

Chapter 8

Virtue Ethics

Sometimes, in deciding on what we ought to do, we first consider how we ought to be. For example, if faced with a situation that involves social injustice, we might pick someone whom we admired and wanted to be like – Gandhi, let's say, or Mother Teresa – and then ask "What would Gandhi do?" This doesn't give us a rigid formula or decision procedure to employ. Instead, it asks us to consider a virtuous person, to consider his or her virtues, and then ask what behavior people with these good traits and dispositions exemplify. Some writers have thought that a picture like this better reflects how people should go about making their moral decisions. They should do so on the basis of concrete virtue judgments instead of abstract principles, such as "Maximize the good" or "Never treat another person merely as a means," and so forth.

Recall also that some writers found Kant's view of the role of emotion in moral life to be rather antiseptic. While Kant does regard the emotions as sometimes morally significant, they are only instrumentally significant on his account. Cheerfulness in doing our duty is good, but good only because it makes us more willing to do it – it makes duty come more easily to the virtuous person. Also, in spite of the work of Peter Railton and others, critics of consequentialism still view that theory as committed to the view that friends ought to view each other's value instrumentally – as a means of promoting the overall good. These are additional considerations that lead many writers to be unhappy with Kantian ethics and consequentialism.

This dissatisfaction with abstract principles that seem difficult to apply in practice, as well as theories that don't seem to allow room for emotions, or for norms of ethics that are partial rather than

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impartial, have led some contemporary writers to try to develop an alternative ethical theory that focuses on virtue evaluation – on evaluating the agent, and not merely the agent's actions. Of course, theories such as Kantian ethics and utilitarianism offer accounts of virtue evaluation, so what would make virtue ethics truly distinctive is the claim that virtue evaluation has *primacy* – that is, the normative concepts in the theory are defined in terms of virtue – so that, for example, right action is defined in terms of virtue, rather than virtue being defined in terms of right action.

Other writers have felt that we should turn to ethical practices of the past to find a theory that could be used to bring together disparate traditions and practices – and virtue ethics has actually been around in one form or another for thousands of years. Current virtue ethicists in fact tend to take their inspiration from Aristotle (382–322 BC), who was a student of Plato (428–348 BC), and certainly one of the greatest philosophers in the history of philosophy. Aristotle wrote the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which – as an aid to his son – spelled out the steps to a good life. Of course, “good” is a bit ambiguous – Is that morally good, or prudentially good, or intellectually good, or all of the above? Well, for Aristotle, the good human life had all these ingredients. A good human being was virtuous in the sense that he embodied all the excellences of human character.

So, Aristotle is often held up as a paradigmatic virtue ethicist. Again, though there is some lack of clarity about what exactly virtue ethics is committed to, it is generally agreed that virtue ethics maintains that character, human excellences, *virtues* are the basic modes of evaluation in the theory, as opposed to act evaluations such as “right” and “wrong.” It is important to note that many virtue ethicists do not believe the theory to be *incompatible* with act evaluation at all.¹ Rather, act evaluation is to be understood *in terms of* character evaluation. Virtue is the primary mode of evaluation, and all other modes are understood and defined in terms of virtue. Thus, one popular version of virtue ethics defines right action in terms of virtue, rather than defining virtue in terms of right or good action. For example, Rosalind Hursthouse offers the following:

¹ The “eliminativist” strategy is more associated with “anti-theory” or the view that we should do without moral theory altogether.

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(RA) An action is right iff [if and only if] it is what a virtuous agent would, characteristically, do in the circumstances . . .²

This is a virtue ethical characterization of “right action” because the rightness of the action is explained in terms of virtue, and not the other way around. Most of the theoretical weight is therefore borne by the account of virtue provided in the theory. To unpack this account of right action, we need to know what the virtuous agent would do. We need to have an account of virtue that will give us some way to approach this issue.

Hursthouse herself adopts a broadly Aristotelian account (with some qualifications). On Aristotle’s account of virtue, virtue is seen as a quality that leads to *eudaimonia*, or human well-being. Aristotle discussed two types of virtue: intellectual and moral virtue. Intellectual virtues are virtues conducive to certain kinds of knowledge, and there are two main intellectual virtues: theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom. *Practical* wisdom is important to our project here because Aristotle understood it to be necessary for moral virtue – moral virtue involves activity that leads to well-being and it is practical wisdom that enables the agent to figure out how to act well: “...a man of practical wisdom is he who has the ability to deliberate...it is a truthful characteristic of acting rationally in matters good and bad for man.”³

Virtue is a mean state, which means that it does not exhibit excess. And practical wisdom comes into play since it is crucial for the virtuous person in choosing the mean:

... virtue or excellence is a characteristic involving choice, and ... it consists in observing the mean relative to us, a mean which is defined by a rational principle, such as a man of practical wisdom would use to determine it.⁴

There is a lot to unpack in this account. The virtuous agent chooses virtue and chooses to perform the virtuous action. Not only this, but

² Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 79.

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), pp. 152–3.

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 43.

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the virtuous agent in choosing exhibits practical wisdom, knowledge of what he is doing and why it is good. This entails that the virtuous agent cannot act out of ignorance; otherwise, he would not be genuinely choosing and would not be exhibiting practical wisdom. The virtuous agent has to be aware of the nature of the choices that he is making. Here's an example to help illustrate what Aristotle believed: Suppose that there are two individuals, Al and Barb. Al is a naturally good person who enjoys helping others – he isn't too bright, but his nature is such that he ends up helping people simply out of the kindness of his heart. This kindness on his part is not cultivated; it is just part of his personality, his basic nature. Barb, on the other hand, is also a kind person, but someone who has worked at it by developing good habits. She is good because she chose to be – she rationally and reflectively endorsed virtue and set out on a path to be virtuous. She might have been helped along by having good parents who instilled good values, but still the choice was hers to make when she grew up, and was able to rationally reflect on her own character and make decisions about what to endorse and what to work on improving. On Aristotle's view, Al is someone who has natural goodness, but no true virtue. Barb, on the other hand, has genuine virtue because she has chosen virtue; she has displayed practical wisdom. Al has not, and so his goodness, in a way, is accidental. It may have turned out that Al just happens to be nice and does nice things for others, but without the guidance of practical wisdom and common sense, Al is operating by a kind of mindless instinct that is actually dangerous:

... it is true that children and beasts are endowed with natural qualities or characteristics, but it is evident that without intelligence these are harmful... as in the case of a mighty body which, when it moves without vision, comes down to a mighty fall because it cannot see... just as there exist two kinds of quality, cleverness and practical wisdom, in that part of us which forms opinions... so also there are two kinds of quality in the moral part of us, natural virtue and virtue in the full sense.⁵

The analogy with vision is important. One way to understand Aristotle's account of how the virtuous person, as opposed to the nonvirtuous

⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, pp. 170–1.

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person, arrives at correct moral judgments is via *perception* of what is morally relevant in the context of making that judgment. On this view, Aristotle is a kind of particularist about moral judgment – about how reasons work in justifying our actions. The person who is well trained, or who has been brought up well by her parents and received the right sort of education, will have developed this perceptual capacity. She will be able to see that a given course of action is wrong, or inappropriate, in much the same way that an interior designer can look at some rocks and tell the difference between granite and slate, and that one is good for countertops and the other for mud rooms.

Practical wisdom is good deliberation that ends in judgments, well-considered judgments, of what we ought to do and how we ought to live. That is why it is termed “practical” and is generally contrasted with “theoretical wisdom,” which is wisdom that does not concern action, but rather contemplation – figuring out interesting abstract problems, for example – or understanding, which has to do with comprehending something that has been written or what someone has said, but does not itself result in a judgment of action, a judgment about what we should *do*. This is important because on Aristotle’s view virtue crucially involves activity. The brave person chooses the path between rashness and cowardice and acts accordingly – he doesn’t simply pass judgment on what we ought to do in his circumstances – that judgment results in action. Otherwise, persons who are weak-willed, who believe or know what they ought to do but fail to do it, would count as virtuous.

Aristotle famously believed in the claim that virtue is a mean state, that it lies between two opposed vices. This is referred to as the doctrine of the mean. The basic idea is that virtue will tend to lie between two extremes, each of which is a vice. So, bravery lies between cowardice and foolhardiness; temperance lies between gluttony and abstinence; and so forth. Some virtues can be hard to model on this view. Take honesty. Of course, failure to tell the truth – telling a lie – would be one extreme, but is there a vice of telling too much truth? Maybe . . . though I suspect there might be some disagreement over this. Part of the mean state concerned our emotions, however, and not just our actions. The virtuous person not only does the right thing, but he does the right thing in the right way – in the right sort of emotional or psychological state. Our emotions can be excessive or deficient as well. The person who runs into the battle to fight, but who is excessively fearful, is not

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fully virtuous. The truly well-functioning person is able to control and regulate his feelings and emotions, as well as act rightly.

Aristotle's picture, then, of the virtuous person is the person who functions harmoniously – his desires and emotions do not conflict with what he knows to be right. They go together. This leads him to view a person who acts rightly, but who feels badly about it, as not being virtuous. This person is merely "continent" – this person can control his actions, but needs to work on bringing his emotions in line with what reason tells him is the right and appropriate thing to do. So the excellent human being is not conflicted; he does not suffer inner turmoil and the struggle between reason and passion.

As a matter of historical fact, Aristotle's account of virtue suffered from prejudices that were rampant in Ancient Greece. He believed that slaves and women, for example, being defective reasoners, could not possess full virtue. They might possess imperfect forms of virtue, appropriate to their station in life, but not full human excellence:

In the soul the difference between ruler and ruled is that between the rational and the non-rational. It is therefore clear that in other connexions also there will be natural differences. And so generally in cases of ruler and ruled; the differences will be natural but they need not be the same. For rule of free over slave, male over female, man over boy, all are natural, but they are also different, because, while parts of the soul are present in each case, the distribution is different. Thus the deliberative faculty in the soul is not present at all in a slave; in a female it is inoperative, in a child undeveloped. We must therefore take it that the same conditions prevail also in regard to the ethical virtues, namely that all must participate in them but not to the same extent, but only as may be required by each for his proper function.⁶

Modern Aristotelian virtue ethicists such as Hursthouse reject this feature of Aristotle's theory. It is anachronistic and completely misinformed. Slavery and the inherent inferiority of some persons on the basis of race, nationality, and gender are rejected by neo-Aristotelians. Everyone has the same chance at goodness, limited only by, perhaps, things such as the circumstances under which they were raised and the sort of moral education they received as children. But, they argue, the

⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, translated by T. A. Sinclair (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1962), pp. 51–2.

broad framework set up by Aristotle is still correct. Rational excellence is crucial to *eudaimonia* and to moral virtue. From a certain perspective, we can see why this feature would be appealing. After all, when we look at what separates humans from animals, it is the capacity for reason – this is a sort of “functioning” that seems unique and distinctive to humans. So shouldn’t reasoning excellence be part of human excellence and thus a crucial component of moral virtue? This reflects a strong strain of naturalism that runs through Aristotle’s philosophy. If we look at human nature, and what marks us off from the rest of nature, we see that we have this capacity that other animals lack and that is of crucial importance to our concept of being a good person, a person who functions well and realizes the full potential of his or her distinctive capabilities. And he is right that most people do think that we ought to work at developing our intellects: education, intellectual self-improvement – these are viewed as good things. On the Aristotelian view, they are good because they improve our lives by making us better people. Note the similarity with John Stuart Mill’s modified hedonism. Like Aristotle, Mill placed a premium on the development of the intellect – however, his rationale was somewhat different. On his view, this would lead to better sorts of pleasures. Still, some have argued that what Mill had been adopting in his own theory was a sort of Aristotelian perfectionism, and that he really wasn’t a true hedonist. Aristotle’s account is called “perfectionist” because it treats the good for humans as a perfection of their distinctive capacities – in his case, their rational capacities. The brand of perfectionism favored by Aristotle has been subject to considerable attack. It depends upon holding the view that there is a human nature and that what is good for humans depends upon developing our natural and distinctive capacities – our “essential” features, if you will. But that we have such “essential” human natures, and that it is somehow developing them that makes our lives go well, both seem rather dubious. Perhaps if we understood the essentialism in extremely general and vague terms it might be right, but then has very little content. But even if we accepted this, many would challenge the claim that developing our essential human capacities makes us good – including morally good. So, for example, suppose that “jealousy” is an essential human emotion – indeed, it is hard to imagine a person who does not ever experience it under completely understandable circumstances. We still might disapprove of it and its expression on moral grounds.

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On the Aristotelian view, moral virtue is chosen, virtuous acts themselves are the result of deliberation and choice, and the agents so deliberating are good deliberators – they possess practical wisdom that allows them to make the correct decisions about what they ought to do. In spelling out Aristotle's view, some writers have made use of a perceptual analogy: morally virtuous agents are correct perceivers – they are the ones to correctly see what is morally relevant in a given context, and they act according to the perceptual knowledge they have acquired. So it is really clear that on Aristotle's view there are a lot of psychological requirements for moral virtue.

One controversial feature of tying practical wisdom so closely to virtue is that it seems to commit the account to a *unity of the virtues* thesis. Practical wisdom is sufficient for being virtuous and it is also necessary: anyone who truly possesses the ability to deliberate well about practical matters and correctly figure out what he ought to do, and when, has moral virtue. Further, anyone who does not have this ability does not have true virtue – he may have some kind of imperfect virtue, or "natural" virtue, but is not true moral virtue. But what this means is that if someone has one virtue, through practical wisdom, then he's going to have all of them, because the same good deliberation that underlies one virtue will underlie all of them. If practical wisdom is necessary and sufficient for one virtue – such as kindness – it will be sufficient for all of them. So the kind person will also be courageous and just and exhibit the proper amount of pride, and so on. This is the unity of the virtues thesis – that they go together, they are united, and to have one virtue is to have them all. Thus, there are no courageous thieves and liars. There are no generous people who are cowards. There are no irresponsible, but noble and self-sacrificing, individuals. And therein lies the oddity.

Aristotle also developed an account of friendship that has been very influential. He incorporated into this account of friendship elements of his view of moral virtue. He claims that there are basically three distinct types of friendship: (i) friendship based on utility; (ii) friendship based on pleasure; and (iii) friendship based on virtue. Type (i) is the sort of friendship we might have with a business acquaintance, for example. It survives as long as the business relationship survives, but its purpose is simply to facilitate the business – we don't have an interest in this sort of friend for his own sake. Type (ii) is closer to what we think of as friendship. This friendship is the sort we have with

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someone who is fun to hang out with – maybe he has a great sense of humor, or maybe he always has good tickets to the opera. In any case, the reason for the friendship is simply that it is pleasurable and if that were to cease, the friendship would cease. It is type (iii) that constitutes perfect friendship, and this sort of friendship can only exist between perfectly virtuous individuals. We need to accept Aristotle's unity of the virtues claim in order to find this picture of friendship at least initially plausible. This is because, on his view, having one virtue means that we have practical wisdom, which means that we have all the virtues. Thus, on his view, the issue of partly virtuous friends does not arise. But for this very reason the account seems implausible upon reflection, because most of us are familiar with virtuous people who are good friends with only partly virtuous people. You may, for example, have a friend with character flaws, but who also has very admirable quality traits – perhaps he's too gruff with people, for example, but you know that when they really need help he's always there to help them. Though you see room for improvement, this does not get in the way of the friendship, and your desire for that person's good. Aristotle might respond that this is really one of the other sorts of friendship – based on utility or pleasure. But those relationships are not marked by desire for that sort of friend's good for its own sake. So, at the very least, Aristotle's classification of friendships does not seem exhaustive or complete.

At the opening of this chapter, I noted that many people were attracted to virtue ethics out of dissatisfaction with impartialist ethics. So, what advantage here does virtue ethics offer? Well, there's no foundational commitment to impartiality. There will be virtues of friendship – appropriate traits to embody in the context of friendship, just as there will be different virtues appropriate to judges, or members of juries, or politicians. Not all virtues need embody impartiality to have moral worth and significance. On Hursthouse's view, if I want to know what to do as a good friend I ask myself what the virtuous person would do in the circumstances – visit the friend in the hospital as opposed (let's say) to working on the Oxfam phone line, which might actually promote more impartial or neutral good. This does raise a tricky issue about conflicts among the virtues – Doesn't the friendship virtue conflict with the civic virtue? In which case, how do you choose? I believe that Hursthouse's answer to this is that either action would be right – so there can be many "right" actions in a given context.

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A number of other problems have been raised for the Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian account of virtue. First of all, it is certainly a highly intellectualist account of virtue. If we view virtue as necessarily involving *correct* perception of what is morally relevant, then some traits that we intuitively think of as virtues would not qualify. Think of a trait such as *modesty*. Surely *sometimes*, anyway, people are modest because they lack a full and correct understanding of how good they are, or how skilled they are, or how significant their research is. Albert Einstein, for example, apparently had a relatively modest view of his own accomplishments. Though he thought well of his work, of course, there were others he thought superior. This seems a case of modesty where the person is making a mistake, an epistemic error – that is, an error in belief about how well his work stacks up against others. Since this would involve a failure of reason – a failure to perceive correctly, on Aristotle's account – it could not count as a moral virtue.

Further, the correct perception requirement raises the issue of whether or not anyone has ever really been virtuous – Isn't it reasonable to assume that we all make moral mistakes of some sort?⁷ For example, the Ancient Greeks seemed to believe that slavery was morally permissible and that women should be sequestered. These are clearly moral errors. Does this mean that no Greeks were ever virtuous *at all*, or in any respect whatsoever, because they lacked correct perception in some area, and thus lacked true practical wisdom? This seems rather harsh. Indeed, this has led some commentators on virtue ethics to note that virtue ethics isn't very practicable in a heterogeneous society.⁸ Suppose that Sheila and Ron are arguing about – let's say – capital punishment. Sheila favors it, but only for the punishment of the most heinous crimes. Ron is against it altogether, arguing that it is cruel and unusual punishment, and that the state should not be involved in administering death under any circumstances whatsoever. Each has arguments to support his or her view. There is no doubt that their opinions on this matter are quite different, and yet, at least in contemporary liberal discourse, we wouldn't want to say that either was unreasonable, even if one of them at least must surely be mistaken.

⁷ Michael Slote makes this kind of argument in "Is Virtue Possible?" *Analysis*, 42, March 1982, pp. 70–6.

⁸ J. B. Schneewind makes this argument in "The Misfortunes of Virtue," *Ethics*, 101, 1990, pp. 42–63.

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Aristotle's correct perception view of virtue would make it the case that at least one of them – the one who fails to see some morally relevant consideration with respect to capital punishment in a particular case – must lack virtue. And thus, each person, convinced that he or she is right, if they accept this view, must regard the other not only as mistaken but as also lacking in virtue. Again, this seems rather harsh. Ron may think Sheila to be misguided, and perhaps as someone who puts a bit too much weight on deterrence arguments – and still view her as a good and virtuous person who is, in good faith and responsibly, trying to decide on a complex issue of justice.

These sorts of cases make a more fragmented view of virtue a bit more appealing. People may have moral blind spots, but they can still possess some virtues. So, for example, a man may be insensitive to his children, and thus not be a good father, and yet still be generous in helping the poor. Most of our experience of the people around us is like this. We rarely will have experience of anyone who we think is morally perfect.

Of course, the virtue ethicists could still maintain this very intellectualist view and hold that virtue ethics offers us an ideal to strive for, even if it cannot realistically be obtained. But we might instead try to soften the Aristotelian picture and not have such stringent requirements for the virtuous person.

Recall that Rosalind Hursthouse has offered an account of "right action" that is Aristotelian. She is one modern theorist who is sensitive to some of the problems raised for the Aristotelian account and wants to offer a version that can avoid some of them. For example, she believes that the view can in fact guide our actions by providing a decision procedure as well as a criterion for act evaluation. The right action is the one the virtuous person would perform. However, a standard problem for her account of right action via virtue has to do with giving an account of why the virtuous agent would do what she does. Is it simply the case that whatever the virtuous agent characteristically does is right, which seems capricious, or is it the case that the virtuous agent picks up on reasons that are morally significant and that justify the action in question – in which case it is those reasons that determine the moral quality of the action, and appeals to the virtuous agent are redundant? Recall from Chapter 2 that divine command theory suffered from a similar problem. Surely the virtuous person is responding to reasons that make one act morally preferable

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over the other available options – perhaps considerations of human dignity and respect, or considerations of good consequences, or a mixture of different reasons, weighed appropriately. In any case, it is these reasons that justify the action as right – it is not that the virtuous agent wills them to be right by fiat. So, these justifying reasons make up the raw materials for a normative ethical theory and we can bypass theoretical appeals to the virtuous agent altogether. Here's an analogy. Suppose that we accept the following for water safety: "Safe water is water the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) says is fine to drink." It may be good for me to abide by this and only drink water that meets EPA standards, but the EPA does not will water with a certain composition safe or unsafe. Instead, the EPA monitors contaminants in the water and studies their toxicity levels, and on that basis decides what is safe and what is unsafe. The true account of water safety, then, involves an account of these contaminants and their toxicity levels for humans – it need make no reference to the EPA at all.

Humean Virtue Ethics

Until a few years ago, this chapter could have been titled "Neo-Aristotelian Ethics," since virtue ethics seemed to entirely draw its inspiration from Aristotle. This, however, has recently changed. David Hume (1711–76) was another philosopher who wrote on virtue and some recent virtue ethicists have looked to his work for ideas about how to develop a virtue ethics. Hume's account differs from that of Aristotle in that Hume views virtues as mental qualities that are pleasing; and they are pleasing (at least in part) because they are conducive to social utility in some respect. Thus, he places no heavy psychological requirements on virtue. Having a virtue just means that one has a pleasing quality (with certain caveats on what counts as "pleasing"). The virtuous person needn't have wisdom or intelligence, though they themselves will count as intellectual virtues because they are pleasing and useful qualities. Hume's account does depend upon a certain view of human nature: the view that we are the sorts of creatures moved by feelings of sympathy for others, as well as concern for ourselves. He rejects the Hobbesian view of human nature that is egoist. In the *Treatise*, Hume writes of selfishness:

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I am sensible, that, generally speaking, the representations of this quality have been carried much too far; and that the descriptions, which certain philosophers delight so much to form mankind in this particular, are as wide of nature as any accounts of monsters, which we meet with in fables and romances. So far from thinking, that men have no affection for any thing beyond themselves, I am of opinion, that tho' it be rare to meet with one, who loves any single person better than himself; yet 'tis as rare to meet with one, in whom all the kind affections, taken together, do not over-balance all the selfish.⁹

Hume believed that people are motivated by self-interest, but that they are also motivated by love and sympathy for others. It is this sympathy that forms the basis for morality. We judge things to be morally good or bad, virtuous or vicious, on the basis of our sympathy with others. The pain of another person is bad, and when I see this I react sympathetically to the person. For example, I would probably feel pity for a person I saw in pain. Suppose that I saw someone evil in pain, someone who had tortured thousands of innocent people. Wouldn't I feel pleasure rather than pity in this case? Perhaps so, but Hume could explain this as a product of my sympathy for his victims. That feeling would depend on the extent to which I thought he deserved the pain he was feeling.

Hume also believed that when we make moral evaluations of people, what we are concerned most about are their motives. A person's actions just give us evidence of the person's motives. Some have interpreted Hume as arguing that the primary focus of moral evaluation is motives – internal states of the agent associated with virtue, or having good character traits. The pleasing motives are the virtuous ones; the ones associated with sympathy, directly or indirectly. For example, when Arthur helps his elderly neighbor with groceries, we might naturally infer that Albert is motivated by benevolence and kindness – we find this pleasing, out of sympathy with the elderly neighbor who is being helped. On Hume's view, if we had no sympathy at all with others, we would not be capable of moral judgment. So his view of moral judgment is dependent on assumptions about human nature. Recall that Kant had a very different view: moral judgment is a matter of reason – if anything, sympathy can get in the way.

⁹ David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 486–7.

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One contemporary virtue ethicist, Michael Slote, picks up on this feature of Hume's account to argue for a kind of virtue sentimentalism. On his view, the wrong action is the one that is not properly motivated. An action must be motivated by warm benevolence to be motivated properly, and a failure to be so motivated makes the action wrong.¹⁰

One appealing feature of this approach is that it can be used to provide a theoretical underpinning to a care approach in ethics (to be discussed further in Chapter 9). While this work was pioneered by feminist writers, Slote believes that the theoretical framework of this approach can be articulated with virtue ethics, so that ethics of care could be formulated along virtue-ethical lines. Since Hume seems to hold the view that as a matter of our nature we are benevolent beings, and that we also make moral judgments based on this – since our sympathy is responsible for the benevolent motives we have – this means that our caring for others is part of our nature as well. And, on a Humean view, it is the part of our nature associated with morality. The worry, I think, for anyone attempting to derive an ethics of care from Hume, however, is that Hume himself was well aware of the dangers of too much partialism. On his account, correct moral judgment is not simply given in our emotional responses to others – true, we need those to begin with, to even get started in making moral judgments, but these responses need to be corrected in order to give us reliable judgments. Hume suggests that this correction takes place when we regard the trait we are judging from “the general point of view” and not simply from our own particular situation. Thus, I may actually be alarmed and upset when I see how brave my enemy is – but, *from the general point of view*, abstracted from my own interests, I can see that this bravery is indeed admirable. However, it would be possible to reject this feature of Hume's analysis and still retain some of the structure of his account of virtue.

Criticism

Many challenges have been posed to virtue ethics in general, as well as to the specific approaches outlined in this chapter. One *general* criticism of the whole approach is that it fails to conform to what we know

¹⁰ Michael Slote, *Morals from Motives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

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about how best to explain human behavior in light of recent experimental findings in psychology. This is a very exciting area in philosophy today. It is interesting in part because we can see how experimental evidence can be brought to bear in either shoring up or ruling out certain normative ethical theories. Although this is highly controversial and the subject of much current debate, one such challenge is that posed by situationism in social psychology.

This is the view that the best explanation for the virtuous behavior we observe someone perform is the situation the agent finds herself in, not her "character traits," or at least character traits of a robust sort that can span widely varying contexts.

For example, researchers have found "...subjects near a fragrant bakery or coffee shop more likely to change a dollar bill when asked than those near a neutral-smelling dry goods store."¹¹ Whether or not we are smelling something nice is seemingly irrelevant to justification of our benevolent action, yet is causally responsible for the benevolent action. So, some people just smell a lot more cookies than others and they act more nicely – Is the best explanation for their behavior a virtue, or the fact that they live above a bakery? It looks as though situational circumstances are much better predictors of behavior – so that seems to be bad news for virtue. If we don't need to appeal to virtues to explain behavior, they don't serve any theoretical function. We have no reason to believe that they actually exist either, since all the behavioral regularities that we observe in people can be better explained in terms of consistent situational factors. If there are no virtues, it looks as though there can't be any virtue ethics – it would be a bit odd to base our normative ethical theory on appealing to normatively significant things that don't actually exist. This is the view that Gilbert Harman endorses.¹² A virtue ethicist could respond in a variety of ways. The first is to accept the evidence of social psychology and claim that virtue ethics offers a "regulative ideal" of behavior. Even if no one is really virtuous, the virtuous ideal can still

¹¹ John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behaviour* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 31.

¹² Gilbert Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 99, 1999, pp. 315–31.

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guide us in our actions. For example, someone might think that it would be impossible for a real person to be like the fictitious accounts of heroes that we read about in comic books, or the gods of Greek mythology – and yet argue that, to the extent that we can, we should use these paradigms as guides to our actions.

Another strategy is, of course, to deny the significance of this research to virtue ethics. We could try to point out methodological problems with the experiments. However, there are so many different experiments that it becomes difficult to knock them all out on methodological grounds.

We could also try to argue that the evidence provided is not sufficient for the radical conclusion that Harman wants to draw. But this could still pose some difficulties for virtue ethics. For example, John Doris proposes that the globalism of traditional virtue ethics be rejected.¹³ There is no one “honesty” trait, for example. Instead, we may have 50 or more “honesties”; that is, narrowly circumscribed traits or dispositions to tell the truth. So, Joe might not have honesty 1, which is the disposition to tell the truth about how well he does on exams, but he might have honesty 34, the disposition to tell the truth about how tall he is. So, Doris thinks that Harman’s view – that situationism provides evidence that character traits don’t exist – is too radical. However, he does think that the experimental evidence supports the view that there are no robust traits; that is, traits to tell the truth over all or even most contexts or situations. And this is a problem for a virtue ethics that understands virtue as a “stable” or “reliable” character trait.

Another challenge has been that virtue ethics doesn’t provide a guide to action. “Be nice, dear” – Well, what is nice, and what are the circumstances under which I should be nice? That’s what we really want to know. This shows that it is these other reasons that actually justify our behavior. This has been raised as a very standard problem for the theory, but virtue ethicists have spent a good deal of time trying to show how their theories could be applied. Michael Slote, for example, has argued that we need to look at what motivates a person’s actions to determine the action’s moral quality – so my guide will be what I consider proper motivational structures. Rosalind Hursthouse

¹³ Doris, *Lack of Character*, p. 64 ff.

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has argued that we can get perfectly serviceable rules from virtue ethics, what she terms the “v-rules” – such as “Be honest” or “Be kind.” Further, this objection is no more a problem for the virtue ethicists than it is a problem for the consequentialist who offers an evaluative criterion rather than a decision procedure (though at least the consequentialist does give us a way to evaluate decision procedures).

This challenge can be expanded by noting that virtue ethics has trouble telling us the right thing to do in conflict situations, where two virtues may conflict, and thus the corresponding rules – such as “Be honest” or “Be kind” – may conflict. But some virtue ethicists think that this is simply the way morality is – it is messy, and for any situation there may be more than one right answer. Insisting that morality is neat and tidy is simply to impose a misleading clarity on moral decision-making.

Virtue-based theories, however, face another practical problem. Recall that if we adopt the Aristotelian view that virtue involves “correct perception” of what is morally relevant, then we are committed to the view that those who disagree with us are lacking in virtue. In a heterogeneous society, this view would lead to lack of respect between people who disagreed with each other on important social issues. This seems rather alien to our outlook today. Rather, it seems quite possible that two people could disagree about something, and yet both are virtuous. Further, if we really do think that something like correct perception is crucial, then it becomes difficult to figure out how anybody is virtuous. Was Aristotle himself virtuous? Well, he certainly had false and appallingly bad views of women – and yet it seems a bit odd to say that because of this he had no moral virtues whatsoever.

Still there are a variety of formulations of the theory that we could adopt that would avoid these implications. We could, for example, soften the psychological requirements that Aristotle places on the possession of virtue. And a Humean account would not be subject to these objections. This is because on Hume’s view, virtues are simply mental qualities that are found pleasing from the correct perspective. This does not place undue psychological requirements on the possession of virtue. Virtue ethics remains an interesting alternative approach to moral evaluation and moral guidance.