Principle of Personal Virtues (Socrates, 470–399 BC, Plato, 427–347 BC, and Aristotle, 384–322 BC)

The concept of moderated or enlightened self-interest was not acceptable to this remarkable series of Greek philosophers. The problem, Socrates noted early in his series of public discussions or forum teachings, was that a person could act with subterfuge or deceit and thus achieve a position of such wealth and power that he would have no fear of future retribution or harm. Socrates started the sequence of analysis to which all three moral philosophers contributed, and that ended with the principle that everyone should act in ways that conveyed a sense of honor, pride, and self-worth. We don't necessarily have to be kind and considerate to others, they concluded. We don't even have to be concerned about the reactions of others. We do, however, have to be honest, truthful, courageous, temperate, and high-minded in our own actions. Why? Because the goal of human existence is the active, rational pursuit of excellence, and excellence requires those personal virtues.

The "rational pursuit of excellence"—a goal also often termed "knowledge of the good"—is the basis of classic Greek philosophy. If you commit those two phrases firmly to your memory, all of the rest of the teachings of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle will be crystal clear to you.

Two thousand four hundred years ago in Athens, these unusually perspicacious men began to address questions of ethical duties and moral justice and laid the foundation for the Western approach to both politics (rules for the conduct of society) and ethics (rules for the conduct of people). This sort of thinking about duties and justice, about politics and ethics, had never before been present in the ancient world. Why in Athens, and why at this time?

The reason was an unusual combination of prosperity and peace. Greece is a mountainous peninsula, with limited agricultural land suitable for growing grain, but the climate is warm and mild, ideal for olives, grapes, and livestock. There were easy "along the coast" sea routes to Egypt, then the granary of the Eastern Mediterranean. Egypt had surplus wheat and barley for export, but it needed olive oil and wine for home consumption. A very prosperous trade developed between the two regions. The defeat of the invading Persian army at Marathon in 490 BC brought a period of peace in Greece that lasted for 140 years, a time that came to be known as the "Golden Age" of Athens.

Conflicts among the nobles (the ex-warriors), the merchants (the ex-sailors), and the citizens (the current residents) brought about an interest in government within Athens. An interest in government brought about schools, first to teach rhetoric (how to talk to assembled groups of citizens) and then logic (how to convince members of those assembled groups). An interest in logic led back to the question, "What is the good life?"

Socrates addressed this question, "What is the good life," for both individuals and societies, which, at the time, meant advanced city-states such as Athens. Socrates wrote nothing, yet Plato recorded Socrates' discussions with other Athenians in the form of a set of dialogues soon after the death of the older man, and these can be assumed to be his thoughts if not his words.

The goal of Socrates was to develop the "first rule for a successful life." Successful then meant happy; it would probably now be translated as contented and prosperous. There could be no happiness in the pursuit of pleasure, Socrates continued, or in the

ownership of property, unless you knew how to use each one of those well. Knowledge of the "good" was thus the goal of life. But knowledge of this good came from both the goodness/badness of the character and the wisdom/foolishness of the intellect. It was necessary to develop both so that everyone (nobles, merchants, and citizens alike) would recognize proposals that were good both for themselves (ethics) and for their society (politics). Ethics and politics were synonymous in Greek thinking; you could not have one without the other.

Plato succeeded Socrates as the major public thinker following the death of the older man in 399 BC. He focused more on politics, on the need to have a good society in order to have a good life. He wrote *The Republic*, in which he began discussing the concept of justice—what it was and how it could be achieved. Athens at the time, like the other city-states on the Greek peninsula, was divided into statesmen (the leaders of the citizens; they were men of thought), nobles (the warriors, who were men of courage), and merchants (the sailors, who were men of property). You needed all three for a good (again, contented and prosperous) society. "Justice" was defined as the harmonious union of all three groups of citizens, with each group excelling at what they did best, and with no one group interfering with the activities of any of the other groups.

Aristotle, the third in this remarkable sequence, focused on ethics, on the need to have good men in order to form a good society. The goal of a society, he wrote, had to be happiness for all of the citizens. But what is happiness? Not pleasure, wealth, or fame. People are reasoning animals, Aristotle wrote, and thus happiness has to be associated with reason. Given that the active use of reason leads to excellence, then happiness has to be the "pursuit of excellence" (again, remember this phrase; it is basic to the understanding of Aristotle's coming conclusion, and it is not a bad rule for modern life). Excellence, he continued, is focused in the character of a man and can be found on a number of different dimensions, such as openness, honesty, truthfulness, temperance (moderation), friendliness, courage, modesty, and pride. Consequently, if everyone would strive for excellence on those dimensions, then all of the elements in the diverse Athenian society—the statesmen, warriors, and merchants, each with very different goals, activities, and interests—would work together well for the benefit of all.

This ethical principle—that "we should be open, honest, truthful, moderate, and proud of what we do so that we work together well for the benefit of all"—has frequently been translated into modern terms: "Never take any decision or action that is not open, honest, and truthful, and that you would not feel proud (here the terms are very modern) to have reported on the front pages of national newspapers or the evening portions of a national news broadcasts."

The Principle of Religious Injunctions (early religious writers of numerous faiths)

The problem with the "be open, honest, truthful, and proud" rule, which clearly can be applied to all and is understandable by all, is that these personal virtues are not enough. There are lots of people who can be open, honest, truthful, and proud of decisions and actions that most of the rest of us would view as exploitive, mean, and self-centered. Something more was felt to be needed, and for many of the early religious writers that something more came from the inherent and established concepts of