

A UNIFIED THEORY OF ETHICS

by Craig Paardekooper

My first task was to list of all human virtues. I asked AI to compile a comprehensive list and it gave me this -

1. Civic Virtues

Virtues that support cooperation, fairness, and the functioning of a community.

- Fairness
- Justice
- Leadership
- Teamwork
- Responsibility
- Citizenship

These are outward-facing virtues that bind individuals into a shared social world.

2. Social Virtues

Virtues that create interpersonal warmth, trust, and relational harmony.

- Kindness
- Compassion
- Love
- Gratitude
- Forgiveness
- Humility

These are the virtues of unity and relational closeness.

3. Resilience Virtues (the “Stoic” virtues)

These are Stoical — they deal with inner strength and emotional stability.

- Perseverance
- Courage
- Self-control
- Patience
- Emotional regulation
- Grit

These virtues allow a person to withstand adversity without collapsing.

4. Intellectual Virtues

Virtues that support truth-seeking, understanding, and cognitive excellence.

- Curiosity
- Open-mindedness
- Creativity (intellectual)
- Critical thinking
- Wisdom
- Love of learning

These are the virtues of exploration and discovery.

5. Creative Virtues

These are the virtues that express vitality, imagination, and the generative power of the mind.

- Imagination
- Aesthetic appreciation
- Artistic expression
- Innovation
- Playfulness
- Inspiration
- Originality

These virtues are about **bringing new forms into being** — the human analogue of biological creativity, but expressed through ideas, art, design, and meaning.

The virtues clustered into 5 groups, but civic and social virtues could be considered a single group to do with social integration.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON THE CLUSTERING OF VIRTUES

Next, I wanted to see if this grouping of virtues into 4 main classifications was supported by empirical studies of factor analysis and clustering.

What is the VIA?

VIA stands for Values in Action. The VIA Classification of Character Strengths is one of the **major frameworks** in positive psychology, originally developed by Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman (2004). It identifies 24 character-strengths, grouped under broad virtues such as wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence.

Does factor analysis research of character strengths (Virtues) show clustering into meta categories?

VIA recognises 24 character-strengths shown in the table below -

| Virtues | Character strengths |
|----------------------|---|
| Wisdom and Knowledge | Creativity [originality, ingenuity] Curiosity [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience] Judgement & Open-Mindedness [critical thinking] Love of Learning Perspective [wisdom] |
| Courage | Bravery [valor] Perseverance [persistence, industriousness] Honesty [authenticity, integrity] Zest [vitality, enthusiasm, vigor, energy] |
| Humanity | Capacity to Love and Be Loved Kindness [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, 'niceness'] Social Intelligence [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence] |
| Justice | Teamwork [citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty] Fairness Leadership |
| Temperance | Forgiveness & Mercy Modesty & Humility Prudence Self-Regulation [self-control] |
| Transcendence | Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence [awe, wonder, elevation] Gratitude Hope [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation] Humor [playfulness] Religiousness & Spirituality [faith, purpose] |

Note: Terms in brackets are variants of the character strength according to Peterson and Seligman (2004).

These virtues can be conceptually grouped as

- **Exploration:** Wisdom and Knowledge
- **Creativity:** Transcendence
- **Social:** Humanity, Justice
- **Stability:** Courage, Temperance

McGrath (2015) factor analysis found a consistent three-factor model comprising strengths reflecting

- **Caring:** interpersonal issues
- **Inquisitiveness:** intellectual exploration
- **Self-Control:** behavioural control

These relationships were replicated in two earlier articles on latent structure of the VIA-IS that found the same three-factor solution (Duan et al., 2012; Shryack et al., 2010).

Greenberg, McGrath, and Hall-Simmonds (2016) have now identified exactly the same three factors across 12 samples of adults, and McGrath (2015) suggested these three dimensions as the basis for a model of virtue that is both conceptually and empirically defensible, and as the most useful structural model for the VIA Classification in adults.

| Virtues | Character strengths |
|-----------------|---|
| Caring | Fairness Forgiveness & Mercy Gratitude Kindness Leadership Capacity to Love and Be Loved Teamwork |
| Inquisitiveness | Bravery Creativity Curiosity Love of Learning Perspective Social Intelligence |
| Self-Control | Honesty Judgement Perseverance Prudence Self-Regulation |

Note: See Greenberg, McGrath, and Hall-Simmonds (2016).

An alternate measure of the VIA Classification was been developed for youth ages 10–17 called the VIA-Youth (Park & Peterson, 2006). An initial factor analysis of the VIA-Youth revealed four factors, which the authors called

- **Temperance Strengths** → Self-Control
- **Intellectual Strengths** → Inquisitiveness
- **Theological Strengths** → Transcendence
- **Other-Directed Strengths** → Humanity / Caring

The first two and last correspond well to the Self-Control, Inquisitiveness, and Humanity virtues described previously.

However, subsequent studies have generally suggested a five-factor solution, comprised of the four factors identified by Park and Peterson (with Theological relabelled Transcendence Strengths) and an additional one variously called Leadership (Gillham et al., 2011; Ruch, Weber, Park, & Peterson, 2014) or Vitality (Toner, Haslam, Robinson, & Williams, 2012) that has never emerged in factor analyses of adults.

| VIA McGrath (2015) | VIA Duan et al (2012) | VIA Shryack et al., (2010) | VIA Greenberg, McGrath, and Hall-Simmonds (2016) | Park & Peterson, (2006) | Gillham et al., 2011; Ruch, Weber, Park, & Peterson, 2014; Toner, Haslam, Robinson, & Williams, 2012 |
|--------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|--|
| Caring | Caring | Caring | Caring | Other-directed Strengths (humanity) | Other-directed Strengths (humanity) |
| Inquisitiveness | Inquisitiveness | Inquisitiveness | Inquisitiveness | Intellectual Strengths | Intellectual Strengths |
| Self Control | Self Control | Self Control | Self Control | Temperance Strengths | Temperance Strengths |
| | | | | Theological Strengths (transcendence) | Transcendence Strengths |
| | | | | | Leadership (Vitality) |

RECENT RESEARCH: Evidence of Higher-Order Clusters

The VIA Classification (24 strengths → 6 virtues) has been repeatedly analysed using factor analysis. Several studies show that the 24 strengths consistently collapse into **3–4 broad factors**, not 24 independent traits.

| VIA Partsch (2022) | VIA McGrath 2016 | VIA McGrath 2020 | VIA Huo 2021 | VIA 24 Virtues | VIA McGrath 2014, 2019 |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|---|---|
| Social | Interpersonal Strengths | Interpersonal Virtues | Interpersonal harmony | Kindness, Love, Social Intelligence, Forgiveness, Fairness, Leadership, Teamwork (7) | Positivity <i>Emotional vitality, Pro-social warmth, uplift, meaning</i> |
| Self-regulation | Self-control Strengths | Self-regulatory Virtues | Self-discipline | Self-regulation, Prudence, Humility, Perseverance/Patience, Bravery, Honesty/integrity, (6) | Dependability <i>Self-control, moral regulation, reliability, restraint</i> |
| Exploratory | Intellectual Strengths | Intellectual Virtues | Diligence/curiosity | Curiosity, Judgement/critical thinking, Perspective/wisdom, Love of learning (4) | Mastery <i>Cognitive engagement, learning, competence, exploration</i> |
| | Vitality/creativity Strengths | Vitality/creativity Virtues | Aesthetic/expressive | Appreciation of beauty, Humour, Hope, Zest, Meaning (spirituality), Gratitude, Creativity (7) | |

There are four higher-order factors that maintain consistency with the empirical clustering of strengths.

| Factor | Core Theme | VIA Strengths Included | Notes / Rationale |
|--|---|--|---|
| Affective Positivity (Emotional Warmth) | Positive emotional energy expressed socially | Love, Kindness, Gratitude, Humour, Zest | Captures interpersonal warmth and positive affect. Removes “symbolic/creative” elements from traditional Positivity. |
| Creative / Meaning-Making | Symbolic, imaginative, and existential engagement | Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence, Spirituality, Perspective, Hope, Creativity | Focuses on strengths that involve meaning, aesthetics, imagination, and visionary thinking. Separated from purely affective positivity. |
| Dependability / Resilience | Self-regulation, moral integrity, perseverance | Self-Regulation, Perseverance, Prudence, Honesty, Fairness, Humility | Maintains the traditional Dependability factor; captures resilience and reliability. |
| Mastery / Cognitive Engagement | Intellectual curiosity, problem-solving, agency | Curiosity, Love of Learning, Judgment, Bravery, Leadership | Captures strengths related to cognitive exploration, mastery, competence, and goal-directed action. |

These 4 categories account for all 24 of the VIA character strengths.

| Function | VIA Strengths Covered | Count |
|--------------|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Exploration | Wisdom strengths | 5 |
| Creativity | Transcendence strengths | 6 |
| Social | Humanity + Justice strengths | 7 |
| Stability | Temperance + Courage strengths | 6 |
| Total | All VIA strengths | 24 |

So, the clustering of VIA virtues into these 4 categories is complete, with none remaining.

So, does psychological factor analysis support this four-cluster model?

Yes — strongly.

Across multiple studies, factor analysis repeatedly reveals clusters that correspond to:

1. **Intellectual/Exploratory**
2. **Creative/Vitality**
3. **Interpersonal/Social**
4. **Self-regulatory/Temperance**

These are the four fundamental **motivational directions** of human flourishing.

And the VIA strengths — one of the most researched frameworks in psychology — map onto them perfectly.

[SAGE Journals](#)

[Revisiting the hierarchical structure of the 24 VIA character strengths ...](#)

[VIA Institute](#)

[Factor structure of character strengths in youth: Consistency across ...](#)

Key references (for citation)

- **Partsch, M. V., Bluemke, M., & Lechner, C. M. (2022).** *Revisiting the hierarchical structure of the 24 VIA character strengths.* Journal of Personality.
- **McGrath, R. E. (2014).** *Scale- and item-level factor analyses of the VIA Inventory of Strengths.* Assessment.
- **McGrath, R. E. (2019).** *The VIA Inventory of Strengths: Development and factor structure.*

SCHWARTZ ANALYSIS OF VALUES

I also looked at values to see how they clustered into groups.

Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values is one of the most widely used models of human values. It organizes values around two main dimensions. Here's a detailed overview:

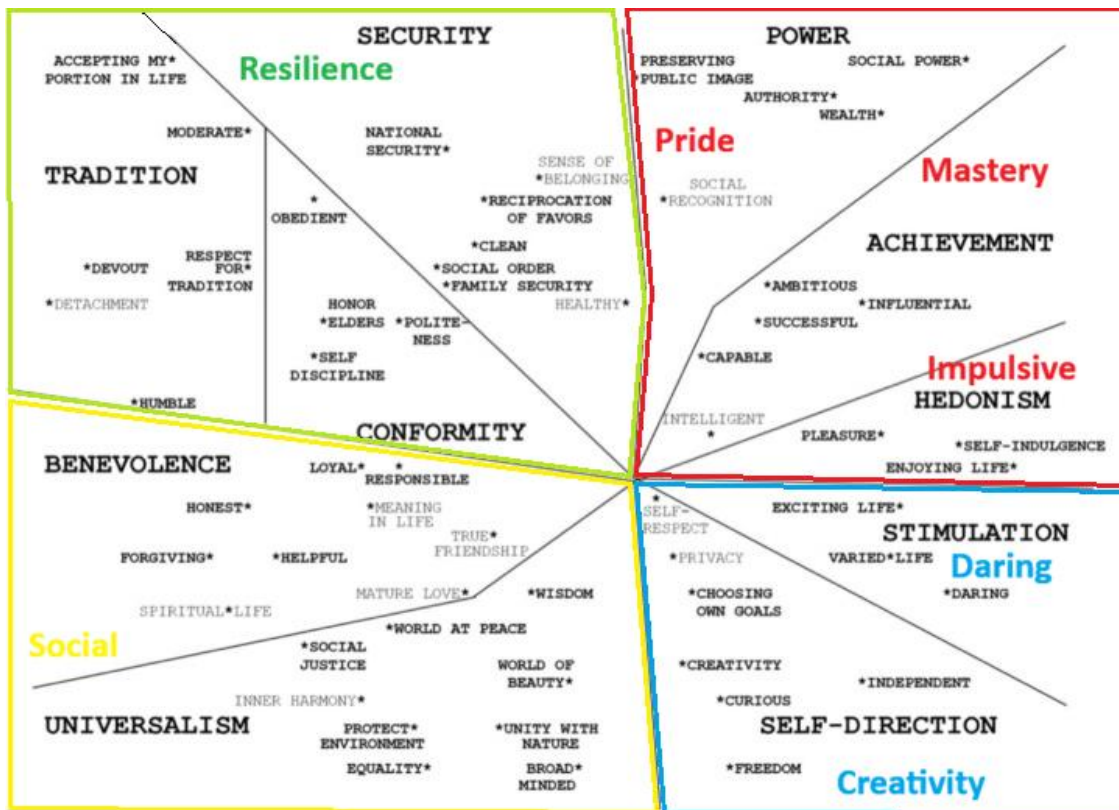


Figure 2. 2-Dimensional Smallest Space Analysis: Individual Level Value Structure Averaged Across 68 Countries

Schwartz's 10 basic values are organized into two bipolar dimensions:

- **Dimension A:** Openness to Change ↔ Conservation
- **Dimension B:** Self-Enhancement ↔ Self-Transcendence

These yield four higher-order value types:

| Canonical | Constituent values | Function Category |
|--------------------|--|------------------------|
| Openness to Change | Self-Direction, Stimulation, (partly Hedonism) | Creativity |
| Conservation | Security, Conformity, Tradition | Stability / Resilience |
| Self-Enhancement | Power, Achievement, (partly Hedonism) | Exploration |
| Self-Transcendence | Benevolence, Universalism | Social |

PLUTCHIK'S DIMENSIONS OF EMOTION

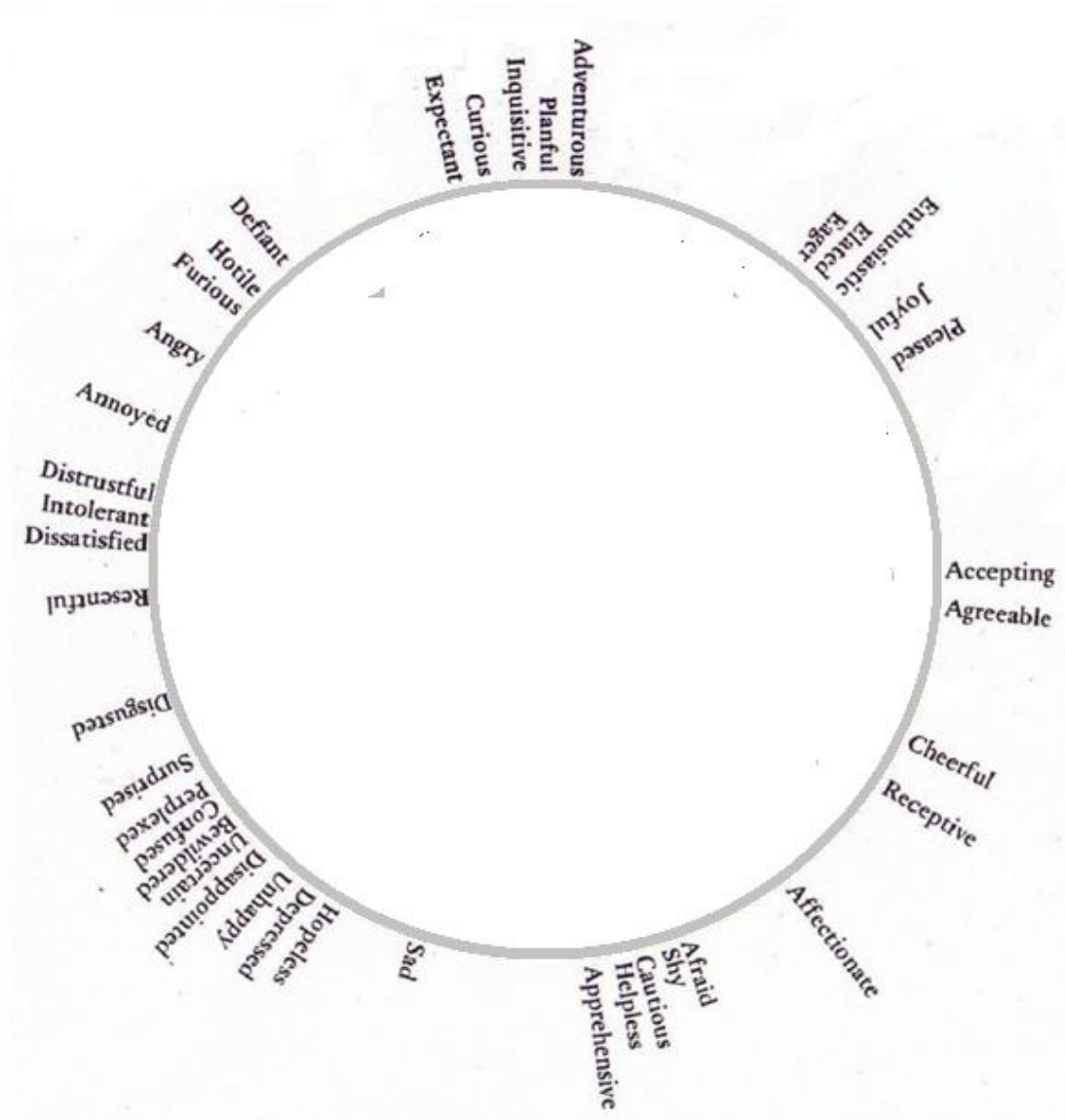
Finally, I looked at the emotions, to see how they clustered into groups.

Researchers in the psychology of the emotions set out to make a list of all the emotions.

The researchers then asked many thousands of subjects to rate each emotion according to its similarity or dissimilarity to each of the other emotions. When this was completed, analysis of the results revealed an interesting pattern. What they uncovered was a map of all the emotions.

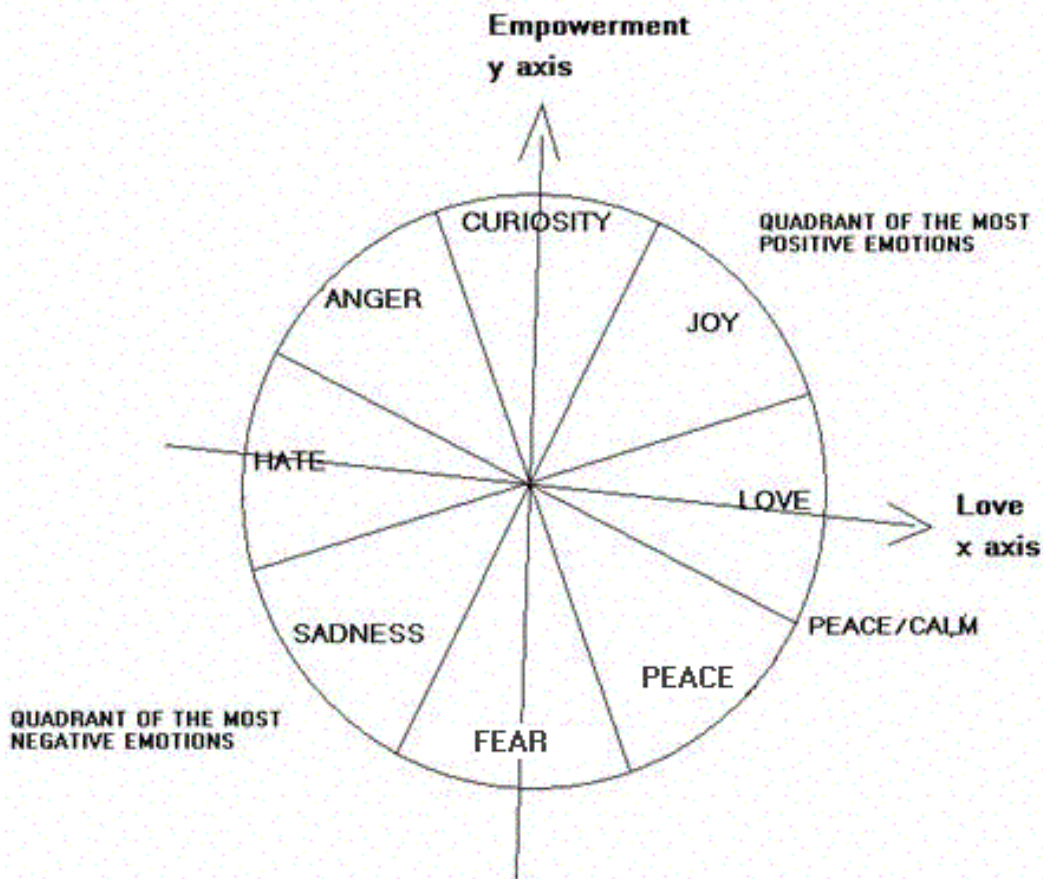
The emotions were arranged in a CIRCLE as shown in the diagram below.

Note that the nearer an emotion is to another emotion on the circumference of the circle – the more similar it is to that emotion, where-as emotions that are opposite one another on the circle are least similar – in fact they are polar opposites



*Angular Placements for a Population
of Emotion Terms*

| <i>Emotion</i> | <i>Angular placement (degrees)</i> | <i>Emotion</i> | <i>Angular placement (degrees)</i> | <i>Emotion</i> | <i>Angular placement (degrees)</i> |
|----------------|--|----------------|--|-----------------|--|
| Accepting | 0.0 | Rejected | 136.0 | Impatient | 230.3 |
| Agreeable | 5.0 | Bored | 136.0 | Grouchy | 230.0 |
| Serene | 12.3 | Disappointed | 136.7 | Defiant | 230.7 |
| Cheerful | 25.7 | Vacillating | 137.3 | Aggressive | 232.0 |
| Receptive | 32.3 | Discouraged | 138.0 | Sarcastic | 235.3 |
| Calm | 37.0 | Puzzled | 138.3 | Rebellious | 237.0 |
| Patient | 39.7 | Uncertain | 139.3 | Exasperated | 239.7 |
| Obliging | 43.3 | Bewildered | 140.3 | Disobedient | 242.7 |
| Affectionate | 52.3 | Confused | 141.3 | Demanding | 244.0 |
| Obedient | 57.7 | Perplexed | 142.3 | Possessive | 247.7 |
| Timid | 65.0 | Ambivalent | 144.7 | Greedy | 249.0 |
| Scared | 66.7 | Surprised | 146.7 | Wondering | 249.7 |
| Panicky | 67.7 | Astonished | 148.0 | Impulsive | 255.0 |
| Afraid | 70.3 | Amazed | 152.0 | Anticipatory | 257.0 |
| Shy | 72.0 | Awed | 156.7 | Boastful | 257.3 |
| Submissive | 73.0 | Envious | 160.3 | Expectant | 257.3 |
| Bashful | 74.7 | Disgusted | 161.3 | Daring | 260.1 |
| Embarrassed | 75.3 | Unsympathetic | 165.6 | Curious | 261.0 |
| Terrified | 75.7 | Unreceptive | 170.0 | Reckless | 261.0 |
| Pensive | 76.7 | Indignant | 175.0 | Proud | 262.0 |
| Cautious | 77.7 | Disagreeable | 176.4 | Inquisitive | 267.7 |
| Anxious | 78.3 | Resentful | 176.7 | Planful | 269.7 |
| Helpless | 80.0 | Revolted | 181.3 | Adventurous | 270.7 |
| Apprehensive | 83.3 | Displeased | 181.5 | Ecstatic | 286.0 |
| Self-conscious | 83.3 | Suspicious | 182.7 | Sociable | 296.7 |
| Ashamed | 83.3 | Dissatisfied | 183.0 | Hopeful | 298.0 |
| Humiliated | 84.0 | Contrary | 184.3 | Gleeful | 307.0 |
| Forlorn | 85.0 | Jealous | 184.7 | Elated | 311.0 |
| Nervous | 86.0 | Intolerant | 185.0 | Eager | 311.0 |
| Lonely | 88.3 | Distrustful | 185.0 | Enthusiastic | 313.7 |
| Apathetic | 90.0 | Vengeful | 186.0 | Interested | 315.7 |
| Meek | 91.0 | Bitter | 186.0 | Delighted | 318.6 |
| Guilty | 102.3 | Unfriendly | 188.0 | Amused | 321.0 |
| Sad | 108.5 | Stubborn | 190.4 | Attentive | 322.4 |
| Sorrowful | 112.7 | Uncooperative | 191.7 | Joyful | 323.4 |
| Empty | 120.3 | Contemptuous | 192.0 | Happy | 323.7 |
| Remorseful | 123.3 | Loathful | 193.0 | Self-controlled | 326.3 |
| Hopeless | 124.7 | Critical | 193.7 | Satisfied | 326.7 |
| Depressed | 125.3 | Annoyed | 200.6 | Pleased | 328.0 |
| Worried | 126.0 | Irritated | 202.3 | Generous | 328.0 |
| Disinterested | 127.3 | Angry | 212.0 | Ready | 329.3 |
| Grief-stricken | 127.3 | Antagonistic | 220.0 | Sympathetic | 331.3 |
| Unhappy | 129.0 | Furious | 221.3 | Content | 338.3 |
| Gloomy | 132.7 | Hostile | 222.0 | Cooperative | 340.7 |
| Despairing | 133.0 | Outraged | 225.3 | Trusting | 345.3 |
| Watchful | 133.3 | Scornful | 227.0 | Tolerant | 350.7 |
| Hesitant | 134.0 | Unaffectionate | 227.3 | | |
| Indecisive | 134.0 | Quarrelsome | 229.7 | | |



Further analysis revealed that the emotions cluster into 8 main groups characterized by the following 8 labels. (Diagram 2)

- Joy
- Love
- Peace
- Fear
- Sadness
- Hate
- Anger
- Curiosity

These 8 groups form 4 pairs of opposites.

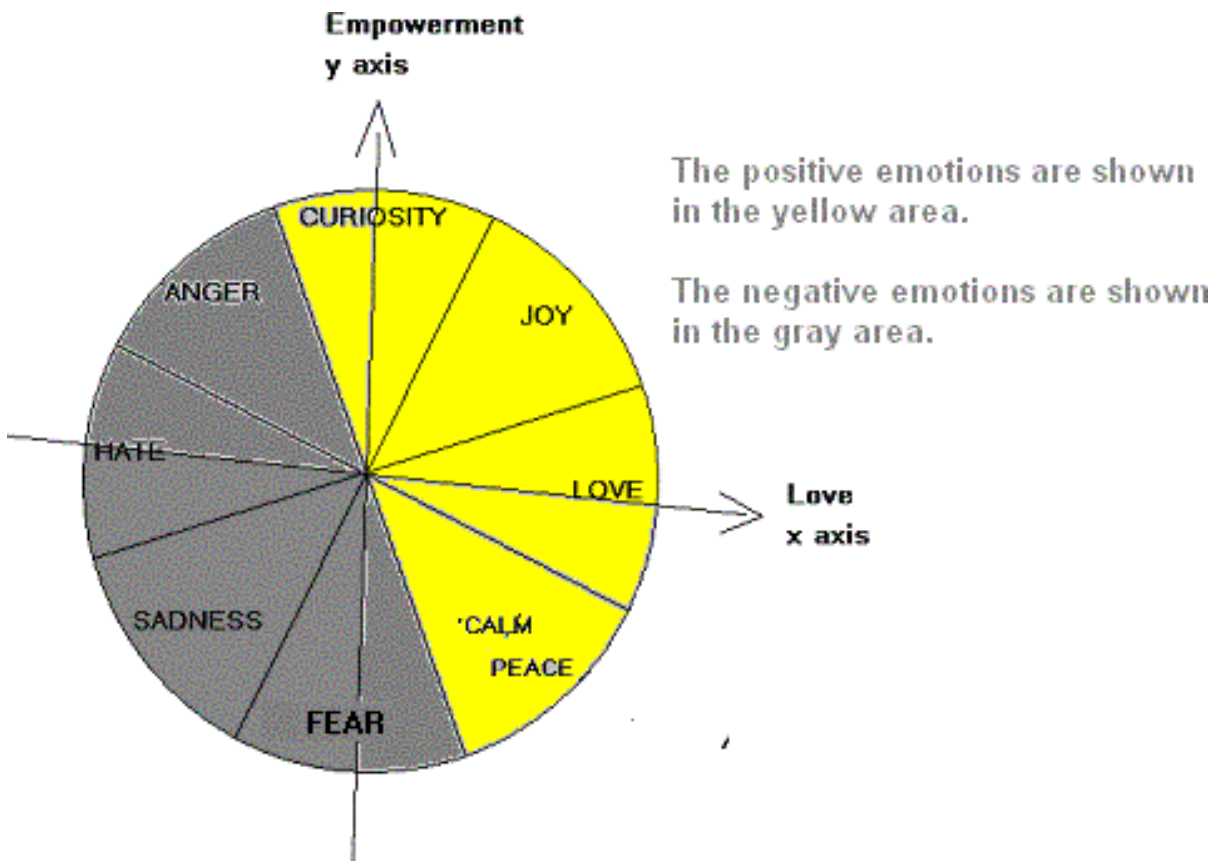
- Love and Hate
- Joy and Sadness
- Anger and Peace
- Exploration and Fear

There are 2 main axes or dimensions

- X-axis – representing approach-avoidance, inclusion-exclusion, warmth-cold
- Y-axis – representing exploration-withdrawal

Notice that these two dimensions match those of Schwartz, so we can now see which emotions correspond to each of the values in the Schwartz value map.

NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE



Each of these emotions were also rated in terms of their positive-ness and desirability. The emotion-circle furnishes us with a map as to where the positive emotions lie in relation to the other darker emotions.

When we take a closer look at the emotions making up each of these 4 emotional dimensions -

Love and Hate
Joy and Sadness
Anger and Peace
Exploration and Fear

we find that there is a very strong mapping of the 4 emotional dimensions onto the 4 functional categories.

- Curiosity → Exploration
- Joy → Creativity
- Love → Social integration
- Peace → Resilience

VIRTUE AND FLOURISHING

Virtue professes to aim at human flourishing as its end or purpose, and manifests in four fundamental categories of activity, identifiable both empirically (e.g., through factor analysis of values and behaviour) and conceptually.

These four dimensions of virtue are:

- Stability / resilience
- Unity / integration (social and interpersonal coherence)
- Exploration
- Creativity

Now, compare this to the **capacities required for the flourishing of any living system**.

Every living organism:

- Is an **integrated whole** that must coordinate its parts (integration),
- Must maintain itself against entropy and disruption (stability),
- Must engage its environment to acquire resources and information (exploration),
- Must adapt to changing conditions through flexible reorganization (creativity).

Living systems are characterized by organized persistence, integrated function, adaptive responsiveness, and the capacity for flexible change under environmental variation.

So, virtues align with the core viability capacities of living systems, and so it follows logically that virtues promote wellbeing and reduce suffering.

- Premise 1: For a living system to flourish rather than fail, it must maintain integrated order while adapting and growing. This requires stability, integration, exploration, and creativity.
- Premise 2: Virtues are behavioural patterns that support these activities.
- Conclusion: Virtuous behaviour supports flourishing and wellbeing and reduces suffering.

Virtue, therefore, serves the objective end of human flourishing **because its component behaviours are essential to life itself**.

When the virtues operate together, they generate not merely survival, but the maintenance and expansion of integrated unity — that is, flourishing.

VIRTUE AND EMOTIONS

We only feel emotion when something matters to us – when a thing we value is affected. Positive emotions are how we feel when what we value is being realised. Negative emotions are how we feel when what we value is being frustrated or threatened. See [emotions-values5.pdf](#)

“Emotions are not problems but signals carrying valuable information about your needs, values, and well-being... Every emotion carries information about what matters most to you — your safety, values, relationships, and well-being.”

— [Psychology Today](#) (2025) on the role of emotions as *signals* of what is valuable or threatened.

“Emotions and values are fundamentally connected... according to appraisal theories of emotion, emotions arise when value concerns are at stake; according to theories of value, a value that is threatened or supported gets infused with feelings.”

— [From values to emotions: Cognitive appraisal mediates the impact of core values on emotional experience](#)

This meta-analysis summarizes hundreds of studies showing that cognitive appraisals — the evaluations we make about events relative to our goals/values — reliably produce specific emotions.

— [“Associations between cognitive appraisals and emotions: A meta-analytic review”](#)

Flourishing is something we value, so we can see that virtue (human flourishing) will generate positive emotion and wellbeing. We found that virtue has 4 components, and these give rise the 4 primary positive emotions.

- Exploration → Curiosity
- Creativity → Joy
- Social Integration → Love
- Stability → Peace

Corresponding negative emotions signal when we are not aligned with these activities –

- Fear = withdrawal, refusing to explore
- Sadness = loss, absence of creativity
- Hate = separation, absence of integration, disunity
- Anger = conflict, external threat

Consequently, **virtue gives rise to positive emotions in a reliable and consistent way** because it establishes what we value – namely the flourishing of the individual and the wellbeing of society.

OBJECTIVE PURPOSE

Living systems proliferate with structures and processes that are goal-directed – in other words, they embed purpose. Their purposiveness is objective, and empirically observable, and so exists independent of our awareness or acknowledgement. (see <https://howbad.info/goal-directedness.pdf>).

Each of the dimensions of virtue is enabled by human physical structures and processes that are highly goal-directed and purposeful

- Stability → homeostasis, regulation, stress tolerance
- Integration → coordination, signalling, language, emotion, social bonding
- Exploration → movement, sensation, curiosity-driven behaviour
- Creativity → cognition, imagination, symbolic thought, behavioural reconfiguration

So, we can think of flourishing as an objective purpose. An end that we are meant to achieve. Something that *we are meant to be*.

Objective purpose is always experienced as *a sense of how things are meant to be*. When a free agent apprehends an end, they do not merely perceive a fact; they perceive what their intended state is, and they perceive whether they are aligned with that intended state. So objective purpose appears as *an awareness of what would complete, fulfil, or properly order a situation*.

Perception of an intended goal or end will be experienced as an awareness of how a thing should be, how it "ought to be".

The "*ought*" is not added later - it is built into the perception of the end, and this generates a moral obligation.

ADAM'S ETHIC

Adam's ethic can be understood as **alignment with objective purpose** (Goodness) rather than obedience to externally imposed rules as such. In the Genesis narrative, Adam is portrayed as existing in a world where the good is immediately intelligible: creation is ordered, meaningful, and "very good," and Adam's task is to *participate* in that order — to "till and keep," to name, to relate, to steward. These are not arbitrary duties but **expressions of what human beings are for – their objective purpose**. Moral life, in this state, is fundamentally teleological: to act well is to act in accordance with the purposes implicit in creation and in human nature itself.

God declared the creation to be Good, and Good implies that there was an intended state – a basis for that evaluation - it was what it was meant to be.

Objective purpose generates moral obligation because purpose introduces **real standards of success and failure** into the structure of life, and a free agent who can recognize those standards becomes answerable to them. To grasp what a being is for is already to grasp how it ought to be treated and how one ought to act. Moral obligation is thus not imposed from outside but arises internally from the intelligibility of objective ends as apprehended by agency.

This gives rise to moral norms such as –

- "Do not treat a creature against its intended nature"
- "First do no harm"
- "Do not cause unnecessary suffering"

From Aristotle through Aquinas to contemporary virtue ethicists such as Anscombe, Foot, and MacIntyre, a consistent philosophical tradition holds that **the perception of objective purpose in nature grounds moral normativity**. To grasp what a being is for is already to grasp standards of its proper functioning, and in the case of rational agents, this recognition gives rise to moral obligation. Moral norms are thus not imposed upon nature but arise from the intelligibility of ends as apprehended by reason.