the practice of restraining the sensory organs and organs of actions. This is the first and fundamental step of yoga, addressing the important issue of how to achieve a peaceful, virtuous and happy life.

In Plato’s *Meno*, in Greek moral philosophy, the meaning of virtue is suggested by Socrates to be some kind of innate and universal knowledge. According to him knowledge is the road to happiness because by first recognising one’s circumstances, then having the inherent universal knowledge at disposal, and being what one truly represents, will naturally lead to right actions.

The two theories, deontology and utilitarianism, dominated modern western moral philosophy until the mid-twentieth century when virtue ethics emerged. Moreover, virtue epistemology, where intellectual virtues were being studied in analytical fashion, was developing. Virtue ethics move the focus from action to the agent by claiming the virtues to be characteristics which determine moral behaviour. They also claim that the action and agent are unifiable because people need the virtuous qualities along with acting accordingly to live a prosperous and beneficial life. Agent ethics take the essence of virtue ethics further by asserting that virtue is about human being’s life by defining virtue as persisting moral excellence aiming at that which is good. This gives the person an opportunity to be truly virtuous, bringing together the agent and action in a more precise and unified manner.
This study within the arena of philosophy confirms the claim that the virtue are an inherent part of human beings. Activating and cultivating them on a regular bases will lead to prosperity and happiness. Therefore, the semantic development of virtue corresponds to the studies of scholars throughout the ages, and will undoubtedly continue to do so as a necessary and natural process in the evolution of human beings.
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