

IS A THEORY OF VIRTUE POLITICS POSSIBLE IN MODERN NATION-STATE CONTEXT?

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Abstract

This article calls for a possibility of virtue ethical theory of politics in contemporary political theory by locating its key sources in normative virtue ethics. First, it evaluates the growing literature on politics and virtue ethics and evaluates their promises. The following sections briefly account for two versions of virtue ethics and two key concepts, character traits and justice, to draw a framework for developing a theory of virtue politics. The last section discusses the modern nation-state as the most critical setback in articulating a virtue-based political act.

Keywords: Virtue Ethics, Politics, Character Traits, Justice as Virtue.

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INTRODUCTION

Although the recent decades have witnessed an upsurge of literature on the development of virtue ethics as a perspective in different fields such as environment, business, health, food, care, etc., politics as an arena to think about virtue ethics has not found strong support in comparison to the other normative ethical approaches in contemporary ethics in general and in contemporary political theory in particular.¹ In this paper, I will argue that we should consider virtue ethics as an equally strong base that will make a case for a virtue ethical-political theory or, to use more appropriate nomenclature, a theory of virtue politics.

There are different reasons why a virtue ethical argumentation in political theory is weaker than others. It could be claimed that extracting a virtue-sensitive political theory from virtue ethics is an idealist attempt to ignore the moral realities of modernity. In other words, the moral condition of the modern world will make the consideration of the political from a virtue ethical perspective obsolete. The second claim says it is weaker because it disregards self-oriented and interest-based politics or exaggerates the extent of the individual's ability to cultivate moral goals for the common good of society.² Ignorance of the basic human quality is at stake

1 Some examples of the increasing trend are as follows: Lorraine L. Besser and Michael Slote, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2015); Stan van Hooft, *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics* (Routledge, 2014); Daniel C. Russell, *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Nancy E. Snow, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*, 1 edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018). Interestingly, these collections have only one chapter on the tradition of virtue ethics in Islam.

2 Shelley Burt, "The Politics of Virtue Today: A Critique and a Proposal," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 2 (1993): 363. Burt views human passions (seeking material comfort and self-desire) as an impediment to a politics of public virtue: "It seems to me, drawing on the insights of Machiavelli and Rousseau, that the problem is more profound, linked not to, particularly modern conditions but to human desires and dispositions with which all political communities have struggled. Public virtue of any sort asks too great an abstraction from self and the parochial interests that conventionally draw citizens into politics to have any chance of being successfully cultivated in a community that must establish its conditions through the legislative process." Instead of public civic virtue, she defends a privately oriented version of virtue politics. Though I disagree with her suggestion that liberalism and capitalism are not to blame for hindering the formation of public virtue, her question of self-desire and desire for

here: human selfishness. A third related criticism may come from a situationist perspective that argues that moral judgment should be evaluated according to the context that shapes moral agency. In other words, behavior is not decided by the character traits that virtue ethics supposes; rather, it is shaped by the situation (as is shown in the famous Milgram experiment).³ It calls for a realist account of human nature regarding what counts as disposition. An adequate theory of virtue politics has to respond to these claims, and this paper tries to do that.

There is nascent literature on virtue politics in contemporary literature as part of a larger virtue ethics framework. Although proponents of the larger umbrella could be considered a significant party to the ethics debate along with Utilitarians and Kantians, virtue politics as a subfield is still in its beginning phase. To the extent that we take virtue political discourse (VPD) as a practice of thinking about the state and society in a traditional society, the discourse has lost its coherency with the modern mind. The arguments of *After Virtue* reveal that the predicament of the moral agent, freed from the divine revelation and other traditional sources, left with an immense relativist availability of choices, most of which, in the end, could be jettisoned as personal preferences.⁴ The implications of this failed project could be best observed in the increasing power of the state and capital markets in cultivating a modern self.

As VPD deals explicitly with the political aspects of moral life, I will give a cursory review of leading scholars in the field. In an article discussing the relationship between virtue and politics, Mark LeBar examines the virtue ethical justifications for political authority by analyzing four modern exponents of virtue ethics: Martha Nussbaum, Michael Slote, Rosalind Hursthouse, Douglas Rasmussen, and Den Uyl.⁵ He argues that the disagreements be-

material comfort reminds me of the importance of psychological realism that any theory of virtue politics needs to heed.

3 Lorraine Besser-Jones, "The Situationist Critique," in *The Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, ed. Michael A. Slote and Lorraine Besser-Jones (New York, 2015), 375–84, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203071755-36>.

4 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Erdem Peşinde: Bir Ahlak Teorisi Çalışması*, trans. Muttalip Özcan (Istanbul: Vakıfbank Kültür Yayınları, 2019).

5 Mark LeBar, "Virtue and Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, ed. Daniel C. Russell, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (New York, 2013), 265–89.

tween these different approaches to authority and other accounts of virtue ethical justifications for political authority could be solved by “a weak form of liberal neutrality.”⁶ He assumes that the state is under the normative constraint of a particular virtue ethical account. In the case of competing visions of virtue ethical visions, this particular account is expected to avoid prohibiting practices that do not comply with them.

LeBar reminds us of John Locke’s emphasis on natural equality discourse, that is, equality because of the very birthright of everyone in power and jurisdiction.⁷ Locke is evoked here to simultaneously solve the problem of the availability of multiple competing virtue ethical visions. I think modern moral disagreements are qualitatively different from those in the early modern (pre-modern) context. The nature of disagreement should be explained first rather than the different versions of virtue ethical accounts of authority. LeBar’s point has made me consider the nature of disagreement in the Ottoman context. Where and when questions or context are briefly essential to evaluate what virtue ethical disputation means in the Ottoman context. One needs to understand first whether separating the line between moral disagreement and legal disputes is possible. LeBar does not mention the legal aspect of the problem where any discussion of moral conflict and authority has to deal with the legal framework in the Ottoman context, and considering the close relationship between the modern state and law, it needs to be taken into account in the contemporary context, too. The coercive nature of the modern state and Islamic legal tradition as a coercive authority should not be confused in the discussions of moral disputation. These two entities correspond to two different political realities germane to the virtue political discourse I will try to define.

Daniel C. Russell critically engages with the virtue-based approach to politics of the last two decades in a review article for the literature on virtue politics. He distinguishes between talking about virtue (as in the instance of Hobbes) and character-based ethics, which he means by the Aristotelian reading of politics.⁸ Af-

 6 LeBar, 277.

7 LeBar, 279.

 8 Daniel C. Russell, “Virtue Ethics and Political Philosophy,” in *The Routledge Companion to Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. Gareth Gaus ve

ter briefly mentioning the revival of virtue ethics in Anglophone academia through the works of Anscombe and Foot in 1958, the article sets the distinguishing feature of virtue ethics; “the account of good character is prior to action appraisal.”⁹ The substantive contribution of virtue ethics in political philosophy is valued. However, we will benefit from virtue politics only through meaningful justificatory explanations instead of adding virtue into the political discourse. Considering the current state of the scholarship on virtue ethics, Russell doubts that a vast and robust expansion of the scholarship is likely. A similar expectation comes from William A. Galston, who argues that virtue ethics will hardly result in a strong case for virtue politics.¹⁰ This consensus reminds me of the interlocutors of Kınalızade Ali Çelebi, who were bemoaning the impossibility of implementing the standards of Sharia in a time of mischief and discomfort.¹¹ I argue that there is a common point between Galston and Russell and interlocutors of Kınalızade Ali Çelebi: the perception of reality. Liberalism, with its variants as a political and cultural vision at large, the military power of the modern state with its obligative character in law and organization of social life, and capitalism as the strongest among all define what we receive as the reality today. Just as the density of the mischief would push one toward thinking that there is an unprecedented crisis, making the realization of ethical standards ideal and futile to be realized at all, contemporary political reality would push one to see that a virtue political vision is ineffective. It should have been clear that Russell and Galston do not use my explanation on the reception of reality. Theirs’ is probably about the academic weakness of the literature compared to other scholarly solid positions in ethics. My argument is that the way the scholar treats reality should be considered essential, a fundamental aspect of VPD.

Fred D’Agostino (Abingdon: Routledge Handbooks Online, 2012), 364-74, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203092231.ch32>.

9 Russell, 365.

10 William A. Galston, “Virtue,” in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, ed. Robert E. Goodin, Philip Pettit, and Thomas W. Pogge (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2017), 843, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405177245.ch54>.

11 Kınalızâde Ali Çelebi, *Ahlâk-ı ‘Alâî*, trans. Mustafa Koç (İstanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı Yayınları, 2014), 996. Against this cry, Kınalızade insisted that it was still possible to implement the Sharia.

1.1. VIRTUE ETHICS: VARIETIES

As one of the critical schools of normative ethics, virtue ethics deals with what is noble and good in human behavior. It prioritizes cultivating good character and motives rather than the consequences of actions or rules. Virtue is the excellence of character traits that can be gained through practice. The main thematical problems for virtue ethics can be listed as “the foundations of virtue, the universality of virtue, the relation between character and issues in applied ethics such as role obligations and right action generally, demands for codifiability and determinacy, and ‘character skepticism’ suggested by situationist psychology.”¹² Some of these problems will be explored briefly in the coming pages.

An essential feature of virtue ethics is the distinction between two kinds of ethical expression; the first one is called deontic (which means necessity in Greek), which judges acts as permissible or obligatory and morally right or wrong according to how they follow the appropriate rules, the second kind is called aretaic (which means excellence or virtue in Greek) where the connection with the rules is secondary to the ethical terms such as morally good, admirable and virtuous.¹³ Virtue ethics is interested in using aretaic terms in its classification of behaviors. This distinction denotes that for an act to be called virtuous, it must go through a process instead of simple obedience or disobedience to a rule. The word cultivation should be noted here. Since one does not acquire moral character from birth, it is by training and education in that one learns from his immediate family members or teachers. The learning process connects us to the community; one cannot self-discipline in character education independent of one’s immediate community. The connection with the group is inherent in the cultivation of the character.

Conventionally, virtue ethics links one to one’s past and tradition. It assumes that human potential is only realized through intergenerational interaction, where one constantly reflects on the accumulated bag of practices. Though liberal modernity is individ-

¹²Christine Swanton, “Virtue Ethics,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (Second Edition)*, ed. James D. Wright (Oxford: Elsevier, 2015), 147, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.63092-1>.

¹³Slote, “Virtue Ethics,” 177.

ualist, virtue ethical school is community-based. In other words, human cognition reaches its moral maturity through the community, only activated through relational behaviors with the outside social world. The community here is key to unpacking individual potential. Modern connotations of the word (i.e., community) are diverse, but the most widespread usage is anti-individualist, such as the meaning that protection of the person from outside dangers or briefly any protective shield from outside attacks; that burial of the individual or lack of recognition of individuality, etc., examples could be added. One notices the first apparent contradiction: how can one talk about moral maturity if individuality is suppressed? The short answer is related to a particular understanding of human beings in virtue ethics as a discipline. An Aristotelian version of the virtue ethics that the article will take as the basis of analyses is established on the idea that there is an opposite inclination in the human soul for every category of the virtuous act. One who pursues a virtuous life must find the middle way between the two extreme poles of categories. There is contempt in modern discussions on the middle way. However, I find this lack of interest unconstructive. The particular relationship that the individual will establish with the community will provide a reasonable middle way. It is not arbitrary or abstract emphasis on finding the middle way. Opposite extremities of any virtuous act could lead to deplorable deeds. The strong connection between individual moral maturity and the community rests on the idea that the manifestation of moral character is observed in social settings. Whether they are inner or outer moral categories, almost all the character features are directly built on visible behavioral models. This shows that inner moral strength can only be proved through practical acts. The next part focuses on two dominant sub-schools within virtue ethics to better understand the discipline.

1.1.1. Eudaemonist Tradition

An essential feature of *eudaemonist* tradition is that it treats virtues in relation to eudaemonia (flourishing, happiness in Greek). It requires practical wisdom for the excellence of character. When determining the essential features of *eudaemonist* tradition, Swanton considers three aspects of it; “(1) A necessary condition of a trait being a virtue is that it at least partially contributes to, or con-

stitutes, the flourishing (*eudaimonia*) of the possessor of the virtue. (2) Practical wisdom is necessary for the excellence of character. (3) The basic ‘thin’ concept in virtue ethics is excellence.”¹⁴ The first condition gives us clues regarding the interconnectedness of the different virtues. The so-called end goal here is the overall flourishing of the individual. If and only if it raises the moral development of the character to the point of excellence, we can talk about a *eu-daemonist* virtue ethical tradition. The question of how virtue can contribute to the flourishing of the possessor of a particular virtue can be answered with the help of practical wisdom. The goal-oriented description should be distinct from the deontological priorities. Virtue(s) is expected to permeate all sections of life practices. The interconnectedness of virtues alludes to the maxim that any virtuous act has to reflect internal goods of any status form.

The close relationship between happiness and virtue shows how vital morality is in cultivating happiness. Julia Annas summarizes the connection between happiness, the idea of a final end, and virtue as follows; “Our lives will only achieve a final end which is complete and self-sufficient, if our aims and actions are subordinated to, and given their roles and priorities by, a life of virtuous activity: a life, that is, lived in a moral way, from a disposition to do the morally right thing for the right reason, and with one’s feelings endorsing this.”¹⁵ The final end is about attaining both internal and external happiness. In this sense, virtue is something external as much as internal. Educating emotions is as important as having a comfortable material life so that the moral act does not lead to pain or any negative/detrimental psychological consequences for the person.

1.1.2. Agent-Based Theories

Another strand of virtue ethics is interested in motives and inner states. Agent-based theories of virtue ethics posit that it is the agent’s inner states (motives, desires, etc.) through which human behavior should be evaluated. Swanton explains: “Whether or not

¹⁴Christine Swanton, “The Definition of Virtue Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, ed. Daniel C. Russell, 2013, 320, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9780511734786.015>.

¹⁵Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 431.

agent-centered virtue ethics is character-centered, or motive/intention/emotion centered, the idea of agent-centeredness can be interpreted in a strong or weak way. Strong agent-centeredness; The evaluation of action e.g., right or required, is wholly derivable from the evaluation of character, motive, or intention, where those features, in turn, are evaluated as excellent or admirable without appeal to further features (such as value or flourishing) not wholly reducible to virtue. Weak agent-centeredness entails an evaluation of action as e.g., right or required is wholly derivable from the evaluation of character, motive, or intention, where those features, in turn, are evaluated as excellent or admirable by appealing to further features (such as value or flourishing) not wholly reducible to virtue, but not wholly independent of virtue.”¹⁶ In these two versions of agent-based theories, the primacy of character, motive, and intention needs further explanations for how virtue is cultivated independently of the character, motive, or intention. For virtue to manifest itself through practices, it must be willed by the inner states.

The most vocal proponent of agent-based theories is Michael Slote, who argues for a non-Aristotelian account of agent-based virtue ethics.¹⁷ He distinguishes between agent-focused and agent-based theories. The former is the common Aristotelian notion of virtue ethics that emphasizes individual character traits rather than actions. This, in the end, he claims, leads to the idea that the virtuous individual is the criterion of what is good and right, that the virtuous person is meant to become “in the best position to know or perceive what is fine or right.”¹⁸ On the other hand, the latter position treats the actions as derivatives of independent and fundamental aretaic facts about the motives and inner states. Slote’s distinction is more about treating virtues as the things in themselves. It is presented as if virtues have their substantive reality outside of actions, and hence, whoever acquires them as part of tradition or through education becomes virtuous. The following part will focus on two important concepts that any discussion on virtue ethics might entail.

16Swanton, “The Definition of Virtue Ethics,” 326–27.

17Michael Slote, “Agent-Based Virtue Ethics,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 20 (1995): 83–101, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.1995.tb00306.x>.

18Slote, 84.

1.2. VIRTUE ETHICS: KEY CONCEPTS

Justice as a virtue and character traits will be discussed to support the argument with the current theoretical concepts.

1.2.1. Justice as a Virtue

The concept of justice as a virtue is a complex one that presents a major challenge for any scholarly attempt to analyze its philosophical, legal, and political aspects, save the virtue ethical reception of the concept. The key question about justice as virtue is to connect justice as part of the individual character with justice as a feature of the political institutions.¹⁹ The modern study of justice as a virtue is more inclined toward treating justice as a feature of institutions. Two caveats apply to justice as a feature of the political institutions: 1) the pre-modern situation where legal institutions are primary sources for the moral legitimacy of the ruling class and the possible expectations of ordinary individuals to be treated justly within the given conditions in especially Islamic context, 2) modern condition where the institutionalized legal system as a tool of state authority. The probable implications of these points will be explored in the next part when I discuss the importance of the distinction between the modern and pre-modern treatment of morality in general.

A prominent aspect of the issue is determining which comes first: justice or virtue. Could they be against each other? What should be the priority in that case? What makes justice virtuous? Are there non-virtuous forms of justice?^{20 21} Each of these questions

19For a study that adds a third dimension that connects individuals and institutions, see David Schmitz and John Thrasher, “The Virtues of Justice,” in *Virtues and Their Vices*, ed. Kevin Timpe and Craig A. Boyd (OUP Oxford, 2014), 59–74.

20Onora O’Neill discusses the first three questions, arguing that the concern for justice and virtue is compatible, and explains how the two have been made incompatible through the distinctions whose origins emerged within the ancient universalist conception of justice and particularist conception of virtue. Onora O’Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 9–37.

21In one of the studies on historical analyses of the relationship between justice and virtue, Jean Porter traced the idea of justice as the character of the person in the works of Aquinas. See Jean Porter, *Justice as a Virtue: A Thomistic Perspective* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2016).

requires a separate study to tackle adequately. For this part, virtue plays a pivotal role in defining what justice is. In the Aristotelian sense, this mostly means distribution and rectification; it is simply about goods and property and how they are shared in a given society. The critical question is about the agents who fulfill the distribution work. Is the agent a requirement for justice as a virtue to be realized in society, or do the institutions themselves guarantee justice? There is not an easy answer to this question, but this much we know: in pre-modern societies, the institutions' function is to ensure that they aim at cultivating virtuous citizens.²² The link between institutions and individuals is not one-directional, and the institution's power is equated with the extent to which they can form an ideal of justice.

Justice as a person's character shapes justice as the character of society.²³ The latter builds upon the former. This principle is as true

22LeBar observes this apparent dichotomy as follows; "... Aristotle's concern about the relation between the person with "the virtue of the citizen" (politon) and general virtue (Politics III 4) foreshadows the concern we must face in a different way. We, too, face a challenge in understanding how general virtue, particularly the individual virtue of justice, carries forward into political society. This challenge is sharpened somewhat if we accept the idea that the virtue of justice requires liberal political institutions – institutions that respect the freedom of individuals to forge and live by their own conceptions of the good, as Rawls framed that idea (1971: §2). This conception of the aim of political institutions contrasts sharply with the Aristotelian idea that they exist for the sake of forging virtuous citizens." Mark LeBar, "The Virtue of Justice Revisited," in *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, ed. Stan van Hooft (New York, London: Routledge, 2014), 270, /core/books/handbook-of-virtue-ethics/virtue-of-justice-revisited/D4EFEBD9113931BA9670BDADFECA5823.

23The idea of justice as the character of the societies is both ancient and modern. Though not particularly virtue ethical, Rawls' theory of justice also deals with this question. His treatment of social justice reverses the position I defend in this article, meaning that he sees justice as an individual character as a derivative of social justice, not the other way around. Therefore, his universalist account (Kantian as well) is rationalist rather than sentimentalist. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 2009). See also for a discussion of Rawls and the idea of justice as the character of societies; Mark LeBar and Michael Slote, "Justice as a Virtue," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2016 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/justice-virtue/>.. Though I emphasize the individual character more in this literature review, both historical experiences and modern treatments of the subject require us to find a balance between them.

for pre-modern societies as it is for modern societies, even though a liberal objection could easily be raised against it. There is something common about the distribution of goods and justice as virtue beyond any historical context that transgresses time and space constraints in analyzing human social behavior; the close connection between the character of the person and the way he acts significantly determines the performance of the particular work in terms of fulfilling the requirements of justice. In the end, this performance contributes toward the common good in society, which is achieved to the extent that the distribution of the goods is done according to merits. This ideal picture in the thought may not be practically a lived experience. However, this was the case regarding the moral justification of public offices. The distinctive mark of the virtue of justice is its ability to provide moral justification for any public work/worker. Considering that moral justification presents a more potent form of legitimacy in a pre-modern situation than political and legal legitimacies, the connection between justice as virtue and moral justification needs to be explored more.

The entry of virtue ethics into the legal theory has recently been studied in the literature. In one of the first extensive works on “Virtue Jurisprudence,” the role of virtue ethics is defined as making the goal of the law as the flourishing of human life. As important as the first goal, a second function is added to the question of how legal institutions can best do their job of conflict resolution; “achieving an excellent judiciary requires the selection of judges who possess the judicial virtues—civic courage, judicial temperament, judicial intelligence, wisdom, and, above all, justice.”²⁴ This account obviously prioritizes justice as the character of the person and emphasizes the character of the judge. For instance, in the case of judicial incorruptibility, corruption is defined as a vice, and any corrupt judicial decision would erode the rule of law and threaten the public adherence to the law and public acceptance of the law as legitimate.²⁵ Similarly, Farrelly and Solum take concepts such as judicial sobriety, courage, temperament and impartiality, diligence, and carefulness and adapt them into the definition process of judicial virtues.²⁶ In this account of justice as a virtue, the social

24 Colin Patrick Farrelly and Lawrence Solum, eds., *Virtue Jurisprudence* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 2.

25 Farrelly and Solum, 7.

26 Farrelly and Solum, 8–16.

significance of the law is emphasized more than the authority of the legal domain. This is what makes justice a virtue; that is, the authority and enforcement of the judiciary, first and foremost, depend on the public acceptance of it, as Farrell and Solum contend. In pre-modern conditions, the close connection between law and morality sustains public acceptance more than anything. Hence, the personal character of the judge is stressed more than in any legal system.

1.2.2. Character Traits

One's character could be defined as his/her behavioral dispositions that do not change easily over time and are relatively stable. We attribute certain key adjectives, such as greedy, compassionate, shy, talkative, etc., to the individual.²⁷ An important question regarding a virtue ethical perspective is determining the extent of the person's character change. Do the character traits come with the birth? What mechanisms allow us to understand how personal traits change over time? Or is it not possible at all to talk about the character change? There are different answers to these questions. This article, however, views that understanding virtues as the acquired behavioral quality of the individual calls for character change to be a required feature of moral development. In this sense, the relation of the character change to virtue politics is fundamental to exploring how the desires for personal gain could be directed towards the public common good. The potentiality of the individuals for character change has significant implications for the perception and formation of the political order. In the case where one can not foresee the experienced injustice and mischief

²⁷There is a plethora of works on character as it crosses multiple disciplines. For some of the recent literature, Owen J. Flanagan, Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, and Amélie Rorty, *Identity, Character, and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology* (MIT Press, 1993); Blaine J. Fowers, *Virtue and Psychology: Pursuing Excellence in Ordinary Practices* (American Psychological Association, 2005); Kristján Kristjánsson, *Virtues and Vices in Positive Psychology* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Christian B. Miller, *Character and Moral Psychology* (OUP Oxford, 2014); Edward Chin-Ho Chang and Lawrence J. Sanna, eds., *Virtue, Vice, and Personality: The Complexity of Behavior* (American Psychological Association, 2003); Christian B. Miller et al., eds., *Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2015). For an extensive collection on character study, "Home | The Character Portal," accessed January 15, 2020, <http://thecharacterportal.com/>.

to be rectified, the root cause is likely linked with the unchanging character of the decision-makers. If a character is formed through experiences and stabilized through established moral standards, its elevation and rectification are always possible. Hence, this understanding of the character carries the seeds for a politics of hope, meaning that any experienced mischief or corruption among the parties to the contract (political or economic) is dissolvable by the common will.

By dissolvable, I mean that one's character (or action) labeled as corrupted could be changed to the degree that it is labeled as law-abiding (or lawful for the action in question). This transition or process is not realized through a legal or administrative sanction. Rather, it is through popularized virtuous acts that are established in the popular imagination that feeds on the expectations and desires for qualitative moral change in the way things are done. The term "popularized virtuous acts" is closely linked with the pioneers of any given society. It does not have time and space constraints as we observe in modern/pre-modern, traditional/contemporary social contexts.²⁸ A politics of virtue based on character change would present the popular imagination with different alternatives or pathways to the just order.

1.3. VIRTUE POLITICS AND THE PROBLEM OF MODERNITY

A common feature of any discussion on virtue ethics starts with a reminder of its historical antecedents in ancient Greek philosophy, and rightly so, how it has weakened as a discipline through the advent of modernity and, rightly again, how it resurfaced in the second half of the twentieth century. This account will inevitably bring into question the role of modernity in the history of the discipline: why did it lead to an interruption, why do we think there is a conflict between virtue ethics and modernity, and why

²⁸It is meant here as "influencers" in the traditional sense. For a recent project that studies morally exceptional people and their contribution to the understanding of morality, "The Beacon Project," The Beacon Project, accessed January 16, 2020, <https://www.moralbeacons.org/>. For an argument that disputes the importance of the morally exceptional for affirmation of moral theory, Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (1982): 419–39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2026228>.

has it reemerged in the second part of the last century? One may put the cause of the conflict on the historiographical gaps in our understanding of the field and claim that the dominant account might simply highlight a narration that defers currents that involve voices of virtue ethics. Competing accounts of political modernity and culture may have a role in that. Another possible answer could be found in the daily conflicts of contemporary life. Indeterminacy and lack of solutions for the conflicts of modernity might channel the search for unity and meaning toward traditional social practices.

Rather than taking virtue ethics as a discipline, my approach is about how it has been lived as a practice that has made it possible to be part of various civilizations, from Islamic and Christian to the Indian and Chinese, for over two millennia. It is not about ideas but about the very givenness and naturalness of social practice that matter in it. So, as a discipline, one may chart the various trends in virtue ethics. However, the emphasis on the importance of the naturalness of the social practice is a common thread, and it could be argued that it is what makes it a common denominator in different civilizational zones. Marriage, work, family relationships, the whole notion of friendship, the government of state affairs etc., are all venues where social practices can be exercised. Any social practice is molded upon a multifaceted relationship between virtue, practical wisdom, and flourishing (eudaimonia; happiness). Each of these terms requires self-standing explanations, which will be briefly done. I want to begin with the idea of the naturalness of the social practice and how it is seen as part of a single and unitary life. By naturalness, I mean the acquisition of any character in the individual's behavioral patterns that comes as if it is a natural part of the person. For instance, benevolence is practiced not because of an expected gain in this or another world but as if an urge to drink water without contemplation comes naturally. On the other hand, the idea of unitary life involves the feeling of unity in different phases of life. Division of labor is still available, but the organic unity of the person with family and state is uninterrupted. In other words, family and state are seen as an extended version of the individual body.

There are two distinct accounts of ethics and modernity that I will follow throughout the article. One of the assumptions of this study is that the emergence of a secular nation-state does signify a radical rupture with the pre-modern. Obviously, the degree and

form of this new phenomenon vary according to the historical and political geographies in question.²⁹ However, the existence of an arguably secular and liberal nation-state is observed in many corners of the world, including Turkey. The importance of this new phenomenon entails the emergence of a new political/religious consciousness and several structural changes in the organization of the society that my study will not go into detail. However, if this is true, then its implications for moral thought require thorough consideration.

The most important consequence of this change in virtue ethics is that the state has been constructed as defining itself; it has its priorities and its sanctions on the individuals that were not available in the past. It is not meant to have a monopoly over the use of violence and provide social order as two distinct powers of the state. It is about the interference of the state with social institutions such as family, law, and religion that we see the most significant ruptures with the pre-modern and, hence, with the paradigmatic understanding of virtue ethics. If the virtue has a value by itself that is independent of the state institutions and shared by the common people and in compliance with the most significant source of normative power in a pre-modern society, i.e., with the religion, then the agreement between the two reflects the ways religion and virtue ethics support each other. Catholic scholarship claims “the selective affinity” between religion and virtue ethics more than its historical precedents.³⁰ A similar claim could be attributed to the Islamic intellectual movements in different parts of the world, though not as much as visible in the Catholic tradition. Historical connections of Islamic scholarship with the tradition of virtue ethics were stronger. So, we have two conflicting pictures in front of us: a Catholic virtue ethical tradition that is historically weak but contemporarily popular versus an Islamic virtue ethical tradition that is historically powerful but weak in the modern era.³¹

²⁹The works of sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt attest to the multiplicity of this process; see Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities*.

³⁰For a brief reception of Aristotelian ethics by Christianity, see Frede, “The Historic Decline of Virtue Ethics,” 129–35. Frede connects the decline of virtue ethics to the decline of trust in the Christian foundation of society, the war of religions, and absolutist regimes in the early modern era.

³¹I mean the discontinuity of virtue ethical thinking in the Islamic world, not

A common point in these two conflicting images is the problematic entry of modernity into the equation and its impact on how politics is practiced. It has begun to define and organize the social relations that were in the purview of the religion. The space previously occupied has been expanded, and the role and meaning of the religion have shifted so that this new political understanding determines private/public differences. Post-Ottoman Turkey in the twentieth century reflects these shifts in its recent history. The breaking of the conventional division of space has culminated in a conflict between the modern practice of politics and religion. The practice of politics in this new sense has been institutionalized as a mechanism that directs the daily life of dissolving communities. The state has intervened in a mass education program for its citizens. The family has become the target of the state policy. Bureaucracy as part of the administrative tool has also been reflected in daily life. The most common repercussions of this new practice are the governing logic of new politics and its echoes on the fragmentation of daily life into calculable units. Appropriation of family, education, and daily life by the bureaucratic state is just one dimension of the new practice of politics. All these aspects of new life have become possible through legal instruments of the state bureaucracy. The governing logic of the new politics defines the law itself.

The difference between being a community member in traditional society and being a citizen of the nation-state in the modern era defines the tension between virtue ethics and modern politics. I do not claim that the modern practice of politics necessarily excludes a virtue ethical pursuit of life. However, as many scholars have shown, an imminent conflict between the two needs to be addressed. Picturing the situation before the emergence of the new politics could clarify the conflict. There is a reason why we can safely assume that virtue ethics was one of the fundamental ways of pursuing a full life in the pre-modern era. This reason is closely related to the space of the state. Assigning a space for the pre-modern state could be evaluated as ahistorical or simply difficult to show its contours. However complex this picturing process is, my attempt here is limited by the normative aspects of allocating space for the state as an institution.

the lack of concern for ethics in general; on the contrary, many important voices utter the issue's significance from an Islamic view.

A putative limit to the pre-modern state's power could be attributed to its lack of means of mass governance, as it is possible today for the modern state. Its volume and extent are significantly small and largely depend on the use of military force. The ways and means of this military power are incommensurable with the modern one. One particular source, among others, is to evaluate the extent of the state's power: public law (*siyaset-i şeriyye*). It could be described as a limited intervention in the penal adjudication process by the state authority, which the representatives of the Sharia law primarily regulated. Restricted use of violence, which was left to the will of the state authority, can be taken as an instance where one can see the state. Otherwise, the encounter with the state in daily life routines was quite rare, such as in the instances of "Mazalim" courts or royal ceremonies. The place of a ruler in the existence of the state is crucial. However, the state's existence as a separate entity independent of the ruler is quite a modern phenomenon. It implies the emergence of the first nucleus of early modern bureaucracy. Pre-modern ruling authorities' demand for legitimacy does not come from the practice of politics. According to the believers, it is determined by a series of moral codes derived from Islamic notions of justice valid for this world and hereafter. Islamic legal framework could be well construed as the primary source of normative power. It has a binding effect on the community, state, and the organization of daily life. A social and political life regulated by Islamic law and local customs is much more in agreement with the community. The state here does not act in itself and for itself; instead, its existence is aligned with social life.

I have favored this simplistic account of the space of state to show why there is a conflict between modern politics and virtue ethics. To clarify the claim made here, it is essential to differentiate between modern and pre-modern conceptions of politics. As there are countless definitions and theories of politics, I have narrowed the issue down to the state's space in the organization of daily life or the location of politics in the sense of formal institutions to see the limitations of the state power compared to the modern one. In this sense, the relation of virtue ethics with the pre-modern notion of politics becomes more evident as it is expected to assume that this picture best suits the pursuit of a whole life. The ability of the state to penetrate the organization of daily life was parochial, and the community's existence as a source of belonging was more substantial.

1.4. CONCLUSION

There are several obstacles before realizing virtue politics in the modern nation-state context. Virtue ethics, as a historical method to think and act on life as unity, is a venue to take inspiration and intellectual sources. Virtue-based political action and discourse lean on various virtue categories formed through character education that mainly flourish in community-based life experiences. The development of moral character and politics as a practice are not two separate entities. Without considering the contents of virtue ethics as a normative school of ethics and taking relevant conceptual tools and arguments, an adequate addressing of theory of virtue politics is not possible.

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FAZİLET EKSENLİ BİR SİYASET TEORİSİ MÜMKÜN MÜ?

Öz

Bu makale, çağdaş siyaset felsefesinde, normatif fazilet ahlakından beslenen fazilet eksenli bir siyaset teorisinin mümkün olduğunu savunmaktadır. İlk kısımda siyaset felsefesi ve fazilet ahlakı arasındaki ilişkiyi inceleyen literatür ele alınmıştır. Sonraki kısımlarda fazilet eksenli bir siyaset teorisine kaynak olarak, fazilet ahlakının iki farklı versiyonu ve adalet ve aksam-ı fezayil kavramları incelenmiştir. Son olarak söz konusu teori inşasının önünde irdelenmesi gereken en önemli olgu olarak modern ulus-devlet fazilet ahlakıyla ilişkisi üzerinden tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Fazilet ahlakı, Siyaset Teorisi, Fazilet Olarak Adalet, Aksam-ı Fazilet