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Virtue Ethics

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Abstract and Keywords

In the tradition of Western philosophy since the fifth century BC, the default form of ethical theory has been some version of what is nowadays called virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is best approached by looking at the central features of the classical version of the tradition. Modern virtue ethical theories have not yet achieved such a critical mass of argument and theory, and most are as yet partial or fragmentary. This article builds up, cumulatively, a picture of the entire structure of classical virtue ethics, and then sees how different versions of it result from ignoring or rejecting parts of that structure. The result, while unavoidably schematic, helps to clarify the various debates that are growing up in virtue ethics, and helps to orient those who are less familiar with the terrain and are sometimes puzzled by the recent proliferation of theories with the name *virtue ethics*.

Keywords: Western philosophy, ethical theory, virtue ethics, classical virtue ethics, debates

In the tradition of Western philosophy since the fifth century B.C., the default form of ethical theory has been some version of what is nowadays called virtue ethics; real theoretical alternatives emerge only with Kant and with consequentialism. This continued dominance is not very surprising, given that concern with virtue is a concern with the kind of person you are, and that this has always been important to real-life ethical matters in Western societies. (And, as is becoming increasingly familiar, this is also true of some non-Western societies and philosophical traditions, particularly Asian ones.)

The tradition has taken several different forms, and sorting these out is useful for finding the underlying structure. I shall also say a little about the way that virtue ethics has been ignored or trivialized by analytical ethical philosophy for about a hundred years, only to reemerge vigorously during the last forty.

Virtue ethics is best approached by looking at the central features of what I shall call the classical version of the tradition. Its theoretical structure is first clearly stated by Aristotle, but it is wrong to think of it as peculiarly Aristotelian, since it underlies all of ancient ethical theory (Annas, 1993, 1999). The classical version is our best entry-point into the subject, because we have a large amount of material that was developed and refined over hundreds of years by extensive debate and that contains resources for establishing the whole theoretical structure, and for understanding what in it is basic and what more parochial. Modern virtue ethical theories have not yet achieved such a critical mass of argument and theory, and most are as yet partial or fragmentary. As I will show, it is only when we have this whole picture in view that we can understand other theories that call (p. 516) themselves virtue ethics. So I shall first build up, cumulatively, a picture of the entire structure of classical virtue ethics, and then see how different versions of it result from ignoring or rejecting parts of that structure. The result, while unavoidably schematic, should help to clarify the various debates that are growing up in virtue ethics, and help to orient those who are less familiar with the terrain and are sometimes puzzled by the recent proliferation of theories with the name *virtue ethics*.

1. Virtue Ethics: The Whole Picture

1.1. The Central Role of Practical Reasoning

A virtue is a state or disposition of a person. This is a reasonable intuitive claim; if someone is generous, say, then she has a character of a certain sort; she is dispositionally, that is, habitually and reliably, generous. A virtue, though, is not a habit in the sense in which habits can be mindless, sources of action in the agent that bypass her practical reasoning. A virtue is a disposition *to act*, not an entity built up within me and productive of behavior; it is my disposition to act in certain ways and not others. A virtue, unlike a mere habit, is a disposition to act *for reasons*, and so a disposition that is exercised through the agent's practical reasoning; it is built up by making choices and exercised in the making of further choices. When an honest person decides not to take something to which he is not entitled, this is not the upshot of a causal buildup from previous actions but a *decision*, a choice that endorses his disposition to be honest.

The exercise of the agent's practical reasoning is thus essential to the way a virtue is both built up and exercised. Because of this feature, classical virtue ethics has been criticized as being overly intellectualist (even "elitist") on this basis (Driver, 2001). However, the reasoning in question is just what everyone does, so it is hard to see how a theory that appeals to what is available to everyone is elitist. Different virtue theories offer us differing ways of making our reflections more theoretically sophisticated, but virtue

Virtue Ethics

ethics tries to improve the reasoning we all share, rather than replacing it by a different kind.

What is the role of the agent's practical reasoning? Virtue is the disposition to do the right thing for the right reason, in the appropriate way—honestly, courageously, and so on. This involves two aspects, the affective and the intellectual.

What is the affective aspect of virtue? The agent may do the right thing and (p. 517) have a variety of feelings and reactions to it. She may hate doing the right thing but do it anyway; do the right thing but with conflicted feelings or with difficulty; do the right thing effortlessly and with no internal opposition. One feature of the classical version of virtue ethics is to regard doing the right thing with no contrary inclination as a mark of the virtuous person, as opposed to the merely self-controlled. Mere performance of the right action still leaves open the issue of the agent's overall attitude; virtue requires doing the right thing for the right reason without serious internal opposition, as a matter of character. This is, after all, just one implication of the thought that in an ethics of virtue it matters what kind of person you are. Of course, what it takes to develop your character in such a way that you are wholehearted about being generous, act fairly without regrets, and so on is a large matter. There is no single unified theory of our affective nature that all virtue theories share, and so there is a variety of views as to how we are to become virtuous, rather than merely doing the right thing for the right reason. All theories in the classical tradition, however, accept and emphasize the point, familiar from common sense, that there is an important moral difference between the person who merely acts rightly and the person who is wholehearted in what she does. Some modern theories implicitly deny the importance of this distinction, without giving a reason for this.

The virtuous agent, then, does the right thing, undividedly, for the right reason—he understands, that is, that this is the right thing to do. What is this understanding? In classical virtue ethics, we start our moral education by learning from others, both in making particular judgments about right and wrong, and in adopting some people as role models or teachers or following certain rules. At first, as pupils, we adopt these views because we were told to, or they seemed obvious, and we acquire a collection of moral views that are fragmented and accepted on the authority of others. For virtue ethics, the purpose of good moral education is to get the pupil to think for himself about the reasons on which he acts, and so the content of what he has been taught. Ideally, then, the learner will begin to reflect for himself on what he has accepted, will detect and deal with inconsistencies, and will try to make his judgments and practice coherent in terms of a wider understanding which enables him to unify, explain and justify the particular decisions he makes. This is a process that requires the agent at every stage to use his mind, to think about what he is doing and to try to achieve understanding of it (Annas, 2001).

Virtue Ethics

We can see this from an example. In many modern societies, the obvious models for courage are macho ones focusing on sports and war movies. A boy may grow up thinking that these are the paradigmatic contexts for courage, and have various views about courage and cowardice that presuppose this. But if he reflects about the matter, he may come to think that he is also prepared to call people in other, quite different contexts brave—a child struggling with cancer, someone standing up for an unpopular person in high school, and so on. Further (p. 518) reflection will show that the macho grasp of courage was inadequate, and will drive him to ask what links all these very diverse cases of bravery; this will lead him to ask what the reasons are on which brave people act, rather than to continue uncritically with the views and attitudes he initially found obvious.

The development of ethical understanding, leading the agent to develop a disposition that is a virtue, is in the classical tradition standardly taken to proceed like the acquisition of a practical skill or expertise. As Aristotle says, becoming just is like becoming a builder. With a practical skill, there is something to learn, something conveyable by teaching; the expert is the person who understands through reflection what she has been taught, and thinks for herself about it. We are familiar with the notion of practical expertise in mundane contexts like that of car repair, plumbing, and so on. In the classical tradition of virtue ethics, this is an important analogy, because ethical development displays something that we can see more clearly in these more limited contexts: There is a progress from the mechanical rule- or model-following of the learner to the greater understanding of the expert, whose responses are sensitive to the particularities of situations, as well as expressing learning and general reflection.

The skill analogy brings out two important points about ethical understanding: It requires both that you learn from others and that you come to think and understand for yourself. (The all-important progress from the learner to the expert is lost in the modern tendency to reduce all practical knowledge to 'knowing how', as opposed to 'knowing that'.) Ethical reflection begins from what you have learned in your society; but it requires you to progress from that. Virtue begins from following rules or models in your social and cultural context; but it requires that you develop a disposition to decide and act that involves the kind of understanding that only you can achieve in your own case.

Virtue is like a skill in its structure. But the skill analogy, of course, has limits. One is that practical skills are devoted to achieving ends from which we can detach ourselves if we cease to want them, whereas virtue is devoted to achieving our final end, which, as I will show, is not in this way an end we can just cease to want. Another limit is that the development of practical understanding in a skill can be relatively independent of emotion and feeling, whereas the development of practical understanding goes along with a development in the virtuous person's affect and response.

Some modern theorists have difficulty grasping the role of practical reasoning in the classical version of virtue ethics because it offends against a common modern dogma to the effect that reason functions only instrumentally, to fulfill whatever desires we happen

to have. The issue is too large to discuss here, but it is important to notice that the classical theory of practical reasoning is a theoretical rival to this account, so that assuming it against the classical version of virtue ethics is begging the question. (One of the most interesting and fruitful modern debates in ethics is opening up the question of the tenability of the instrumentalist (p. 519) account.) The classical account can be shown to be empirically well supported, and this makes it easier to show that virtue ethics of the classical kind is not vulnerable to some criticisms that assume the truth of an account of practical reasoning that it rejects (Annas, 2001).

The classical account has also been criticized because of the notions of disposition and character that are central to it. Some modern theories object to making character basic to ethical discourse, as opposed to single actions; this reflects a difference between types of ethical theory that focus on actions in isolation and types that emphasize the importance of the agent's life as a whole, and, relatedly, the importance of moral education and development. Recently, virtue ethics of the classical kind has been attacked on the ground that its notion of a disposition is unrealistic. These attacks rely on some work in 'situationist' social psychology that claims that unobvious aspects of particular situations have a large role in explaining our actions. Some philosophers have claimed from this that we are not justified in thinking that people have robust character traits; for, if they did, these would explain their actions reliably and across a wide variety of types of situation, excluding this kind of influence (Doris, 2002; Harman, 1999).

However, these studies assume a notion of disposition that is defined solely in terms of frequency of actions, where the actions in question are defined with no reference to the agent's own reasons for acting. For virtue ethics, however, a virtue is a disposition to act *for reasons*, and claims about frequency of action are irrelevant to this, until some plausible connection is established with the agent's reasons, something none of the situationists have done (Sreenivasan, 2002).

1.2. Virtues and My Flourishing

Virtues, then, are character traits of the kind discussed. There are character traits, however, which are not virtues. To qualify as a virtue, a character trait must embody a commitment to some ethical *value*, such as justice, or benevolence. Moreover, this commitment is not merely a matter of performing actions that happen to be just, benevolent or whatever; a disposition, as already stressed, works through the agent's practical reasoning. The virtues are dispositions *to be* just, benevolent and so on, to give others their fair share, treat others in considerate ways, stand up for others' rights.

So far I have talked of virtue, but of course in everyday life we encounter a number of different virtues—fairness, generosity, courage and so on. The virtues, as we ordinarily think of them, embody commitments to a number of values, and this comes out in the

Virtue Ethics

ways in which different kinds of situation are typically thought of as requiring different virtues.

What makes such diverse virtues as courage and generosity *virtues*, dispositions (p. 520) that it is ethically admirable to have? Any theory of virtue will have something to say about the way the different virtues are valuable. Since the virtues are dispositions of me, they are ways that I am, traits of my character; so they contribute to my living my life as a whole in a certain way. So thinking about the virtues leads to thinking of *my life as a whole*. This notion is crucial, and is prominent in all forms of classical virtue ethics, because the virtues make sense only within a conception of living that takes the life I live to be an overall unity, rather than a succession of more or less unconnected states. And further, cultivating the virtues is worthwhile because living virtuously will constitute my living my life as a whole in a way that lives it *well*, in a way that it is valuable to live.

The final end to which the virtues contribute is often called *eudaimonia*, since this is the term found in ancient Greek theories (that are hence, unsurprisingly, called eudaimonist). The least unsatisfactory modern English equivalent is *flourishing*, which I shall use. *Happiness* would be in many ways better, but unfortunately runs into two problems. One is that the modern philosophical notion of happiness has been influenced by utilitarian ideas, leading easily to the trivializing thought that happiness is pleasure. And while the idea that happiness is flourishing—a well-lived life—does have a place in everyday ideas of happiness, it is often held together with implicitly conflicting ideas, such as that happiness is having a good time, or being prosperous. Modern analogues of ancient eudaimonist theories have, moreover, come to be called virtue ethics, not happiness ethics. Virtue is the concept that has become the central one in recent philosophy, sometimes obscuring the importance of the idea of the agent's overall flourishing to which the virtues contribute.

Do we have such a final end? It is important to note here that the idea is not a philosophers' demand brought in from outside everyday ethical reasoning. It is just a very ordinary and everyday way of thinking of our lives. We get to it simply by reflecting that our actions can be thought of not just in a linear way, as we perform one action after another: They can also be thought of in a nested way, as happens whenever we ask *why* we are doing something, for the answer will typically make reference to some broader concern, and this in turn to one even broader. Given that I have only one life to lead, I will eventually come up with some very broad conception of my life as a whole, as what makes sense of all my actions at any given point. I cannot escape the fact that at any given point, my actions reflect and express the kind of person I am, and the nature of my ends and priorities. This is a very ordinary way of thinking, one in which everybody engages. (People who are severely conflicted about their aims, or in denial about the way their actions fit into broader patterns in their lives, appear to be exceptions to this; but note that we think of them as having *damaged* lives, not as showing us alternative ways of living *well*.)

Virtue Ethics

Thinking in this way, we come up with the notion of my living my life as a whole, and living it well. This is not yet specific as to its content. (For Aristotle, (p. 521) it is trivial that my final end is *eudaimonia* or happiness, but this link is not obvious for us, and even for Aristotle this was the start, not the finish, of debate as to what living well consists in.) But it is not a trivial result. For one thing, my final end must meet the formal constraint of being *complete*—all my actions are done for its sake, while I do not seek it for the sake of anything further. This at once rules out some instrumental ends, such as money or fame, which always raise the question of what they are sought *for*, what part they play in the living of a flourishing life. For another thing, my final end, flourishing, cannot consist in things, stuff, or passive states like pleasure. I am aiming at *living* in a certain way, being active where my life is concerned rather than letting it drift along. One major difference from many modern theories is that I am aiming at living my life in a way that only I can do, by developing the way I reason about it; I am not aiming at stuff, or states that other people could just as well provide for me.

How do the virtues contribute to my flourishing? Classical theories of virtue ethics claim that virtue is, more weakly, necessary, or, more strongly, sufficient for flourishing. How is this to be understood? Classical virtue theories reject the idea that flourishing can be specified right at the start, in a way that is both substantive and makes no reference to the virtues. Someone who supposes that flourishing can be defined as feeling good, or getting whatever you want, has given an account of it that is unacceptable to a virtue theory even before we get to the virtues. Rather, virtue ethics tells us that a life lived in accordance with the virtues is the *best specification* of what flourishing is. This claim in turn is not neutral ground between the virtue ethicist and the person who thinks that flourishing is getting whatever you want. Rather, we have already got *rival specifications* of what it is to flourish, to lead a good life. And this is exactly what we would expect, given that the issue of what it is to lead a flourishing life is not one that we could expect to be decided at the *start* of ethical investigation, *before* we try to spell out what is involved in living a life in which you try to live fairly, courageously, and so on, as opposed to living a life in which you aim to get whatever you want. It is a theoretical advantage of classical virtue ethics that it respects a fundamental point about our ethical discussions. When people disagree as to whether someone did or did not ruin his life by performing an action that is honest but loses him a job he has aimed for, we do not expect them to resolve the dispute by appeal to some neutral list of indicators that a way of life is worth living. We recognize that this kind of dispute is not a simple disagreement about rival means to an agreed-upon end. It is a complex kind of dispute that brings in a wide range of issues, because what is in dispute just is what kind of life constitutes a flourishing one, as opposed to a failure.

Many modern critics have objected to the claim that virtue is even necessary for flourishing, on the grounds that not everybody thinks that it matters to be fair or brave, and that some of these people appear to be flourishing by conventional standards. It is clear, however, that this kind of objection misses the point (p. 522) that virtue ethics does not begin from any specification of flourishing that is substantive and independent of the virtues. Virtue ethicists are often accused of naivete in thinking that being virtuous is a

Virtue Ethics

good bet if you want to flourish, where flourishing is understood independently of the virtues; but virtue ethics rejects this conception of flourishing. Each of us begins with an unspecific notion of living his life well as a whole, and different theories within virtue ethics give us differing answers as to the importance of virtue in giving us a right specification of living well, and so of flourishing. Virtue ethics begins from the point that we do attach value to being virtuous, as well as to having money, a family life, and so on. (It is exceptional, not standard, as some modern critics think, to be cynical about the value of the virtues in life; this is not what we teach our children, or assume in most ethical discourse.) The argument proceeds by getting us to see that virtue is not just one value in life, which could reasonably be outweighed by others, such as money; it has a special status such that, on the weaker version, those without it do not flourish, whatever else they have, and, on the stronger version, virtue is necessary and sufficient for a flourishing life. Different theories press different points, and no complete range of positive arguments can be given here, but it can be stressed that most classical theories emphasize the point that virtue is like a skill exercised on the materials of your life. Acting virtuously is not an *alternative* to making money, for example. Rather, making money is one of the things you have to do, one of the circumstances of your life, and you can do this either virtuously or not; which of the two it is makes all the difference to the place and significance in your life of making money.

The point that flourishing, as the aim of the virtues, is not antecedently specified independently of living virtuously is also important in defusing various objections to the effect that classical virtue ethics is egoistic. Sometimes it is claimed that someone who lives virtuously as a way of aiming at flourishing is acting for egoistic reasons. But this is a confusion. The person who aims at living a flourishing life by living in a fair, generous, and brave way is not aiming at *her* good, as opposed to the good of others. Still less is she aiming at some *state* of herself. Living in a flourishing way is an activity, the ongoing activity of a life, and living in a brave, generous, and so on way is a specification of what that is.

Hence it is a mistake to claim that the virtuous person's motivation is egoistic because it is aimed at her flourishing and not mine, or yours. She aims at her own flourishing and not mine just in the sense that she is living her life and not mine. There is no implication that she is furthering her own interests at the expense of mine. It would be odd to do this by acting fairly, being generous, courageously standing up for others! Still less is it plausible to think that the agent who thinks that living virtuously is the best specification of a flourishing life will be acting for egoistic reasons. This objection simply misconstrues what a virtue is. Courage, for example, is the disposition to stand up for what is right, among other things, whether or not this benefits me or others. Courage is not a dispo
(p. 523) sition that can be switched off when my own interests, as opposed to those of others, are not at stake. Someone who has dispositions that further only his own interests in a way that could conflict with those of others is not even a minimal candidate for being virtuous.

Virtue Ethics

The complaint that virtue ethics is egoistic is surprisingly stubborn. It seems to depend partly on the assumption that flourishing must be specified independently of the practice of the virtues, so that they are just means to it as an independently agreed end, and partly on the assumption that ethical disputes about lives are disputes about alternative means to agreed-upon ends. But neither assumption is shared by virtue ethics, so these objections miss their target. And in any case, they are false.

1.3. Living Virtuously

How does virtue ethics explicate the notion that I have just made use of so far, of the *right thing to do*? It is clearly important for the theory, since a virtue is a disposition built up by doing the right thing and acquiring increasing understanding of what this is, and why.

Virtue ethics makes the realistic assumption that by the time you come to think about ethics and want to develop or improve your life as a whole, you already *have a life*. You already have a social position, a cultural education, a family, a job, and so on. These are all factors that have contributed to your ethical development, for good or for ill. Because for virtue ethics it matters what kind of person you are, it takes into account the importance of the person you already are when you begin to think about being virtuous. It is unrealistic to think that your ethical views are all completely disposable, and that you can come to be a better person by overnight conversion. By the time you think for yourself about what it is to be brave, just, and so on, you already have developed views and attitudes.

However, classical virtue ethics always assumes that reflection about our ethical views will reveal them to be inadequate to the way we want to be. As Aristotle says, “In general everyone seeks not the traditional but the good” (*Politics* 1269a3–4). All classical virtue ethics assumes, in a way oddly absent from many modern theories, that ethical thought essentially includes an *aspiration* to be better than we are. Classical virtue theories are marked both by realistic recognition of the socially embedded nature of our ethical life, and by insistence that if we are thinking ethically, we are striving to be better, to reach an ideal that is not already attained. And all classical virtue theories are very demanding in this regard (Annas, 2002). It is therefore irrelevant to point out that the specific classical theories were produced for audiences in societies very different from ours. Virtue ethics (p. 524) gets a grip whenever we realize that the ethical beliefs we live by are inadequate, that, for example, they may imply sexist and racist attitudes, and that we need to become *better people*. Virtue ethics develops from the reasonable thought that *I* have to improve myself; no teacher or book can do the job.

None of this is incompatible with our recognizing that there are some judgments about action that are not only widely shared but not negotiable when we think about virtue and the good life. This is just part of the background from which we all begin. What is important, however, is that this cannot be developed into a theory telling people what it is right and wrong to do in a way that pays no attention to the fact that they are aspiring to

ideals from within different contexts and at very different stages of their own ethical development. Some modern theories have thought that there is such a thing as a 'theory of right action', which will tell us which actions are right, or give us an account of what makes an action right, and can be used by anyone, at any stage of moral development, with any level of interest in being a good person. This would make ethical thinking about how to act like using a computer manual. As has been forcefully pointed out (Hursthouse, 1991, 1999), this is a completely unrealistic view of ethical thinking. It is not plausible to suppose that a bright eighteen-year-old could by reading a book become an ethically wise person, an excellent source of ethical advice as to what to do. Nor can we realistically separate the questions of whether we respect someone's advice as to what to do, and our attitude to what they find admirable in life. We cannot take someone's 'theory of right action' seriously if they have appalling priorities in their life—even if they claim, on theoretical grounds, that the two are unrelated.

The answer that virtue ethics offers to the question what is the right thing to do denies that there is any such thing as a 'theory of right action' in this abstract sense. In explaining what is the right thing to do, virtue ethics appeals to the idea of what would be done by the virtuous person. This is not a definition in which the virtuous person is independently defined and right actions derived from this. For virtue ethics appreciates that 'the virtuous person' cannot be defined in a void and then used to derive right actions in a void. Rather, the thought is that what I should do, in my situation, is what I would do if I were brave (generous, fair, etc.), where this is taken to mean: braver than I am, nearer the ideal of the brave person. Working out the answer is complex, because, as we have seen, it requires thinking about both what matters in this situation, and what bravery demands. This in turn requires reflection on what the relevant factors in question are, and whether the conception of bravery I have acquired thus far is adequate; perhaps I need now to think harder about the brave person's reasoning. Obviously, no simple universally applicable formula will result from this.

Virtue ethics' commitment to the position that acting rightly should be understood as acting as the virtuous person acts has led to a number of different objections. One simply restates that this is not a 'theory of right action' available (p. 525) to all, regardless of what they are like. We can see by now that there is no way that virtue ethics could produce such a theory, so the issue moves to whether this is an advantage or not. So far, advocates of such a 'theory of right action' have failed to produce any arguments for thinking that this is the form that ethics should take, mostly because it has been until recently an unchallenged assumption. Here the recent resurgence of virtue ethics has opened up a much-needed debate.

Another objection, increasingly fading as virtue ethics becomes better understood, is that it is ethically conservative, since it begins from our embedded lives, rather than assuming that we are blank slates receptive of a 'theory of right action' telling us what to do. These charges come from noticing only half the theory's concern with action, its recognition of embeddedness. They ignore the theory's commitment to virtue as an *ideal*, and the insistence that ethics involves *aspiration* to an ideal. In the classical tradition, different

Virtue Ethics

theories make more or less stringent demands on us as we aspire to the ideal. The most stringent demand, that of the Stoics, is that to be virtuous I must think of myself as just one among other rational humans, one member of the moral community, with no special standing because of my individual achievements and relationships. Other theories make less stringent demands. No classical virtue theory takes seriously the idea that virtue could be achieved by conforming to your society's conventions; this would leave out what ethics is all about—aspiration to an ideal, trying to live better.

At the beginning of its recent revival, virtue ethics was sometimes accused of not being “applicable” to moral problems; telling us what kind of person to be, it was thought, would not help us with problems like the ethical status of abortion and euthanasia and other difficult moral problems that we would expect ethical theory to help us with. At this point, it is clear that all that virtue ethics cannot provide is an all-purpose ‘theory of right action’ that will mechanically give anybody the answers to these problems in any context. But it is also clear that virtue ethics rejects this view of a ‘theory of right action’ in favor of an account that does more justice to our moral discourse and moral psychology. Meanwhile, virtue ethics has been applied to a gamut of such problems, with spectacular effectiveness, judging by the level of interest. There is now a wealth of virtue ethical approaches in every branch of applied ethics, so the facts are by now on the ground. A virtue ethics approach to abortion in particular has been extremely influential.¹

1.4. Virtue and Nature

It is often assumed that virtue ethics is naturalistic—that is, that its claims about our final end and virtues depend on a particular view of nature, especially human nature, understood in a broadly scientific way independent of the ethical claims themselves. Sometimes this theory is called ‘Aristotelian’.

(p. 526)

It is actually not true that virtue ethics is bound to be naturalistic. In the ancient world, we find versions of virtue ethics that incorporate Jewish and Christian beliefs, and Christian virtue theories were standard during the mediaeval period and, in a different form, in the eighteenth century. Even among the ancient pagans there is a minority tradition, deriving from passages in Plato, taking virtue to be ‘becoming like God’. Thus aspiring to the ideal of virtue may be understood in terms of a radically otherworldly theory, metaphysical or religious, that tells us to find out about our human nature only to transcend it.

However, the most developed and influential classical theories of virtue were naturalistic, and so are most modern versions (with the exception of a revival of Christian virtue ethics, as in Porter, 2001). The best known modern virtue theories, Foot's and Hursthouse's, characterize themselves as neo-Aristotelian, and this is the form of naturalism most commonly associated with classical virtue ethics. It is Aristotelian in spirit, in that the claim that the virtues benefit me, by constituting my flourishing, is supported by the claim that having the virtues benefits me as a human being. I flourish only if I am virtuous, because human nature is such that flourishing, for humans, requires us humans to live in a virtuous way.

This is, obviously, a definite and bold claim. It has often been criticized on mistaken grounds. It is sometimes, for example, thought that it depends on a ‘metaphysical biology’ peculiar to Aristotle and long since refuted. However, classical virtue theory does not depend on biology, or any science, in the way that modern philosophers have often demanded of a theory that is naturalistic. Virtue ethics is not derived from science or any other field; as we have seen, it emerges as a theoretical version (ultimately, several theoretical versions) of reflective thoughts that we all have. There is no question of ethics being “reduced” to some nonethical level, or emerging as the result of the analysis of the vocabulary of some other field. Ethics, in this tradition, emerges from our reflections on how to live, and, when developed in a theoretically rigorous way, guides us in how to live better.

Nonetheless, an ethical theory is weakened if the best contemporary science conflicts with its claims or makes it hard to see how they could be true. In the ancient world, classical forms of virtue ethics appealed to what they considered to be the best science available, which is why Aristotle reasonably thinks that his ethics is supported by his biological account of human nature: It explains and supports the moral psychology that

the ethics presupposes. However, can contemporary forms of virtue ethics appeal to human nature, scientifically considered, in the same way? Some have tried to resuscitate particular features of Aristotle's own biological outlook, such as teleology, but this has not been found very convincing.

Contemporary virtue ethics with the ambitions of the classical theories, of which the most powerful example is that of Hursthouse, does in contemporary (p. 527) terms what the classical theories do in theirs. It looks at human nature as we find out about that from the best contemporary science. Here the relevant sciences are biology, ethology, and psychology, studies of humans and other animals as parts of the life on our planet. When we look at other species, it has long been clear that we can discern patterns of flourishing particular to the species. There has been reluctance to extend this to humans, on the grounds that we, unlike other animals, can choose and create different patterns of living, and evaluate them, sometimes rejecting and changing them as a result. It is only recently that it has been realized that this is not a reason for rejecting naturalism. For this fact about our species is, precisely, a *fact* about our *species*. It is because we are rational beings that we can create and evaluate different ways of living, rather than carrying on in the set patterns that members of other species follow. And this is a fact about us of the same sort as the facts about other species on the basis of which we study them. Human rationality is not something that cuts us off from the rest of the biological universe; it is just what is most distinctive about us as a species. If we take this point seriously, then a naturalistic account of humans needs to come up with patterns of flourishing as we do for other species, but specific to humans, thus taking account of the way our life patterns are dominated by the fact that we are rational beings. Virtue theory takes advantage of the fact that human rationality has been the subject of scientific study by psychologists for quite some time now, though it has only recently been recognized that it is this, rather than some outdated Aristotelian ideas, that forms the basis of a naturalistic support for virtue theory.

Neo-Aristotelian kinds of virtue theory claim not only that it benefits me as an individual to be virtuous, but also that it benefits humans to have the virtues because of the kind of animals that we are. This is obviously a large claim, and it has been found contentious. But it is important to note that it is a claim based on accepting and studying the best science. It does not depend on ignoring biology, or on 'moralizing' biological claims. It comes from taking seriously the fact that we are rational animals, *as a natural fact*. Here, again, virtue ethics has opened up a fruitful new set of issues. One of them is whether, when we do give due weight to our rationality as determining the way we live, we will end up with something nearer to a Stoic than to an Aristotelian view; this is explored by Becker (1998).

This has been a highly schematic and bare account of the major structural features of classical virtue ethics. I have not been able even to touch on some of the many rich areas that have been explored by modern as well as ancient writers. To mention but a few: The importance of practical reasoning in a virtue raises the issue of the degree to which the virtues are unified by the reasoning they share. This in turn highlights the importance of

the affective element in virtue, and of exploring the moral psychology of the emotions, and of pleasure. The (p. 528) social embeddedness of the virtues raises issues of social and political cooperation, and the kind of theory of justice a virtue ethics requires. It also foregrounds the kind of demand that the ideal of virtue must make if a virtue ethics is to have the kind of universality that we commonly demand from an ethical theory. All these issues are now reemerging as subjects of lively discussion.

2. Reduced Versions of Virtue Ethics

2.1. Weakening the Centrality of Practical Reasoning

While all the aforementioned features of virtue ethics in its classical version are important, perhaps the most crucial is the central role of the agent's practical reasoning. I am not virtuous unless I have thought through and understood for myself the reasons on which I act, even if I have originally picked them up from teachers and parents. If we omit this point, we get the idea of a virtue just as a disposition to act. It need not be a disposition that I have endorsed for myself in thinking through the reasons on which I decide to act bravely, justly, or whatever.

What would be the point of such a disposition? A common line of thought is that I have reason to have such a disposition, to act bravely or whatever, if it does some good, either to me or to others. For why ever should I be motivated to have the disposition, if it did no good to me or others? Hence we get a 'Humean' kind of virtue ethics.² On this view, a virtue is a disposition that is, broadly, useful to me or to others, a disposition that, in general, does good. On this view, why should it matter whether I endorse the disposition in my own reflective reasoning? The moderate version of this position holds that I can have a virtue even if reflection reveals that I have it purely as a result of the influence of others, without my own reflective endorsement (Merritt, 2000). The radical version holds that I need not put reflective thought into the matter at all; I can have a virtue even if my having that disposition requires me to be ignorant or thoughtless (Driver, 2001).

Once we have weakened the requirement that the disposition develop and be exercised through the agent's practical reasoning, virtues can be seen as merely dispositions to act that are productive of good (the agent's good, or good in general), and this is the part assigned to them in those forms of consequentialism that recognize a role for the virtues. Their value for a consequentialist is an instrumental one, and since they get their value from being productive of consequentialist good, it is this good-productivity that will determine their shape.³ (p. 529) Hence, for a consequentialist, virtues will be plastic dispositions that take their changing shape from the shifting circumstances of good-productivity. This line of thought is taken to comic extremes in Bentham. However, some more recent consequentialists have realized that this takes us rapidly far away from any ordinary understanding of the virtues, making the exercise arguably pointless. They have therefore also explored the idea of taking the virtues in their full classical version, and asking how these can be *indirectly* productive of good within a consequentialist framework (Slote, 1988).

All these varieties of virtue are clearly trivial by comparison with the full classical account, and theories that include virtue in any of these roles are not generally taken to be types of virtue ethics. This is because the centrality of practical reasoning in the classical version links a virtue as a disposition to the agent's reflective reasoning and thus to her character; virtue is not just a disposition in the sense of a reliable habit productive of something, but is the way the agent is, constitutive of the way she is living her life as a result of her own decisions. It is no accident that theories that talk about virtue but omit

this element try to fit virtue into a framework that is fundamentally centered on something other than the agent: usually production of consequentialist good. Virtue in these theories is trivialized, since its links have been cut to the importance of the agent's living a certain kind of life in accordance with his own reflective reasoning rather than values he happens to have picked up. For this latter is the point of classical virtue ethics.

Kantian theories have also been accused of trivializing virtue, but this is a more complex situation. When discussing virtue, Kant regards it as strength of will to do your duty, and he has been interpreted as holding that virtue is nothing more than a disposition instrumentally valuable for its role in enabling the agent to do what is independently recognized as being what he ought to do. This impression is strengthened by Kant's imperceptive attacks on classical theories of virtue that see it as constituting our final end (Irwin, 1996). Yet other interpretations of Kant insist that his theory does not cut the rightness of action off sharply from the agent's life and overall patterns of emotional response. Recent richer interpretations of Kant that take into account all of his ethical works give us a more nuanced picture of the place of virtue in his thought (Engstrom, 2002; Sherman, 1997; Wood, 2002). This harmonizes with recent Kantian interpretation and neo-Kantian theories that place less stress on the deontological aspect of obeying rules and give more importance to the role of respect for persons and the 'kingdom of ends' (Herman, 1993; Korsgaard, 1996). The relation of Kantian ethics to classical virtue ethics is still in the process of discovery (Engstrom and Whiting, 1996; Hursthouse, 1997).

(p. 530) 2.2. Narrowing Our Conception of Flourishing

The idea that our final end is defined by formal constraints rather than by content is still relatively unfamiliar in modern ethical philosophy. We are also unfamiliar with the thought that we begin from a vague specification of flourishing, but then, via ethical reflection, achieve the understanding that flourishing requires living virtuously (at which point there are different theoretical options as to the place of virtue in a flourishing life). Modern theories tend to assume that any conception of flourishing that has a role in ethical theory must be defined at the start in a way that is independent of the virtues. (This tendency has been encouraged by utilitarianism, which thinks of happiness passively, in terms of a pleasant state, rather than as the active living of a life.) This has the immediate result that the virtues appear to have an egoistic role, being seen as merely instrumental to the acquisition of the agent's final end, and their being seen in this reduced role has encouraged the widespread rejection of virtue as an ethical notion in the twentieth century. Virtue ethics has also been seen as implausible in holding that being virtuous is the best way to achieve flourishing independently defined. Many critics see virtue ethics as this unattractive combination of high-mindedness and selfishness. But their target is only the reduced form of virtue that results when our conception of flourishing is narrowed in advance by being defined independently of virtue. And it is no surprise that it has been hostile critics who have constructed this easy target.

Seeing the virtues as merely means to an independently specified end has appealed to consequentialists who try to attach the virtues to an end other than the agent's own flourishing. But, as we have seen, either the virtues become plastic dispositions pushed and pulled around by the demands of producing consequentialist good, or they have to be defended in a merely indirect way. If this result is seen as problematic, then a consequentialist has either to reject the virtues altogether as part of ethical theory (a move that is becoming increasingly implausible) or find a way of giving them a noninstrumental role in the production of good, where this is defined independently of the agent's life and concerns. But this is hard to do, as long as the point of having the virtue is unconnected to the agent's concern with his own life; if the role of practical reasoning is also eliminated, then no connection is established between virtue and the agent's priorities in living, and this leaves virtue with a reduced and trivialized role.⁴

2.3. Rejecting a Final End

What happens if we reject the idea that we have a final end, or, less radically, reject the idea that the virtues are connected to it if we have one? It is possible to hold that our lives are given shape by our having a final end but to deny that (p. 531) the virtues contribute to that end. Perhaps the virtues are focused on such different values that practicing them does not unify my life by contributing to my living my life overall. Or perhaps they do, but the result is not to benefit me, in which case the notion of flourishing will come apart from the way the virtues enable me to live a specific kind of life (Swanton, 1997).

It is more common, however, to reject, or just ignore, the notion of flourishing and indeed of a final end altogether. This does not in itself imply rejecting or ignoring the virtues, but it does imply the rejection of a unified rationale for them. It is compatible with either accepting or rejecting a central role in the virtues for practical reasoning, but it commits the theory to the idea that the agent's practical reasoning develops in the different areas of the virtues in a way that is not unified over her life as a whole. This in turn puts severe constraints on the extent to which practice of the virtues can be taken to be part of aspiration to an ideal of living a better life as a whole.

In recent years, there has been a revival of interest in the virtues, sometimes unaccompanied by any interest in the notion of the agent's life as a whole as providing a unifying rationale for them. One form this has taken has been study of the particular virtues in a consciously piecemeal way. This has gone with a deliberately atheoretical, or even antitheoretical, approach to them (Pincoffs, 1986).

Other approaches have been more theoretical but have limited themselves to discussing virtues in the absence of any eudaimonist framework. As a result, it has been uncertain what the relation of virtue is to other ethically important notions, particularly those concerned with action, and there has been much debate. One version argues that the rightness of actions can in fact be based in the quality of the agent's virtuous motivation

(Slote, 2001). Another goes to the other extreme in locating virtue entirely in the performance of virtuous actions, dispensing with the character aspect of virtue (Thomson, 1997). Unsurprisingly, this has been held to collapse into 'Rossian pluralism', the view that various kinds of acts just are right or wrong in a piecemeal way.

2.4. Keeping Embeddedness and Neglecting Aspiration

Some theories calling themselves virtue ethics that have been developed in recent years have stressed the social embeddedness of virtue to the neglect of the aspirational side, the point that virtue is an ideal that virtue ethics demands that we try to achieve. (The early work of Alasdair MacIntyre [1984] has been interpreted in a one-sided way, but his later work provides a balance.) Such theories have put emphasis on the point that virtues are developed within existing traditions and societies. Over-emphasis on this, however, risks falling into relativism, the (p. 532) view that different virtues are developed within contexts that cannot be meaningfully compared and thus are removed from mutual discussion and criticism. (This has resulted in much unfair criticism of the classical view, which always stresses virtue as an ideal not limited to particular social contexts.) These versions of virtue ethics have been both attacked and defended for being ethically conservative, stressing the importance of our social embeddedness at the expense of reflection about the ethical tenability of many aspects of that embeddedness.

Failure to stress the ideal aspiration side of virtue also tends to lead to a lessened emphasis on the role of practical reasoning within the virtues. Indeed, culturally conservative theories reduce their conception of virtue by stressing the position of the learner as someone who must acquire the virtues within a social and cultural context, but neglecting the stages of increasing understanding and independent thought that are crucial to the classical versions. Culturally conservative theories of this kind may stress the importance of the agent's final end as the point of the virtues, but will put reduced emphasis on the extent to which the agent's own reflection can rethink and reorder her priorities.

Since the classical theory is made up of several different important elements, there are obviously a large number of ways in which modern theories can produce reduced accounts of virtue by minimizing or omitting these elements in various combinations. I have just tried to present, in a way I hope is illuminating about them and their mutual relationships, the commonest ways in which modern theories do diverge from the model of full virtue in the classical tradition.

3. Unreduced Modern Virtue

Virtue Ethics

Not all modern versions of virtue ethics do work with reduced versions of virtue, however. Most promising here is the work of Foot and Hursthouse in developing a 'neo-Aristotelian' theory of virtue, and of Becker in developing a 'neo-Stoic' theory. These theories recognize the importance of the agent's own reasoning in the practice of virtue; claim that the virtues benefit the agent by leading to flourishing; and stress that the virtuous person does far more than conform to the conventions of her society. Moreover, they explore a form of naturalism that locates humans in the biological universe in a scientifically sound way. These theories, of course, differ from ancient eudaimonist theories in many ways, but this is exactly what we would expect. They rethink the full structure of classical virtue ethics in distinctively modern ways.

4. Conclusion

Why has virtue ethics been so neglected for so much of the last hundred years? One influence has been consequentialism, which has recognized only a reduced notion of virtue as instrumental to the achievement of some independently defined good. There has also been a general focus on actions at the expense of agents; the dominant forms of Kantian ethics have until recently been narrowly obsessed by rules and principles. Indeed, until recently, it was assumed that the only two major forms of ethical theory were consequentialism and deontology—an assumption that clearly takes it for granted that the central concern of ethics is action in isolation from agents. The resurgence of virtue ethics has not merely provided a “third way”; it has challenged this underlying assumption, and thus it not only provides an alternative to the other forms of theory but provides resources from which they have been enriched.

A role has also been played by narrow and metaphysics-driven ‘metaethics’, which has argued, from metaphysical premises that have little to do with ethics, that any form of naturalism is problematic. This has for some time been thought to provide problems for virtue ethics. But this is doubly mistaken: virtue ethics is not by definition naturalistic, and those forms of it that are take their start from the actual state of knowledge in biology, ethology, and psychology rather than from metaphysics. Indeed, the growth of virtue ethics has provided one challenge to the idea that metaphysics is somehow privileged with regard to ethics; many workers in ethics are impatient of the idea that metaphysics is ‘first philosophy’ that can lay down rules for ethics prior to any work in ethics. The rapid growth of modern virtue ethics has gone along with an explosion of interest in applied ethics that likewise takes it that our first task is to get the ethics right and then ask about metaphysical implications, rather than vice versa.⁵

We are now emerging from a period of piecemeal understanding of virtue ethics, and a variety of theories focused on one or other form of reduced virtue. It is obvious from this chapter that I think that the future belongs to theories that do in modern terms what the classical theories did in theirs. This is not because of any reverence for the past, but simply because these theories deal with the full range of issues that virtue brings up, and thus provide for virtue, as an ethical notion, a structure adequate to show how and why it is the central concept in ethical theory as well as ethical discourse. The more discussion brings the major issues to the fore, the sooner we will emerge from some still-current criticisms that treat objections to reduced versions of virtue as though they were objections to the full theory. In the last thirty to forty years, we have seen virtue reemerge as a theoretical notion in ethical discussion and have progressed to the point where virtue ethics is once more a recognized ethical approach. We are getting to (p. 534) the point of being able to develop some of the major issues of the classical theories in modern terms—for example, the kind of naturalism we need to ground a theory that, as virtue ethics does, makes substantial appeal to the rationality of our human nature. What is most

Virtue Ethics

needed is more clarity as to the relation of virtue to flourishing and to practical reasoning, issues that are prominent in current discussion.

Virtue ethics receives far more bitter and hostile criticism than other forms of ethical theory, and this seems to be because it challenges assumptions that have grounded ethics for much of the last hundred years, and thus is rightly perceived to be a radical and unsettling force. Once we look beyond reduced conceptions of virtue, we can see why virtue ethics has been so uncomfortable for the previous settled academic orthodoxy. Ethics now has to consider rival accounts of practical reasoning; pay attention to moral psychology; ask seriously what is involved in giving a unifying justification to our uses of a moral concept; question whether an ethical theory can churn out a one-size-fits-all decision procedure to settle all ethical problems; take seriously the ethical role of our lives as wholes and the living of a life as activity rather than passive state. There is enough here to keep the pot boiling for years.

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Notes:

(1.) Hursthouse, 1991, has been reprinted in a large number of anthologies.

(2.) Baier, 1994; see also Foot, 1978. (Contrast Foot's later work, in Foot, 2002, where her views on the role of practical reasoning and virtue are far closer to the classical view.)

(3.) Hurka, 2001, follows G. E. Moore in allowing virtue a limited noninstrumental role within consequentialism. Hurka's idiosyncratic definition of virtue as a positive attitude to intrinsic good produces a reduced account; it omits the dispositional aspect of virtue, the role of practical reasoning, and the role of a final end.

(4.) See note 3.

(5.) The work of John McDowell, however, is influenced by metaethical concerns: see McDowell, 1979 (frequently reprinted).

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