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Varieties of Virtue Ethics

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Introduction

Defending his career as a philosopher, Socrates tells the Athenian court, For this is what God commands me, make no mistake, and I think there is no greater good for you in the city in any way than my service to God. All I do is to go about and try to persuade you, both young and old, not to care for your bodies or your monies first, and to care more exceedingly for the soul, to make it as good as possible; and I tell you that virtue [excellence] comes not from money, but from virtue comes both money and all other good things for mankind, both in private and in public (*Apology* 30a–b).

To judge from such early or Socratic dialogues as *Laches* and *Euthyphro*, Socrates' effort at life-changing persuasion centered on “virtue ethics” — unrelenting exploration of virtue concepts such as wisdom, courage, temperance, piety, justice, and love.

Socrates was arguably the first virtue ethicist in the Western tradition. In the meantime, the philosophical focus on virtues has assumed diverse forms and purposes. The present paper aims to give a sense of the variety of ways that virtues have been and are being treated in philosophy. Thinkers sometimes distinguish virtue ethics from virtue theory (Driver 2001?), or assume that virtue ethics is restricted to theories that derive all moral valuation from virtue concepts (Baron 1985). To broaden my comparisons, I will use ‘virtue ethics’ more generously, to encompass any ethical view or procedure that makes virtues and vices a focal point of philosophical reflection about ethics.

Virtue ethics has been diverse in several interconnected ways. Different thinkers and traditions give divergent lists of virtues. The differences in these lists often reflect (sometimes hidden) differences of metaphysical backgrounds, especially of fundamental anthropology. These differences in turn beget or stem from diverse ways of understanding the relation between the virtues and emotions (affections, passions). Philosophical accounts of the virtues can have divergent understandings of the broad conceptual structure of morality, some being aretaically monistic (conceiving virtues or the motivational element in virtues as foundational for the remaining moral phenomena) while others are pluralistic (conceiving the virtues as one among several dimensions of the moral life). Related to this is the possibility of monisms that make some dimension of the moral life other than virtue fundamental, and derive their concept of virtue from this other single foundation. And finally, the purpose of the activity of virtue ethics can be variously conceived. I'll structure my discussion around these varieties of variety.

Diverse lists of virtues

What are the specific contours of human excellence? Which traits make a person ideally good? Perhaps the best-known divergence on these questions is that between Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle on the cardinal virtues. Though Aristotle does not talk about cardinality, it seems clear from the number of words he allots to each of the dozen or so virtues sketched in *Nicomachean Ethics* that the major ones in his view are practical wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. These are roughly the same virtues as structure the argument in Book 4 of Plato's *Republic*. To Aristotle's cardinal virtues Thomas Aquinas "adds" three biblical (I Corinthians 13) virtues: faith, hope, and love. But the effect of adding the "theological" virtues to the ancient list of cardinal virtues is not just addition, as though the variety results simply from tacking the biblical virtues onto the pagan list. No, the effect is ecological: when you introduce a new species into a niche, older residents adjust slightly or radically or disappear; perhaps nothing remains exactly as it had been.

Similarly, adding the theological virtues affects the conceptual structure of the Greek cardinal virtues, thus yielding a *pervasively* different picture of what traits it takes to make a human being an excellent specimen of the human species. Aquinas discusses this impact of the theological virtues on the structure of the cardinal virtues in *ST 1a2ae 63*, where he tells us that when God bestows the theological virtues, our life takes on a new end-goal that re-orientates all the other virtues. An example is temperance, the virtue by which our desires and pleasures of "touch" (of food, drink, and sexual contact) are made right, appropriate, and proper. The new end-goal our life takes on when we love, trust, and hope in God adjusts the standard (in Aristotle's term the "mean") by which our desires and pleasures of touch are qualified as virtuous (*ST 1a2ae 63.4, respondeo*). We come to have new reasons for our physical desires and pleasures.

The person who has an explicit relationship with God through faith, hope, and love will be differently temperate from one who lacks these virtues. An example of an ordinary virtuous pagan reason for desiring and enjoying food is that it will promote the health of the body. A Christian's appetite, too, might be shaped by this concern, but in addition she may find herself losing her appetite for meat because her eating companion, for whom Christ died, thinks it was sacrificed to an idol (I Cor. 8.11). Or a Christian husband might experience a special sexual enjoyment with his wife because she is a gift to him from the Lord. These are exemplifications of distinctively Christian temperance because the reasons embodied in the desire or pleasure are distinctive of a Christian way of life and thought. (For discussion of how reasons can be embedded in desires and pleasures of touch, see Roberts 2014.)

Another locus of divergence is the virtue of humility. Humility is important in the Christian scheme of virtues and in some schemes of virtues that are a heritage of Christianity, and seems to be strongly incompatible with the virtue that Aristotle calls greatness of soul in Book 4, chapter 3 of *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle says nothing

about humility, but tells us that greatness of soul is the crown of the virtues. David Hume (1975, p. 270) expressly places humility in the catalog of vices, and co-opts its name for the uncomfortable emotion that we call shame (*Treatise* Book I, Part II, Section II). The Stoics famously reject compassion (see Nussbaum 2001, p. 354–400), a virtue which, in several variants (see Roberts 2007), is endorsed by many, perhaps the majority, of reflective people.

The mention of variants, which I illustrated with the case of temperance in Aristotle and Aquinas, is a kind of diversity among catalogs of virtues that may be hidden by a common vocabulary and by a human tendency to assimilate the unfamiliar to the familiar. Virtues that go by the same name ('liberality,' 'compassion,' 'justice' [see MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and the discussion of justice in *After Virtue*, chapter 17] need not always have the same conceptual grammar. For example, the virtue that Nietzsche, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1,22,1), calls "the bestowing virtue" (*die schenkende Tugend*) might be called generosity or liberality, but it isn't the virtue that most of us would call by that name, because of its strongly expressivist import: The person who lavishly gives gifts out of Zarathustran generosity does so above all as a way of expressing his personal abundance, his strength, his inner wealth, his "nobility" (for discussion, see Roberts and Wood 2007, 289–92). This generosity is about the giver, in contrast with the generosity that we tend to be more familiar with, which is most perfectly exemplified by concerned attention to the need or pleasure of the recipient, and a corresponding relative *inattention* to the giver.

Another difference between Aristotle and Aquinas is their understanding of magnanimity or greatness of soul. Aristotle's greatness of soul (*NE* 4.3) is a virtue that rules out gratitude and humility (two important Christian virtues). Aquinas rescues magnanimity by interpreting it as a complement of humility: as humility damps down our excessively high aspirations, magnanimity ramps up our deficiency of aspiration (See *ST* 2-2, 129 on magnanimity and 161 on humility). Aquinas's magnanimity is very different from Aristotelian.

Diverse metaphysical backgrounds

It isn't difficult to trace the differences between Aristotle's and Aquinas's lists of virtues and their conceptions of the good life for human beings to divergent background beliefs about the nature of human beings and the universe we inhabit. Aristotle's God is not one in which it would make sense to have faith and hope or the kind of I-Thou love relationship that is arguably required for the infusion of virtues (see Stump 2014). Similarly, the difference between Nietzschean generosity and its Christian analogue is plausibly attributed to the difference between thinking that human beings are most fundamentally a will-to-power and thinking that we are most fundamentally made in the image of a gracious God for generous fellowship with him and with one another. In her defense of "non-relative" virtues, Martha Nussbaum (1988) fails to notice two

purportedly generic features of human nature that vector away from Aristotle's conception of the "moral" virtues, namely the human tendency to believe in and worship the divine, and our tendency to mess up our lives by our concerted efforts to establish our self-importance. Perhaps it could be argued that differences of opinion on these issues stem *from* diverse moral formations as much as they ground them. In any case, the two kinds of difference seem internally connected.

Virtue ethicists can also diverge in their understandings of the function of virtues: for Aristotelians, a central function is to make human beings good (fully actualized). Virtues are traits that purport to be aspects of maturity for human beings. This is the conception of virtue on which the particular contours of the concepts of the virtues are tightly tied to some conception of human nature. It is probably the majority view, shared by Stoics, Aristotelians, Christians, Nietzscheans, and at least some Confucians. Nussbaum (1988) nicely illustrates this understanding by reference to Aristotle. But at least one virtue ethicist (see Driver 2001) holds that a virtue's status as a virtue is determined entirely by the kinds of outcomes that it tends to generate, exhausted in its function of fostering some extrinsic desideratum. To make her point Driver says that if it turned out that brutally beating your child when he reaches a certain age resulted in his living longer, then the disposition to beat your child brutally when he reaches that age would be a virtue. Notice that while Driver is not able to escape some connection between human nature and virtue, the connection she makes is not between virtue and the nature of the possessor of the virtue, but between the virtue and the person who is affected by the person of virtue (namely, the children who get beaten).¹ Thrasymachos in Plato's *Republic* Book 1 illustrates an egoistic version of this "consequentialist" understanding of the nature of justice. According to Thrasymachos, the trait of justice in a ruler's people is a "virtue" just to the extent that the ruler "wisely" so designs the trait that when his people act in accordance with it they promote the ruler's pleasure, wealth, and power. Again, it is not the possessor of the virtue who reaps the good, but someone affected by the possessor of the virtue.

Relation of emotions to virtues

Major divides in the history of virtue ethics center on the relation between virtues and emotions. In Plato and Aristotle, whom I'll call the classical virtue ethicists, emotions and emotion-like states are, along with actions, important "outputs" of virtues. As Plato describes actions that express the virtue of justice, for example, they must conform to the requirements of the rational or prescriptive part of the soul, but those norms must be mediated to actions by the functioning of the "high-spirited" part (*thumoeidês*, literally anger-producing, but I suppose that guilt- or shame-threatening is also essential) (see

¹ Driver says somewhere that she wants the people with whom her children have to do to have traditional virtues like justice and generosity, but that she would not want her children to have those virtues.

Republic Book 4). Consider a teenager who knows that he should tell the truth even when it's disadvantageous or embarrassing to him, and he is truthful in that he reliably behaves truthfully. But he does so primarily out of awareness how easy it is to be caught in a lie, and wants not to be caught. He behaves truthfully out of fear of shame. Compare him with his older sister, who's been studying philosophy with a virtuous tutor. She has been discussing truthfulness with the tutor and fellow students, and has a growing appreciation of its intrinsic beauty and the ugliness of deceit (see *Republic* Book 3). The understanding that she's acquiring has made truthfulness attractive in its own right, and deceit repugnant. She and her brother may not differ much in truthful behavior, but her understanding of the matter is a deeper integration of emotion and reason. He tells the truth, but she is a truthful person.

Similarly, Aristotle says that a person cannot be said to have the virtue of justice if he doesn't take pleasure (joy) in performing just actions, or liberal if he doesn't enjoy acting liberally (*NE* 1.8, 1099a16–21). And we might amplify his point by saying that it's a mark of the virtue of justice that you take pleasure in seeing other people act justly, and delight in just states of affairs, and that you are distressed by injustice, either your own or other people's. Aristotle analyzes the virtues of courage and gentleness chiefly in emotion-terms: courage is the disposition to fear the right things, in the right way, to the right extent, for the right reasons, and so forth, and similarly to feel confidence; and gentleness is the disposition to be angry with the right persons, for the right reasons, on the right occasion, for the right length of time, with the right intensity, and so forth for any way in which anger can be right or wrong. Awkwardly, Aristotle calls this correctness of the emotion in its various dimensions the "mean" with respect to it; but clearly his idea is that there are reasonable and unreasonable ways to experience fear, confidence, and anger, and that courage and gentleness are dispositions to experience these emotions in the reasonable ways. For emotions to be morally praiseworthy — that is, expressions of virtues — they need to be in conformity with "reason" in this sense.

David Hume, the greatest of the fathers of "moral sentimentalism," reverses the direction of normative authority between virtues and emotions as understood by Plato and Aristotle. If Plato and Aristotle think that emotions are virtuous only when they have been trained into conformity with the rightness that the virtue concept prescribes, Hume proposes that the emotional pleasure or distress that we feel upon contemplating some trait (say, generosity or stinginess) as displayed in a person's actions or feelings is *the basis of their being virtues or vices*:

The distinction of moral good and evil is founded on the pleasure and pain, which results from the view of any sentiment or character; and as that pleasure or pain cannot be unknown to the person who feels it, it follows, that there is just so much vice or virtue in any character, as everyone places in it, and that it is impossible in this particular that we can ever be mistaken (T.546–7).

The traits that we like and approve of are virtues, and the ones we hate and blame are vices. It is true that he thinks we like some traits and dislike others because the former are pleasing or useful and the latter are displeasing and destructive, and this ‘because’ seems to introduce a standard of reason: there is something about the virtues that *makes* them pleasing and useful to beings like us humans, and whatever that is would seem to be the reason that we respond emotionally as we do. Hume tries to avoid this implication by making emotions non-“cognitive,” as though they are ultimately merely “feelings” and thus don’t attribute any character to what they are about. They project a kind of evaluative coloration onto their objects, but make no kind of “claim” about the object itself. But this is very difficult for him to maintain, since he also wants emotions to be discriminating responses — to discriminate between virtues and vices, and also between virtues (say, between courage and benevolence). He also stipulates that “the view of any sentiment or character” must be taken from the “common” perspective, a perspective that abstracts from the individual interests of the viewer. This qualification is supposed to avoid examples of people who take pleasure in another person’s vice (say, the viewer will profit from the vice) or experience distress at another’s virtue (say, the other’s virtue makes him a more able rival of the viewer). The “common” viewpoint is supposed to be humanly universal, but in fact, as Hume himself admits, there are many “common” viewpoints — Muslim, Christian, Scottish Enlightenment, 20th century therapeutic, Homeric, current day PC, and so forth (see Hume 1985, p. 229) — and they are in various ways incompatible, and, to the extent that they can be mediated or reconciled, the job will have to involve the use of reason. Aristotle’s viewpoint is no doubt parochial in some ways, but it has the enormous advantage over Hume’s sentimentalism that it welcomes the contribution of reason and reasoning in ethics. Contemporary non-cognitive sentimentalism (Ayer 1946, Blackburn 1998) has tended to be less interested in virtues than the sentimentalists of the 18th century.

A third emotion-related border on the map of virtue ethics divides Stoicism and its trends from both classical and sentimentalist virtue ethics. If classical thinkers integrate emotions into virtues and sentimentalists try to derive virtues from emotions, the Stoics make the eradication of emotion — or at least what they call passion — crucial to virtue. The master virtue for Stoics is *apatheia*, literally passionlessness. Hume (1975, p. 103) complains that “EPICETUS has scarcely ever mentioned the sentiment of humanity and compassion, but in order to put his disciples on their guard against it.” And it will seem to many that Epictetus indeed falls short in proper human sentiment when he advises, “If you kiss your child, or your wife, say that you only kiss things which are human, and thus you will not be disturbed if either of them dies” (*Enchiridion* 3). On the Stoic understanding, human wellbeing is a kind of tranquility, and the disturbance that undermines it is emotional perturbation, for example the grief most of us would feel at the death of our child. But grief comes from the same place as joy and gratitude and affection for family and friends, namely attachments and concerns and loves. The Stoics

have a hard time maintaining their campaign against emotion, as is shown by Seneca's (1995) *On Favours*, which is perhaps the best treatise in the history of philosophy on generosity and gratitude. The reader feels that in that work Seneca has abandoned Stoicism and taken up with the classical virtue ethicists. Gratitude, like all other emotions, depends on caring about things. To foreclose grief, as Epictetus tries to do, is to abort joy and hope and other emotions that to most people seem essential to happiness. The Stoics use various dodges — distinguishing passions from *eupatheiai* (anger is a passion and gratitude a *eupatheia*) and “first movements” (the sage's momentary anger is a first movement, not a passion), the good from the preferred (your child's thriving is “preferred” but not good), and the evil from the dispreferred (the death of your child is “dispreferred” but not evil) — to soften Stoicism without abandoning it (see Roberts 2013a, chapter 2 for discussion). Immanuel Kant's attitude toward emotions seems indebted to Stoicism, and aspects of Stoicism continue to be attractive to some philosophers (see Nussbaum 2001, Becker 1997).

Theory versus exploration in virtue ethics

Until sometime in the 1980s philosophers of ethics tended to think that the major alternatives in ethical theory were deontology and utilitarianism. Deontology is the view that some principle of obligation — Kant's categorical imperative is the dominant contender — is the foundation of morality. Actions gain their moral worth by being generated from this foundation, and the virtuous person is one who is properly sensitive to the foundational principle (has “respect for the moral law”). Utilitarianism is the view that the goodness of actions derives not from their generating principle, but from the quality of their consequences. A classic example is J. S. Mill's view that actions' goodness comes from their fostering the general happiness or correcting unhappiness. Each of these theories offers its preferred basis of morality as the single ultimate and exclusive basis of moral goodness and rightness (which is not to deny that some thinkers offer “mixed” or “impure” theories that admit both bases on an equal footing, thus turning two monisms into a dualism, so to speak).

Sometime in the 1970s some philosophers got the bright idea of proposing a third alternative ethical theory, which they called “virtue ethics.” It was to have the same formal structure as the two classic modern theories, but be more plausible. So the basic idea was that virtue, not a principle of obligation or good outcomes and states of affairs, would be the foundation of ethical distinctions. Michael Slote well represents this proposal:

An agent-based approach to virtue ethics treats the moral or ethical status of acts as *entirely derivative* from *independent* and *fundamental* aretaic (as opposed to deontic) ethical characterizations of motives, character traits, or individuals... (2001, p. 5; italics added).

Again, Gary Watson writes,

...action appraisal is derivative from the appraisal of character. To put it another way, the claim is that the basic moral facts are facts about the quality of character. Moral facts about action are ancillary to these” (Watson 1990, p. 452).

Notice that virtue ethics in the sense of a modern ethical theory restricts to zero the kinds of considerations we can offer in favor of the virtuousness of a virtue. To say that an aretaic characterization of motives, character traits, or individuals is independent, fundamental, and basic is to say that no argument can be offered in their favor. Earlier I said that one thing that makes a virtue good (and thus a virtue) is that it is a realization of human nature: if you become virtuous, you have the reward of having become a real human being. But that sort of explanation is anathema to virtue ethics as a modern ethical theory. Similarly, we might think that generosity and conscientiousness are good because they promote the happiness of society, or because they fulfill the will of God, or satisfy the demands of practical rationality. Virtue ethics rules out all these explanations because only one thing can be fundamental, and in virtue ethics that is virtue. Virtue is not conceptually dependent on or derivative from anything else. On this understanding of virtue ethics, Aristotle is not a virtue ethicist. Another writer, who sometimes seems to turn virtue ethics into a modern ethical theory, is Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), but she is not consistent in this stance (for discussion, see Roberts 2013a, chapter 1). Jason Kawall (2009) makes a valiant effort to defend the conceptual primacy of the virtues.

If the reader is wondering why I haven't mentioned the “big names” of the virtue ethics revival, Elizabeth Anscombe (1958) and Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), the reason is that they don't represent the kind of continuity with modern ethical theory that I have just briefly illustrated. David Solomon (2003) distinguishes this “routine” virtue ethics from the “radical” virtue ethics of Anscombe and MacIntyre whose projects are very different from such traditional theorizing. Their projects are hard to summarize or systematize, and Solomon gives a list of some of their main concerns:

Suspicion of rules and principles

Rejection of conscientiousness

Focusing on concrete terms — ‘generous’, ‘just’, ‘despicable’ — rather than ‘good’, ‘right’ and ‘ought’.²

Critique of modern models of practical reason

Stress on community, not merely the individual

Focus on the whole human life rather than actions

Interest in narrative

Centrality of contingently based special relationships (family, friends, church)

Suspicion of morality (as distinct from ethics)

Emphasis on “thick” moral education, that is, education in the virtues

² Notice how Watson, Slote, and Kawall neglect any attention to particular virtues; they are only interested in using the concept of to construct a theory.

Solomon comments, "...this complex set of overlapping and intertwining disputes seems to involve a disagreement rather about the very idea of a normative theory within which something might be basic" (69–70). I would add that MacIntyre seems to be preoccupied with understanding how deep moral disagreements based in rival traditions can be resolved; and the concepts of the virtues seem to be pivotal to his proposals (see MacIntyre 1991). Bernard Williams would share many of the above concerns. See his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985). See also Talbot Brewer's *The Retrieval of Ethics* (2009), especially the Introduction, which is a brief but pungent history of contemporary virtue ethics. For a spirit akin in some ways to "radical" virtue ethics, see Michael Stocker's classic 1976 paper on the schizophrenia of modern ethical theories.

A third strand of contemporary virtue ethics bases itself in one or the other of the two "traditional" modern theories, and then attempts to show that theory to be also a virtue ethics, not in the "routine" sense that it makes virtue basic to all other moral concepts, but in the sense that it implies or enshrines an understanding of virtue(s). Virtue ethicists who thought of virtue ethics as a rival of deontology and utilitarianism sometimes accused the rival theories of neglecting virtue. In response to the rise of routine virtue ethics, Kantians protested that their man too talked virtue — that there was a Kantian virtue ethics — and they pointed to the then little-read second part of Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals: The Doctrine of Virtue*, among other works. The Kantian concept of virtue turns out to bear a strong family likeness to the rest of Kantian ethics: Virtue is *steady respect (Achtung) for the moral law*. This key virtue has two aspects: on the one hand, it is that rational combination of attraction and awe toward the moral law written on the human breast, that you shall always so act as to be able to will the maxim of your action as universally binding; and on the other, it is the fortitude to be resolutely disposed over time steadily so to will and so to act within the embodied context of counter-pressure from your natural inclinations *not* so to think and will and act. In other words, it is a reliable staying-on-track of your sense of duty in the face of temptations to forsake it. Differentiation of general targets of categorical duty allows further distinctions of virtues: for example, steadfastness in duty to pursue your own moral perfection could be called rational self-love, and steadfastness in duty to pursue the happiness of others could be called benevolence. But any and all virtues will fall under the virtue of fortitude in respect for the moral law. It seems clear that in Kantian virtue ethics the concept of virtue is derivative from the central Kantian preoccupation with duty. A less theory-bound virtue ethics will likely include the sense of duty among other virtues such as justice, generosity, humility, perseverance, compassion, and so forth, but will not attempt to reduce any of them to a single central conception. In this sense, with the exception of Socrates who thought that all virtue was basically wisdom, the classical tradition is pluralistic rather than monistic in its conception of the virtues. Plato and Aristotle *enumerated* the virtues, and if the dialogues are to be believed, even Socrates discussed

such virtues as piety, courage, justice, love, and friendship. Defenders of Kantian virtue ethics are Onora O’Neill (1984), Robert Louden (1986), and Nancy Sherman (1997).

The other main modern ethical theory is of course utilitarianism, and in it we see the same reductive pattern as in Kantian thought. In *Utilitarianism*, chapter 4, John Stuart Mill responds to critics of utilitarianism who insist that happiness is not the only thing of value in human life, that virtue is also intrinsically desirable. Mill responds by admitting that some people desire virtue even in abstraction from happiness, just as some desire money for its own sake and pursue it even to the detriment of their happiness. But it doesn’t follow, says Mill, that virtue is desirable in abstraction from happiness, any more than that money is. Money’s value is more patently limited to its role as either a part of or means to happiness than virtue is, because some people’s pursuit of money works to the detriment of others’ happiness, whereas people’s pursuit of virtue makes them all the more a blessing to their associates. It remains, says Mill, that virtue is without value except as either a means to happiness or a part of it.

The classic virtue ethicists, too, think that virtues (more precisely, the activities characteristic of the virtues) are partly constitutive of happiness, and in a way that money is not. Their idea is that virtues make for happiness mostly because they are aspects of the realization of our human nature. A rational person wouldn’t want to be without the virtues any more than he’d want to be without legs or eyes; without the virtues, we’re not whole. If you aren’t just and temperate and courageous, then you’re a failed human being no matter how high may be your index of “subjective satisfaction” with your life (see Roberts 2015). Thus the classical virtue ethicists have a different conception of happiness than Mill, who thinks of happiness more in terms of pleasure and freedom from pain. The drift of his thought is that virtue makes our lives more pleasant — which it does, on the whole; but it does much more than that and so has a kind of importance that Mill misses. The most notable of contemporary virtue ethicists who offer a utilitarian theory of virtue is Julia Driver (2001).

Diverse understandings of the task of virtue ethics

What is moral philosophy and psychology good for? What’s the point of reflecting long and hard about virtues and all the connected concepts — vice, emotions, desire, human nature (faculties, powers), knowledge, understanding, belief, the language of virtue and vice (rhetoric, narrative), tradition, practices, and so forth? We’ve briefly visited a number of varieties of virtue ethics, and their practitioners seem to have had diverse purposes in pursuing their activities.

I’ve quoted Socrates’ speech from the *Apology* to the effect that he considered virtue ethics a discipline by which he and his interlocutors would come to have better souls. Through the practice of thinking hard about the virtues (which, after all, could be regarded as attributes of the excellent soul), you imprint your mind with an *eidōs* of

excellence that may then, under certain conditions, attach to you and become your own attribute. Aristotle seems to have had a similar aim in view when he said,

Our present inquiry does not aim, as our others do, at *theoria* [contemplation³]; for the purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us (*NE* 2.2, 1103b26–29).

For Aristotle, as for Socrates, virtue ethics is an *intellectual* practice, aimed at the *intellectual* good of understanding — understanding human nature and its potential for excellent formation. So when he says it doesn't aim at contemplation, I don't think he means that it doesn't aim at contemplation *at all*, but that its *ultimate* aim is not *mere* contemplation. The understanding that virtue ethics generates is itself an ethical one, an understanding which, when “complete,” engages the emotions and the will and emerges as *phronesis* (affective and motivational wisdom about living). This is why virtue ethics can't be taught to people who haven't had a good enough upbringing (see *NE* 1.3): whatever ideas they may pick up from it will likely fail to become affective and motivational.

I said that the *eidōs* (idea) of virtues, as called into articulation by Socratic virtue ethics, may, *under certain conditions*, be imprinted on the individual's soul in such a way as to become his own attributes. Not everyone with whom Socrates conversed about the virtues acquired them; see *Euthyphro*. What might those conditions be? Pierre Hadot (1995, 2002) has made a career of detailing what ancient virtue ethics, both classical and Hellenistic (chiefly Platonists, Stoics, and Epicureans), took them to be. In brief, the learner *chose* a philosophical way of life that he wanted to follow; he *joined* a supportive and ongoing community of persons who challenged him and shared with him his seriousness about putting on the virtues; he *discussed* the concepts of the virtues rigorously with other members of his community; he undertook *regular disciplines* of emotion, memory, and will designed to keep the ideas of the virtues before his mind and to transform emotion, memory and will in conformity with the community's concepts of virtue. In brief, classical philosophers' purpose in pursuing virtue ethics was the cultivation of humanity; its ultimate goal was the formation of souls into conformity with a standard of human excellence.

A second purpose, which we see in Hume and his 20th and 21st century followers, is polemical. He is defending what we have come to call “naturalism” against theological views, in particular Christianity, and views that are open to or noncommittal on transcendent sources of values such as Aristotle. He wants to establish, by detailed exposition of a naturalistic view of the virtue concepts, that the concepts of human excellence can be traced without remainder to human psychological sources, so that there is no need to appeal to the mind of God or to a transcendent realm of virtue-Forms such

³ *Theoria* must not be confused with ethical theory as contemporary philosophers understand it (see Roberts 2013a, chapter 1; see Rorty 1978).

as Plato posited (*Republic*, book 7; *Symposium*, Diotima's speech; *Phaedrus*, Socrates' second speech). He was committed to showing that the concepts of the virtues are nothing but outputs of our feelings, suitably processed by the demands of our social nature.

A third purpose, represented by Watson, Slote, and sometimes Hursthouse, seems to be the purely "professional" goal of formulating a successful reductive theory. This can look analogous to the goal of foundationalism in epistemology: the goal of finding an ultimate grounding of ethical distinctions on which we can all agree such as puts an end to ethical disagreements and controversies, and secures us all from fundamental ethical doubts. But, given the history of modern ethical theory, that goal is so universally recognized to be unrealistic as not to be attributable to these philosophers. Perhaps the explanation is that the activity of reductive theorizing has simply become professionally *de rigueur*: philosophers are socialized to suppose that that's what philosophers do, and so they do it. The virtue ethicists who defend Kantian deontology or utilitarianism by pointing to their resources for conceptualizing virtue are of course also engaged in modern ethical theory, except that they propose a different foundation than Watson and company.

The ancient virtue ethical goal of forming souls in excellence seems to me to give philosophy a kind of indisputable human importance that the other aims, and the philosophical practices associated with them, don't give it. Classical virtue ethics makes moral philosophy an indispensable and fundamental human enterprise, rather than a marginal academic exercise of dubious value.

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