

**What's Old Is New: Recovering Virtue in Contemporary  
Moral Philosophy**

**by**

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**A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

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**Winnipeg**

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## Official Abstract for FGS

*This thesis argues that virtue belongs in any framework of moral philosophy, and specifies this along several lines. In the first chapter I establish that virtue is a good, or a duty. I defend this against skeptical objections which argue that virtue is only an instrumental good. In Chapter 2 I specify some features of virtue. I argue that virtue is an attitude toward the good, and also is enhanced by an inclination toward action and a stable disposition. Chapter 3 argues against certain meta-ethical objections that would question the veracity of the aspects of virtue discussed in Chapter 2. These objections draw from psychological studies about traits and the telos of a life. Chapter 4 suggests a hypothesis that eudaimonia, or human flourishing defined narrowly can provide the theoretical unification for virtue.*

Is moral philosophy finished with virtue? The current landscape of moral theory might suggest otherwise. Virtue theory, inspired by Aristotle, has reentered the conversation in moral philosophy. But perhaps the moral theorist critical of virtue theory can nevertheless pay little heed to virtue. Fads emerge now and again, and perhaps Aristotle's insights on virtue, admirable early attempt though it might be to establish an ethical theory, is simply no substitute for the precision of a contemporary consequentialist or deontologist. Just as Aristotle's thoughts on slavery can be easily dismissed as obviously having been supplanted, so too can virtue theory—or so some ardent adherents to contemporary moral philosophizing might be tempted to believe.

But what of virtue itself? Virtue, in our general, socially-accepted moral milieu, which is not entirely removed from Aristotle's conception, is taken quite seriously. I will argue that moral philosophers of all stripes should do the same.

In the first chapter I will establish that virtue is a good, or a duty. What I mean here is that it is not simply an instrumental good—good because it leads to good—but is a good or obligation on its own, independent of its consequences. This claim should become intuitively obvious with the aid of thought experiments. I will defend this claim against skeptical challenges such as that of Julia Driver, who argues that our intuitions are wrong when we isolate virtue. She argues that we cannot truly appreciate what virtue is without also appreciating its consequences because our intuitions have been primed to take anticipated or general consequences into account. I show that there are instances where we are capable of disentangling a trait from its anticipated consequences, and therefore Driver's skepticism is falsified.

Chapter 2 builds on the claims of Chapter 1. Chapter 1 simply examined virtue without supplying any details concerning what virtue is. Chapter 1 relied on a sort of commonplace understanding of the meaning of that term. I examine in Chapter 2 how virtue as an attitude toward the good drives the intuitions to which we became attuned in Chapter 1. I then expand further upon what virtue is in Chapter 2. Virtue is not only (a) an attitude toward the good, but it also is enhanced by (b) an inclination toward action, and (c) a stable disposition. The point about an inclination toward action is quite nuanced, and does not oppose the conclusions of Chapter 1, which specifically attacked categorizing virtue as an instrumental good. As we will see, an *inclination* toward action is not the same as the action itself. I could be disposed toward an action without then carrying through with that action. Chapter 2 specifies some features of virtue, without claiming to be exhaustive.

Chapter 3 reverts to making defensive claims. There are certain meta-ethical objections that would question the veracity of the aspects of virtue discussed in Chapter 2. I respond to two such claims, the first propounded by Harman, the second by Prinz. Both cite psychological studies to establish that philosophical claims about virtue are on unsure footing. Harman holds that psychological studies indicate that character traits as we think of them do not really exist. Prinz holds that psychological studies leave traditional, teleological virtue theory with no foundation. I argue that both Harman and Prinz grossly overstate the conclusions that can be drawn from these psychological studies. Furthermore, there may be some reasons why the data from these psychological studies are not the only word on what the ground of virtue

can be. Thus, these claims do little to overturn the veracity of the conclusions I draw in Chapters 1 and 2.

Chapter 4 returns to the aspects of virtue discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. Having relied heavily on carefully honed intuitions in those Chapters, Chapter 4 supplies a theoretical basis for virtue. Virtue, I suggest, is unified by eudaimonia, or human flourishing defined narrowly. This traditional aspect of virtue ethics can be easily incorporated into consequentialism or deontology. This final Chapter does not supply an exhaustive defense of eudaimonia as the ground of virtue, but it does point out the many intuitive and theoretical advantages of placing eudaimonia as the theoretical heart within the greater body of virtue.

## Chapter 1.

### Does Virtue Really Matter?

Some of us think we should try to be good people. We take it for granted that it is incumbent upon us to live good or virtuous lives—we think we should have moral fiber. But is an emphasis on cultivating good character reasonable, or is this emphasis instead a common sense notion that careful reflection would suggest we jettison? Much moral philosophy of the past few hundred years has ostensibly favored the latter answer, with some moral systems relegating the good of a person to either an instrumental concern, or ignoring virtue altogether. I argue to the contrary that we ought be virtuous, and that moral philosophies of various stripes should take this into account.

This paper can therefore be most properly categorized as a work in *virtue theory* rather than a work of *Virtue Ethics*. The former is a more limited discussion of the topic of virtue. *Virtue theory* could play a role within the context of many broader moral systems—be they forms of consequentialism, deontology or *Virtue Ethics*. *Virtue Ethics*, as might already be clear, is one major system of moral philosophy, in which discussions of a virtuous life play a central role.

My discussion in this thesis remains neutral with regard to which major moral system is correct. My purpose is to argue that any major moral system should accommodate virtue as a good or something that we ought cultivate. Forms of consequentialism, deontology, and *Virtue Ethics* should all be capable of incorporating (at least most of) the virtue theory that I expound upon.

My first task is to show that there is something to this virtue business—that virtue carries some moral weight. It must be conclusive that if we had a moral system like a consequentialism or deontology that focused solely on consequences or duties without including virtue as a good or an imperative, something of moral importance would have been neglected. Demonstrating that virtue should be pursued in its own right is the aim of this first chapter.

My methodology in this chapter draws heavily on normative ethics—specifically our moral intuitions as uncovered from thought experiments. This method differs from much of what has motivated virtue ethics in the twentieth century. Much contemporary virtue ethics has drawn on metaethics.<sup>1</sup> I believe that a straightforward normative case has been somewhat underappreciated, and yet it can convincingly show the value of virtue.

This chapter proceeds as follows: I begin in Section 1 by exploring whether we can simply accept that virtue is a good or that there is an imperative to be virtuous because it is so obviously self-evident. I suggest that relying on the self-evidence of virtue is insufficient, for an instrumental conception of virtue seems to plausibly account for the moral pull or apparent good of virtue. Section 2 provides a thought experiment where the instrumental role of virtue is removed, and our intuition is that we find virtue has some moral weight of its own. The remainder of the chapter deals

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<sup>1</sup> A common justification for virtue ethics will often reference some topics that a moral philosophy should address, and then claim virtue ethics addresses them better than other moral theories. See for example: Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 3



with skeptical challenges to our intuitions about the thought experiment. Section 3 outlines a sophisticated skepticism as espoused by Julia Driver, which holds that we fail to appreciate the artificially restricted character of virtue and vice proffered by thought experiments because we import notions of unrestricted virtue and vice as we experience them in reality. In Section 4, I provide examples that falsify Driver's theory, and so Driver's objection fails. Finally, in Section 5, I refine Driver's objection, and show through another thought experiment that the refined objection to our first thought experiment does not apply to the second. Disabused of these objections, we are left to rely on the intuition that vice and virtue have moral weight of their own.

### *1. Is Virtue Simply an Instrumental Good?*

We may wonder whether the common sense intuition about being virtuous is, at least in a very weak form, so plainly true that it needs little additional argument in its support. There are, after all, some moral precepts that are rightfully accepted as *sine qua non*. Take a very weak form of the principle: *do no harm*. When put into the form: *one should not needlessly harm others*—the principle seems unassailable from within moral philosophizing. It could be challenged perhaps with metaethical arguments in favor of moral skepticism which would also cast doubt on any and all moral claims, but once one has conceded that there is something to moral theorizing, the weak principle of doing-no-harm seems hard to do without. All major moral theories would agree upon it (while some might strengthen it) and it strikes us as entirely uncontroversial and plainly true. It seems somehow analytic or to follow

from some moral truism such as *we ought to do the good*. Absent some counter-examples disputing it, this sort of principle can be taken as a given.

*That we should be good people* also seems quite right. It seems built into the fabric of our moral talk and thinking. We describe certain people as good and think a virtuous character is commendable, while we deplore viciousness. Especially virtuous people are hailed as paragons for society to emulate. Criminal justice systems will even employ facts about one's character in assigning punishments. During sentencing, those familiar with the guilty can attest to their character in order to argue that they warrant less punishment. When a good person has done wrong out of character, the status quo would have it that their punishment should not be as severe as the vicious deserve. Thus the intuition that *we should be good people* seems pervasive.

If we are to put a virtue principle in a weak form akin to the no-harm principle, it strikes us as quite right. All things being equal *we ought be good people, or, it is good to be virtuous*.

While intuitive and commonsensical, the virtue principal is different from the no-harm principle in that the former would not be accepted by all moral theories in the form I have stated. If doing the good means maximizing utility, or respecting the autonomy of others, is it true that all things being equal *we ought be good people*? If the good is respecting others or maximizing goods, and this has been accomplished, no more is added by being a good person. We certainly ought to be good, but only insofar as it promotes true goodness. Under these theories our virtue principle has

been categorized incorrectly as a principle—it is rather best categorized as a reliable rule that will be helpful in promoting the good. Virtuous people can be relied upon to do good things. Thus by promoting virtue, we help promote the real goods. In other words, virtue is an instrumental good.

Categorizing virtue as an instrumental good also seems a fine way of explaining the thread of virtue in our moral fabric. We want less punishment for the good person because their crime was likely an aberration and they will not commit it again. Good people are celebrated because they are inclined to do good, and by holding them in high esteem, we encourage others to emulate them and thus make more people inclined to do good.

Interpreting the virtue principle as either a true maxim or a practically helpful rule both seem plausible and can account for the pervasiveness of virtue in our moral talk. What we need to do is to control for the good consequences or duties fulfilled and see if virtue becomes negligible. We will see that it does not.

## *2. Virtue Is Valuable Apart from Its Consequences*

So far we find that there is an intuitive case for the straightforward truth of the weak claim that we ought be good, but it is unclear whether this is some good of its own accord and an independent duty, or whether it is an instrumental good. In this section a simple thought experiment will show that virtue is not purely instrumental. Even when outcomes or duties performed are identical, a circumstance in which a person is virtuous leaves a kind of moral remainder that causes us to see that a

circumstance that includes a virtuous character is morally preferable to a circumstance which includes a vicious character.

Take the following thought experiment. Suppose we have two separate but identical desert islands. Stranded on island A is Alice, while Beth is stranded on island B. Alice and Beth are marooned on their islands never to return to civilization. Alice's character is such that we would find her virtuous, while Beth's character is vicious.

Alice wishes to live morally on her island. She searches for natives to befriend when she arrives in the hope that she can join in their way of life and live-out her days peacefully with them. Unfortunately, there are no natives. She wishes to give swift deaths to the animals she must kill to survive so that they will not suffer unduly, and succeeds in doing so. She keeps the promise she made to her children to think of them whenever they are apart for prolonged periods.

Beth often wishes the opposite of Alice. She searches in vain for natives on the island because she hopes she can enslave them to make her life easy. She wishes to torture the animals she captures for her food, but she is not a sophisticated enough hunter, and the best she can do is kill them swiftly. She specifically wishes never to think about her children again even though she had promised to think of them, but inadvertently they often come to her mind and she regrets having fulfilled her promise.

Alice and Beth share identical outcomes or duties fulfilled and die on their islands. There is no risk of them finding their way to the mainland and tending toward good or bad actions there. Neither will serve as example for any others. We know

how their story ends. The question for us is: is there something morally preferable about what's happened on island A over what's happened on island B? I think there surely is. We prefer the circumstances on A over B. There is some kind of good remainder or purer rightness that makes us think island A or Alice is better than B or Beth.<sup>2</sup>

Those for whom the instrumental explanation of virtue initially seemed more appealing would have to say that, if they were forced to choose morally between A and B, that a coin should be flipped. I think few would think flipping the coin the best moral choice. The virtuous character of Alice and her good actions seems decisively better than the good actions of Beth committed out of impotent viciousness. The examples above include some traditional deontic duties and some consequentialist goods. However, I don't believe our intuitions about the thought experiment would change depending on what moral acts we assign to Alice and Beth. So long as Alice and Beth fulfill the same duties or act in ways that produce identical consequences while Alice is virtuous and Beth vicious, we will find Alice or the circumstances of A morally superior:

If we accept as reliable the conclusion of this thought experiment, we cannot assign virtue a purely instrumental role. Virtue seems to be playing some more robust

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<sup>2</sup> Our judgement may take a slightly different form depending upon the moral theory we are inclined toward, and I give the adjudications in ways that aim to be pluralistic. After all, a consequentialist would no doubt weigh the totality of circumstance and the overall good on the two islands. A deontologist might look at who has acted best in accord with moral obligations. A virtue theorist will look at who lives the best life or who is the more virtuous person—deciding more between the individuals than the circumstance. The point is that regardless of the terms our judgment takes, I surmise we find A or Alice morally preferable.

role—it adds something to our moral calculus when all actions we take without including virtue are held constant. However, not all moral intuitions are reliable. There may be reason to be skeptical of our intuitions about this case.

### *3. Driver's Skeptical Objection*

A compelling way to object to the above intuition is to argue that our intuitions about the above case are faulty because we fail to appreciate the artificial character of the case. We find something like this objection in the work of the virtue theorist who takes virtue to be only instrumentally good.

Julia Driver has argued that virtue can be fit into a traditional consequentialist model without having to add virtue as a good. Virtue is a good only insofar as it produces good consequences.<sup>3</sup> In other words, virtue facilitates good, so it is instrumentally good. However, the island thought experiment shows that equal consequences do not cause us to view Alice and Beth's disposition or circumstance as equally good. What's more, we find Alice's situation (or Alice) morally preferable to Beth's, and thus virtue cannot be purely instrumental. I extrapolate from her arguments that Driver would hold that our intuitions about the island case are faulty because the case is at odds with the general outcomes of virtue and vice.

I will supply Driver's own thought experiment, and her objection, to explain how the objection applies to the island case. Imagine that there is a non-human,

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<sup>3</sup> Julia Driver "The Virtues and Human Nature" in *How Should One Live? Essay on the Virtues* ed. Roger Crisp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 113

intelligent race called “Mutors” that evolved differently than humans. If Mutors severely beat their children at exactly age 5.57, the children's lifespans increase by 50%. The only Mutors who have the stomach to give such beatings are those that have developed a trait that causes them to relish beating a child when the child is aged precisely 5.57. Mutors take their children to the Mutors with this trait when they reach this age for the good of the child. Of note is that the violent Mutors do *not* enjoy beating children because it will help the children to live longer—this fact is irrelevant to them—they simply take pleasure in beating children. It is also important that this violent trait is extremely precise: the Mutors with this violent trait only want to beat the children at the precise time that it is good for them.<sup>4</sup>

According to Driver, any trait that generally brings about good should be considered virtuous. Driver admits that on her view, she would have to deem this violent trait of the Mutors *virtuous*. It has only good consequences, and never any bad. But her own Mutor case inspires an intuition that seems to contradict her claim—it does not seem to us that the very precise violence of the Mutors is really a virtue. It seems that, even though the outcome is good, the violent Mutors' trait still should be considered vicious.

Driver seems sympathetic to our intuitions, but objects that they can be explained away as faulty. She avers “It is our intuitions about unspecific traits (such as viciousness) which infect our intuitions about the Mutors’ trait.”<sup>5</sup> Traits such as

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 120 Some deontologists or consequentialists who allow for many goods may wonder whether this whole operation is morally justified. We can assume that it is for the sake of argument.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 120

violence are rarely as specific as the Mutors' violent trait. When we reflect on the Mutors' case, we import our familiarity with violence as not so restricted only to instances where it would produce good as in the Mutors' case. We are uneasy about these Mutors because in humans we suspect those who enjoy violence are not limited to enjoying it only where it causes good. So we deem the Mutors' trait to be a vice because we are accustomed to violence generally bringing about bad consequences, and fail to appreciate how restricted it is in this artificial case.

I take it that Driver, then, is offering an epistemic theory that falsifies some of our moral intuitions about traits.<sup>6</sup> We develop some attitude about a trait based on whether it generally brings about good or bad consequences. This attitude clouds our judgment about cases such as the Mutors, where the trait has been artificially restricted solely to good consequences. Since the general, real-world outcome of some trait is bad or good, we have trouble finding it to be otherwise when it is restricted in thought experiments.

This same line of reasoning can be used to object to our intuitions about Alice and Beth. Our moral preference for Alice is the product of being accustomed to virtue such as that belonging to Alice generally resulting in more good and Beth's vice yielding bad. Our intuitions about the case have failed us because we do not

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<sup>6</sup> Robert M. Adams also takes issue with Driver's conclusions about the Mutors. However, his argument is to emphasize just how counter-intuitive the Mutor case is for Driver's theory. I think he fails to take seriously that she recognizes that it is counter-intuitive, and fails to engage her alternative epistemic theory. Robert M. Adams *A Theory of Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 54-55



appropriately understand that the vice and virtue are restricted to just the good consequences specified. There is no “good” remainder—there is only a remainder from how virtue and vice generally operate that steers our intuitions wrongly in such cases.

I believe it can be shown that such an objection is flawed. However, it is worth noting first that at best the Driver-style objection casts some doubt on our judgment about the Alice and Beth case, but does not compel us to abandon it. Driver offers a competing theory to explain why our intuitions are faulty in evaluating the Mutor case or the island case. Yet it’s not obvious that Driver’s theory should be favored over the theory that our moral intuitions are in working-order when we entertain the island case. It’s worth noting our powers of abstraction are not always so easily swayed by that to which we have become accustomed. No doubt sometimes our intuitions are hampered in this way, but not always. For example, it is generally the case that receiving a paper cut is painful and to be avoided. Yet, I could imagine that, for psychological reasons, or because of a differences in the way endorphins are released, some other species (or even some humans) might find paper cuts something to be pursued. I do not insist that paper cuts are necessarily painful and to be avoided because they are generally painful. So if sometimes we are able to abstract away from the general result that we are accustomed to, how do we know whether in the case of Alice and Beth we have successfully abstracted away from what we are accustomed to or whether our intuitions have failed in that case? Concluding in favor of Driver or our intuitions without further evidence would amount to begging the question in

favor of a more intrinsic or instrumental conception of the value of virtue.

#### *4. Counter-examples to Driver*

While I agree with Driver that traits such as virtue and vice are usually unrestricted in reality, I think Driver's objection fails and therefore we should not doubt that we have successfully abstracted in the island case. Through abstraction we can appreciate that the consequences or duties fulfilled are equal (excepting the virtue differential), and yet still we think A or Alice is better.

The following two thought experiments show Driver's epistemic theory is wrong. Suppose there was some human, let's say John, who thoroughly enjoys gory horror movies. John is obsessed with how it looks when someone is decapitated in spectacular fashion. John attends live theatrical performances as often as possible where the company performs staged murders in the most realistic way possible. Now, let us imagine that John only ever wishes to observe these macabre displays in their staged form. He does not wish to see them as they involve real harm. He never witnesses a real murder, nor does his attendance at these shows ever promote injury to any person.

Without the artificial restriction that John only wishes to see these performances when staged and all harm is avoided, I think we would legitimately wonder whether John's love of mock-torture might escalate, or that he occasionally might incentivize an underground performance where someone is really hurt. He may have a fascination with real violence, too. By Driver's reasoning, our moral

judgement should be based on these anticipated consequences. But do we find something immoral about John when we specify that there are no bad consequences to his character trait? I think we do not.<sup>7</sup> We find him odd, and perhaps we would be uneasy about such a person in real life, but I do not think we find his character vicious if he lives for fake gore—unlike the mutors who like to beat children when it is ultimately good for the children although this is not their purpose. We still find such mutors vicious.

Take a further example. Suppose some Mutors have developed gene “A” that gives them intense pleasure and no pain when they are choked. Imagine some other Mutors have a gene “B” that causes them to love choking other Mutors. They do not wish to bring about pain with choking, they simply delight in the sensation of wrapping their hands around a throat and watching the Mutor being choked go limp. Gene “A” Mutors experience only pleasure and suffer no damage from the encounters. If the Mutors who enjoy choking were ever to choke Mutors who lacked gene “A,” it would hurt and kill them, but part of having gene “B” means that you can accurately find those with gene “A” and only wish to choke those with gene “A.”

Is gene “B” and the desire to choke a vice in this context? My guess is that we would say “no.” Now in humans, some intense desire to choke would be very

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<sup>7</sup> This intuition might seem to directly contrast with Hurka 2001 163. Hurka claims we do find that those who enjoy fictional pain seem to be vicious. However, note that I am not claiming John relishes fictional pain. Rather, he enjoys fictional stories which feature fictional pain and murder. Much seems to turn on the specifics of the attitude. I do not think it bodes well for Driver's argument if she can admit that our intuitions are fine-grained enough to capture this distinction. Driver is suggesting that our intuitions make but blunt instruments that react to the general or anticipated consequences.

dangerous. Loving the feeling of a body going limp in your hands would probably not be restricted to people who love to be choked—we would probably not let a person with such a penchant hold the new baby. Surely the general outcomes of a love of choking are very bad. And yet, in the fantastically restricted Mutor case, I suspect that we do not find the disposition vicious. The Driver claim would have it that we import the general, real-world outcomes of certain traits into the thought experiments. And yet it seems our real-life concerns do not cause us to see John or the choking Mutors as vicious.

What the gore and choking experiments show is that we can appreciate the artificial restrictions of the island and first Mutor cases. In the real-world, a penchant for choking or for fictional violence will generally cause bad consequences. People with such traits might justifiably make us uneasy, in much the same way as would those who like to beat children only in cases where consequences are good. Yet we are able to set aside our real-world uneasiness to make a rational determination about the morality of the case. Discomfort and general outcomes of a certain trait is not the driver of our moral intuitions about such cases, and therefore Driver's skepticism fails.

A clarification seems warranted before we retire Driver's objection. The instrumentalist might admit that while our intuitions about John and the choking Mutors falsify Driver's skeptical theory, they may also bolster her instrumental conception of virtue. If sometimes when we subtract the negative consequences of some vice, and it no longer seems vicious, then does this not support the claim that virtue and vice are simply instrumentally good or bad?

Again, I think not at all. We still find the Mutors who enjoy beating children vicious, and we prefer Alice to Beth. Driver's objection does not prove these intuitions incorrect. So we take them as accurate barring other objections. All that the John and choking case show is that not all behavior associated with vice and virtue are independently good or bad. We could say that Driver is partially correct that some things we may wish to call virtue and vice are simply instrumentally good and bad. But when we abstract from the consequences, some become transparent to us as instrumental, while we remain convinced others are good or bad in their own right.

This should come as little surprise given that most moral theories leave room for instrumental goods or duties of various sorts other than virtue. Take something like technological progress. I know of no consequentialism that holds technology to be an intrinsic good. Likewise, an imperative to innovate is not usually mentioned by deontologists. I think moral philosophers would acknowledge that technology can facilitate the distribution of goods and the sharing of information. Thus it can be instrumentally good. Yet we might refer to technological progress as good without immediately qualifying the way in which it is good. So we should not be surprised to find that some things referred to as *vices* are likewise instrumentally bad, while some vices are bad independently. As we will see in the following chapter, the motivation and intentions of the actor, along with the nature of the activities one is disposed toward, drive our intuitions about these cases, and constitute virtue and vice.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This will be discussed when virtue is defined in the following chapter, but note that Driver's qualification that the beating Mutors like to beat children without regard to their well-being is quite important in driving our judgment that they are vicious. The choking Mutors and John wish to avoid harm, and we adjudicate their disposition differently.

Abstraction allows us to get beyond the unrestricted nature of traits like vices as we are familiar with them so that we can recognize and appreciate the confines of the thought experiments. If Driver's objection were true, we should find John and the choking Mutor vicious, and yet we do not find them to be vicious as we do the Mutors who love to beat children. Thus the theory that the unrestricted tendency of traits like virtue and vice in reality controls our intuitions about the thought experiments is false, and so Driver's objection fails to discredit our intuitions about the island case.

#### *5. A Refinement to Driver Still Fails on Balance*

Driver's skepticism is flawed, but perhaps there is a refinement that will save it. Suppose that we narrow the scope of her claim. It is not just that we are unduly influenced by the general outcomes of unrestricted traits. More specifically, the general outcomes of traits like virtue and vice cloud our judgment when we need to see these opposing traits as equivalent. This gets us around John and the choking Mutors. For in these cases, we can intuit that traits that would generally have bad consequences are not immoral within the confines of the thought experiments. But perhaps its a more difficult intuitive leap to see a trait that generally has bad consequences as a virtue as in the Mutor case. Likewise, we cannot quite view Alice and Beth as equivalent, for generally their traits produce opposite effects. What I am suggesting is that while we can bend our general expectations from negative to

neutral, it is a greater intuitive difficulty to view traits that generally produce opposite effects as equivalent.

Despite this objection, on balance the evidence would still favor relying on our intuitions about the island case. Recall that sometimes we can abstract away from the familiar and our intuitions are reliable, and sometimes we cannot. And without further evidence, it was indeterminate whether the island case was one we could successfully abstract about. So, if we can abstract about some aspects of traits that have general outcomes, this is some weak evidence that virtue, as such a trait, is the kind of thing that we can successfully abstract about.

But we can do better than weak evidence. Cases that do not require conflating virtue and vice continue to show a moral discrepancy based on virtue. Suppose two individuals, Alan and Bob, play some sport with the same frequency, and they have a certain disposition they only exhibit during these sports. Alan is a rather clumsy and occasionally has poor awareness of the placement of his limbs. Every six months that Alan plays, someone receives a minor though painful injury as a result of Alan's clumsiness. Twice over the course of Alan's playing career, someone receives a more serious injury, such as a concussion. Bob's playing results in the exact same frequency and severity of injuries. Yet Bob is not clumsy at all. Bob occasionally gets caught up in the game, and wants to punish those who are playing well when he plays defense. So it is Bob's vindictiveness which motivates him to cause the injuries. Let's assume that both Bob and Alan's behavior is subtle enough that they do not develop a reputation for being either vindictive or clumsy. Neither Bob nor Alan are clumsy or

vindictive in any other circumstance. Is one situation worse than the other? I think most find something morally worse about Bob's situation than Alan's. Bob's limited vindictiveness strikes us as worse than Alan's limited clumsiness.

We have already established that general outcomes do not control our intuitions. So while we might be tempted to hold that we find Bob worse because we expect him to be vindictive in other circumstances, we have shown that we can appreciate the artificial restrictions on traits where the trait would normally have unrestricted negative consequences.<sup>9</sup> So this objection cannot be applied here.

Additionally, our modification has no teeth here. We find a moral discrepancy between Alan and Bob, but we have not made a vice into a virtue here, nor are we forced to conflate what is normally vice and virtue. So with Alan and Bob, we have undisputed evidence that at least vice figures negatively into our moral judgment.

Without an objection to Bob and Alan, the intuition stands that Alan's limited clumsiness is morally preferable to Bob's limited vindictiveness. Further, our intuition about Alan and Bob is exactly what we would expect to find if our original intuition about Alice and Beth were based on the virtue and vice discrepancy, making this seem the better explanation of our intuitions than skepticism.

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<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, I do not think Bob's case is all that artificial. I think there are context-sensitive vices. Some people who are otherwise benign can become violent when drinking, or wriled-up from sports, or under extreme duress, etc. and we could fully understand that this vice is restricted to a particular context. This, however, need not be true for my general claim to be true.



### *Conclusion*

It now seems clear that virtue has some moral weight of its own—its value is not just a matter of its consequences. An instrumental conception of virtue is at odds with our intuition as shown in the island thought experiment. A plausible skepticism as extrapolated from Julia Driver posits that our intuition is swayed by general outcomes of traits—yet we saw through the simulated gore and choking cases that general real-world outcomes do not determine our intuitions. Driver's objection is therefore faulty. Skepticism that holds we cannot properly understand cases where vice and virtue are equated cannot explain our final case where vice is viewed more negatively than clumsiness, and so we are left with relying on this intuition. Virtue has some moral weight of its own.

Our argument for virtue has so far been limited to establishing the nature of virtue's moral pull, absent virtue's specific *content*—a definition or details that comprise virtue. Things like intentions and other aspects of virtue were touched upon, but went undiscussed. The following chapter will take as its task to explicate this content.

## **Chapter 2.**

### **The Nature of Virtue**

In Chapter 1, we established that virtue has some good or moral pull independent of its tendency to produce good consequences. In this chapter, however, the nature of virtue will be fleshed-out in greater detail. We will establish that while virtue does have an easily identifiable precondition, there also are an amalgam of conditions that yield higher forms of virtue.

A virtuous character is present if and only if a mental state wherein love of the good is likewise present at some point in time in an individual. This gives virtue a scope that is not synonymous with good intentions, or right action for the right reason, since action need not be present to find virtue. However, the formula for evaluating virtue is not as simple as tallying-up instances of positive mental states. Virtue is at its best or in its purest form when these mental states in an individual are the impetus to action; that is to say, a character in which love of the good leads toward action is superior to a passive love of the good. Furthermore, we find that when virtue stems from a stable character wherein virtue has been cultivated, this virtue is better than love of the good which is an aberration of character. Virtue, then, has higher and lower forms, but it has a positive attitude toward the good as a necessary condition. And virtue is at its apex when it is enhanced by the additional presence of (a) an inclination toward action, or (b) a stable disposition, or better still, both. We could view virtue as occupying a pyramid: its base is love of the good, but it becomes better when the twin conditions of inclination toward action or a stable condition are

present (the pyramid's top).<sup>10</sup>

In this chapter, I will first establish that a positive attitude toward the good is a necessary condition of virtue in Section 1. Then in section 2 and 3 respectively, I will argue that virtue as a positive attitude is inferior to virtue as an impetus toward action and virtue stemming from a stable disposition. This chapter will therefore establish what basic virtue is, and then building on this basic virtue, it will discuss a fuller and loftier virtue.

### *1. Making Sense of the Mutor Intuitions*

In Chapter 1, our intuitions about thought experiments drove our conclusions. Therefore, by examining these intuitions, we can extract the moral principle that drove them. This in turn can give us purchase on the definition of what we have called virtue.

The most fruitful experiments to examine will be the Driver *Mutor* experiments and our variations on them. Driver acknowledges that we intuit viciousness in the Mutors who enjoy beating children although it is beneficial for them. Yet we do *not* deem the innocuous choking Mutors (the mutors whose physiology causes choking to be pleasurable) to be vicious. What distinction exists between these two cases that could explain why we adjudicate them to be morally

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<sup>10</sup> While this chapter is limited to discussing these three facets mentioned, it does not preclude the possibility that there are other conditions in addition to an inclination toward action and a stable disposition that likewise enhance virtue.

nonequivalent?

The obvious answer seems to be that in Driver's case, the Mutors enjoy an activity that, taken in isolation, is painful and disturbing to a child, without regard to the greater good that it generates. They simply enjoy an activity that, in and of itself apart from its result, is reprehensible. The choking mutors enjoy an activity that, for their species, is not even harmful taken in isolation. Driver's mutors love what in isolation is an evil activity, while the choking mutor's love something that, at worst, is innocuous, and is at best an enjoyable and good activity.

I think our intuitions about the cases contained in Chapter 1 hinge a great deal on the caveats about what precisely the agents are relishing—the aspect of the action that they enjoy. In her original Mutor case, Driver is careful to explicitly state that the Mutors who enjoy beating children do not do so with their well-being in mind. In the choking Mutor case and the gory movie case, it is specified that the aim of the trait is not the suffering or degradation inflicted—on the contrary, built into these cases is the stipulation that harm, suffering, or degradation is *not* the object.

This explanation further helps us make a distinction between an analogy Driver draws between her Mutor case and a real-world example. Driver compares the abusive Mutor case to more mundane medical procedures: it is morally justified, she avers, to allow children to go through painful operations to cure them of their diseases or extend their lives. And we do not find the doctors who perform these painful operations to be nefarious with respect to their performance of them.<sup>11</sup> In his

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11 Julia Driver "The Virtues and Human Nature" in *How Should One Live? Essay on the Virtues* ed. Roger Crisp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 113 120

response to Driver, Adams agrees that in the medical procedure example, we would find a morally justifiable case wherein doctors are not found to be vicious.<sup>12</sup> Adams holds that we do not find anything nefarious about the doctor who performs such a procedure. The explanation that the intentions of the actors drive our intuitions gives us a principled reason to see the doctor and mutator cases as distinct qua viciousness. We do not need to rely solely on the intuitive differences in judging the Mutators as vicious and not such doctors. Doctors, for the most part, do have some concern for the well-being of the child. Or at the very least, they are not performing such medical procedures because they enjoy bringing about suffering.

To crystallize the point that the morally relevant difference is the intentions, I believe we can make the doctor case analogous to the mutators. Suppose that there is some doctor—let's say a pediatric surgeon—who takes pleasure in bringing about pain in his youthful patients. He performs painful medical procedures because he delights in the agony this creates for the young people in his care. He makes sure to perform the procedures well, but only so that he can keep his job and continue to be introduce pain into children's lives. His only concern for the life-saving result of his procedures is legal and pragmatic.

I think we find such a doctor both callous and sadistic—in other words, vicious, and we would find it morally preferable that he be compassionate and empathetic. In cultural representations, we can recall Steve Martin's character in the film version of

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12 Thomas Hurka, *A Theory of Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 55

*Little Shop of Horrors*. Martin becomes a dentist because he enjoys inflicting pain. While successful and presumably competent as a dentist, he is undoubtedly a villainous character. If we find that a doctor delights in pain, even though they do good work, we find their character vicious and inferior to a compassionate doctor. In this way we see that Driver's comparison of her Mutors to doctors is only salient if the doctor is sadistic, and if so, we judge them as we do the Mutors.

Given that motivation or intentions seems to be steering our intuitions about virtue, we make this part of our definition of virtue. Virtue requires an attitude wherein one's action follows from a desire to achieve the good.

## *2. The Good Attitude of Virtue Made Better by a Disposition toward Action*

By recognizing that good intentions are a prerequisite for virtue, we have added a principled reason and insight for our preference for virtue over vice when discussing the same action. But we may wonder, then, if we are conflating virtue with intentions—if intentions are driving our intuition, do we need the concept of virtue at all, or do intentions get us the same results more directly?

We find in Thomas Hurka a definition of virtue that includes intention, but is not limited to it. For Hurka, virtue is a sort of attitude toward intrinsic goods. Specifically, "If x is intrinsically good, loving x (desiring, pursuing, or taking please in x) for itself is also intrinsically good."<sup>13</sup> It is likewise evil to love those things that are

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13 Thomas Hurka *Virtue Vice and Value*. (New York: Oxford University Press 2001) 13

intrinsically evil. Moral virtues are these intrinsically good or evil attitudes toward good and evil.

For Hurka, virtue is not simply an action committed with the appropriate intention. Such intentions are certainly part of virtue, but virtue can also be the attitude of taking delight in good states of affairs, or just hoping that they occur, or even loving virtuous attitudes themselves.

While this creates for virtue a scope of its own which includes intention but is not limited to it, it has counter-intuitive implications. I will detail two such counter-intuitive implications and their corrections successively.

First, Hurka's definition of virtue as these mental states makes no distinction among the value of the different sorts of mental states. He makes a point of arguing that taking pleasure in good states of affairs, pursuing them, and desiring them, are each and all the intrinsic goods of virtue, and that a desire leading to action is not necessary for virtue.<sup>14</sup>

This relegation of virtue to the mental perhaps runs contrary to what we normally take virtue to be. If I claim that someone is a virtuous person, or describe them as having some particular virtue such as kindness, I surely am implying something about their tendency toward actions. I do not only mean the kind person has an abiding love for kindness; rather, I am implying that we notice them acting in a

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14 Ibid. 13

15 Ibid. It may be that Hurka would concede this point. He doesn't specifically argue for equality of these mental states, but he likewise makes no mention of any hierarchy among them.

kind way. In our vernacular, we assume that a kind person will take certain kinds of kind actions. Therefore, attributing virtue to someone implies that a person has a character oriented toward good action.

Contrasting a virtuous attitude in Hurka's sense versus the common sense notion of virtue supports our common understanding of the term—at least in part. Suppose person A has a deep abiding love of alleviating suffering. They fervently wish for any suffering to end. They experience great pleasure when suffering is alleviated. Yet they do not act on this desire. Person B is driven to act when they witness suffering. Person B accepts a stipend to work for an organization attempting to alleviate suffering in an impoverished country.

Which person would we take to possess more virtue? I think Person B is decidedly of more noble of character. That is not to say person A would not be preferable to some reprobate who takes great pleasure in the suffering of others. But is not the person whose love of the good inclines them toward action in pursuit of this good better than one who has a positive mental attitude toward the same good but does not feel inclined to act?

Another way to articulate this point is to say that a disposition toward action on behalf of the good is superior to a love that does not spill out into action. Indeed, this comports with our assessments of individuals with whom we commonly interact. Many of us may be familiar with the following two sorts of people who are politically aware: one sort of person may fervently care for some political cause they take to be good. They may lodge criticism or express displeasure with those who do not support



this good political cause, and loathe the injustice of the absence of this policy. Another person may also care deeply for this same cause, but they might attend a protest in support of the cause, or volunteer for the very same work they hope some political policy may make easier. The lover of justice who is idle with regard to this love seems obviously inferior to the active lover of justice.

I do not believe this preference for action-inclined virtue is dependent upon some anticipated good consequences. We could imagine that a person who acts could in fact effect worse consequences than the idle person. Suppose person B above does work in his impoverished nation that has bad, though unintended, consequences. Perhaps advocacy of safe-sex practices on B's part provides a fascist group with the propaganda they need to eject B's organization and all other NGO's from the country. While this state of affairs is certainly bad, do we assess A and B's virtue, taken in isolation from goods produced, differently? It seems we still find actions taken in concert with love of the good as superior to love of good not accompanied by action.

Hurka takes care to describe virtue as a sort of appropriate attitude toward a given situation. It may be the case that A loves virtue as much as person B, but person A is not capable of acting for the good—they might not have the skill to act in a way that would alleviate suffering. Suppose they are infirm, or in a given instance, they cannot even conceive of what action would best alleviate suffering, and are therefore limited only to wishing that a better state of affairs or more just conditions were in place.

This sort of virtue-according-to-ability thinking might put a kink in our claim

that B is more virtuous. Is it not somehow *unfair* to adjudicate B as more virtuous—producing more good or acting more rightly—simply because circumstances allow them to be so?

I think this kind of objection would conflate praise-worthiness and the intrinsic good or right of virtue. It may very well be the case that we take circumstances into account when we adjudicate the praise or blame we might be inclined to attribute. But when evaluating the best state of affairs or action, B's disposition toward action is simply more preferable than A's lamentable inability to act, and therefore lack of a disposition to act.<sup>15</sup>

To elucidate this further, we might emphasize that ethical judgments simply aren't fair—they are entirely dependent upon circumstances outside of one's control. Suppose two small societies on opposite sides of the world inherit from their ancestors different political systems and cultures. The former society promotes kindness and has just laws, while the latter society has a culture of corruption and selfishness. We should expect those inhabiting the corrupt society to have more corruption, and selfishness, and this surely is not the fault of those born into this society. But does this mean we cannot judge the characters of individuals of one society as productive or more good or see them as more just than the other? Should judging the best kind of virtue, the most superlative type, be any different in ignoring differences created by circumstances on an individual level than the circumstances

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<sup>15</sup> We might also respond to the “unfair” objection with a counter-factual. We could say that virtue is superior to good intentions when it would yield disposition toward action, even if circumstances prevent its actual execution.

created by a society? It might not be fair that some people find themselves with the opportunity to act most virtuously while others do not, but this does not mean we cannot detect a difference.

Some virtuous paragons no doubt were in situations that allowed them to act in very good ways. Ghandi was in luck to have the skill-set, and was mired enough in the social ills of his time, to act boldly to help others. Was his character therefore only as virtuous as those who had tremendously good attitudes about the good but could do nothing for it? We might agree that each produced some good by having the appropriate attitude that constitutes basic virtue, but this mental state leading to action is greater still. Ghandi exhibits more virtue than someone who is unable to act on behalf of justice some reason.

Put otherwise: if a perfect situation would be one in which everyone *could* act in concert with their good attitudes, is their then not something inferior about a state in which a person cannot act in such a way? The consequentialist surely is in the business of adjudicating the best state of affairs. The deontologist, following Kant, emphasizes that *action* under the categorical imperative should conform to universal laws. Thus when action can come in conformity with right attitudes, the consequentialist and deontologist should find this to be virtue at its best, or in purest conformity to universal maxims.

We therefore must say of virtue that it is at its best when it is an appropriate attitude that disposes one to real action that is in concert with this attitude.

### 3. *An Action-inclined Disposition Meets a Stable Disposition*

We discussed that Hurka's account—which seemed to emphasize the mental side of virtue—needed certain corrections in order to avoid running afoul of our intuition. Besides its neglect for emphasizing the superiority of an action-inclined disposition, Hurka makes a further claim about virtue that goes against a more traditional view of virtue. Hurka believes that habitual virtue is no more valuable than isolated virtue in a given instance. I take this to be incorrect.

Hurka claims that he finds no reason to hold that virtue sustained over time is any more worthwhile than virtue at a given moment. Of course, virtue over time has more value in that it is recurring, and so the sum of these instances makes them superior to a single instance. But for Hurka, in a given instance, virtue at odds with one's normal character is no better than virtue that stems from a habitual character. This claim contradicts both the strong Aristotelian claim about the value of habitual virtue, and the claims of certain intuitionists like WD Ross, as Hurka acknowledges.<sup>16</sup> Such intuitionists find that virtue stemming from a stable or virtuous character is superior to virtue that is an aberration. Yet Hurka can find no justification for this Aristotelian claim, and does not see its intuitive pull. In a given situation, if one acts virtuously, why should it matter whether this virtue is commensurate with a habitual character or whether it is a novel instance of virtue?<sup>17</sup>

Notably, neither Hurka, Ross nor Aristotle supply compelling sustained

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16 Thomas Hurka, *Virtue Vice and Value*. (New York: Oxford University Press 2001) 42-43

17 Ibid. 42-43

argumentation for their positions. Both Ross and Hurka rest somewhat on their intuitive laurels, hoping that our intuitions line-up with their own. Hurka's line of argument is simply to clarify that we must weigh a virtuous action from a stable disposition and an aberrant action from virtue in isolation from future tendencies and consequences. For my own part, Ross and Aristotle seem to be on more secure footing here. Even when we take two cases of virtue in isolation as Hurka suggests, we should still recognize that they have qualitative differences. I see this as quite apparent when comparing two instances of viciousness. The viciousness of a person in an instance where this vice is out of character does not seem as evil as an instance of viciousness emanating from someone who is hardened in consistent viciousness. The viciousness stemming from a stable, vicious, character seems worse than the aberrant instance of viciousness.

Furthermore, I think concluding in favor of the superiority of virtue emanating from a stable disposition becomes hard to deny when we examine some of the implications of Hurka's position. For Hurka, an isolated instance of virtuous action has the same value as one stemming from a virtuous character. We may then assign them equal value for the sake of argument. The virtue-value in these cases can be ascribed the equal value of 1:1. Now let us suppose that person A exhibits this isolated instance of a virtue. We can suppose that this is just an instance of *wishing* for the good to be realized. This should eliminate any further good consequences of A's virtue that might muddy our intuitions. Person B wishes for the good as well in some instance, which is part of his stable character of loving the good. Now let us suppose

person A wishes for the good in many discreet instances—let's say twice daily for six days out of the week, he wishes that there were peace and no violence in the world. Now on the seventh day of the week, he wishes twice for the evil of violence and suffering in the world in the same proportion he wished for the good. This wishing for evil would result in sum total good in a smaller degree (according to a consequentialist model) than would have been the case had he not wished for evil, but overall he has still generated a value of 10. B wishes for the good only 3 times a week, but he does not deviate from this desire, generating 3 units of good. We might say his character is such that he consistently wishes for the good. By Hurka's theory, we should find A to be productive of more virtue, or on the whole a more virtuous person. But this seems quite wrong—though A might exhibit more instances of virtuous mental state, B strikes us as the more genuinely virtuous person. Hurka therefore seems to underestimate the value of a stable disposition.<sup>18</sup>

Placing greater value on virtue emanating from a stable disposition likewise helps explain some seemingly conflicting thought experiments. For example, Philippa Foot raises some contrasting examples where a “stable disposition” seems superior in virtue, but others where the virtue emanating from an unstable character seem superior. Her examples include the following: imagine a man who is tempted to steal when he sees an opportunity to get away with it but does not do so. His temptation

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<sup>18</sup> Another way to salvage both our intuition and the equality of stable vs. aberrant virtue would be to ascribe vice greater negative value than the positive value of virtue. Thus in the case of the occasionally vicious person, he is generating enough evil to be on the whole to be less good than the consistently virtuous person. There might be a certain plausibility to a viciousness-averse theory of virtue and vice, but this would require serious modifications to most consequentialist theories.

comes from an inclination toward stealing, or perhaps greed, that we might say is part of his character. Then we imagine a man who does not steal because he is an honest to the point where stealing “never entered his head.” Foot says we find the more stably honest man's honest character to be superior to the one who had to resist the temptation—the temptation, Foot posits, may be taken as a defect in his honesty, and results in an inferiority.

But there are examples of other virtues where the having to overcome a temptation is in fact superior. Take the case of courage. Suppose two persons separately display great courage in taking a good action (defending someone against persecution from a powerful group, let's say). The first person has no fear of repercussion (though they are aware of the possibility of repercussions), but always acts in the way they think is right. The second person *does* have a warranted fear of repercussion, but acts rightly in spite of this. We may be inclined to find that the perseverance in face of fear in this latter case, despite fear, is an instance of greater virtue.

So which is right: that virtue emanating from a stable disposition is better as in the case of theft, or is there instead an equally strong intuitive pull for preferring virtue when it is a matter of great effort and not from a stable disposition as in the courage example? There is a simple way to reconcile the courage example and our reductio of a Hurka-type equality of virtues and the theft example. We might say that being inclined toward dishonesty, as is our would-be thief, and being inclined toward self-preservation, as is our would-be coward, are not comparable. An inclination

toward dishonesty or selfishness is intrinsically bad, whereas a desire for preserving oneself is not in and of itself wrong. So these are not really opposite intuitions, as we rightly find dishonesty objectionable and self-preservation acceptable. Yet this still does not explain why we might even *prefer* the nervous hero to the unflappable hero. If the nervous hero is tempted toward self-preservation which is innocuous, we should have found the two to be the same.

I think clarity about what is happening in the courage example should help to explain our inclination toward viewing the nervous hero as better. There seems to be an element of the courage example that is not specific to courage—namely, something like fortitude, strength of will, or integrity, amidst temptation to do what is ultimately the wrong thing for one's own preservation. While courage might require us to persevere in the face of negative consequences, fortitude requires us to persevere despite a visceral temptation toward personal preservation. In the courage case, we might say that the person who is resisting temptation is actually virtuous in two ways: they are both courageous, and they have fortitude, thereby making their character preferable.<sup>19</sup>

Yet this solution creates its own problem. We have good reason to suspect that over time a person practicing some virtue will do so more easily and naturally. It might be difficult for me to give up some of my leisure time to volunteer, but as I continually engage in this practice, it should become easier. In fact, we might wonder if some love of the good is lacking or some other defect is present in someone for

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<sup>19</sup> The would-be thief might also be said to exhibit fortitude, but if he has a genuine tendency of inclination toward an evil action, this is still different than a desire for self-preservation.



whom volunteering is a constant battle and struggle, as Foot points out. We suspect that this person still has some defect in their love of the good. But according to our courage solution, fortitude is a good, and therefore fortitude and some virtue such as charity should be superior to a natural, effortless charity.

The resolution to this problem can be found in refining our sense of how fortitude works, and see that it need not be at odds with a more effortless virtue. We do ascribe added value, or true rightness, when a virtuous action is done while the visceral temptation to serve oneself is overcome. Yet we also see virtue emanating from a stable character as superior to an unstable character. It is here that the traditional virtue-ethical emphasis on one's entire life, as opposed to discreet instances, allows these intuitions to be reconciled—fortitude is not something that perpetually has value, but is rather something that has value at one time during the process of becoming a better person with a stable character.

To illustrate this, let us imagine three individuals. Person A is virtuous without any temptation to the contrary—he happily volunteers his time without any thought given to how he could enjoy that time serving himself. Person B is strongly tempted toward enjoying himself at each and every instance that he volunteers, but he manages to volunteer anyway. For years and years he is always tempted to spend his time on himself but resists doing so. Person C is initially tempted toward making himself happy, but volunteers in spite of that temptation. Person C becomes over time like person A, without the temptation toward spending that piece of his leisure time focusing on his own enjoyment. Thus over time, he becomes habituated to

volunteering and is tempted less and less.

Which of these people is really the best? If fortitude is perpetually good, we should find “B” the best throughout his life. Yet I take it we do not find “B” the best. In the first discreet instance we may find both “B” and “C” preferable to “A.” But I don't find that “C” becomes less virtuous than “B.” In fact, there is something very attractive about the arc of “C”—that he has both acted with fortitude, and that he has honed his life into one of stable virtue. When we look back again at some discreet action of “B” and “C” later in life, where “B” still resists temptation and “C” need not do so, given that we know “C” previously exhibited fortitude on this matter, this seems to match or even exceed the fortitude “B” must exhibit each and every time. So it would seem that the value of fortitude can carry through across a person's life, and need not be exhibited in each and every instance.

### *Conclusion*

We have now moved from establishing that virtue has value in Chapter 1, to filling out some details of the nature of virtue. Virtue has as a prerequisite a love of the good. We know that what we intuitively saw as valuable through the thought experiments in Chapter 1, can be identified as an intentionality toward the good. Yet, this love alone is only a starting point for virtue. As we have seen, virtue is superior in instances where a disposition toward good action is also present, and it is superior when it comes from a stable, virtuous character. Virtue requires an attitude, but at its best it is more than an attitude, and more than a mental state at a given time.

### **Chapter 3.**

#### **Meta-ethical Challenges to Virtue**

In chapter 1 we determined that virtue does have an independent moral pull. This can easily fit into either a consequentialist or deontic framework, which should come as little surprise given that, historically, virtue has been included in the consequentialist and deontic frameworks of the likes of early twentieth century philosophers G.E. Moore and W.D. Ross. However, in exploring the nature of virtue in Chapter 2, we found some aspects of virtue's moral pull that could make for strange bedfellows with consequentialism or deontology. Specifically, these latter systems generally focus on determining right action. In contrast, the good of virtue is enhanced by a character that tends toward right action, and a consistently virtuous character over time is superior to the sum of discreet instances of virtue. Like traditional virtue ethics, the good of virtue is dependent on cultivating an identity that is good, rather than on determining the right action to take. We could of course, take this cultivating of an identity to be a good or a duty in and of itself. But there is some skepticism founded in meta-ethical claims that would hold that pursuing such an identity is not possible at all.

In this chapter we will examine whether the aforementioned aspects of virtue, those that focus on cultivating an identity, are viable ethical imperatives. Recent challenges to virtue ethics seem to apply equally well to the aspects of virtue we discussed in Chapter 2. As we will see, such challenges claim that the metaethical

peculiarities of the good of virtue make it untenable. I will argue that they do no such thing.

### *1. There Are No Such Things as Traits*

One trend in philosophy over the last twenty years has rejected Virtue Ethics as a system by positing that there are no such things as character traits as we imagine them. This sort of argument was popularized by Gilbert Harman in 1999. While in this paper I have argued for a far weaker claim than does contemporary Virtue Ethicists (who would have it that virtue is of primary importance to moral theorizing), my claim that virtue that tends toward action is better than virtue that remains inert would be likewise challenged by Harman's theory. If Harman is correct that character makes no relevant difference in how people behave, than my claim that action-inducing virtue is as good is false, as virtue does not induce action at all. To clarify, this is just one of my claims—I established in Chapter 1 that virtuous character without causing action is superior to a lack of virtue, while in Chapter 2 I argued for several supplementary claims, including that action-inducing virtue is superior to inert virtue. These claims can stand alone, but if Harman is correct, my claim about action-inducing virtue from Chapter 2 is incorrect. I will show that his argument does not go through.

*(a) Traits Have No Impact*

Harman draws on some famous experiments from Social Psychology to claim that there is no evidence that character traits of the sort relevant to virtue ethics exist. Virtue-ethics requires that relatively stable dispositions stem from the cultivation of virtue. If someone has a virtuous character, they will tend toward commensurate action<sup>20</sup>. I think Harman correctly takes this to be a commonsense view of virtue—one which Harman believes makes an attribution error about why we take the actions that we do.

The famous experiments cited by Harman seem to indicate that what is driving morally relevant action is not character, but circumstance. In the original Milgram experiment of 1963, researchers asked participants to administer what they were lead to believe were increasingly potent shocks to an unseen “learner” subject when the learner gave incorrect answers. The researchers believed the majority of the participants would refuse to administer the shocks beyond the level labeled “very strong shock.” To the contrary, all 40 participants went beyond this point. Only 14 subjects stopped at various other levels of increasing intensity, while 26 administered all of the levels of potent shocks.

Harman claims it would be implausible to hold that the majority of participants acted in an immoral way because of defects in their character. Far more plausible, he suggests, is the explanation that the participants were driven to act the

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<sup>20</sup> Gilbert Harman, “Moral Philosophy meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99, (1999): 317

way they did by their circumstances—not by some malformation of virtue.<sup>21</sup>

For my part, I find this appeal to circumstances to be a gross misrepresentation of the results of the experiment. Surely this experiment indicates that circumstance is not to be ignored as a driver of behavior, but it in no way indicates that it is the only driver of behavior. If circumstances drove all of the behavior, then why would 35% of the participants deviate from the majority? The circumstances were uniform, but the actions were not.

Luckily, we do not have to choose between either circumstances or character as the mono-causal explanations for participants' behavior. An explanation that references both the agent and the circumstance gives us an explanation that covers 100% of the behavior. For any action, the circumstances will exert an influence over the subject—it might confuse a subject (as is part of Harman's preferred explanation of the Milgram experiment) or make certain actions easier than others, and so on. However, this does not cause character to fall out of the equation. Character could likewise have an impact. That is, character could give us an explanation for why 35% of the participants deviated from the majority. Furthermore, the explanation from circumstances alone sheds no light on why various participants stopped at different levels of shock. A theory that invokes both circumstance and character can explain this variation. While the circumstance is fixed, character is not. Degrees of virtue can run a spectrum from loosely upright and formed in character, all the way to staunch and well-formed rectitude. Participants who were more virtuous in all relevant ways

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 322

refused to shock sooner, while the less virtuous stopped later (or were overwhelmed by the circumstance and complied fully).

I should clarify that the experiment offers no direct evidence that it is character causing the 35% deviation. Rather, the 35% who deviated show that something more than circumstance simpliciter is at work here. The experiment is perfectly consistent with an explanation that invokes character and circumstance.

It seems quite clear that this experiment does not contradict the notion that character has an important impact on action. Quite the opposite: the experiment supplies evidence that circumstance alone does not explain peoples' actions in the Milgram experiments. The deviation from the majority implies that some aspects unique to an agent or groups, perhaps character, apart from the circumstance, have an impact on a course of action. While the explanation for the deviation from the majority could be any number of factors apart from the circumstance (for example, some oppositional defiant disorder inflicting deviants), character could equally be at a play.

The second experiment cited by Harman seems to go further to showing that circumstance overwhelms personality. In a "good Samaritan" experiment, it was discovered that students who were in a hurry were far less likely to help a victim in need than those who were in no hurry. The study found that 10% of students in a great hurry stopped to help the victim, 45% in a moderate hurry helped, while 63% in no hurry helped.<sup>22</sup> The students' behavior was measured on the additional variable

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 324

of reading the parable of the good Samaritan prior to encountering a person in need. Finally, the authors discuss the impact of the type of religiosity as derived from a questionnaire. It was determined that these latter differences did not matter as to whether the students helped—only the level of tardiness showed an impact.

Harman claims that “religious and moral orientations” were derived from a type of religiosity questionnaire. In fact, the personality measurement used was not so expansive. In the words of the original authors: “The general personality construct under examination was religiosity.”<sup>23</sup> The questionnaire was designed to measure whether the students took their own religiosity to be aligned with the good Samaritan in the parable. It was taken that those who saw their religion as a means to some benefit were not aligned with the good Samaritan, while those who took religion to have an intrinsic value or were religious in order to find meaning in every day life were assumed to be in line with a traditional reading of the parable.

Harman takes the lack of correlation between the type of religiosity expressed in the questionnaire and the helpfulness of the participants to be evidence that personality has a negligible impact on moral action. The authors assume a similar implication. However, it is hardly clear that this self-reporting of religiosity matches what the Virtue Theorist is speaking of with regard to virtue. The Virtue Theorist speaks of habitual behavior, practical knowledge and a desire for the good. A self-reporting of religiosity asks only about one's personal motivation with regard to

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23 John M. Darley and C. Daniel Batson. "" From Jerusalem to Jericho": A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behavior." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27, no. 1 (1973): 103



religion. While it is possible this type of religiosity has some relationship to a virtuous kind of personality trait, such a relationship is hardly a foregone conclusion, and certainly they are hardly one and the same. Thus to conclude that because the personality trait of self-reported view of religiosity did not have an impact, the personality trait as described by Virtue Ethicists must likewise not have an impact on action, is an unfounded leap from what the study shows.

It seems clear that the results of these studies do not refute the notion that traits influence behavior. And as a corollary, they do not rule-out the possibility that virtue can guide behavior, which in the previous chapter we found was a superior form of virtue. If there is not strong empirical evidence for either eliminating or confirming the influence of traits, the commonsense view from experience which Harman finds so objectionable seems to gain more credibility. If the proverbial jury is out on the empirical front, what we know from our own experience should be favored.

But suppose we temper Harman's strong claim that traits have no impact on behavior. Suppose we take the studies to be indicating that traits have *less* impact than we commonly think. Vicissitudes of circumstances have a great deal of impact on moral action, while traits such as virtue are only a secondary player. Does this more plausible psychological claim strike a blow to believing that virtue is superior when leading to action?

While this claim is a more plausible interpretation of the results of the studies, it is not really a problem for action-inducing virtue (or Virtue Ethics as a whole).

Those individuals who did the right thing, though they are in the minority, prove that some quality of an individual can trump the pressure of circumstance. Therefore, whatever this quality is seems worth pursuing and inculcating in people. Of course, this quality may not be something that we could inculcate, but the studies do not preclude this. Using the psychological maxim that both nature and nurture have an impact on behavior, it seems possible that this quality could be inculcated and extended to more people. Even if this strategy only altered the behavior of some individuals, this would be better than tossing hands in the air in defeat, as virtue could and may still induce action. While some psychological study might indicate that this trait is not and cannot be virtue or could not be inculcated, and thereby strike a serious blow to action-inducing virtue ethics, we find nothing of the sort in the studies cited by Harman.

So, even taking only the studies cited by Harman, we have no compelling reason to doubt that virtue can induce action, and therefore no reason to abandon the conclusion of Chapter 2 that action-inducing virtue is superior to impotent virtue.

Not only is Harman's position unsupported by the evidence he sites, another problem arises for Harman's claim that social psychology leaves no room for virtue to have an impact. His favored mid-twentieth century studies are not the only psychology data on the matter. Jesse Prinz sites more recent psychological data that shows that situationist claims of Harman are not supported by psychology literature.

Prinz cites many studies that indicate inter-cultural differences do (or would likely) have an impact on behavior. Something like a shared cultural ethos will result

in differences in behavior. To cite one study that makes this abundantly clear contra the situationists: Prinz references cross-cultural comparisons of the original Milgram study. While 65% of Americans are completely compliant in administering shocks, 85% of German subjects comply fully. At a rate of only 28%, those downright uncooperative people from down under in Australia complied at a far lower rate. It is clear that what is happening in a Milgram experiment would be woefully under-explained with an appeal solely to circumstance. Culture would seem to be having a great deal of impact.<sup>24</sup>

While we might balk at the idea that different cultures display different rates of certain virtues, which is what my theory would suggest about these results, I do not think we should dismiss this idea on the basis of charges of racism, jingoism, or cultural elitism. These results are not implying that Australians are, on the whole, more virtuous than Germans. Rather, it implies that on this specific matter of not complying with vicious authority, something about Australian culture or politics engenders more resistance to vicious authority. Furthermore, some Germans remain resistant to vicious authority, though not at as high a rate as Australians. It may very well be, and I suspect as much, that we would find that different cultures engender better results on different matters of virtue. And this claim again fits with traditional Virtue Ethics: virtue is something sensitive to society. Virtue Ethicists have long made the related claim that moral education is essential to virtue.

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24 Jesse Prinz. "The normativity challenge: Cultural psychology provides the real threat to virtue ethics." *Journal of Ethics* 13 2-3 (2009): 130

Prinz uses these studies to claim that there is empirical evidence for character traits. These studies would seem to imply that there is something like “national character” exerting an influence. Prinz uses other quite compelling examples: personal identity and self-conception do very much seem to have an impact on the sorts of behavior one engages in. People who like certain Hardcore punk rock music might become vegan, hippies may protest war and liberals might vote for liberals. Are these identities not having an impact on behavior?<sup>25</sup>

The examples cited by Prinz are somewhat based on psychological studies, but he likewise draws from anecdotal evidence. To my view, both are compelling. And it is worth using this as a further criticism of Harman's methodology. It is a very hasty form of philosophizing to dismiss common sense, and the well-thought and cited examples, in favor of a single interpretation of some psychological experiments that have multiple explanations, especially when there are complicating results from other experiments. The evidence from psychology not only does not support Harman's conclusion in this case, but the nature of the field of psychology is often not as cut and dry as the experiments of a hard science. Harman would like us to believe that just as in Physics where it has been proven that our common sense arm-chair musings must be left behind, psychology asks us to do the same. But we have no fundamental corollary in social psychology in this case to what we find in relativity or quantum physics that indicates that our reflection is useless. The psychological field in this case is itself not as clear, and human behavior is something we know about by virtue of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 129

having to navigate it in daily life. It is not as clear that theorists investigating human traits need to check their thoughts on the subject at the threshold of psychological surveys simply because that is what someone examining physics must do. Harman is drawing a false parallel between the fields of psychology and physics on this matter.

## 2. *Virtue is Groundless*

Harman raises interesting epistemological questions about our assumptions about traits, but seems to give no compelling reason to abandon these assumptions. However, Prinz provides his own argument in favor of doubting the traits cited by Virtue Ethicists. Instead of turning to psychology to disprove the common sense notion that there are traits, Prinz purports to have found a fatal flaw in Virtue Ethics in that it has no meta-ethical grounding. He calls this the *Normative Challenge* to Virtue Ethics.

Prinz's argument runs thusly: a normative theory needs an explanation as to why we ought to follow it—there must be a source of its normative force. Traditionally, normative theories have been justified on the grounds of Divine Command, Reason, the Sentiments or a Natural Teleology. Many Virtue Ethicists have followed Aristotle in finding that virtues receive their normative force from a natural teleology. Virtues are good because they are the constituent pieces of our flourishing—virtue leads the human being to flourish.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 133

Here Prinz finds a major chink in the armor: in order to maintain that flourishing is a natural tendency, we must be able to identify what flourishing is for the species. We cannot do so by referencing virtuous states at the risk of circularity. One way to do this is to develop an empirically derived set of criteria for flourishing. Yet when we look cross-culturally, we find a lack of agreement as to what a flourishing life is. Given that there is no agreement about what constitutes a life that is flourishing—that is, since there is no single set of criteria for what a flourishing life is—therefore there is no single, natural tendency that constitutes flourishing, and thus there is no telos on which Virtue Ethicists can hang their hat.<sup>27</sup>

In response to Prinz's objection, we might first question whether this charge really applies to our defense of the value of virtue apart from virtue ethics. Prinz himself acknowledges that if virtue ethics in an austere form borrowed from a metaethics of the sentiments, this would ground the value of virtue.<sup>28</sup> Prinz holds to the Humean idea that our sentiments form the basis for our moral preferences, and admittedly our sentiments would seem to show an inclination toward virtue. Therefore, on the cautious view I expound upon in these pages, our valuing of virtue could fit with Prinz's Humean sentimentalism. We do not need to rely on some teleological justification, and therefore avoid his critique.

Yet I do not see that Prinz's argument compels even a more robust virtue ethicist to retreat to the small niche of Humeanism Prinz has carved. Further, this essay has sought to show that virtue is more important and worth more attention

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 134-135

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 137

than late twentieth century philosophers generally held. So, in defending the Virtue Ethicist, we also defend at least the logical space for believing in a wide scope for the value of virtue. And we can defend against Prinz's criticism while remaining agnostic on metaethical matters.

First, we can question Prinz's evidence for the assertion that there is no agreement, cross-culturally, on what is a flourishing life, and thus, there is no human telos of a good life to be found. Prinz takes it that psychological data corroborates this claim.

There seems to be good reason to withhold judgment here. Psychological studies do record representative cultural opinions. But common sense might indicate that we should not simply take it that a popularity contest will decisively yield correct moral answers. Perhaps general surveys simply are not the way to go, or at least should not be accepted as solely definitive. We can see how a Humean would take to such rough-and-ready data since it seems to indicate peoples' sentiments, but this flirts with begging the question for Prinz.

A far more subtle understanding of moral intuitions as data is expounded by intuitionists such as Ross and Moore. Their understanding of intuition differed from the sort of snap judgments psychological surveys often seek. Ross took the intuitions of "thoughtful" people to be instructive, by which he meant not simply reactions, but considered responses.<sup>29</sup> We can, following Shaver 2012, isolate several ways in which philosophical intuitions are different than what is captured in psychological surveys.

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<sup>29</sup> Robert Shaver "Ethical Non-Naturalism and Experimental Philosophy." *Ethical Naturalism*, ed. Susana Nuccetelli and Gary Seay, (Cambridge University Press 2012) 194

First, such intuitions are meant to be tested. That is, a variety of thought experiments of nuance and precision are meant to hone in on our intuition. Second, discussion and exchanging arguments are an essential component to a considered view. Third, intuitions can be revised as new cases, theories or axioms are proffered. Finally, considered intuition means that all of this can be adjudicated over time, not simply as a snap decision.

The differences between philosophical intuitions and the survey data cited by Prinz to prove cross-cultural incommensurability regarding a good life are vast. They may eventually go to Prinz's point, but their current incarnation renders them only a first step toward a philosophical intuition. These data simply fail to pass philosophical muster. So, Prinz's point is only conjecture.

A second response to Prinz, and one which can be combined with response number one, is that perhaps some agreement on the good life can be found if the proper data could be distilled. This is related to some traditional responses to relativism. This should come as little surprise as Prinz's argument about cultural disagreement could likely be extrapolated against consequentialist and deontic principles, and thus his objection does not apply solely to virtue ethics. While Prinz's psychological studies indicate that there is cross-cultural disagreement about the value of an autonomous life versus a communal one, these points of emphasis need not contradict one another. It remains possible that a distilled, or supra-understanding of such superficially opposed ideals. We might say that successful relationships in a general way are necessary for a flourishing life, while allowing that



some variation in degree of interconnectedness does not mean successful relationships are not part of the telos of a good life. Likewise, some freedom to choose one's path, even if it is used to opt into or continue to live in a tightly-knit community might also be considered part of the supra-telos. Other general areas of agreement on the good life stand a similar chance of being cross-culturally acceptable.

### *Conclusion*

We have seen that the account of virtue articulated in Chapters 1 and 2 can withstand meta-ethical critique stemming from psychological studies. Both Harman and Prinz engage in a hasty interpretation of psychological data. Moreover, there are reasons to think that the psychological data employed by Prinz does not precisely match data that would refute the ground of virtue—people's opinions and philosophical intuitions are not one-and-the-same.

Having tried to shake some implicit foundations of our claims in Chapters 1 and 2 and finding them to be sturdy, we will turn in Chapter 4 to a discussion of a more explicit theoretical foundation and unification of virtue.

## Chapter 4.

### Eudaimonia Revisited

In this final section, we will examine more closely a unifying feature of virtue. To this point, we have relied heavily on thought experiments to show that we *do* believe in, and there is intuitive evidence for, such a thing as virtue as a moral duty or good, and we explored some of the aspects of what makes a virtue. These aspects could fit into a number of different moral theories—Virtue Ethics, of course, but also deontology or consequentialism. Yet I take it that the incorporation of these aspects without any exploration of a theoretical underpinning would be unsatisfying.<sup>30</sup> In this chapter I would like to suggest one such theoretical underpinning that could fit within consequentialism or deontology. I will suggest that virtue's traditional theoretical umbrella—namely, eudaimonia in a basic form—can be included in deontology or consequentialism, and thereby supply theoretical unification for virtue within these systems.

I will not only suggest that, from within consequentialism or deontology, eudaimonia can function to unite a theory of virtue, but I will also suggest that eudaimonia might even further motivate acceptance of virtue. One main theme of this section will be to draw parallels between a eudaimonistic account and agent-relative duties or goods. There is a feature of agent-relativity also present in eudaimonia that makes it an integral part of our moral outlook. Namely, eudaimonia

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<sup>30</sup> An antitheory approach could incorporate these aspects without much theoretical unification. Likewise, a very strong intuitionist account could simply take them as brute moral facts. I will push for a more theoretically transparent approach.

explains why we think our own lives as a whole matter and explains why we should pursue virtuous development. Moreover, this species of eudaimonia dovetails with other theoretical concerns.

I should clarify that this defense is not exhaustive—there are other theoretical justifications for virtue that have merit, and I will not parse each and compare them to my limited treatment of eudaimonia. I would like simply to offer a hypothesis that eudaimonia has many theoretically attractive features and can easily be incorporated into deontology or consequentialism.

### *1. What Species of Eudaimonia?*

Just what is Eudaimonia? We can start by examining the concept's role in Ancient philosophy, and see how it might be useful in discussing virtue today. Julia Annas works primarily in ancient philosophy, and has attempted to revive Virtue Ethics and eudaimonia for ethics today, so we can examine her carefully rendered account to see what might prove useful.

Annas outlines several features of any eudaimonistic theory, or eudaimonism, that are not obvious to the student of only contemporary philosophy. First, she takes eudaimonism to be the object or telos of our lives. To illustrate by comparison: in our discreet daily actions, we have some goal or aim in mind that is the reason why we perform a given action. The reason I exercise, for instance, is that I wish to be healthy and to fit into my clothes. In an analagous way, ancient philosophers held that our lives are purposeful or goal-oriented. Aristotle arrives at the admittedly open-ended

concept of eudaimonia, or happiness, as our lives' purpose. *Eudaimonia* is often more aptly translated as *flourishing*, so as not to confuse it with pleasurable brain states or preference satisfaction or some other more popular definition of happiness subscribed to today. The important point is that eudaimonia as flourishing is the telos of our lives.<sup>31</sup> This telos is what I wish to emphasize about eudaimonia.

One prerequisite of moral flourishing is virtue. We have as a goal in our lives to live with certain morality, and when looking at our lives as a whole we want this responsiveness to morality to take the form of being virtuous in many facets of our lives. We want to have a moral life well-lived.

It is integral that we not conflate pleasure and eudaimonia, or the theoretical function of eudaimonia will remain obscure. Eudaimonia as I am using it here in a rather stripped-down way just means a flourishing moral existence of an individual over an entire life. In other words, it is the successful execution of a moral life—excellence at moral living. There is a lengthy pedigree of philosophers who take it that our capacity for morality is a high-water mark of human activity. Kant is certainly commonly held to be an adherent of this view. Thus the goal of a moral life well-lived is a lofty one. It fits with one of our higher moral capacities as humans, which is our moral capacity. Moreover, it takes seriously our activities as *persons*. Being good in terms of achieving eudaimonia is not just performing abstract or discreet acts, but rather is something we are capable of over the course of our life as a whole.

To illustrate the point that virtue is a prerequisite of eudaimonia, or the moral

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<sup>31</sup> Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (OUP: Oxford, 2011) 129

telos of a life, we could look at the lives of individuals who differ with respect to virtue. An individual who lives their entire life with pleasant feelings and disposition but minimal virtuous character seems to lack something in their life. They have missed the mark as to what a life is supposed to be. Their life, viewed in its totality, is not a moral success. They have not succeeded in living well morally compared with someone who was virtuous. We would not admire the life of the unvirtuous, pleased person in the way we admire the virtuous. We would not advocate that others emulate the pleased unvirtuous person in the same way that we would advocate emulating the virtuous person. A virtuous life is taken to be a life worth emulating, while a non-virtuous life seems shallow or base by comparison.

We should clarify further that eudaimonia is not a reduction or naturalization of virtue. It remains an evaluative concept. Eudaimonia as the goal of our entire moral life is something we value and strive for. Virtue on this account avows a moral justification.

For the stoics, being virtuous was necessary and sufficient for eudaimonia, while for Aristotle virtue was only a necessary condition. We can withhold judgment here about necessary and sufficient conditions, or even whether our moral telos is the same as other teloses of our lives, and merely agree that we have as a goal for our lives that we want to be good, and this entails being virtuous. This virtue includes the intentions we established in Chapter 1 as well as the character development and action-disposition mentioned in Chapter 2, and this list of aspects is not assumed to be exhaustive. But these aspects we built from the bottom up can also be justified, as

it were, from the top down. We want eudaimonia, which in turn entails virtue which is comprised of many aspects. And as we shall see, these aspects are not instrumental, but the essential components of virtue and eudaimonia.

To summarize: when I refer to “Eudaimonia” in this chapter, I refer simply to our *goal of being a good person throughout our whole lives*, which on either a stoic or Aristotelian, account is a necessary condition for eudaimonia. There are more robust versions of eudaimonia, but I rely only on eudaimonia’s function as a moral telos of an entire life.

## *2. Eudaimonia as a Good or Duty*

The virtues are constituent components of eudaimonia, and there are ways to fold a eudaimonistic function into a consequentialist or deontic moral framework. Rather than eudaimonia being the *only* moral imperative, it simply becomes one among others. It could still be a moral dictum that one must minimize suffering, say, in a consequentialist vein, or that one must respect others’ autonomy, to emphasize a deontic principle. These can be goods or duties alongside pursuing one’s own flourishing or moral development as another good or duty. And of course, these imperatives would often go hand-in-hand. I do develop and exercise my virtue of beneficence if I donate to charity, for I would be increasing my empathy and practicing virtue by respecting others. These moral requirements are hardly mutually exclusive.

I believe this gets us beyond the “fundamental egoism” Thomas Hurka finds at the heart of virtue ethics. Hurka claims that because Virtue Ethics advocates pursuing

one's flourishing only, Virtue Ethics is at its core an egocentric theory.<sup>32</sup> We believe we should act for others' sake, Hurka emphasizes, not fundamentally for our own flourishing. But in folding eudaimonia into consequentialism or deontology, we can act both for others and our own flourishing (which entails acting for others) without pitting the goods of others and our own flourishing against one another, as just mentioned.

Annas' response to Hurka is different than my own suggestion. She thinks his critique can be avoided entirely from within Virtue Ethics. She claims Hurka's critique rests on several misunderstandings. Eudaimonia and virtuous pursuit are mutually intertwined on Annas' Aristotelian view.<sup>33</sup> Since living the virtues is part of what eudaimonia is, we cannot at all pursue eudaimonia without pursuing virtues. And pursuing virtues requires acting on behalf of others. For example, being generous in a truly virtuous way requires us to think of the good of others. It would not be truly generous to think of oneself or one's own development in being generous. This would be but a hollow generosity.<sup>34</sup> Hence, the virtuous person does not aim for eudaimonia as apart from aiming at serving others.

I take it Annas' response does go some way to assuaging fears that Virtue Ethics is nothing more than an egoism masquerading as a moral theory. Pursuing eudaimonia entails acting for others' sake. Yet a critic may still point out that there is

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32 Thomas Hurka, *Virtue Vice and Value*. (New York: Oxford University Press 2001) 232

33 Julia Annas "Virtue Ethics and the Charge of Egoism," in Paul Bloomfield (ed.), *Morality and Self-Interest*. (Oxford University Press 2008) 220

34 Julia Annas "Virtue Ethics and the Charge of Egoism," in Paul Bloomfield (ed.), *Morality and Self-Interest*. (Oxford University Press 2008) 208

a structural feature of Virtue Ethics that has an unseemly tilt toward egoism. That criticism proceeds as follows.

The critic can admit that it is true that in exercising any individual virtue, one must act for the sake of others in order to exercise that virtue. Moreover, eudaimonia entails acting for the sake of others. Yet the answer to a basic and structural question, namely, *what is the ground of morality*, is not answered by the virtue ethicist with reference to specific virtues. Instead, the answer to this question makes reference to an individual's own telos, which is eudaimonia. So even if eudaimonia entails concern for others, the theoretical justification, or order of priority, for being moral makes reference to the life of the self. The critic, I suggest, rightly finds that the virtue ethicist carves the moral landscape at a basic level with a reference to the self.

Egoistic theories face intuitive obstacles. Moral philosophers are drawn to moral theories like that of Kant or of Levinas because they focus on others, not on the good of the self. Kant argues that others be treated as ends and never as means, while Levinas champions the primacy of others over the self.

There may of course be a way for the Virtue Ethicist to wiggle out of this characterization, or they may insist it can be refined away. I shall not explore such any such strategy here. For my purposes, it is enough to show that one way around this objection is to take eudaimonia away from its apex position in virtue ethics. It can instead be placed alongside other moral imperatives in a consequentialism or deontology. Putting eudaimonia on par with separate moral imperatives to act on behalf of others avoids making an egocentrism the heart of our moral theory.



### 3. *The Case for Eudamonia*

But suppose some critics, following Hurka or even Kant who believe we should only act for duties' sake, are still worried that we have injected a selfish reason where it does not belong. Morality demands we pursue the good *exclusively*, not our own good. Or, I help another person because I respect them and this is all there is to it, not *also* because I want to improve my own character. We still invoke a wrong reason when we are moral for our own sake, even if this is not the only moral imperative.

I find such thinking too puritanical and self-abnegating. Surely we would rather have someone pursue a life of developing a moral character than not. Attempting to live a good life, to aspire to moral development and growth, is surely itself a noble and admirable goal.<sup>35</sup>

What I am suggesting is a middle-way between the Virtue Ethicist, whose eudaimonistic theory makes an egoistic consideration the starting point of all morality, and self-abnegating consequentialisms or deontologies. The self and its own eudaimonia in the way I have described *can* matter to moral philosophy, provided it does not matter *exclusively*. We do seem to care about the trajectory of our own lives, and this not just in terms of success or pleasure, but in terms of how well we navigate our friendships and family lives. We care that we learn and grow from our moral

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<sup>35</sup> It is worth mentioning as well that Philosophers who allow that we are permitted to pursue our own projects or development are already putting these pragmatic, self-oriented concerns into the moral sphere. The pragmatic is having an impact on the moral, and is thus, part of a moral calculation. I restrict myself here to looking at how one's own moral development is of moral concern.

failings, and we are personally offended by our moral failings and feel guilty about them. We also want our own lives to matter. We do not want our own existence to be an interchangeable cog in rules or goods entirely indifferent to the unique worth of our lives.<sup>36</sup> Eudaimonia in a particular way relates our own morality to morality more generally and gives a voice and support to the inklings that our own moral activities uniquely matter.<sup>37</sup> Our own performance in our interactions is uniquely important, as is the unique value of our own life as an end in itself. This is so because our own eudaimonia achieved through our own virtuous exercise is a moral imperative.

#### *4. Theoretical Advantages of Eudaimonia*

There are a number of theoretical advantages to incorporating eudaimonia in a moral theory beyond its prima facie appeal. First, this middle-way position responds to some common criticisms of consequentialism. Consequentialism is often accused of an improbable demandingness. In its simple hedonistic form it calls for tremendous sacrifice of self, to the point where a spartan life of charity or self-abnegation is required. Eudaimonia allows the self to reenter the moral conversation. One's own moral contribution and growth becomes important in incorporating eudaimonia, thus blunting the self-abnegating charge of hedonistic utilitarianism.

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<sup>36</sup> Of course, we must always bear in mind as well Annas' point that eudaimonia entails virtue and concern for others. So this moral imperative is not purely egoistic or self-serving, even though this particular moral imperative takes the flourishing of the self as one moral node.

<sup>37</sup> Raz speaks of being the author of one's own life. See Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Clarendon Press: Oxford) 373. Other moral philosophers carve space for permissible pursuit of projects. But part of one's own project is one's own moral project of virtuous development, and I am suggesting this project is part of caring about the importance of our own life.

A second theoretical advantage of including eudaimonia in our moral theory is that the concept's focus on the self is correlative with other so-called agent-relative concerns. We might recall that Bernard Williams famously skewered dry consequentialism. He articulated an agent-relative concern when he unleashed a dialectical assault on standard consequentialist responses to the value of one's own relationships. It would be absurd, Williams suggests, to think that I would save my wife from a fire versus an important benefactor because, over time, such decision-making increases the utility of everyone. You do not save your wife for the sake of the theory that this increases overall utility—you save your wife because she's your wife!<sup>38</sup> I am suggesting that eudaimonistic virtue ethics captures a similar sense of why we are moral as the man saving his wife.

To go into a bit more detail, Thomas Nagel popularized the distinction between agent-relative reasons and agent-neutral reasons. In essence, agent-relative reasons make reference to a specific person, their relationships, and the like. This is in contrast to agent-neutral reasons which are just general imperatives without any reference to some individual's particularities.<sup>39</sup> To return to Williams: saving one's wife because it increases marginal utility is an agent-neutral reason, while saving her because she is your wife—marginal utility be damned—is relative.

For his own part, Nagle was baffled by how agent-relative concerns could fit into his own avowed consequentialist schema.<sup>40</sup> But because eudaimonia concerns

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38 Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973-1980*. (Cambridge University Press 1981) 18

39 Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*. (New York : Oxford University Press, 1986) 152–153

40 Nagel explicitly leaves many questions related agent-relativity unanswered. Thomas Nagel, *The*

the agent and its sphere of activity, it is at least a close-cousin of other agent-relative matters. It is another imperative that takes intimate human relationships seriously—much that same as agent-relative concerns take these relationships seriously. And eudaimonia dovetails with these concerns—eudaimonia requires that I act in the service of my intimate relationships as part of my own moral development, while agent-relative concerns demand I act in the service of these relationships for their own sake. The two obligations comport well with one another, and also bear a structural similarity in that the details of an individual and their relationships are of moral concern. Given their similarity, agent-relative-duties and eudaimonia are mutually reinforcing.

As Bernard Williams' rhetoric suggests, agent-relative concerns are *prima facie* compelling.<sup>41</sup> Yet they are not without their critics, as Nagel was keenly aware. For Nagel, holding to both agent-relative and neutral concerns creates something of a two-tiered moral outlook, in which we are left with competing, qualitatively different exigencies.<sup>42</sup>

The same worry about competing, different moral tiers seems applicable to eudaimonia. Eudaimonia takes its cue from an individual's flourishing. This includes direction as to how, morally, to interact with one's own friends or family. Eudaimonia may also include virtues relative to one's circumstance and ability. Although I have not treated such ability-based virtues in this paper, we could imagine that there may

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*View from Nowhere*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 156.

41 See the following for a characterization of such examples as *reductios*: Robert E. Goodin, "What's So Special about Our Fellow Countrymen?" *Ethics* 98 (1988) 665-666

42 Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 150-156.

be such virtues. If, say, one is particularly intelligent or artistic, such person may emphasize the virtue that corresponds to such ability. So there are aspects of eudaimonia that could be decried as forming a second tier of morality, apart from agent-neutral requirements.

To such a criticism, we might first respond that although agent-relative duties or goods complicate the moral landscape, jettisoning them leaves us with a morality few would recognize as such. Therefore, their retention is worth the baggage of their complexity. And if we retain some agent-relative duties, adding eudaimonia does not add a new tier of morality, but rather fits with the existing agent-relative tier.

A second response to such criticism is to note that there are ways to articulate agent-relative duties so that they are fine-grained enough to make agent-relative duties simply more detailed agent-neutral duties.<sup>43</sup> For example, rather than this or that person having a duty, perhaps, to their best friend of 20 years, we could instead say that *anyone* who has a best friend of 20-years has certain duties to them. Thus, it may well be that agent-relative or eudaimonistic concerns do not create a new tier of morality at all, contra Nagel.

There are yet further theoretical advantages of eudaimonia. One area in which it may prove fruitful is with regard to reasons internalism/externalism concerns. Korsgaard is a seminal figure in this debate. She agrees with internalists who claim that motivation and moral reasons are necessarily connected. The alternative (*externalism*, wherein reasons and motivation for moral action are two separate

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43 Stephen White, Lecture, Metaethics group Loyola University, Chicago, IL, November 14, 2014

matters) opens moral theory to skepticism about why we should be moral at all. Why should anyone be moral if some abstract moral laws relate in no way to people, or have no pull on us?<sup>44</sup>

The advantage here of eudaimonia is that it is one way of reinserting the individual and their desire back into morality. In other words, moral demands do relate to a person and their desire. As we already discussed, they relate to a person's hope for themselves to be a good person. This would not imply that eudaimonia grounds the reason for all morality, but perhaps it could provide the link between motivation and all moral demands. In a way it opens the individual's motivations to all moral demands. This idea is no more than a mere suggestion for further research, but it is another theoretically fruitful area and shows the promise of including eudaimonia in our moral theories.

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<sup>44</sup> Korsgaard, C. "Skepticism about Practical Reason," in her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 317

## Conclusion

No contemporary ethical theory, it would seem, can leave virtue behind. We think that virtue matters. Specifically, we have established that virtue as an attitude toward the good or the right matters in moral philosophy, and what's more, virtue as a tendency toward action and virtue as a stable disposition is better still. Attempts to undercut virtue on meta-ethical grounds based on psychological studies were found to be unsuccessful.

When we combine the features of virtue we have discussed, we find that a picture of something akin to a human character begins to emerge. What we care about with respect to virtue is attitudes, dispositions and the stability of those dispositions over time. Thus it seems that one thing that is material to moral philosophy is a feature of persons. Moreover, this feature is not reduced to one very desiccated feature of a person—say, a person's ability to choose or pleasure states. Virtue pushes us toward a more holistic view of the goods of a person. My arguments above implicitly contend that moral theory can and should take this holistic feature of persons into account. Finally, a suggestion was made for the holistic concept of eudaimonia to unify virtue—yet another holistic concept of the person.

If moral theory is to avoid being seen as a set of legalisms or an impersonal calculus, the person in its totality needs to be taken more seriously. Including virtue with its manifold layers in moral philosophy—layers which trace the contours of complexity of a person—is a step in the direction of a more fulsome moral

philosophy.

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