

UNIT 2

VIRTUES AND VICES

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we are going to study Virtues and Vices from an ethical point of view. After understanding the meaning of virtue, we make an effort to grasp the Socratic, Platonic and the Aristotelian conception of virtue. Then we shall attempt to see virtues in Hinduism and Islam. By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- Grasp the meaning of virtue
- Understand the virtues according to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle the three main Greek Philosophers
- Appreciate the virtues in Hinduism and Islam

2.1 INTRODUCTION

We are now in III Block after you have studied the general approach to Ethics: Western and Indian. In the first unit you have seen how experience is the teacher of life. Here we focus upon virtues. What are the virtues? They may be defined as the habits that characterize the human personality which is on the quest for final fulfillment in specifically human happiness. As individuals and as groups, human beings search for happiness. The means to attain this goal was discovered by the Greeks to be in the cultivation of virtue. In Indian philosophies also there are qualities contributing to human well-being; however, quite often instead of focusing on human happiness as such, Indian concepts of virtue are intertwined with the concept of salvation and after life. Something similar happened in Western thought after Greek philosophy met the Christian Revelation. In the present unit however we shall not be dealing specifically with the religious and theological links but only with those elements that fall under the general purview and more or less universal survey of human reason.

2.2 MEANING OF VIRTUE

The Greek term for virtue is *arête* which was used for excellence of any kind. But generally the excellence referred to is an excellence belonging to human person so that the virtues may be described as the forms of human excellence. 'Virtue' which comes from the Latin *virtus* means moral excellence. A virtue is a character trait or quality valued as being good. Personal virtues are characteristics valued as promoting individual and collective well-being, and thus good by definition. The opposite of virtue is vice. In ethics, 'virtue' is used with two somewhat different meanings. (a) A virtue is a quality of character – a disposition to do what is right in a particular direction, or to perform one of the more universal duties. (b) A virtue is also a habit of action corresponding to the quality of character or disposition. We may refer to the honesty of a human person, or to the honesty of his dealings equally as virtues.

Virtues can be placed into a broader context of values. Each individual has a core of underlying values that contribute to our system of beliefs, ideas and/or opinions. Integrity in the application of a value ensures its continuity and this continuity separates a value from beliefs, opinion and ideas. In this context a value (e.g., Truth or Equality or Creed) is the core from which we operate or react. Societies have values that are shared among many of the participants in that culture. An individual's values typically are largely, but not entirely, in agreement with their culture's values. Individual virtues can be grouped into one of four categories of values: Ethics (virtue - vice, good - bad, moral - immoral - amoral, right - wrong, permissible - impermissible) Aesthetics (beautiful, ugly, unbalanced, pleasing) Doctrinal (political, ideological, religious or social beliefs and values) Innate/Inborn (inborn values such as reproduction and survival).

Laird has divided virtues into three classes: (a) There are virtues of what he calls, 'the righteous quality'. A virtue of this kind consists in the habit of performing a duty of a particular kind and in the quality of character which leads to this kind of action. The only distinction that can be made between virtuous conduct of this kind and right conduct is that the term 'virtuous conduct' emphasizes the habitual performance of what is right.

(b) There are virtues of the 'requisite quality'. These are necessary to a virtuous character, but are also found in bad characters, and indeed may tend to increase the wickedness of the bad. Such virtues include prudence and perseverance. The villain who is persevering in his villainy is a worse man than the villain who is hesitant.

(c) There are virtues of the 'generous quality'. These are chiefly of an emotional kind and they add something not strictly definable, but of the nature of beauty or of moral intrinsic value, to actions that are in other respects right. They sometimes even give a strange quality of nobility to conduct that is morally wrong. We find this in the adventurous courage sometimes attributed to a brigand chief and in the loyalty of often shown to people utterly unworthy of that loyalty. Virtues of this kind seem to have some intrinsic value; this at least is suggested by the value that we assign to these virtues in the characters of people where no good result follows from the presence of the virtue in their actions.

Of the three classes, virtues of the 'righteous quality' are the most important in the moral life. Virtues of the 'requisite quality' are clearly subordinate to the virtues of the 'righteous quality', for they are of value only when they accompany such virtues. Virtues of the 'generous quality' depend more on the natural endowments than the other two classes do, and are hardly to be acquired merely by the conscientious doing of one's duty. Virtues of this quality have an appeal

that is perhaps more aesthetic than moral, but they do give to goodness a colour and an adventurous atmosphere which are sometimes sadly lacking in those whose virtues are merely of the righteous quality. Those who think of virtue as being something more than doing one's duty appear to be thinking often of some virtue of this kind, and these virtues do have about them a richness of emotion and a picturesqueness to which few people attain in the moral life.

2.3 SOCRATES: VIRTUE IS KNOWLEDGE

The core of Socrates' ethics is the concept of virtue. Virtue, according to Socrates, is the deepest and most basic propensity of man. This virtue is *knowledge*. "... if there exists any good thing different, and not associated with knowledge, virtue will not necessarily be any form of knowledge. If on the other hand knowledge embraces everything that is good, we shall be right to suspect that virtue is knowledge." If virtue is knowledge it can be known and consequently taught. This is the meaning of the imperative "know yourself." Know yourself means bring your inner self to light. Through knowledge human gains possession of oneself whereby one becomes one's own master.

According to Socrates virtue is the highest aim and greatest good one has to seek in life. He also insisted that if it is to be highest aim and the greatest good it must have universal consistency and be the same for all. Now, what is universally consistent and the same for all is knowledge which is obtained through concept by the use of reason common in all. ***The relation between virtue and knowledge is inseparable. For, Socrates thinks that health, wealth, beauty, courage, temperance etc., which are customarily considered to be various forms of good, are good only if they are guided by wisdom; if guided by folly they could be considered forms of evil.***

Ethics, according to Socrates, has yet another dimension. It does not stop at mere acquisition of the knowledge of the ideas of good. The knowledge of the idea of the good aims at controlling all other ideas and ultimately guides the whole man, including his will and feeling, and necessarily leads him to good actions. Hence ethical knowledge tends to culture the soul which ultimately leads the soul towards regaining its pure, pristine glory. For Socrates this is the reason for believing that "no one does wrong knowingly" and "that knowledge is virtue."

Socrates says that virtue or goodness is one, although practices differently in different forms of good. In Plato's *Protagoras* Socrates says that although wisdom, temperance, courage, justice and holiness are the principal forms of virtue, there is one single reality which underlies them all. Yet on another occasion, in Plato's *Meno*, we find Socrates looking for one virtue which permeates all other virtues.

Socrates explained this by means of an example of a healthy body. According to him all kinds of bodily excellence follow from one single health of the body, similarly, all kinds of virtue follow from the health of the soul. What is meant by the health of the soul? The soul has different functions. The health of the soul follows from orderly arrangement of these different functions. In Plato's *Gorgias*, we see Socrates saying that the functions of the soul are reasoning, temper, and desire. The function of reasoning aims at attaining wisdom, temper means the courage, and desire is the soberness. The health of the souls depends on the organized relation that these functions hold to each other. An orderly arrangement of these functions is something like the

following. Wisdom commands and temper assists in the execution of these commands, while desire furnishes the material basis for the actualization of these commands. The aim of the oneness or unity of the virtue is the ultimate happiness of the individual. "A successful functioning of the harmonious activities under the regulation of reason yields happiness." Thus the Socratic notion of virtue as one means is "the self of a good man is an organic unity of all its functions."

The Socratic notion of virtue as one leads us finally to conclude that there is one Idea of the Good which underlies all the ethical activities of man which are intrinsically good. Socrates speaks in the *Republic* of Plato that

...in the region of the known the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of good, and that when seen must need point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light, and author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private or public must have caught sight of this.

Check your progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What is the meaning of virtue?

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2) Explain the Socratic dictum "Virtue is Knowledge".

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2.4 PLATO'S FOUR CARDINAL VIRTUES

The four virtues which Plato described in the *Republic* were later called the *cardinal* virtues. The word 'cardinal' is a derivative of the Latin word 'cardo', meaning a hinge, and the cardinal virtues are the virtues by which the moral life is supported as a door is supported by its hinges.

Plato describes the four cardinal virtues in *The Republic*:

Wisdom (calculative) - see the whole

Courage (spirited) - preserve the whole

Moderation (appetitive) - serve the whole

Justice (founding/preserving virtue) - "mind your own business" i.e. "tend to your soul"/"know yourself"

Plato defines how an individual can attain these virtues: *Wisdom* comes from exercising reason; *courage* from exercising emotions or spirit; *moderation* (sometimes "temperance") from allowing reason to overrule desires; and from these *justice* ensues, a state in which all elements of the mind are in concord with one another. Justice is described by Plato to be the founding and preserving virtue because only once someone understands justice, can he or she gain the other three virtues, and once someone possesses all four virtues, it is justice that keeps it all together. Courage is the virtue that will be found in Kings and Queens. Wisdom will be found in the Philosopher Kings and Queens and the guardians. Moderation and justice will be found in all of the above and the artisans.

2.5 ARISTOTLE'S CONCEPTION OF VIRTUE

Aristotle said that the moral end is 'eudaimonia', which may be translated as happiness, and he said that 'eudaimonia' consisted in the exercise of a person's soul in accordance with virtue. To put it in Aristotle's own terminology, 'eudaimonia' is the *end* or what was later called the final cause of the moral life, while virtue is what was later called the *form* or the *formal cause* of the moral life. The *form* is analogous to the conception of his picture in the mind of an artist which guides and limits one's activity as one works, and which gives shape to one's creation. Aristotle defined virtue as a habit of choice, the characteristic of which lies in the observation of the mean or of moderation, as it is determined by reason or as the practically prudent person would determine it.

Aristotle regarded virtue as primarily a habit of action, and so it was with him only secondarily a quality of character. Virtue is not a mere habit, but a habit of choice. Aristotle defined choice as the deliberate desire of things in our power after consideration of them by the intellect. Choice accordingly is in some sense free for it deals with things in our own power, and it is when such a deliberate choice is repeated that it becomes the habit of action which we call a virtue. The choice, for example, of doing what is right in the face of pain becomes, when habitual, the virtue of courage. The mere doing of single good actions may be accidental or merely impulsive; it is the habitual choice that counts as virtue.

The point in Aristotle's definition which has been most discussed is his notion of the mean or middle course. A virtue is regarded as if it were a middle position between two vices; courage for example, is the middle position between rashness and cowardice, and liberality is the middle position between extravagance and miserliness. The place of the mean relative to the vices at the extremes depends on the circumstances of each individual. A soldier's courage should be nearer to rashness than that of a statesman, for it is his business to take risks which it would be criminal on the part of a statesman to take. This conception is obviously in agreement with the Greek emphasis on proportion and harmony in art, as expressed in the maxim 'Nothing too much' or virtue lies in the middle.

Check your progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Explain the four Cardinal virtues according to Plato.

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2) Explain Aristotle's conception of virtue.

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2.6 HINDU VIRTUES

Hinduism, or *Sanatana Dharma* has pivotal virtues that everyone keeping the Dharma is asked to follow. For they are distinct qualities of *manusya* (humankind), that allow one to be in the mode of goodness. There are three modes of material nature (*guna*), as described in the Vedas and other Indian Scriptures: *Sattva* (goodness, creation, stillness, intelligence), *Rajas* (passion, maintenance, energy, activity), and *Tamas* (ignorance, restraint, inertia, destruction). Every person harbours a mixture of these modes in varying degrees. A person in the mode of *Sattva* has that mode in prominence in one's nature, which one obtains by following the virtues of *Dharma*.

The modes of *Sattva* are the following: Altruism: Selfless Service to all humanity; Restraint and Moderation: This is having restraint and moderation in all things. Sexual relations, eating, and other pleasurable activities should be kept in moderation. Some orthodox followers also believe in sex only in marriage, and being chaste. It depends on the sect and belief system, some people believe this means celibacy... While others believe in walking the golden path of moderation, i.e. not too far to the side of forceful control and total abandon of human pleasures, but also not too far to the side of total indulgence and total abandonment for moderation. Honesty: One is required to be honest with oneself, honest to the family, friends, and all of humanity. Cleanliness: Outer cleanliness is to be cultivated for good health and hygiene; inner cleanliness is cultivated through devotion to god, selflessness, non-violence and all the other virtues; which is maintained by refraining from intoxicants. Protection and reverence for the Earth. Universality: Showing tolerance and respect for everyone, everything and the way of the Universe. Peace: One must cultivate a peaceful manner in order to benefit oneself and those around him. Non-Violence/Ahimsa: This means not killing, or not being violent in any way to any life form or sentient being. This is why those who practice this Dharma are vegetarians because they see the slaughter of animals for the purpose of food as violent, when there are less violent ways to maintain a healthy diet. Reverence for elders and teachers: This virtue is very important to learn respect and reverence for those who have wisdom and those who selflessly teach in love. The Guru or spiritual teacher is one of the highest principals in many Vedic based spiritualities, and is likened to that of God.

2.7 VIRTUES IN ISLAM

In the Muslim tradition the Qur'an is, as the word of God, the great repository of all virtue in earthly form, and the Prophet, particularly via his hadiths or reported sayings, the exemplar of virtue in human form. The very name of Islam, meaning "acceptance," proclaims the virtue of submission to the will of God, the acceptance of the way things are. Foremost among God's attributes are mercy and compassion or, in the canonical language of Arabic, *Rahman* and *Rahim*. Each of the 114 chapters of the Qur'an, with one exception, begins with the verse, "In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful". The Arabic for compassion is *rahmah*. As a cultural influence, its roots abound in the Qur'an. A good Muslim is to commence each day, each prayer and each significant action by invoking God the Merciful and Compassionate, i.e. by reciting *Bi Ism-i-Allah al-Rahman al-Rahim*. The Muslim scriptures urge compassion towards captives as well as to widows, orphans and the poor. Traditionally, *Zakat*, a toll tax to help the poor and needy, is obligatory upon all Muslims (9:60). One of the practical purposes of fasting or *sawm* during the month of Ramadan is to help one empathize with the hunger pangs of those less fortunate, to enhance sensitivity to the suffering of others and develop compassion for the poor and destitute.

The Muslim virtues are: prayer, repentance, honesty, loyalty, sincerity, frugality, prudence, moderation, self-restraint, discipline, perseverance, patience, hope, dignity, courage, justice, tolerance, wisdom, good speech, respect, purity, courtesy, kindness, gratitude, generosity, contentment, etc.

2.8 VICES

Vice is a practice or a habit considered immoral, depraved, and/or degrading in the associated society. In more minor usage, vice can refer to a fault, a defect, an infirmity or merely a bad habit. Synonyms for vice include fault, depravity, sin, iniquity, wickedness and corruption. The modern English term that best captures its original meaning is the word *vicious*, which means "full of vice". In this sense, the word *vice* comes from the Latin word *vitium*, meaning "failing or defect". Vice is the opposite of virtue.

The term *vice* is also popularly applied to various activities considered immoral by some: a list of these might include the abuse of alcohol and other recreational drugs, gambling, smoking, recklessness, cheating, lying and selfishness. Behaviors or attitudes going against the established virtues of the culture may also be called vices: for instance, effeminacy is considered a vice in a culture espousing masculinity as an essential element of the character of males.

THE CHRISTIAN VICES

Christians believe that there are two kinds of vice: those which originate with the physical organism as perverse instincts (such as lust), and those which originate with false idolatry in the spiritual realm. The first kind of vice, although sinful, are believed to be less serious than the second. Some vices recognized as spiritual by Christians are blasphemy (holiness betrayed), apostasy (faith betrayed), despair (hope betrayed), hatred (love betrayed) and indifference (scripturally, a "hardened heart"). Christian theologians have reasoned that the most destructive

vice equates to a certain type of pride or the complete idolatry of the self. It is argued that through this vice, which is essentially competitive, all the worst evils come into being. In Judeo-Christian creeds it originally led to the *Fall of Man*, and as a purely diabolical spiritual vice, it outweighs anything else often condemned by the Church.

The Roman Catholic Church distinguishes between vice, which is a habit inclining one to sin, and the sin itself, which is an individual morally wrong act. Note that in Roman Catholicism, the word "sin" also refers to the state which befalls one upon committing a morally wrong act; in this section, the word will always mean the sinful act. It is the sin, and not the vice, which deprives one of God's sanctifying grace. Thomas Aquinas taught that "absolutely speaking, the sin surpasses the vice in wickedness". On the other hand, even after a person's sins have been forgiven, the underlying habit (the vice) may remain. Just as vice was created in the first place by repeatedly yielding to the temptation to sin, so vice may be removed only by repeatedly resisting temptation and performing virtuous acts; the more entrenched the vice, the more time and effort needed to remove it. Saint Thomas Aquinas says that following rehabilitation and the acquisition of virtues, the vice does not persist as a habit, but rather as a mere disposition, and one that is in the process of being eliminated.

Dante's seven deadly vices are: Pride or vanity — an excessive love of the self (holding the self outside of its proper position regarding God or fellows; Dante's definition was "love of self perverted to hatred and contempt for one's neighbor"). In the Latin lists of the Seven Deadly Sins, pride is referred to as *superbia*. Avarice (covetousness, greed) — a desire to possess more than one has need or use for (or according to Dante, "excessive love of money and power"). In the Latin lists of the Seven Deadly Sins, avarice is referred to as *avaritia*. Lust — excessive sexual desire. Dante's criterion was that "lust detracts from true love". In the Latin lists of the Seven Deadly Sins, lust is referred to as *luxuria*. Wrath or anger — feelings of hatred, revenge or denial, as well as punitive desires outside of justice (Dante's description was "love of justice perverted to revenge and spite"). In the Latin lists of the Seven Deadly Sins, wrath is referred to as *ira*. Gluttony — overindulgence in food, drink or intoxicants, or misplaced desire of food as a pleasure for its sensuality ("excessive love of pleasure" was Dante's rendering). In the Latin lists of the Seven Deadly Sins, gluttony is referred to as *gula*. Envy or jealousy - resentment of others for their possessions (Dante: "love of one's own good perverted to a desire to deprive other men of theirs"). In the Latin lists of the Seven Deadly Sins, envy is referred to as *invidia*. Sloth or laziness - idleness and wastefulness of time and/or other allotted resources. Laziness is condemned because it results in others having to work harder; also, useful work will not be done. Sloth is referred to in Latin as *accidie* or *acedia*.

Check your progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. List the Hindu and Islamic Virtues.

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2. What is a vice? Which are the seven deadly vices?
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2.9 LET US SUM UP

‘Virtue’ which comes from the Latin *virtus* means moral excellence. A virtue is a character trait or quality valued as being good. Personal virtues are characteristics valued as promoting individual and collective well-being, and thus good by definition. The opposite of virtue is vice. While for Socrates knowledge is virtue, for Aristotle virtue lies in the middle, and Plato speaks of the four cardinal virtues on which rest all the moral virtues. Every religion advocates a virtuous life and shuns vices. We have seen how Hinduism and Islam stress on various moral virtues and point a way to salvation. On the other hand, by looking at the vices and the seven deadly sins we have understood the way Christianity advocates a virtuous life. Hence the message of all the three religions: Live virtuously and avoid all the vices.

2.10 KEY WORDS

Arete: Greek term for excellence of any kind.

Virtue: Latin term for moral excellence

Vitium: Latin term for vice, meaning defect.

Cardinal comes from the Latin ‘cardo’ meaning hinge. So cardinal means the main on which others are hinged.

2.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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2.12 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check your progress I

1. The Greek term for virtue is *arête* which was used for excellence of any kind. But generally the excellence referred to is an excellence belonging to human person so that the virtues may be described as the forms of human excellence. ‘Virtue’ which comes from the Latin *virtus* means moral excellence. A virtue is a character trait or quality valued as being good.

Personal virtues are characteristics valued as promoting individual and collective well-being, and thus good by definition. The opposite of virtue is vice. In ethics, 'virtue' is used with two somewhat different meanings. (a) A virtue is a quality of character – a disposition to do what is right in a particular direction, or to perform one of the more universal duties. (b) A virtue is also a habit of action corresponding to the quality of character or disposition. We may refer to the honesty of a human person, or to the honesty of his dealings equally as virtues.

2. Virtue, according to Socrates, is the deepest and most basic propensity of human. This virtue is *knowledge*. If virtue is knowledge it can be known and consequently taught. This is the meaning of the imperative "know yourself." Know yourself means bring your inner self to light. Through knowledge man gains possession of himself whereby he becomes his own master. According to Socrates virtue is the highest aim and greatest good one has to seek in life. He also insisted that if it is to be highest aim and the greatest good it must have universal consistence and be the same for all. Now, what is universally consistent and the same for all is knowledge which is obtained through concept by the use of reason which is common in all. ***The relation between virtue and knowledge is inseparable. For, Socrates thinks that health, wealth, beauty, courage, temperance etc., which are customarily considered to be various forms of good, are good only if they are guided by wisdom; if guided by folly they could be considered forms of evil.***

Check your progress II

1. Plato describes the four cardinal virtues in *The Republic*. They are: wisdom, courage, moderation, justice. Plato defines how an individual can attain these virtues: Wisdom comes from exercising reason; Courage from exercising emotions or spirit; Moderation (sometimes "temperance") from allowing reason to overrule desires; and from these Justice ensues, a state in which all elements of the mind are in concord with one another. Justice is described by Plato to be the founding and preserving virtue because only once someone understands justice can he or she gain the other three virtues, and once someone possesses all four virtues it is justice that keeps it all together. Wisdom is the virtue that will be found in Kings and Queens. Courage will be found in the Philosopher Kings and Queens and the guardians. Moderation and justice will be found in all of the above and the artisans.

2. Aristotle defined virtue as a habit of choice, the characteristic of which lies in the observation of the mean or of moderation, as it is determined by reason or as the practically prudent man would determine it. Aristotle regarded virtue as primarily a habit of action, and so it was with him only secondarily a quality of character. Virtue is not a mere habit, but a habit of choice. The point in Aristotle's definition which has been most discussed is his notion of the mean or middle course. A virtue is regarded as if it were a middle position between two vices; courage for example, is the middle position between rashness and cowardice, and liberality is the middle position between extravagance and miserliness. The place of the mean relative to the vices at the extremes depends on the circumstances of each individual. A soldier's courage should be nearer to rashness than that of a statesman, for it is his business to take risks which it would be criminal on the part of a statesman to take. This conception is obviously in agreement with the Greek emphasis on proportion and harmony in art, as expressed in the maxim 'Nothing too much' or virtue lies in the middle.

Check your progress III

1. The Hindu virtues are: altruism- selfless Service to all humanity, restraint and moderation, honesty, cleanliness, protection and reverence for the earth, universality, peace, non-violence/ahimsa, reverence and respect for elders and teachers. The Muslim virtues are: mercy, compassion, prayer, repentance, honesty, loyalty, sincerity, frugality, prudence, moderation, self-restraint, discipline, perseverance, patience, hope, dignity, courage, justice, tolerance, wisdom, good speech, respect, purity, courtesy, kindness, gratitude, generosity, contentment, etc.

2. Vice is a practice or a habit considered immoral, depraved, and/or degrading in the associated society. In more minor usage, vice can refer to a fault, a defect, an infirmity or merely a bad habit. Synonyms for vice include fault, depravity, sin, iniquity, wickedness and corruption. The modern English term that best captures its original meaning is the word *vicious*, which means "full of vice". In this sense, the word *vice* comes from the Latin word *vitium*, meaning "failing or defect". Vice is the opposite of virtue. The seven deadly vices are: pride or vanity, avarice, lust, wrath or anger, gluttony, envy or jealousy and sloth or laziness.

