

# What Is Virtue? — Historical and Philosophical Context



*Some assumptions underlie our selection and discussion of virtues.*

## **Right and wrong exist. Understanding civic virtue means acknowledging this.**

To further justice requires that one exercise judgment. To understand and evaluate virtue, we must be willing to admire heroes and condemn villains. We must be willing to take a stand. A special challenge today may be that many people do not wish to appear judgmental. We seek to balance two ideas: on the one hand, being too quick to judge is wrong. Respect means not looking down on others who are not harming anyone simply because you don't agree with them. On the other hand, a reluctance to judge the behavior of others should not mean we do nothing in the face of evil. All that is needed for evil to triumph, it is often said, is for good people to do nothing.



“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

—Atticus Finch, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee



“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

## **Being virtuous does not require belief in a supreme being.**

We need not shy away from the term “virtue.” Despite the occasional misunderstanding that it requires religion, virtue may in fact be defined as conduct that reflects universal principles of moral and ethical excellence essential to leading a worthwhile life and to effective self-government. For many leading Founders, attributes of character such as justice, responsibility, perseverance, and others were thought to flow from an understanding

of the rights and obligations of men. Virtue is compatible with, but does not require, religious belief.

To many in the Founding generation, religion and morality were “indispensable supports” to people’s ability to govern themselves. This is because religious institutions nurtured virtue, and the Founders knew virtue was needed for self-government to survive. On the other hand, to paraphrase Thomas Jefferson, it does you no injury whether your neighbor believes in one god or twenty gods. A person’s religion alone would not make him virtuous, and his particular (or lack of) religion would not mean he was incapable of virtue.



“We ought to consider what is the end [purpose] of government before we determine which is the best form. Upon this point all speculative politicians will agree that the happiness of society is the end of government, as all divines and moral philosophers will agree that the happiness of the individual is the end of man. . . . All sober inquirers after truth, ancient and modern, pagan and Christian, have declared that the happiness of man, as well as his dignity, consists in virtue.”

—John Adams, *Thoughts on Government*, 1776

## **Why virtues and not “values” or “character”?**

Virtues are eternal because they are rooted in human nature. Values, on the other hand, can change with the times. The word “value” itself implies that values are relative. While values can change with circumstances, it is *always* good to be just, to persevere, to be courageous, to respect others, and so on. The word “character” refers to the sum total of virtues an individual displays. A person of character is virtuous.

## Why these virtues?

The United States Founders believed that certain civic virtues were required of citizens in order for the Constitution to work. Numerous primary sources—notably the Federalist Papers and the Autobiography of Ben Franklin—point us to the “Founders’ Virtues.” You will explore some of the following civic virtues as an integral part of *Heroes and Villains*.

- Contribution
- Courage
- Humility
- Integrity
- Justice
- Perseverance
- Respect
- Responsibility / Prudence
- Self-Governance / Moderation

## Virtue

Conduct that reflects universal principles of moral and ethical excellence essential to leading a worthwhile life and to effective self-government. For many leading Founders, attributes of character such as justice, responsibility, perseverance, etc., were thought to flow from an understanding of the rights and obligations of men. Virtue is compatible with, but does not require, religious belief.