To Return or Not to Return: The Shopping Cart as a Measure of Ethical Character

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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Introduction:

The seemingly trivial act of returning a shopping cart is often overlooked as an inconsequential decision. Yet, this everyday choice offers a unique lens through which moral character can be examined. Scholars and social commentators have long debated the role of external enforcement and societal norms in shaping ethical behavior, often emphasizing legal consequences or tangible incentives as primary motivators. While prior discussions acknowledge that returning a shopping cart is ethically preferable, they often fail to recognize the deeper, subconscious moral processes that drive this action. This limited understanding overlooks the role of virtue ethics and the habitual nature of moral behavior. If we continue to focus solely on external pressures, we risk ignoring how internalized virtues shape ethical decision-making. I argue that the decision to return or abandon a shopping cart is guided primarily by internal moral dispositions rather than external incentives, making it a powerful test of character.

Drawing upon virtue ethics as a framework (particularly Aristotle's concept of habitual virtue cultivation and Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of practices), I will demonstrate how this decision reflects ingrained moral habits. Additionally, psychological theories such as self-perception theory and moral disengagement further explain why individuals either act virtuously or fail to do so. By analyzing the shopping cart dilemma through these lenses, we gain a deeper understanding of how seemingly trivial choices reveal underlying ethical commitments, enriching our comprehension of moral character and its development in everyday life.

Literature Review:

The groundwork of the Shopping Cart Theory has been laid out by many scholars in recent years, but many analyses lack the depth necessary to account for the full complexity of ethical decision-making in everyday life. This results in an unintended omission of underlying

complexities and factors related to humans' internalization of everyday ethical choices. While many scholars attempt to explain the reasoning behind the average person's decision of whether to return the shopping cart or not, these explanations attribute credit nearly entirely to conscious, external factors and gloss over subconscious, internal ones. While there is certainly merit to this approach, a complete understanding of people's ethical decision making cannot be achieved without analyzing all factors at play.

This is especially evident in the work of researchers Monkia Kukar-Kinney and Angeline Close, who analyze the evolution of shopping cart use from physical to online systems. In their analysis, the physical shopping cart is treated as a purely utilitarian device whose value ends once it has fulfilled its function of transporting goods (Kukar-Kinney & Close, 2009). Using this framework, abandoning the cart after use is framed as a logical and efficient action. However, this analysis is fundamentally flawed in many ways. By viewing humans as purely rational actors, these authors obscure their internal ethics and reduce human behavior to functional efficiency, coming to incomplete conclusions about their decision making.

Conversely, the role of humans' internal characteristics cannot be overemphasized when analyzing their ethical decision making. In the review "Ethical decision-making: a multidimensional construct," Danielle Beu and her co-authors argue that a person's pre-defined characteristics such as age, sex, and cognitive aptitude serve as a guide to predict one's ethical decisions (Beu, 2003). While such traits may offer general insights, this wide categorization of people without regard to their culture, personal upbringing, or current state of mind opens up a large possibility for erroneous predictions. For example, something as mundane as inclement weather can affect one's mood and thereby affect their ethical behavior, leading them to make decisions that may conflict with those associated with someone of their characteristics. With this

in mind, these trait-based predictions can hardly achieve a complete understanding of one's ethical decision-making.

To summarize, existing analyses reveal a fragmented understanding of why individuals choose to return or abandon shopping carts. My goal in this paper is to address these gaps in current analyses and provide a more thorough examination of the factors that cause people to return or abandon their shopping cart. This examination will provide a more comprehensive basis that incorporates both internal virtues and external conditions. By doing so, I aim to provide a deeper and more accurate account of the ethical dynamics involved in this specific shopping cart decision that encompasses all relevant ethical factors.

Conceptual Framework:

My analysis of the Shopping Cart Theory draws on the ethical framework of virtue ethics which offers insight into how habitual actions, such as returning or not returning a shopping cart, reflect an individual's moral character and internalized virtues. This framework emphasizes the development of virtuous character traits over adherence to external rules or consequences, making it particularly relevant for examining behaviors in the absence of formal enforcement (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2022). Rooted in Aristotelian philosophy, virtue ethics centers on the cultivation of virtues: positive character traits that enable individuals to achieve eudaimonia, or human flourishing. Unlike deontological ethics, which prioritize adherence to moral duties, or consequentialism, which evaluates the outcomes of actions, virtue ethics is primarily concerned with the moral agent's character and the inherent qualities that constitute a good person (Aristotle, trans. 2009; Hursthouse, 1999). Three core concepts underpin this framework and are especially relevant to my analysis of this framework: the distinction between virtue and vice, the concept of practical wisdom, and the goal of eudaimonia.

The first key concept relevant to the analysis is the dichotomy of virtue and vice. Virtues are dispositions to act, feel, and think in morally commendable ways; examples of these include courage, honesty, and generosity. Vices, in contrast, are negative dispositions like cowardice, deceit, and selfishness. Importantly, Aristotle's doctrine of the mean posits that each virtue lies between two extremes: an excess and a deficiency. For instance, courage is the virtuous mean between cowardice (deficiency) and recklessness (excess), illustrating how virtue involves balance and moderation (Aristotle, trans. 2009).

The second key concept is practical wisdom. This concept, also known as phronesis, refers to the intellectual virtue that enables individuals to deliberate effectively about what is good and beneficial for themselves and others. Practical wisdom involves sound judgments, sensitivity to context, and the ability to translate moral principles into appropriate action. This acts as a guide for navigating complex moral situations and aligning one's actions with virtuous intent (Hursthouse, 2022).

The third key concept is eudaimonia, often translated as "flourishing" or "well-being." Eudaimonia represents the ultimate goal of human life in virtue ethics. Achieving eudaimonia involves consistently living in accordance with reason and virtue, resulting in a life of meaning, fulfillment, and ethical integrity (Hursthouse, 1999; Aristotle, trans. 2009).

By focusing on the development and expression of virtuous character traits, virtue ethics provides a lens through which moral actions can be evaluated based on the internal motivations and dispositions of individuals. This perspective is particularly useful for analyzing behaviors that occur without external enforcement, such as the decision to return a shopping cart, as it highlights the role of personal integrity and moral upbringing in ethical decision-making.

In the analysis that follows, I will draw upon virtue ethics to explore the internal factors influencing an individual's decision to return or abandon a shopping cart, such as ingrained habits, personal values, and moral upbringing. I will then examine how these habitual actions serve as indicators of one's moral character and the extent to which virtues like responsibility, respect, and community-mindedness are internalized. This approach reveals how seemingly trivial, unenforced actions can provide significant insights into the way social engineering defines an individual's ethical dispositions and the cultivation of virtue in everyday life.

Analysis:

The seemingly mundane act of returning or not returning a shopping cart offers a surprisingly rich lens through which to assess moral character. Viewed through the framework of virtue ethics, this choice reflects more than just a fleeting decision; it reveals ingrained habits, internal motivations, and the ethical dispositions that shape a person’s behavior. Rather than being guided by external rules or consequences, this action is often determined by internalized moral character. I argue that the decision to return a shopping cart is primarily driven by subconscious ethical conditioning and habitual virtue, making it a subtle but powerful indicator of one’s moral identity.

To better understand the implications of this decision, it is important to examine the common scenario. After completing their shopping, a customer typically wheels their cart into the parking lot to load groceries into their vehicle. At this point, they are faced with a simple but telling decision: will they return the cart to a designated corral or leave it in the parking lot, where it may obstruct parking spaces or roll freely?

From a purely consequentialist or external perspective, it is easy to see why many would choose not to return the cart. There are no legal penalties for abandoning it, and most grocery stores have no enforceable policies mandating its return. Social pressures are also minimal—often, the act is carried out when no one is watching, and even if observed, it is unlikely to provoke a confrontation. Moreover, returning the cart brings no direct reward. Shoppers typically receive no thanks, financial incentive, or personal benefit for doing the "right" thing. From this angle, the most rational, self-interested decision is to leave the cart behind.

However, the simplicity of this decision is what makes it ethically significant. Returning the cart is a low-effort action that yields positive outcomes: it prevents potential damage to other vehicles, reduces the workload for store employees, and contributes to a more organized and accessible parking lot. Importantly, these benefits are not directly experienced by the individual who returns the cart; they are experienced by others. This distinction shifts the ethical weight of the action. When one acts in ways that benefit others for no personal gain, especially when no one is watching, it points to internal virtue rather than external compulsion.

Here, Aristotle's notion of virtue as habit becomes particularly relevant. Ethical behavior, according to virtue ethics, is not a one-time decision made in response to rules or punishments, but rather the result of consistent moral practice developed over time (Aristotle, trans. 2009). Someone who habitually returns the cart, even when no one is observing and no benefit is at stake, demonstrates the kind of character that acts in accordance with virtue for its own sake. This idea aligns with Rosalind Hursthouse's assertion that virtue is not only about doing the right thing, but doing so from the right motivations—those grounded in character, not calculation (Hursthouse, 1999). This makes the shopping cart decision a rare case of "unenforced ethics." It

stands outside institutional enforcement, yet still invites people to act ethically. The fact that people still do return their carts under these conditions shows how virtue, once internalized, can guide behavior without the need for oversight.

Although returning a shopping cart is ethically preferable, psychological mechanisms such as moral disengagement and the bystander effect help explain why many individuals fail to act accordingly. These factors complicate the assumption that people always behave according to their moral knowledge. Even when individuals recognize the "right" action, they may rationalize their way out of it or feel that it is someone else's responsibility. Understanding these tendencies not only clarifies why ethical lapses occur, but also reinforces the idea that choosing to return the cart, even in light of these barriers, reflects a robust and internalized moral character.

Moral disengagement, a concept developed by psychologist Albert Bandura, refers to the mental processes individuals use to distance themselves from the moral consequences of their behavior (Bandura, 1999). These mechanisms allow people to violate ethical standards without experiencing guilt or self-condemnation. In the context of shopping carts, this might include reasoning such as: "It's the employees' job to collect them," "One cart won't make a difference," or "Everyone leaves them out anyway." These justifications shift blame or minimize harm, creating a psychological buffer between one's actions and one's ethical standards. In a 2002 study, Bandura and colleagues found that individuals who engaged in moral disengagement were significantly more likely to act unethically in various scenarios, such as cheating on tests or showing aggression in competitive environments (Bandura et al., 2002). Although these scenarios are more extreme than leaving a cart, the underlying process is the same: people disengage from personal responsibility when the consequences are indirect, diffuse, or socially tolerated.

Closely related to this is the bystander effect, a phenomenon first identified by Bibb Latané and John Darley, in which individuals are less likely to take action when others are present (Darley & Latané, 1968). The classic example involves emergency situations where multiple witnesses fail to help, each assuming someone else will intervene. In the shopping cart scenario, a similar logic unfolds: seeing several abandoned carts or numerous people walking by without returning theirs may lead an individual to believe that someone else (whether an employee or another customer) will handle it. This diffusion of responsibility reduces the felt obligation to act.

The presence of these psychological mechanisms strengthens the argument that returning a cart is not merely a product of logical reasoning or social pressure but instead a test of ethical integrity. When someone returns their cart despite the temptations to disengage or defer responsibility, they are acting against strong psychological currents that often lead people to justify inaction. Doing so reflects a deeper moral commitment and alignment with virtue.

In this light, the shopping cart becomes more than just a utilitarian object—it becomes a stage on which practical wisdom (phronesis) is enacted. As Aristotle described it, phronesis is the capacity to make morally sound judgments in variable, everyday circumstances, guided by both intellect and character (Aristotle, trans. 2009). The absence of rules or surveillance in this scenario means the choice must be self-regulated. This voluntary return of the cart reflects an individual who not only understands what is right but acts upon it, even when doing so offers no personal gain.

Some scholars may argue that it is extremely important to acknowledge that external factors such as weather conditions, time constraints, or physical limitations can influence the

decision to return a shopping cart. For instance, a parent with small children may reasonably prioritize the safety of their children over returning a cart, especially if return stations are far from their parking spot. Similarly, an elderly person or someone with mobility issues may face real barriers to returning a cart. These considerations are not acts of negligence but context-specific decisions shaped by personal circumstances.

However, these exceptions do not account for the broader trend. In most cases, shoppers are physically able to return their carts, and there are no strong external deterrents to doing so. More significantly, there is usually no formal enforcement compelling them to act. The fact that many people still return carts in these unregulated settings suggests that internalized ethical dispositions play a decisive role. When there is no punishment for failure or reward for success, we are left to observe behavior that arises from habit, character, and conscience.

A particularly instructive counterexample is Aldi's shopping cart system, which requires customers to insert a 25-cent deposit to unlock a cart, returned only upon reattachment. This system effectively externalizes responsibility and leverages a small financial incentive to ensure compliance. A 2017 *Wall Street Journal* article noted that Aldi maintains low staffing levels in part because its cart system significantly reduces the need for employees to retrieve stray carts (Chatterjee, 2017). The success of this model highlights the power of even minimal incentives in shaping behavior.

At first glance, Aldi's system might appear to undermine the argument that returning a shopping cart is a moral test. It begs the question: if people return carts to retrieve a quarter, is the action still virtuous? However, this example actually reinforces the distinction between externally motivated behavior and behavior stemming from internal virtue. When the system

requires a deposit, the act becomes transactional: return the cart to retrieve your money. In contrast, most shopping environments do not operate under this system, and yet many individuals still return their carts.

This contrast reveals an important moral distinction. In environments without incentives or monitoring, those who return their carts do so without expectation of reward or fear of punishment. Their actions are self-regulated and voluntary, which aligns with the concept of virtue as an internal habit of character. Aristotle emphasized that virtuous actions are not only those that produce good outcomes, but those done for the right reasons and out of a stable character disposition (Aristotle, trans. 2009).

Therefore, rather than weakening the argument, Aldi's cart system actually highlights the moral significance of unenforced shopping cart returns. It provides a useful foil, showing how behavior changes under external regulation, and underscoring how meaningful it is when someone returns their cart voluntarily. In this way, the Aldi example strengthens the original thesis: that in the vast majority of cases, the act of returning a cart reflects not compulsion, but internal moral commitment.

The idea that everyday actions can serve as meaningful indicators of one's character is deeply rooted in ancient philosophy. Aristotle's virtue ethics emphasizes that moral character is not innate, but cultivated through the repetition of virtuous acts. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes, "We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts" (Aristotle, trans. 2009, II.1). This view supports the idea that a routine, seemingly inconsequential act, such as returning a shopping cart, can serve as a window into one's habitual moral orientation. If returning a cart is done consistently and voluntarily, even

when no one is watching, it signals the presence of internalized virtues such as responsibility, consideration, and respect for communal spaces. The repetition of such acts contributes to the formation of a virtuous character. Individuals who habitually perform these small acts of courtesy are likely exhibiting the kind of moral discipline Aristotle saw as essential to ethical development.

Philosopher James Rachels similarly emphasizes this point in *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, where he defines a virtue as "a trait of character manifested in habitual action" (Rachels, 2010, p. 177). For Rachels, virtues like honesty, generosity, or responsibility are not one-off acts, but enduring tendencies revealed through consistent choices. This framing supports the idea that the act of returning a shopping cart, especially when repeated and done without external pressure, functions as more than mere politeness; it reflects the depth of one's character over time.

Adding further strength to this interpretation is Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of practices, outlined in *After Virtue* (MacIntyre, 1981). MacIntyre defines a practice as a "coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity," which allows participants to pursue internal goods—those intrinsic rewards such as excellence, integrity, or virtue—that arise through sustained engagement. Although shopping cart returns may not qualify as a "practice" in the robust sense MacIntyre intended (e.g., chess, architecture, or medicine), they can be seen as micro-practices that nurture internal goods such as personal responsibility and civic mindfulness. When performed regularly and willingly, such acts reinforce an individual's ethical orientation, much like participation in a larger moral tradition.

This virtue-based framing stands in sharp contrast to deontological ethics, which evaluates actions based on whether they conform to moral rules or duties. A deontologist might argue that unless there is a specific law or universally accepted maxim requiring one to return a shopping cart, no obligation exists. For example, Kantian ethics would ask whether the action could be universalized—i.e., "What if everyone abandoned their cart?"—but may struggle to capture the importance of habitual moral development. The virtue ethicist, on the other hand, is less concerned with the presence or absence of rules and more focused on whether the action contributes to the long-term cultivation of ethical character.

MacIntyre's critique of modern moral frameworks is particularly relevant here. He argues that contemporary ethical discourse has become fragmented and overly focused on rule-following, at the expense of fostering genuine moral communities (MacIntyre, 1981). In this context, the shopping cart dilemma gains new significance: it is not just about whether one obeys a rule, but whether one participates in a shared moral practice, however small, that reflects and reinforces communal values.

Thus, returning a shopping cart becomes more than a test of politeness or obligation; it becomes an instance of practical moral formation. As Aristotle and MacIntyre both assert, the path to virtue lies in the repetition of morally significant acts, especially when those acts are freely chosen. Viewed through this lens, shopping cart returns are not trivial; they are part of the fabric of everyday moral life, shaping who we are through what we habitually choose to do.

To further this argument, it must be asserted that the decision to return a shopping cart often takes place in the absence of any formal enforcement or external reward. In such moments, internal motivations become the dominant force behind ethical behavior. From the perspective of

virtue ethics, this reinforces the idea that ethical action stems not from fear of punishment or expectation of praise, but from stable internal dispositions (such as empathy, responsibility, and integrity) that guide one's behavior even when no one is watching.

Support for this view comes from studies on prosocial behavior, which have shown that individuals who act in ways that benefit others such as helping strangers, volunteering, or following civic norms are often motivated by internal values rather than by external incentives. Penner et al. (2005) found in their study that prosocial tendencies are positively correlated with empathy, moral development, and psychological well-being. These findings suggest that individuals engage in socially constructive behaviors because doing so aligns with their self-concept and produces an internal sense of satisfaction, not because of tangible external rewards.

Applied to the shopping cart dilemma, these insights reinforce the argument that returning a cart reflects an internally cultivated sense of virtue. The act requires time and effort, yields no social recognition, and benefits others more than oneself. Yet, many individuals do it voluntarily. This behavior aligns with Aristotle's view that virtuous action stems from habituated dispositions that are developed and reinforced over time through practice (Aristotle, trans. 2009).

Another useful psychological perspective is self-perception theory, proposed by Daryl Bem (1972), which posits that individuals often infer their own beliefs and attitudes by observing their own behavior. When internal cues are weak or ambiguous, people look to their actions as evidence of who they are. In the context of shopping cart returns, an individual who consistently returns carts may come to view themselves as someone who is responsible, respectful, and considerate. This self-identification then reinforces future virtuous actions.

Conversely, those who routinely abandon carts may rationalize their behavior by adopting beliefs that reduce cognitive dissonance—such as "it's not my job," or "one cart won't make a difference." This illustrates how behavior not only reflects one's virtues but also shapes them in a cyclical process of moral self-development. Over time, small ethical or unethical choices contribute to a person's overall sense of moral identity.

This insight dovetails neatly with virtue ethics, which emphasizes that moral character is shaped through repeated, intentional action. The person who chooses to return their cart, despite the absence of external pressures, is not only acting virtuously; they are reinforcing a self-conception that aligns with virtue. As these behaviors accumulate, so does the moral strength of the agent, making ethical behavior more habitual and more deeply ingrained. Thus, the act of returning a shopping cart is not merely an isolated event; it is a microcosm of the broader process through which moral character is formed and reinforced. By linking psychological theories of behavior with the philosophical principles of virtue ethics, we see how small, habitual actions contribute meaningfully to the development of one's ethical identity over time.

Conclusion:

The decision to return a shopping cart—an action often dismissed as mundane—emerges, upon closer examination, as a meaningful reflection of one's moral character. In the absence of external enforcement, this choice becomes a powerful expression of internalized virtues such as responsibility, empathy, and respect for others. Rooted in the tradition of virtue ethics, returning a cart exemplifies how habitual, self-regulated actions contribute to the cultivation of ethical character over time.

Throughout this analysis, the role of psychological mechanisms such as moral disengagement and the bystander effect further clarified why some individuals choose not to return carts. These phenomena highlight the obstacles to moral action and reinforce the value of behavior that resists them. Likewise, the contrast between voluntary returns and incentivized systems like Aldi's underscores how uncommon it is for ethical behavior to occur without external prompting, making such acts all the more significant. Ultimately, the shopping cart dilemma reveals that ethical identity is not forged in rare, dramatic moments, but in the quiet, repeated choices individuals make when no one is watching. These small decisions, far from trivial, shape and reinforce one's moral compass.

This insight has broader implications. Recognizing how everyday actions reflect and reinforce ethical character invites individuals to seek greater moral consistency in all areas of life. In fields such as engineering, where integrity, accountability, and public trust are critical, the development of strong moral habits is essential. Understanding ethics as a lived, practiced discipline (rather than a set of external rules) offers a more sustainable foundation for responsible and ethical decision-making, both professionally and personally.

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