

Moral charisma: The power of virtue

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What is moral charisma?

We all know what charisma is: that special charm some people radiate that draws others to them. But have you ever heard of moral charisma?

Confucian scholar Philip Ivanhoe, who first identified this idea in ancient Chinese ethics, defines moral charisma as “the natural attraction one feels toward morally great individuals.” In classical Chinese philosophy, the traditional term for virtue (de) implies “a power over others, but one that paradoxically cannot be used to manipulate others for one’s own private ends.” - Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, 2000)

A magnetic sway

Those who are virtuous exercise a sort of magnetic sway over other people due to their moral completeness and their lack of interest in the usual objects of desire, such as wealth, fame, and power. They are charismatic specifically because they do not want to manipulate others for their own private ends. They usually have more cosmic goals in mind.

Examples of moral charisma

Moral charisma has traditionally been downplayed in Western philosophy in favour of theoretical investigations of morality. But that doesn’t mean it’s not important. Socrates, the father of Western philosophy, had moral charisma in spades. Just listen to how Alcibiades describes Socrates’ influence over him: “Whenever I hear him speak, I get more ecstatic than the Corybantes! My heart pounds and tears flood from my eyes under the spell of his words. I’ve seen him have the same effect on plenty of others too...” - Plato, *Symposium*.

This description of Socrates highlights the “personal magic” that so inspired his friends. In fact, you might say that Socrates’

moral charisma was an essential aspect of his philosophical persona; he just wouldn’t have been Socrates without it. The unsettling effect he had on people drove some to love him and some to hate him, but no one could ignore him.

Stoic philosophers also used moral charisma to great effect in their teaching. Epictetus said of his teacher, Musonius Rufus, that “He used to speak in such a way that each of us, as we sat in front of him, would imagine that someone must have been informing him of our faults, since he showed such a sure touch in assessing our condition, and setting each man’s failings before our eyes.” - Epictetus, *Discourses*, 3.23.29.

And Epictetus, in his turn, inspired similar feelings in his students. In his preface to the *Discourses*, Epictetus’ student Arrian wrote, “When Epictetus was speaking, the listener was compelled to feel just what Epictetus wanted him to feel.”

These great moral teachers are great not because of their theoretical command of doctrine, but because their moral compass is so finely calibrated that it can point even the most wayward student in the right direction. Their inner vision shines so brightly – in perfect alignment with their words and behaviour – that they can light the way for others.

Learning is more than transmission

For those of us who see philosophy as a way of life, learning is not merely a transmission of doctrine but a communicative event, a personal interaction, even if it takes place from afar. So let’s remember, as we look for moral teachers, that while theory is important, so is finding a person who can inspire inner transformation. Choose your teachers and role models not just for their knowledge, and certainly not just for their charisma, but for their personal moral commitment that will, in turn, lead you to your own.