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Applying Aristotelian Ethics to Combat Corruption in Indonesia: Virtue, Moral Education, and Ethical Governance

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Abstract. Corruption remains a persistent challenge in Indonesia because it weakens public trust, undermines welfare, and obstructs equitable development. This article examines how Aristotle's virtue ethics can contribute to anti-corruption efforts by addressing the moral roots of corrupt behavior. The study argues that corruption is not only a legal or administrative violation but also a failure of character, judgment, and commitment to the common good. Using a qualitative conceptual design, the article employs philosophical analysis, a structured literature review, and Socratic questioning to examine the relationship between virtue, leadership, and public integrity. The analysis identifies three principal roots of corruption: weak moral character, poor ethical judgment, and self-interest over the common good. It shows that Aristotelian ethics offers an integrated response through the cultivation of moral virtue, intellectual virtue, and practical wisdom. The findings suggest that virtue-based ethics is most effective when combined with anti-corruption education, ethical leadership, stronger rule-of-law implementation, and institutional arrangements that reduce opportunities for abuse of power. Aristotle's framework does not provide a complete solution, but it offers a valuable normative foundation for strengthening ethical public culture in Indonesia.

Keywords: Aristotle; Corruption; Ethical Governance; Indonesia; Virtue Ethics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Corruption is one of the most destructive obstacles to democratic governance and social development because it diverts public resources, distorts decision-making, normalizes unfair privilege, and erodes citizens' trust in institutions. In the Indonesian context, corruption remains a pressing public concern, not merely because of its legal consequences, but because it has direct implications for welfare, education, public services, and social justice. Official national statistics underscore this concern. The 2024 Anti-Corruption Behavior Index reached 3.85 on a scale of 0 to 5, lower than the 2023 score of 3.92, indicating that anti-corruption behavior has weakened rather than strengthened (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2024). At the institutional level, the Corruption Eradication Commission formally defines its anti-corruption mandate through three broad strategies, namely education, prevention, and enforcement (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, n.d.). These realities suggest that corruption in Indonesia cannot be understood only as a matter of criminal enforcement. It must also be examined as a problem of ethical formation and public culture.

Much anti-corruption scholarship has focused on legal sanctions, institutional design, monitoring mechanisms, compliance systems, and administrative accountability. These are indispensable. Yet such approaches often concentrate more on acts than on agents, more on detection than disposition, and more on compliance than character. This creates an important gap. Corruption is enacted by persons who make choices, rationalize wrongdoing, and often

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place personal gain above public duty. A framework that ignores moral character risks treating corruption as a purely technical malfunction rather than as a moral failure embedded in habits, desires, judgments, and institutional cultures.

This article addresses that gap by turning to Aristotle's virtue ethics. Aristotle's moral philosophy remains influential because it asks not only what actions are right or wrong, but what kind of person one should become. Ethics in this tradition is grounded in habituation, practical wisdom, and the cultivation of virtues that orient action toward the good life and the common good (Aristotle & Ross, 2017; D'souza & Introna, 2024; Hursthouse, 1999). Virtue ethics is especially relevant to corruption because corruption flourishes where greed overrides justice, where self-control is weak, where judgment is distorted by immediate advantage, and where leadership loses sight of collective wellbeing. Aristotle's emphasis on honesty, temperance, justice, prudence, and civic responsibility offers a way to address corruption at its moral roots rather than only at its administrative surface.

The research problem of this article is not simply whether corruption is wrong, because that is already well established. The deeper question is how Aristotelian ethics can be applied to reduce corruption in Indonesia by confronting the root causes that make corrupt behavior thinkable, attractive, and socially tolerated. The article retains three central causes identified in the study's conceptual framework: weak moral character, poor ethical judgment, and self-interest over the common good. These causes are examined through Aristotle's distinction between moral and intellectual virtues, and through his account of practical wisdom as the capacity to deliberate well about right action.

The objective of the article is to explore how Aristotle's virtue ethics can be applied to anti-corruption efforts in Indonesia and to explain why virtue formation should complement legal and institutional reform. The article argues that corruption cannot be sustainably reduced unless public ethics is strengthened through character education, ethical leadership, habituation in honesty and fairness, and institutional arrangements that discourage the concentration and misuse of power. This argument is consistent with work that positions virtue ethics as a complement to auditing, monitoring, and administrative controls rather than as a substitute for them (Garofalo et al., 2001). It also resonates with scholarship that frames anti-corruption discourse within virtue ethics and highlights the role of integrity and practical wisdom in public administration (Everett et al., 2006; van Steden, 2020).

The contribution of this study is fourfold. First, it repositions corruption in Indonesia as a problem of moral formation as well as governance. Second, it clarifies how moral virtue and intellectual virtue can illuminate the ethical dimensions of corruption. Third, it offers a

structured virtue-based framework for anti-corruption education and leadership development. Fourth, it recognizes the limits of Aristotle's thought in modern governance and therefore proposes a complementary model in which virtue, law, and institutions operate together rather than in isolation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics and the Moral Formation of Character

Aristotle's ethics begins from the claim that human beings aim at the good, and that the highest human good is eudaimonia, often translated as flourishing or living well (Aristotle & Ross, 2017; Miller & Zalta, 2017). Flourishing is not equivalent to pleasure, wealth, or status. It is achieved through rational activity in accordance with virtue. For Aristotle, ethics is not merely a matter of rule-following. It is a matter of becoming the kind of person who habitually chooses well. Virtues are stable dispositions formed through repeated action. People become just by doing just actions, temperate by practicing self-restraint, and courageous by facing fear rightly.

This emphasis on habituation is critical for anti-corruption analysis. If character is shaped by repeated conduct, then corruption is not only an isolated crime but also a vice that can become normalized through repeated rationalization and reward. Conversely, integrity is not a spontaneous moral event but a cultivated disposition. Virtue ethics thus offers a framework for understanding why anti-corruption must begin before an official confronts a bribe, a procurement decision, or a conflict of interest. It begins with the kind of character that has been formed over time.

Contemporary virtue ethicists have reinforced Aristotle's insight. Virtue ethics directs attention to the moral agent rather than merely to isolated acts (Hursthouse, 1999). The central ethical question becomes what kind of person one should be rather than only what rule one should follow (Doris & Stich, 2007). Virtue concerns not only outward behavior but also the quality of will and the desire to do what is good (Mion et al., 2023). Virtues sustain social practices and communities by enabling trust, responsibility, and shared standards of excellence (MacIntyre, 2013). Becoming virtuous resembles acquiring a practical skill through continuous practice, so that good judgment becomes more stable, intelligent, and embodied (Annas, 2011).

Moral Virtue, Intellectual Virtue, and Practical Wisdom

Aristotle distinguishes moral virtue from intellectual virtue, and that distinction is especially useful for this study. Moral virtues regulate desires, emotions, and conduct. They include honesty, justice, temperance, fairness, and self-control. Intellectual virtues concern

reasoning, understanding, and sound judgment. Among them, practical wisdom, or phronesis, is central because it enables a person to deliberate appropriately about how to act in concrete situations (Aristotle & Ross, 2017).

This distinction matters for corruption because corrupt behavior often involves both moral weakness and intellectual distortion. An official may know that an act is wrong but lack self-control, or may rationalize corruption as normal, necessary, or harmless because judgment itself has been corrupted. Practical wisdom is therefore indispensable. It helps a person perceive what is ethically significant in a situation, resist immediate gain, weigh consequences in relation to the common good, and choose a mean that reflects justice rather than excess or deficiency.

Aristotelian practical wisdom has important implications for public integrity because it links good governance not simply to rule compliance but to the cultivated judgment of public professionals who must align their work with a substantive vision of the good (van Steden, 2020). This reinforces the relevance of Aristotle for public administration. It suggests that integrity is not exhausted by the absence of violations. It also requires moral wholeness, sound judgment, and excellence in professional practice.

Corruption as a Moral, Political, and Institutional Problem

Corruption is commonly defined as the abuse of public power for private gain (Dimant & Schulte, 2016). This definition remains influential because it captures the basic movement from public trust to private benefit. Yet corruption is more than a transactional offense. It is also a moral and social phenomenon. It damages trust, rewards cynicism, weakens institutions, and signals that public office is a tool of personal enrichment rather than public service.

Corruption can be explained partly in terms of monopoly, discretion, and weak accountability (Klitgaard, 1988). This institutional perspective remains indispensable because it shows how corrupt opportunities are structured. However, institutional opportunity does not entirely explain why some agents succumb to corruption while others resist it. Self-justification and gradual moral compromise can make unethical behavior appear acceptable (Ariely & Jones, 2012). Wrongdoing can become normalized when critical judgment weakens (Arendt, 2022). These perspectives complement virtue ethics by showing that corruption thrives when moral reflection is shallow, institutional incentives are misaligned, and vice becomes habitual.

Recent scholarship has also explored corruption through ethical frameworks beyond legal compliance. Global anti-corruption discourse can be fruitfully understood through a virtue ethics lens because virtue ethics highlights the moral formation of agents and the ethical assumptions beneath institutional reform (Everett et al., 2006). Virtue ethics should supplement

monitoring, financial controls, and auditing by emphasizing character development and universal ethical commitments across cultures (Garofalo et al., 2001). This literature supports the present study's central claim that anti-corruption is weakened when it relies only on external controls and neglects internal moral formation (Pildes, 1997).

Corruption in Indonesia and the Need for Ethical Complementarity

In Indonesia, anti-corruption efforts have long involved statutory regulation, enforcement mechanisms, public education, and institutional innovation. The national anti-corruption framework explicitly combines education, prevention, and enforcement, which itself suggests that law alone is insufficient (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, n.d.). Yet the continuing salience of corruption in public discourse indicates that institutional enforcement must be reinforced by a stronger ethical culture. That ethical culture cannot be reduced to slogans. It requires sustained habituation in honesty, accountability, civic-mindedness, and prudent judgment.

This is where Aristotle's relevance becomes clearer. Aristotle does not deny the importance of law. Rather, he sees good laws and good habits as mutually reinforcing. Character is shaped by education, political order, and communal standards. For this reason, virtue ethics offers a framework that links personal ethics and public institutions rather than separating them absolutely. At the same time, important limitations must be acknowledged. Aristotle wrote for a very different social and political context. His framework does not provide detailed institutional strategies for contemporary bureaucratic states, nor does it adequately resolve the complexities of large-scale democratic governance, party politics, procurement systems, or digital financial crime. A further limitation lies in the exclusionary social assumptions embedded in parts of Aristotelian political thought, which do not align comfortably with modern democratic equality (Schwartzberg, 2016).

The literature therefore points toward a balanced conclusion. Virtue ethics is not a replacement for anti-corruption law, oversight, and organizational reform. It is a normative foundation that can deepen them. The relevant research gap lies precisely here: anti-corruption debates in Indonesia often emphasize enforcement and institutional design, while the moral formation of agents, the role of practical wisdom, and the cultivation of public virtue receive comparatively less sustained attention. This article addresses that gap by integrating Aristotelian ethics with anti-corruption thinking in a focused Indonesian framework.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative conceptual research design. It does not seek to measure corruption statistically or test causal hypotheses through surveys or experiments. Instead, it examines how an ethical theory can illuminate a social and political problem and generate a coherent framework for analysis and practical response. A qualitative design is appropriate because the object of inquiry is normative and interpretive: the study investigates moral concepts, evaluative judgments, and the ethical dimensions of public behavior rather than numerical relationships alone (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The research draws on three complementary methods: philosophical analysis, structured literature review, and Socratic questioning. First, philosophical analysis is used to clarify key Aristotelian concepts such as virtue, habituation, justice, temperance, and practical wisdom, and to connect them to corruption as a moral problem. Primary attention is given to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, especially the relationship between moral virtue, intellectual virtue, and deliberative judgment (Aristotle & Ross, 2017). Secondary philosophical sources are used to support interpretation and contemporary application, including works by Hursthouse, Foot, MacIntyre, Annas, and Kraut.

Second, a structured literature review was conducted to identify relevant scholarship on corruption, public integrity, ethics in public administration, and virtue-based approaches to governance. The review prioritized peer reviewed journal articles, established academic books, and authoritative institutional sources relevant to Indonesia's anti-corruption context. The purpose of the literature review was not exhaustive bibliographic coverage but analytical relevance. Sources were selected because they helped explain either the roots of corruption, the importance of moral character, or the connection between virtue ethics and institutional life.

Third, the study uses Socratic questioning as an analytic device. Rather than treating virtue ethics as a fixed doctrine mechanically applied to Indonesia, the study asks guiding questions that clarify the problem. What kind of moral failure is corruption? Which virtues are lacking in corrupt action? Can legal compliance exist without integrity? How does practical wisdom alter decision-making in ethically difficult situations? What is lost when anti-corruption policy focuses only on penalties? These questions structure the analysis and help move from abstract philosophy to practical ethical interpretation.

The data sources therefore consist of textual materials rather than participants. These include classical philosophical texts, contemporary virtue ethics scholarship, corruption literature, and official Indonesian institutional materials that establish the public significance

of the issue. The study treats these texts as conceptual data to be interpreted rather than as neutral repositories of facts.

Data analysis proceeded through thematic categorization and analytical synthesis. The selected literature was examined for recurring themes related to the causes of corruption, the role of character, the meaning of public integrity, and the institutional implications of virtue ethics. From this process, three core corruption causes and four major analytical findings were developed. These findings were then compared with prior scholarship to assess coherence, originality, and practical relevance. The goal of the method is interpretive rigor: to develop a logically consistent argument about how Aristotelian ethics can contribute to anti-corruption efforts in Indonesia while remaining attentive to the limits of philosophical application.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Corruption as a Failure of Character

The first finding is that corruption should be understood not only as a breach of law or administrative procedure but also as a defect of character. The study identified three moral roots that recur throughout the conceptual material: weak moral character, poor ethical judgment, and self-interest over the common good. Weak moral character refers to the absence of stable virtues such as honesty, temperance, fairness, and integrity. Poor ethical judgment refers to the inability to evaluate actions prudently, especially when short-term gain conflicts with long-term justice. Self-interest over the common good refers to a political and moral orientation in which office is used for personal advantage rather than civic responsibility.

Aristotle's framework helps explain why these three factors are interconnected. A person without good habits is more vulnerable to temptation; a person without practical wisdom is more likely to rationalize wrongdoing; and a person whose moral horizon is narrowed to self-interest cannot sustain justice in public office. Corruption, therefore, appears as a vice sustained by habituation, rationalization, and the degradation of civic purpose.

Virtue, Judgment, and Anti-Corruption

The second finding is that Aristotle's distinction between moral virtue and intellectual virtue offers a powerful way to diagnose corrupt conduct. Moral virtue is necessary because corruption frequently involves greed, excess, lack of self-control, and injustice. Intellectual virtue is necessary because anti-corruption also requires discernment, prudent deliberation, and the capacity to identify ethically significant aspects of complex situations.

This joint structure is important. Anti-corruption is often framed as though moral conviction alone is sufficient. The analysis suggests otherwise. Good intentions without practical wisdom may still fail in contexts of institutional ambiguity, political pressure, or normalized impropriety. Likewise, intelligence without moral virtue can become merely strategic rationalization. Aristotelian ethics resists this separation by insisting that good action emerges when desire and reason are both rightly formed.

Moral Education for Anti-Corruption

The third finding is that education is not an optional supplement but a central anti-corruption mechanism. Aristotle's ethics emphasizes habituation from an early stage of life. The study's analysis supports the claim that anti-corruption education should not be confined to legal awareness or compliance training. It should include the cultivation of honesty, fairness, self-restraint, civic responsibility, and reflective judgment across educational stages.

This finding applies both to schools and to public institutions. In schools, ethical formation can prepare future citizens and leaders to recognize corruption as a violation of both justice and communal trust. In government and public service, ethics education can support leadership formation, judgment under pressure, and resistance to practices that have become informally normalized. The official anti-corruption framework in Indonesia emphasizes education, prevention, and enforcement, which is consistent with this integrated view (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, n.d.).

Virtue Ethics and Institutional Reform

The fourth finding is that virtue ethics is strongest when treated as a complement to institutional reform rather than a replacement for it. Aristotle's moral thought highlights character, but his political thought also recognizes the importance of constitutional balance and the dangers of concentrated power. In contemporary terms, this suggests that anti-corruption requires both virtuous agents and institutions designed to constrain vice.

The analysis therefore supports a combined model in which virtue formation, legal enforcement, transparent procedures, ethical leadership, and balanced authority operate together. This integrated relationship between the moral roots of corruption and Aristotelian ethical responses is summarized in Table 1, which maps common corruption drivers to relevant Aristotelian concepts and corresponding practical interventions. This conclusion aligns with arguments that virtue ethics should work alongside auditing and monitoring, and with scholarship showing that anti-corruption discourse benefits from deeper ethical framing (Everett et al., 2006; Garofalo et al., 2001).

Table 1. Linking Corruption Causes to Aristotelian Ethics.

Root Cause Of Corruption	Aristotelian Concept	Ethical Implication	Practical Anti-Corruption Response
Weak moral character	Moral virtue	Corruption reflects deficient habits such as dishonesty, greed, and lack of self-control	Character education, integrity training, role-model leadership
Poor ethical judgment	Intellectual virtue, especially practical wisdom	Officials may rationalize wrongdoing or fail to deliberate well	Ethics-based decision training, reflective leadership development, case deliberation
Self-interest over common good	Justice and civic virtue	Public office is treated as private property rather than public trust	Civic education, service-oriented leadership, institutional accountability
Abuse enabled by concentrated power	Political balance and rule-guided order	Vice becomes easier when oversight is weak	Checks and balances, transparent processes, enforcement and monitoring

Discussion

The findings show that Aristotelian ethics provides a useful framework for understanding corruption in Indonesia beyond legal and administrative categories. Corruption is not only a violation of rules but also a manifestation of weak character, poor ethical judgment, and diminished commitment to the common good. This perspective helps explain why corruption often persists despite the existence of formal regulations, sanctions, and supervisory mechanisms. Rules may constrain conduct, but they do not automatically cultivate integrity.

This study reinforces the argument that anti-corruption efforts should address both institutions and moral agents. Legal enforcement, transparent procedures, and accountability systems remain essential, but they are unlikely to be fully effective when ethical culture is weak. Aristotelian ethics clarifies that corruption is sustained not only by opportunity and inadequate oversight but also by habits of greed, rationalization, and self-interest. In this sense, virtue ethics complements institutional approaches by focusing on the moral formation of individuals who exercise public authority.

The distinction between moral virtue and intellectual virtue is especially important for interpreting corrupt behavior. Moral virtue concerns honesty, justice, and self-restraint, while intellectual virtue, particularly practical wisdom, concerns sound judgment in concrete situations (Aristotle & Ross, 2017). Corruption often reflects the failure of both. Officials may lack the character to resist illicit gain, but they may also fail to judge ethically in situations shaped by pressure, ambiguity, or normalized misconduct. This finding supports the view that public integrity requires not only compliance but also the cultivated ability to deliberate well about what is right (van Steden, 2020).

The analysis also highlights the importance of education and habituation. In Aristotelian ethics, virtue is developed through repeated practice, not merely through abstract instruction. This suggests that anti-corruption education should extend beyond legal awareness and include the formation of honesty, fairness, responsibility, and civic commitment. Such ethical formation is relevant both in schools and in professional settings, particularly in leadership development and public service training. This conclusion is consistent with the Indonesian anti-corruption framework that emphasizes education, prevention, and enforcement as interconnected strategies (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, n.d.).

At the practical level, the study suggests that virtue ethics is most effective when combined with institutional reform. Aristotle's framework offers a strong moral basis for anti-corruption, but it does not replace the need for legal enforcement, transparent governance, and effective oversight. A virtue-based approach should therefore be understood as complementary. Anti-corruption policy will be stronger when it integrates character formation, ethical leadership, institutional checks, and credible sanctions. This is consistent with prior scholarship showing that virtue ethics can deepen anti-corruption efforts by supplementing auditing, monitoring, and compliance systems (Everett et al., 2006; Garofalo et al., 2001).

At the same time, the limitations of Aristotle's framework must be recognized. Virtue ethics does not provide a detailed operational model for addressing corruption in modern bureaucratic and democratic systems. Its contribution is primarily normative rather than technical. For this reason, the relevance of Aristotelian ethics lies not in offering a complete institutional blueprint but in providing a moral foundation for building a more ethical public culture. Overall, the discussion suggests that reducing corruption in Indonesia requires more than stronger rules. It also requires the cultivation of virtuous character, prudent judgment, and sustained commitment to the common good.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This article has argued that Aristotle's virtue ethics offers a meaningful framework for combating corruption in Indonesia by addressing its moral roots. The study preserved three central causes of corruption, namely weak moral character, poor ethical judgment, and self-interest over the common good, and showed that these can be interpreted through Aristotle's distinction between moral virtue and intellectual virtue. The analysis demonstrates that corruption is not only a legal offense but also a vice sustained by bad habits, distorted judgment, and a diminished sense of civic responsibility.

The study's main conclusion is that anti-corruption efforts in Indonesia should combine virtue formation with institutional reform. Education in honesty, fairness, self-control, and practical wisdom should begin early and continue through professional life. Ethical leadership should be developed intentionally rather than assumed. Public institutions should strengthen procedures, distribute power responsibly, and ensure that enforcement is credible and not subordinated to political interference. In this sense, virtue ethics does not replace law, oversight, and prevention. It gives them a deeper moral foundation.

The study also acknowledges important limitations. Aristotle's framework does not provide detailed administrative solutions for large modern states, and parts of his broader political thought do not align fully with contemporary democratic equality. The present study is conceptual rather than empirical, so its claims require further testing through policy analysis, curricular evaluation, institutional case studies, and comparative governance research.

Future research should therefore examine how virtue-based anti-corruption education can be implemented in Indonesian schools and universities, how ethical leadership programs affect public decision-making, and how Aristotelian concepts such as practical wisdom and justice can be translated into institutional training, recruitment, and evaluation systems. Research could also explore how digital culture shapes corruption tolerance and how virtue-based public ethics might respond to that challenge. Even with its limits, Aristotelian ethics remains valuable because it reminds us that a just political order depends not only on better rules, but also on better persons.

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