

The Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics



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INTRODUCTION

Almost everyone in philosophy knows that virtue ethics dominated ethics during the period of classical antiquity (in the West); and everyone also knows that it started reviving ever more strongly with the appearance, in 1958, of Elizabeth Anscombe's article "Modern Moral Philosophy" (*Philosophy*). Nowadays virtue ethics is one of the three leading approaches to normative ethics in the English-speaking world—the other two being consequentialism and Kantian ethics, and in reaching that status or role, it has had to come a long way. There are still occasionally philosophers who want to argue that virtue ethics cannot stand on its own, that it is a merely illusory alternative to other moral approaches, or that it is inadequate because it is unable to offer any form of useful practical guidance, but for the most part virtue ethics seems to have established itself very firmly in our field and in our profession. We now see many courses on virtue ethics, many books about or in it, and, yes, many collections and anthologies dedicated to it. So what reason do the present editors have for offering another volume to the growing number of volumes dedicated to virtue ethics? This volume explores the seeds of virtue ethics, as well as its extensions and influences, in ways that have not yet been brought together in one collection.

The virtue ethics that followed in the wake of Anscombe's article was at first fairly exclusively Aristotelian in its inspiration and method. It has only in recent years been acknowledged, among Anglophone philosophers, that our own David Hume was also, arguably, a virtue ethicist with ideas relevant to today's philosophical climate. And it has only recently been that other philosophers have argued that we also need to take Stoic or Platonic or Nietzschean virtue ethics seriously for present-day philosophical purposes. Thus the seeds of virtue ethics, even within Western traditions, are more vastly spread than had been initially

recognized in the wake of Anscombe's article.

Proceeding in a somewhat parallel direction is a growing recognition that the seeds of virtue ethics can be found in many non-Western traditions. Increasingly it has begun to dawn on Western virtue ethicists that virtue ethics has been historically present and influential in other parts of the world and especially in Asia. Many (though far from all) ethicists who think about Chinese thought, now regard Confucianism as a form or cluster of forms of virtue ethics, and it is possible to say the same about Buddhism and other "world philosophies." Other anthologies and collections recognize this only partially or in a limited way. Nowadays, and unlike thirty years ago, anthologies relating to virtue ethics usually have an article or two on Confucianism or Buddhism or Daoism, but this effectively treats Western virtue ethics as more developed, more worthy of our attention, than what has happened elsewhere in the world, and the present volume seeks to rectify that partiality. The present volume contains *lots* of articles relating to virtue ethics in other parts of the world, and in particular, by offering separate and substantial accounts of the philosophies of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, it treats those ethicists on a relative par with the likes of Plato, Aquinas, and Aristotle, to whom separate chapters are also devoted. This is not to take sides on the philosophical issues that divide these thinkers from one another, but it is to imply or indicate that all six of the aforementioned thinkers deserve our attention in their own right as individual thinkers and not just as part of some tradition that deserves our attention as a tradition. And this is just one example of how the present volume seeks to open up our understanding of the possibilities, both historically and presently, of virtue ethics and of how, in fact, looking at the matter from a more international perspective, things are at least starting to appear to those who think about virtue ethics. This is just one of the many ways in which the present volume aspires to open up our understanding of virtue ethics.

Another notable way is the emphasis on religious virtue ethics. There are separate articles on Augustine and Aquinas and two other chapters on religious virtue ethics in its present-day context and developments. With this opening up of virtue ethics comes also a focus on new extensions of virtue ethics, and treatment of new problems associated with the moral

psychology of virtue ethics. Recognizing the plurality of both historical and contemporary approaches to virtue ethics allows the present volume to explore a wide range of lines of criticisms that test the limits of virtue ethics, such as considering whether Kant can reasonably be thought a virtue ethicist, considering the relations between role ethics, care ethics, and virtue ethics, and considering whether or not philosophical conceptions of virtue and character can be brought into harmony with psychological research. Finally, this volume pushes and extends the application of virtue ethics—considering not only whether and how an Aristotelian virtue ethics can be of use in applied contexts but how Confucianism and other non-Western traditions can be extended to deepen our understanding of real world contexts.

The total picture presented will, we hope, indicate that the possibilities for historical scholarship on virtue ethics and for taking virtue ethics in new directions for present-day philosophy are larger and more various than many virtue ethicists, until very recently, have recognized. As Christine Swanton has very aptly suggested, virtue ethics turns out to be a genus and not a species called Aristotelianism, and the emphasis here on differing virtue-ethical traditions in different parts of the world may encourage philosophers to look, for inspiration or for solutions to problems, beyond the confines of fields of ethics considered in more traditional or accustomed terms.

One interesting issue that arises with cumulative force as one reads through (as we editors have) all the different chapters of this volume, is the question of what virtue ethics *is*: If a genus, how do we best describe it? Many of the chapters contained here find it difficult to say whether the contemporary or historical approach they focus on really counts as virtue ethics, and in fact the question of what virtue ethics is has animated virtue ethics itself (and many positions critical of virtue ethics) over the years since Anscombe's article appeared. Similar problems *do not* seem to arise with respect to consequentialism or Kantian ethics, and that very fact has led to uncertainties that do not seem to have beset other approaches (despite all the other philosophical problems they might have). But the problematic character of ascriptions of virtue-ethical status do not at all necessarily impugn the validity or plausibility of any particular approach or doctrine about which one hesitates to use the term

“virtue ethics.”

While we are certainly not proposing to settle all such issues of nomenclature with a definitive definition of virtue ethics that everyone could or ought to agree to, the chapters contained here hold together in virtue of sharing a common interest in exploring the dynamics of an agent’s character and how this contributes to her status as a moral agent; in exploring with seriousness the notion that what the agent brings to her actions (be it her motives, her wisdom, her virtues) is of the utmost importance; and in exploring the possibility that these kinds of considerations may take methodological priority over other aspects of morality. Do these commitments define the genus of virtue ethics? We do not pretend to know, decisively, the answer. But we invite the reader to explore the following, to open up his or her understanding of virtue ethics, to begin to think for him- or her- self how we ought to define the genus.

As we expect the reader will quickly see, all the forms of ethics discussed in this volume are eminently worthy of our philosophical consideration, and that should be enough both for virtue ethics to be a valid concept and for the particular, but contestable forms it takes in these chapters and elsewhere to deserve our attention as philosophers or historians of philosophy.

Nonetheless, over the past two decades, as virtue ethics has become increasingly prominent and influential, the whole idea of virtue ethics as a self-standing approach to morality has occasionally been challenged in various ways. Most notably, Roger Crisp has raised objections to recent work that bases the morality of actions in the morality of character/motivation in the way that is most distinctive in virtue ethics (“A Third Method of Ethics?” in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 2012). But his objections are based in assumptions about the nature of morality that some ethicists (and not just virtue ethicists) would want to challenge.

And so his work seems to us to represent an expression of the liveliness of debates about where virtue ethics should and can go, rather than a sign that virtue ethics has nothing significant to say for itself and should fade into the philosophical background. Indeed, we think that the entire present volume gives evidence of how vital, variegated, and

distinctive virtue-ethical thought can actually be.

Lorraine Besser-Jone
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Part I

HISTORY OF VIRTUE ETHICS

PLATO AND THE ETHICS OF VIRTUE

Nicholas White

In recent years some of Plato's readers, influenced by discussions of the 'ethics of virtue' over recent decades, have been moved to ask whether Plato espouses such a view, and have given various different answers. The question is difficult, because the phrase still doesn't have a clear-cut meaning. This is caused partly by the fact that its component expressions, 'ethics' and 'virtue' are likewise ambiguous. And even 'of' causes difficulties, because there's little agreement about what, in the phrase 'ethics of virtue,' the relation between virtue and ethics is supposed to be.

Start with the simple idea that an ethics of virtue is an ethical position that makes virtue prominent by using virtue expressions often. Then it's easy to determine that Plato does espouse such a position. But this standard isn't interesting: the prominence could easily be caused by trivial expository considerations. We want more than word-counting. We want to focus on substantive philosophical issues. If virtue terms are prominent, then why? Does Plato have grounds for making them so? One can't describe a position properly without identifying some grounds on which it's adopted.

As I've hinted, the historical question whether Plato espouses an ethics of virtue hasn't been raised in a vacuum. It's been occasioned in recent decades by particular concerns within ethics itself. We should keep our eyes on those concerns. Therefore, one of our tasks is to determine whether, when Plato talks much of virtue and virtues, his reasons for stressing virtue are the same as the ones that are now philosophically

active. My eventual answer will be: no. But I'll start by reviewing some of the reasons that have been advanced in the last few centuries.

Prominence is a relation. If virtue concepts are common in Plato, we have to ask, prominent in contrast to what? What do they overshadow? What else might someone have stressed instead? We also want to know: to what are virtue terms applied? Various kinds of things can be called virtuous: people, their actions, their intentions, and so on. Which applications are prominent in Plato, and for what reasons?

Some usable answers are forthcoming from recent discussions. As to field of application: nowadays an ethics of virtue is typically thought of as giving priority to virtue terms as used of persons or their characters. Usually an ethics of virtue tries to tell us primarily what kind of person it's 'good to be.'

Actions can be called virtuous too, of course, or be said to have particular virtues, like being courageous or just. But in a typical ethics of virtue these days, virtuous actions are specified, or defined, *as* actions that a virtuous *person* would do. Thus an action's virtue is usually thought to be somehow derivative from the virtue of the character or personality that produces it. The action *inherits* its evaluative character from the agent from whom it stems.

We've now touched on the main point that we need to understand about Plato. In his *Republic* he, too, pictures the virtue (or absence thereof) of an action as derivative from the virtue (or absence thereof) of a person. But in Plato's picture the dependence is quite different from the modern one. On his view, we'll see, a just action is one that *brings about* or *maintains* justice in a person, not one that *comes from* it. That difference betokens other important differences between Plato's concerns and more recent ones.

An ethical view that isn't an ethics of virtue is most likely (there are exceptions; see Frankena 1970) a so-called *ethics of duty*. Such a view doesn't recommend actions by saying that they're what a virtuous person would do—which is how an ethics of virtue recommends actions. Rather, an ethics of duty typically does two things. First, it usually gives general

characterizations identifying types of actions—characterizations like ‘keeping promises’ and ‘telling the truth.’ (Thus an ethics of duty specifies sorts of actions *directly*, rather than by the roundabout way of saying that they’re what a virtuous person would do.) Second, an ethics of duty specifies those types of actions as actions that are *required* or *obligatory*, that’s what it means to call them *duties*, or to say that one *ought* to do them.

Those who espouse an ethics of duty often say that because it specifies actions directly, it makes telling what to do much easier than an ethics of virtue does (see Frankena 1970; Schneewind 1990). An ethics of duty has to indicate how we can tell, in a given situation, ‘what a virtuous person would do.’ We’ll see later how Plato, with his ethics of virtue, seems to try to answer this question.

The history and historiography of philosophy from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century reveal a definite occasion for asking whether Plato has this kind of reason for emphasizing concepts of virtue over those of duty and action. I sketch the picture with an extremely broad brush.

In the earlier part of this period, partly under the influence of legal thinkers like Grotius and Pufendorf, it was thought important to treat ethical standards as, in important ways, like a legal code, with clear rule-like specifications of what a person is to do and is not to do—in other words, as an ethics of action and, often, as an ethics of duty (Schneewind 1990). In the nineteenth century, there was a reaction against this, under the influence of Schiller and Hegel, and then increasingly in the second half of the twentieth, especially in English-speaking philosophy. This reaction largely involved objections to Kant’s ethics, which stressed duty vigorously.

These objections issued in a movement, especially since the 1950s, favoring an—as it came to be called—ethics of virtue, offered as a supposedly superior alternative to (especially) Kantian ethical thinking, and also favoring the evaluation of actions as opposed to persons and their characters.

Beginning with Schiller’s and Hegel’s criticisms of Kant (and stimulated, no doubt, by Kant’s chilly disregard of Greek ethics), this

movement harked back strongly to classical Greek philosophy in general—to Aristotle most of all, but also sometimes to Plato. The thought was that Greek philosophers represented the kind of thinking that was so sadly lacking in Kant and others like him.

As a result, many find it apposite to ask whether this historical picture—of this or that Greek philosopher as offering an ethics of virtue as against Kantian duty-centered thinking—is correct. Consequent on asking that question, of course, one asks the additional question: does Greek ethics offer grounds supporting an ethics of virtue? And are these grounds like the modern ones?

Does Plato say directly *why* he talks so much about virtue, or argue for doing so? No, he just *does* it, seemingly unselfconsciously. He does it a great deal in his early works, where he seems to be strongly under the influence of Socrates (esp. the *Crito*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Major*, *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Meno*, and, I'd say, *Republic 1* as well), where he tries to define various virtues and, in the *Meno*, virtue itself. This seeming link between Socrates and Plato's early discussions of virtues, together with a selective view of non-philosophical Greek literature, has made some of Plato's readers believe that he unthinkingly absorbed an interest in virtue from earlier writers and from his 'culture.'

That view can't be sustained, for two reasons. For one thing, there's plenty of talk within Greek literature, both in Plato's time and before, that doesn't revolve around virtue, and doesn't treat the virtue of persons as focal. In fact, there's plenty of talk about actions that are *required* by a standard emanating from some other source than virtue. The gods issue lots of commands, and punish mortals for disobeying them. Zeus does that with thunderbolts. Greek mythology is full of such pictures (Lloyd-Jones 1983). There's no good ground for saying that 'attractive' standards of goodness and virtue there dominate 'imperative' standards arising from commands.

These commands come from both divine and legal sources (and even from both, as in Plato's *Crito*). True, Plato has no confidence in the power of law and law courts to regulate society, and throughout he gives

this job over primarily to education. Nevertheless his *Laws*, written near the end of his life, is anything but skeptical of the power of law to set standards, though that's largely because it gives law an educative role too (*Laws* 857e).

Plato's early works, by contrast, are chiefly devoted to attempts to define virtue terms (along with a couple of others, such as friendship in the *Lysis*). Strikingly, however, Plato often cites cases of virtue that aren't persons or their characters, but rather actions or action types (e.g., *Euthyphro* 5d–e, 7a). He doesn't say that persons are conceptually primary instances of virtue.

The *Republic* is like Plato's earlier works in focusing on virtues possessed by persons, especially the virtue of justice, which the *Republic* tried to define. However, the work shows that Plato recognizes a different approach to ethics, which emphasizes actions and general rules. The interlocutors in the conversation accept the action- and rule-oriented approach. All of their attempts at defining justice in this way are refuted within Book 1. A definition of justice as speaking the truth and repaying what one owes is proposed and refuted (331d; N.B.: such references without the name of another Platonic work are to the widely standardized pages of the *Republic*); likewise a definition of it as helping friends and harming enemies (332d). Plato is on his way to arguing against, not only these particular definitions, but the whole approach of trying to define a virtue by means of direct specifications of the actions that fall under it.

Actions are likewise the focus of the conversation in Book 1 between the character Socrates and his chief adversary, Thrasymachus. The latter's way of broaching the topic (338–339) sounds for all the world like a present-day treatment of the question, “Why does it make sense to *do* what's right?”

Not only is Thrasymachus' focus on just or right *actions*, including notably those that are required or forbidden by laws. Thrasymachus also maintains that most actions that are so called actually harm the persons who do them. So he asks, “Why should anyone do them?” Thrasymachus himself asserts that doing them is simply “high-minded foolishness” (*êlithios*, 348c). (Notice that as the word “high-minded” shows,

Thrasymachus doesn't think that everyone acknowledges that they act only in order to further their own well-being; rather, he ascribes to people a notion of non-self-regarding motivation, and Plato agrees; see White 2002: 189–214.)

The same preoccupation with actions is exhibited further in the restatements of Thrasymachus' position by Glaucon and Adeimantus in *Republic 2*. The question on the table thenceforth is, then: is it in fact foolish to perform just actions?

Once Plato has disposed of these definitions, as we'll see, he's on his way to rejecting—clearly, self-consciously, and emphatically (443c–e)—the whole action-oriented approach to defining justice. Instead he opts in the rest of the *Republic* for a kind of ethics of virtue—though not, as we'll see, the kind that's common nowadays.

What we might initially expect from Plato as a response to Thrasymachus' position is, of course, an argument for saying that doing just actions is indeed beneficial. But that's not what we get. From its inception in Books 2–4, and its continuation thereafter, Plato's response has little directly to do with just or obligatory actions. Instead it deals with virtues, and especially justice as a virtue, both of characters or personalities ('souls' or *psychai*), and also, by analogy to persons, of city-states (*poleis*) or social organizations of individuals.

Critics have objected that Plato has switched the terms of the debate in the middle of it, and hasn't shown his reply to be relevant to Thrasymachus' position. This matter doesn't concern us here.

What *does* concern us is Plato's shift in application of the term justice. In Plato's early works and in *Republic 1*, the talk was of virtues, both of persons and of actions. Thrasymachus' outburst (336b) led us to think primarily about justice as applied to (he thinks, "foolish") actions. Thereupon Plato forced us to shift our attention back again to justice as applied to persons and their characters. These shifts have implications for whether we're dealing with an ethics of virtue or not.

What that series of shifts conveys is this. Plato's Socrates (and probably the historical Socrates, with his interest in the health of the

individual's soul) wanted to focus on defining virtue terms as applied both to persons and to other things, including actions. The relation between these two kinds of application wasn't fully articulated. The public discussion generated by Sophistic thinkers, represented by Thrasymachus (perhaps a historical figure, perhaps not) focused on actions, and on whether or not it was intelligent to perform just ones (Adkins 1960). Plato disagreed emphatically, and in *Republic* Books 2ff. turned the spotlight back onto justice in the person. He also, in his famous analogy, explained justice in the city-state as well.

We can be sure that Plato's concentration on virtue of character after *Republic 1* was deliberate. The difference between his approach there and the action-focused approach of Socrates' interlocutors in Book 1 is too obvious to have escaped his notice, and not to have been intentional. The point is clinched, as we'll see, by his explicit statement in Book 4, that "in truth justice . . . *isn't concerned with someone's doing his own externally, but with what is inside him*" (433c–d).

From our perspective here, Plato's explanation of justice in *Republic 2–4* amounts to a transition, from the action-focused standpoint of Thrasymachus, to an approach focusing, more single-mindedly than the early dialogues had, on justice and virtue as applied, first, to a city-state and, then and by analogy, to an individual's character (441c). (Plato didn't, however, regard virtue as the most basic concept; as is well known, *Republic 509–516* declares that concept to be goodness; for elaboration see Santas 2001.)

Plato's explanation begins with a description of the origin of a city-state. This city-state is in a sense ideal—a "model" or "paradigm" (*paradeigma*) "laid up in heaven" (592b)—but it also has innumerable features of a thing that's perceptible and concrete. It also contains many non-ideal citizens, though they're introduced as falling under schematic types (*genê*). Its rulers are to some degree ideal and are good (431c–d).

Into this quasi-ideal description individual actions enter, but they're given almost no direct attention. In my opinion that's largely because Plato doesn't believe that there's any such thing as an ideal action or even ideal type of action, and so doesn't think that talking of actions has

a functional role in his idealizing description (White 2010, 2013). In any event, actions are out of the picture until almost the end of Book 4.

I'll review some familiar facts about Plato's description of the virtues of a city-state and an individual 'soul' (*psychê*), or (as we should think of it) character or personality. These details are essential for understanding what it would mean to say that Plato accepts (or rejects) an ethics of virtue.

Plato works from what he takes to be the development of what he claims—controversially, ever since Aristotle—is a “completely good” city-state (from 369b to 427e). It's able to provide for its own needs (369b–c), and (he infers) is as unified and stable and free from internal conflict as possible (422e, 462āb)—though because it's an idealization of an institution in the physical world, it can't be completely so. Moreover since this city-state, Plato supposes, is necessarily not alone in the world, it can't be free from external danger and so must defend itself against other city-states (414b).

For these purposes a city-state must comprise various groups of people. These include artisans in the lowest class, who perform various different functions within it. The function of external defense is performed by “auxiliaries”; the function of coordinating all of the functions and of assigning people to them is itself performed by “rulers.”

Plato believes that each person of each type is “by nature” suited to performing a single one of these functions. The rulers are to organize this scheme and to arrange for appropriate training for each person to perform his or her own “natural” task (the task that it is “by nature” most capable of performing) and not to interfere with other tasks naturally performed by other people.

Being in such a condition of coordinated capacities and motivations, according to Plato, is what makes a city-state *good* (427e), i.e. is its *aretê* or “virtue.” The virtues of the city are the various aspects (four in number according to *Republic 4*) of this condition. Wisdom (*sophia*) concerns the coordinating function of the rulers. Courage (*andreia*) concerns the enforcement of the necessary performance by others of their natural functions, and the prevention of attempts to interfere with others' activity. “Moderation” (*sôphrosynê*) is the restraint of motivations and impulses that would disrupt this condition. Justice (*dikaiosynê*) is the

overall performance by each class of citizens of its natural function, and non-interference with others.

These four aspects (as they should be labeled) sometimes overlap. Though they're aspects of a single condition or coordinated harmony, they're distinguishable. As in the case of the individual, Plato seems uninterested in making sure that the boundaries among the 'parts' or 'classes' are sharp and clear (though many readers try to hold him to a strict scheme).

Now for Plato's conception of the virtues of the character of an individual. Famously, he accepts an analogy between the structure and virtues of the city-state and those of the individual personality (435āb). It's needless to inquire whether he argues 'from the city to the soul' or 'from the soul to the city'; whichever way he argues, he believes that his claims about both are plausible on their own account.

Corresponding to the classes of citizens with their respective motivations and capacities, the individual personality contains desires (*epithymiai*) and capacities performing functions to serve a person's needs. We should think of these desires as *motive forces* or motivations. They fall into three classes (*genê*), or sometimes 'parts.' These are labeled "reason" (*logos*), "spirit" (*thymos*), and "appetite" (also *epithymiai*; that word is used both for any motivation, e.g., at 580d, and also for mostly bodily appetites, e.g., 439d, 571d–e).

Several features of Plato's ideas about the human character must be kept in mind. First, he tries to explain what humans do solely by means of these three types of motive forces, the three "parts of the soul," and no others. Most notably, he posits no super-part, no "self" over and above them that mediates among them and plans or decides how they should be coordinated.

Second, Plato depicts all desires of each type as producing and influencing one's actions in the same way, that is, as motive forces towards or away from one thing or another. This fact appears, e.g., in his description of the way in which thirst can move one towards a drink and reason can move one away from it (439b–c). Internally the desires of the different types do differ, especially since within the reason the force is

generated by “calculation” of good and bad (439c, 602d), whereas other complexities occur within the other parts (e.g., Cooper 1984: 19–21).

So whatever may go on in a desire within any part, the result in action is effectuated similarly in all cases, differing only in direction. (This is the basis, at 439b–c, of Plato’s thesis that the soul must be thought of as divided into “parts.”) A consequence of this thought will appear later, that Plato’s psychology doesn’t contain a variety of states and conditions—for example, intentions, deliberations, plans, etc.—which populate other types of more complex philosophical psychology.

Plato’s theory has often been called a ‘hydraulic’ conception of motivation. The forces of all desires are roughly commensurable. Each part’s desires exert pressure in some direction. The action that these desires produce depends on the direction in which the total pressure is greatest. One desire’s gain in pressure is also another desire’s loss. No further factor plays a role.

The picture is complicated, to be sure, by Plato’s strong tendency to believe that it’s impossible “willingly” (*hekôn*) to act badly (*Protagoras* 345e). Saying that requires complications in one’s psychology (e.g., to account for people who seem to say that they do so). Unfortunately there’s no space to pursue this matter until we come to the *Laws* below.

Plato explains the virtues or excellences (*aretai*), and vices or deficiencies (*kakiai*), in a human character as structures, harmonious and disharmonious, of these “desires” (441–444).

Roughly, wisdom is the “rule” of the person by reason (*logos*), enjoining each desire to perform its natural function and not encroach on the others (e.g., hunger should act to keep one healthy, not to win eating contests). Courage is obedience of spirit (*thymos*) to reason as it enforces harmony on the other motivations, especially the “appetites” (again, *epthymiai*). Moderation is the obedience of the appetites to reason’s organization. And justice is the overall condition by which each part performs its own natural function and doesn’t encroach on the other parts.

Obviously Plato’s whole scheme, like his scheme for the city-state, depends on his highly problematic views about what the various

motivations and their ‘natural functions’ are. But however implausible or objectionable these views might be (‘charity in interpretation’ has its limits), his resulting substantive views about how individual and social motivations should be structured are what they are.

Plato’s main further theses through Book IX deal not with particular actions but with types of individuals. He compares ‘the just person’ with ‘the unjust person,’ the life of the former with the life of the latter. The just person and the just life, he says there, are very much better than their unjust counterparts. He never says that each just action produces an increment of benefit or happiness, nor that an unjust action does the opposite. Many have asked whether he was committed to any such claim. There’s no evidence for saying that he is, however much a modern reader might expect it. This is another sign of his concentration on character rather than actions.

Now we can finally move back to just action. On the basis of the foregoing account of justice of character, Plato returns to Thrasymachus’ challenge, and in Book 4 gives the first part of his explanation of why he takes just action to be beneficial to the agent (the rest continues through the end of the *Republic*).

First he presents an account of what it is for an action to be just. This amounts to a kind of ethics of virtue—though *not*, as we’ll see shortly, the kind of ethics of virtue that’s standard nowadays. It’s an ethics of virtue in the straightforward sense that it explains the notion of a just action as derivative from the notion of a just character or soul.

The basic sense of ‘justice,’ he now makes explicit, is indeed a state of one’s soul or character (443c). Alluding back to his statement that justice in the city is the doing by each person of his or her natural task (432c–433b), he says (433c–d): “And in truth justice is, it seems, something of this sort. However, it isn’t concerned with someone’s doing his own externally, *but with what is inside him*,” namely, the harmony of the ‘parts’ that Plato has identified with justice of character.

Then comes his explanation of just action. He says that a person whose soul is “bound together harmoniously” (443e–444a; cf. 444b–d),

when he does anything, whether acquiring wealth, taking care of

his body, engaging in politics, or in private contracts—in all of these, he believes that *the action is just and fine that preserves this inner harmony and helps to achieve it*, and calls it so, and regards as wisdom the knowledge that oversees such actions.

So a person whose personality is harmonious is to call an action just that *establishes and preserves* harmony of character and so justice in the soul. That is, a just action is defined as an action having a certain kind of *effect*, namely, the establishment or maintenance of justice of character. (It's a nice question whether Plato holds that the justice that's established or maintained must be in the agent *herself*; the text doesn't insist on that understanding, and leaves it open that, as Plato surely *should* say, just actions can support justice in others too, or in a city-state.)

So insofar as just actions are obligatory actions, then in the sense of definitional priority Plato does espouse an ethics of virtue. A moment's thought reveals, however, how different Plato's view is from the type of conception of just and virtuous action that's been standard in modern times and, indeed, ever since Aristotle. A just action can be taken to be simply an action that conforms to certain rules; within an ethics of duty this conception isn't unusual. But if one thinks about virtue in the normal way, one nowadays takes a *virtuous action* to be an action—*not*, that *brings about* a virtuous state of the personality, as in Plato, but rather—that *comes from* such a state.

For an action to be fully just, most thinkers now hold, mere conformity to rules of just action isn't enough. For such conformity might be blind, accidental, or compelled. Rather, the agent normally must have *intended* to act as he did, and to have been aware of what he was doing. Therefore, some conditions or others concerning his 'state of mind' must be fulfilled.

This idea, however, doesn't come into Plato's explanation of what defines just action. It might *seem* to, if one assumed that he '*must have had it in mind*,' as some interpreters seem to. That idea might be fed by an over-reading of the passage just before 443d–444d, namely in 442d–443b, that a person with a harmonious character in his sense won't commit such ordinary crimes as temple-robbing. That's because, Plato

says, in such a person each part “does its own work,” i.e., the person is just in the sense that he has explained. Plato is assuming here, perhaps understandably but without much evidence or argument, that the cause of such ordinary misdeeds is generally the failure of reason to harmonize desires.

But Plato doesn't define a just individual as someone who refrains from such ordinary crimes. That's proved by his statement, quoted above, that “in truth” justice “isn't concerned with someone's doing his own externally, but with what is inside him” (443c–d). A just person is *defined*, for Plato, by the harmony of his desires, not by the types of actions that he does or the rules that he conforms to. And just actions, for him, are defined as such by *supporting* harmony, *not* by springing from it.

Notice that Plato seems to have an avenue open to claiming (I don't say convincingly) to be able to tell which actions a just person would generally do. They'd be the just actions, that is (443–444), actions that establish and preserve justice of character (either in the agent or, as I suggested he must wish to claim, also in others). Throughout the *Republic* Plato obviously claims to be able to tell which actions those are.

Aside from this point, the difference between saying that an action is virtuous if it *establishes or preserves* virtue in the person, as Plato does, and saying that an action is virtuous if it *comes from* virtue in the person, is very great. It leads to large differences between views of and philosophical investigations into virtue, and corresponding differences between kinds of ethics of virtue.

Beginning with Aristotle, and all the way through to the present day, the investigation (often labeled ‘action theory’) of the kind of psychological states that lead to actions has been an integral part of ethics. Philosophers have invoked states such as *intentions, willing, deliberation, choosing*, etc., in addition to the uniform kind of desires that one sees in Plato. Ever since Aristotle, philosophical theories of motivation have mostly, for philosophical good or ill, been more complex than Plato's—though occasionally interpreters read Aristotelian

materials back into him. But Aristotle's action-theoretic complexities are new, not built out of Platonic concepts.

Plato's psychological account of people's actions is based simply on the idea of (mostly relative) strengths of desires, as I've said. Whatever complexity present within a 'part' may generate such a desire, the desire *itself* acts simply as a motive force, pushing against or with forces in other parts. Reasoning about what's best to do occurs within one's reason or *logos*, and produces a motive force towards realizing its conclusion. Other kinds of complexities within other parts (though not reasoning about what's best) can simultaneously produce other inclinations. But Plato never hints that once the motive forces are established, further deliberating or deciding is involved in mediating or negotiating among them. Rather, he believes that the strongest motive force produces an action. Thus in *Republic* 442d–443b, people with well-ordered personalities don't rob temples simply because any such inclination they may have is *weaker than* reason's inclination to follow its calculation of what's best.

Consequently Plato's ethics of virtue, such as it is, diverges significantly from the kind of ethics of virtue that many philosophers have advocated more recently. Ever since Aristotle, the virtues and vices have mostly been explained by means of the apparatus of action theory that I've sketched, which concerns the states that lead *to* actions (Slote 1992 is a notable partial exception).

On these terms, being virtuous is thought to depend on having certain kinds of intentions and plans, deliberating in certain ways rather than others, making certain choices, and so on—not *simply* in having desires of particular strengths, (though desires do come into it). Some philosophers do think that the relevant psychology can be built entirely out of beliefs and desires, but most philosophers who have recently talked about the ethics of virtue haven't taken that view. Accordingly, when they think of an ethics of virtue, they employ a notion of virtue that involves the action-theoretic psychology mentioned.

If we view virtue thus, we must go beyond the psychology that Plato employs. His notion of virtue is a notion of a balance of *desires*, and

invokes no more psychology than that. So even though Plato does define just and obligatory action *in terms of* virtue of character, the pertinent notion of virtue of character is very different from the notion that's now standard.

Moreover, as I've emphasized, Plato defines just action as action that *leads to* virtue of character, not action that springs from it. That means that for him, an investigation of whether an action is just or virtuous doesn't explore the *antecedents* of the action at all, whether in the soul or anywhere else. Instead it concerns itself solely with the *effects* of the action, in creating or maintaining a virtuous character. That yields a very different perspective on the action.

What makes Plato's ethics of virtue so different from the one that Aristotle and most subsequent philosophers adopt? The answer is clear. Virtue seems to most philosophers now to be tied up with which of one's actions one is *responsible for*, i.e., can properly be praised or blamed or rewarded or punished for. One's virtue isn't affected by doing actions that one's not responsible for (e.g., because they're coerced).

But what one is responsible for is a matter of one's intentions and choices and deliberations and the like, not simply one's desires. If you merely desired to do, then that, under this conception, isn't enough for you to be blameworthy for it; but your having *chosen* or *intended* it *is* enough. So determining responsibility requires investigating action-theoretic concepts of what brings about actions.

Plato's concerns in the *Republic*, once again, are the results of actions, not what leads to them. In 443e–444a, replying to Thrasymachus, he must claim that just actions lead, in a special way, *to* justice of character and so to a good state of soul. That's the whole point of his argument. He's not occupied with the antecedents of action.

Moreover the *Republic* simply bypasses the topic of responsibility. Plato there treats it as irrelevant. Notoriously, his view of law courts and exculpatory legal maneuvers are caustic (405āc, 409ād). He looks mainly to education to regulate people's future actions in his city-state. But since explaining responsibility for actions isn't on his agenda, the topics of action theory don't arise.

In a few passages outside the *Republic* Plato touches on the action-theoretic notions that he ignores there. One is in the *Phaedo* (67e–69d) where he distinguishes between true virtues (courage, moderation, etc.) and what people *call* virtues. People merely *call* virtue the abstention from pleasure now only because, aiming at pleasure overall, one expects that present restraint will enable one to gain pleasure later. Here we have a case of identical actions produced by different states of mind. But Plato doesn't investigate the matter.

The *Laws*, written late in Plato's life, finally attempts, briefly and inadequately, a treatment of relevant distinctions present in Athenian law between grades and types of offenses with various psychological etiologies (esp. 857a–864c). Just as in the *Protagoras*, as we saw, Plato's thinking here is complicated by his view that no one is willingly (*hekôn*) bad (*kakos*) or unjust (860d, 731c). That makes it very awkward for him to make sense of the standard Athenian legal view, that unwilling acts should be punished (or not) differently from willing ones.

The passage has been variously interpreted (see Stalley 1983: 137–165), but space precludes discussion here. However, two remarks are in order. First, Plato's thoughts plainly aren't fully worked out—precisely because, as we've seen, he doesn't have a developed apparatus for dealing with complex motivations. Second, even though he here considers taking motivations into account when administering punishments, he's still moved primarily, as in the *Republic*, by future-regarding considerations, namely, how punishments can benefit society, perhaps by curing the criminal. Judgments about etiology are of minor import.

Plato espouses an ethics of virtue in the sense explained. He defines the justice of actions in terms of justice of character. However, he does it otherwise than thinkers since Aristotle have. He doesn't define just actions by the character traits that *lead to* them, but identifies just actions as those that *produce and support* just traits. He's interested in the consequences of just actions, not in conditions of responsibility. That leads him to a focus different from that of the typical modern ethics of

virtue.

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ARISTOTLE'S VIRTUE ETHICS

Dorothea Frede

Preface

In a way all ancient philosophers are virtue-ethicists. For they all hold that happiness, the good life, presupposes virtue. This should come as no surprise once we realize that *areté* in ordinary parlance can refer to any kind of superior quality, ability, or talent. 'Virtue' is therefore not attributed to human beings only, but also to animals and lifeless objects, such as tools and instruments, on account of their special suitability. Which of the human virtues enjoy the highest esteem depends on the context. A soldier's 'virtue' differs significantly from that of a poet, a musician, a politician, an ordinary citizen, a head of household, and so on. The translation by 'goodness' is misleading because of its connotation of well-intendedness or even good-heartedness. 'Excellence,' an alternative that has been used for decades, is also misleading because of its suggestion of competitiveness. Only a few can excel but, according to the view of most ancient philosophers, in principle all human beings can attain virtue, even if it is unlikely that all will do so. But despite the general agreement on virtue as the basis of the good life among the ancient Greek philosophers, their views of the nature of virtue and its different kinds differ as widely as do their views about what the good life should consist in. For if a life of knowledge is regarded as the ideal, a different set of good qualities is required than if

and its growth to teaching, while ethical virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (*êthikê*) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word *êthos* (habit).

(1, 1103a14)

The “slight variation” is that *êthos* (= habit) with a short ‘e’ differs from *êthos* (= character) with a long ‘e.’ From Aristotle on, ‘ethics’ was used to designate that branch of philosophy even by those philosophers in antiquity who did not share Aristotle’s conception of character-virtues. ‘Moral’ became standard in the Latin tradition after Cicero’s translation of ‘*êthikê*’ by ‘*moralis*’ (*De fato* 1).

Both intellectual and ethical virtues have in common that they are acquired dispositions, or firm conditions, in the soul. For, according to Aristotle although humans are born with the natural ability to acquire these dispositions, their development requires an appropriate education. The need for development is, of course, not confined to practical reason and to the set of character-virtues. It also applies to those intellectual virtues that are responsible for the arts and sciences; but Aristotle treats them as separate dispositions that are acquired in ways that differ from both types of virtue that are operative in ethics.

What, then, is the rationale of the separation of two kinds of virtue in ethics and for the assignment of character-virtues to the non-rational part of the soul, in contradistinction to practical intelligence, and what is the nature of their interaction? As Aristotle has it, virtues of character are dispositions that are concerned with the affective or emotional side of human nature and with the way it determines behavior:

By dispositions (*hexeis*) I mean the things because of which we are disposed well or badly with respect to the affections (*pathê*), e.g. with reference to anger we are disposed badly if we feel it too violently or too weakly, and well if we feel it in an intermediate way, and similarly with respect to the other affections.

(II 5, 1105b25–28)

The focus on the affections rather than on actions at this point is no accident, because it is the affections as the desiderative element that leads to action or its avoidance. The affections or emotions as such are

part of human nature from birth on; but they are conditioned for the good or the bad by training from early on (see Kosman 1980). Practical reason, by contrast, is concerned with the ways and means we put our desires and aversions into action. There seems, then, to be a neat division of labor between the two types of virtue. As Aristotle states: “character virtues make the end right, practical reason that which leads up to it” (VI 12, 1144a7–9). So the virtues of character determine what ends we desire or shy away from, while practical reason sees to the right way to attain the end through action.

A closer look shows, however, that this ‘separation of powers’ is not without problems. Are our aims or ends, those goods we want to achieve by our actions, really settled by, basically, non-rational desires? And is the function of practical reason limited to the provision of the means for those non-rationally determined ends? As will emerge, the division of labor is not as neat as certain pat statements make it sound and the cooperation of the two ‘powers’ is in fact quite complex. But why, then, does Aristotle discuss the virtues of character first and dedicate nearly half of the *NE* to the investigation of them (books II–V), while the treatment of practical reason is confined to one single book (book VI), where it is compared to, and contrasted with, the other kinds or intellectual virtues? There is a simple explanation of the preferential treatment of the character-virtues: Aristotle regards this conception as his main innovation and therefore dedicates the lion’s share to the clarification of that concept and to a careful analysis of each kind. Had he started out with practical reason, the intellectual disposition, the affective dispositions might have looked like mere appendices to the faculty that is responsible for rational decisions. The disadvantage of this procedure with its strong emphasis on virtues of character is that the role of practical reason in moral actions remains underdetermined, a shortcoming that makes it hard to understand its precise function and also its interplay with the virtues of character.

That this ‘separation of powers’ is an artifice, anyway, comes to the fore at many points in the discussion; but it is most prominent in the ‘official’ definition of the virtue of character, for this definition clearly anticipates the cooperation of character-virtue and practical reason: “Virtue, then, is a disposition concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e.

a mean relative to us, this being determined by an account, and as the person of practical reason would determine it” (II 6, 1106b35–1107a2). If readers find this formula hard to understand, this is not just due to its compressed form, but also because most of its parts refer to practical reason (“choice,” “account,” and “the person of practical reason”). The only exception is “lying in a mean relative to us.” Comments on each part of the definition will provide enlightenment on the conception of character-virtue as well as on its interconnection with practical reason.

That character-virtue is a disposition has been mentioned before; but in the official definition it is called a “disposition concerned with choice” (*hexis proairetikê*). As Aristotle is going to divulge in III 2–5; VI 5, 7–9; 12–13, ‘choice’ is the function of practical reason and it selects the means towards the ends/aims that are determined by virtue of character. The close connection of ‘virtue of character’ with that rational capacity is further confirmed by the fact that this disposition is supposed to be determined by an “account (*logos*) in the way the person of practical reason (*phronimos*) would determine it.” Thus, practical reason and its functions play a major role in the conception of virtues of character. If Aristotle refers to them in anticipation of their elucidation later in the *NE*, he does so because he regards them as vital to the definition of character-virtue and counts on his audience’s/readers’ prior understanding.

The only element in the definition that seems to relate exclusively to the virtue of character is that it ‘lies in mean’ (*mesotês*). This feature has been explained at length in the preceding chapters of book II and it is most characteristic for Aristotle’s conception of character-virtue, because it explains at the same time these virtues’ concern with the affections/emotions.

Virtue as a Mean between Excess and Defect

The importance of the affective element has already been adumbrated in the example quoted above concerning the right disposition towards anger: it must be felt neither too violently nor too weakly but in an intermediate way. This doctrine is not confined to the affections; it also applies to the corresponding actions: one must act neither too forcefully

nor too weakly. What might sound like mere cautionary folk-wisdom is one of the most original and central aspects of Aristotelian ethics and also one of its most controversial points, both concerning its precise meaning and its evaluation. According to Aristotle, every character-virtue lies between two vices, a vice of excess and a vice of defect. Courage, for instance, is opposed to rashness on the one hand and to cowardice on the other; there can be too little or too much of fear and confidence, the emotions that are characteristic of that virtue. Moderation is opposed to licentiousness as the excess and to insensibility as the defect with respect to physical pleasures. That this triadic arrangement of every virtue as a mean between two vices represents an innovation is confirmed by the fact that Aristotle refers to a 'table' of the triplets of virtues and vices that must have been attached to the wall of his classroom (*NE* II 7). Moreover, in some cases Aristotle invents names for some of the virtuous, vicious or intermediate dispositions, because ordinary language does not provide suitable terms; in other cases he remarks that the disposition has no name. Before Aristotle virtues and vices had been treated as pairs: courage was opposed to cowardice, liberality to avarice, justice to injustice. The question is, then, what justifies Aristotle's confidence in his triadic schema of virtues and vices?

In his preparatory discussion earlier in book II of the *NE* Aristotle does not just rely on the common experience that it is always possible to do too much and too little, as well as to feel too strongly and to feel too weakly. He resorts to health and physical fitness as his paradigms to show that the best state is not only a right mean, but that it is also the subject of proper disciplines, of medicine and physical training, respectively (II 2, 1104a11–26: 6, 1104a11–18). In the case of physical training the best state can be ruined both by too much or too little exercise and by too much or too little food. And analogous relations apply to medicine. Medicine in ancient Greece largely relied on the idea that health is the right balance of the elements of the body. Therapy therefore aimed to restore that balance (the right amount of heat or cold, liquid or dryness), both by medication and dietary regulations. In analogy to medicine and physical training Aristotle presupposes, then, the existence of an optimal state of character that lies in a mean between excess and defect. Did this analogy let him assume that the intermediate,

excess and defect are to be understood in a quantitative sense? That seems to be suggested by Aristotle's predilection for mathematical vocabulary. For in his comments on the "mean relative to us" he refers to a divisible continuum:

. . . by the intermediate in the object I mean that which is equidistant from each of the extremes, which is one and the same for all; by the intermediate relative to us that which is neither too much nor too little—and this is not one, nor the same for all. . . . If ten pounds is too much for a particular person to eat and two too little, it does not follow that the trainer will order six pounds.

(II 6, 1106a26–b7)

This doctrine has received quite some criticism from Aristotle's exegetes (see Hursthouse 1980–81, 2006), criticism that turns both against Aristotle himself and against his defenders, both literalist (Urmson 1973) and non-literalist (Brown 1997). For even Aristotle's assurance that the standard is not the same for all, but varies from person to person, as the qualification "relative to us" purports to show, provides cold comfort. For the difficulty remains what to make of the idea of the right intermediate between excess and defect with respect to both affections and actions. There are clear indications, however, that Aristotle, despite his love of mathematical language, does not think of the intermediate in terms of quantity. This is shown above all by his specifications of what is too much and too little with respect to affection and action: "But to feel them at the time one should, with reference to the object one should, towards the people one should, in the way one should, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue" (II 6, 1106b20–24). These specifications, which are repeated at different occasions, confirm that Aristotle is not concerned with quantification. For, you may have the wrong person to be angry at, be angry for the wrong reason, express your anger in the wrong way and by the wrong means. None of these conditions can be spelled out in quantitative terms, though in some cases quantification is possible (for how long you are angry, how much abuse you utter, how hard you hit someone). But why, then, does Aristotle propagate the model of a right mean between excess and defect in the first place? He does indeed go on the assumption that the

dispositions to act and be affected can go wrong on both sides; but this need mean no more than what we mean when we attribute to a person the tendency to overact and overreact, or when we regard that tendency as insufficiently developed, where quantification of over- and under(re)action is a negligible aspect of our critique. A closer look at the way in which dispositions of character are acquired, according to Aristotle, will confirm this interpretation.

The Acquisition of the Virtues of Character

On the question of how the virtues of character are acquired Aristotle provides, by his standards, clear evidence. For he takes up this question immediately after the introduction of the distinction between intellectual virtues and virtues of character at the end of *NE* I 13. “Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and ethical, intellectual virtue owes both its origin and growth to teaching, while ethical virtue comes about as a result of habit” (II 1, 1103b14–16). So what does habituation amount to? As Aristotle explains: “the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them” (1103b31–33). Thus virtues are acquired by practice, i.e. by acting in the appropriate way: by doing brave acts people become brave, by doing just acts they become just; and the same applies to the affections that instigate such actions. In addition, such practice is supposed to make the person enjoy acting in that way and be pained by the opposite. The pleasures and pains one takes in the right course of action provide the motivation to further such activities. There is, then, no need for any further incentives or sanctions. These pleasures and pains are at the same time indicators of a person’s character:

We must therefore take as a sign of the disposition of character the pleasure or pain that supervenes upon acts; for the person who abstains from bodily pleasures and delights in this very fact is moderate, while the person who is annoyed is self-indulgent . . . For character virtue is concerned with pleasure and pain; it is on account of the pleasures that we do bad things, and on account of the pain that we abstain from noble ones.

Although pleasure therefore plays a major role in Aristotle's ethics, he is not a hedonist, because pleasure is not the ultimate aim or the highest good. Good actions are done for their own sake, not because of the pleasure they provide; pleasure is just an integral part of acting and being affected.

Now the salient set of questions with regards to habituation is: How does education work? Who are the educators? Where do their standards come from? In his discussion of the acquisition of the virtues of character Aristotle is remarkably silent on these questions. We learn that moral education has to start from early on; that it works by practice, that good and bad practice leads to good and bad dispositions, and that it receives praise and blame. The two examples Aristotle refers to in his explanation of practice are *prima facie* not informative. For playing the kithara and building houses rely on 'arts' and not on virtues of character. They are, however, very demanding arts and suggest that by 'habituation' Aristotle does not have 'mere habits' in mind, which, once acquired, don't need much thought—such as swimming, reading and writing, or handling knives and forks. Even if architecture in ancient Greece did not require as much mathematics as it does nowadays, the building of temples and houses was no mean profession. And playing the kithara required not just dexterity of the fingers and a well-trained ear, but the mastery of the complex harmonic systems (Ionic, Doric, Lydian, Mixolydian, etc.). Musicians did not play from sheet music but had to be able to improvise and to modulate. The point of the reference to playing the kithara and building houses is that theoretical knowledge is insufficient; proficiency needs to be acquired by steady practice, and only practicing well will turn someone into a good musician or builder (II 1, 1103b613).

The analogy with kithara-playing and house-building suggests that there are experts. Who are they in the case of the ethical virtues? There are two possibilities: (i) family, friends, and the community at large, and (ii) the legislators. Ideally, they should all be working together, but Aristotle at this point mentions only the legislators: good legislators make the citizens good by habituating them well, bad ones miss their vocation and end up with bad citizens (II 1, 1103b2–6). At the very

beginning of the *NE* statesmen have been credited with the “most architectonic science of life”:

And politics appears to be of that nature; for it ordains which of the sciences should be studied in a state, and which class of citizens should learn and up to what point they should learn them; . . . and since, again, it legislates as to what we are to do and what we are to abstain from, the end of this science must include those of the others, so that this end must be the human good.

(I 2, 1094a25–b11)

This looks like a well-regulated, if not over-regulated form of life, a life that includes education by training. But that assumption seems not to fit well with a *caveat* that Aristotle introduces concerning the master-science: it does not allow for the same precision as mathematics. Instead, its rules hold ‘only for the most part’ and must be taken only in a rough and tough way (I 3, 1094b11–27). This warning is repeated several times, and at some point Aristotle seems to rule out any kind of certainty:

[M]atters concerned with actions and what is good for us have no fixity, any more than matters of health. The general account (*logos*) being of this nature, the account of particular cases is yet more lacking in exactness, for they do not fall under any art or precept, but the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion, as happens also in the art of medicine or of navigation.

(II 2, 1103b34–1104a10)

How does this affect “being determined by an account (*logos*), and as the person of practical reason would determine it?” in the ‘official’ definition of virtue in II 6? It should be noted what Aristotle affirms and what he denies. He does not deny that there are general accounts, rules, or standards. Their imprecision is due to the need for adjustment to the particular cases in the way specified earlier (to whom one should, as one should . . .). Similarly, medicine and navigation are based on rules, but their application in each particular case is up to the practitioner’s discretion, especially in exceptional cases. When to administer what kind

of drug in what quantity to what patient is up to the doctor's judgment, as it is up to the captain how to weather a particular storm. That is why Aristotle often emphasizes the importance of experience, and at times even seems to value it more highly than the knowledge or general rules. But what conclusions are we to draw from that fact concerning the acquisition of the virtues of character by habituation?

There are two 'schools of thought' on this issue. The 'particularists' regard rules and laws as the legislator's domain that has no direct influence on moral action. For, as they see it, moral education habituates individuals in such a way that they will, without resorting to general considerations, respond to the demands of particular situations, both emotionally and intuitively, in their decisions. Predilection for the appropriate aim and the selection of the right means has become 'second nature' to a person, so that there is neither any need nor the occasion for deductive reasoning that derives conclusions from general rules (Burnyeat 1980; McDowell 1998, 2009). The advantage of this interpretation is that it explains the emphasis on experience and on the critical function assigned to 'perception.' There is usually neither the time nor the need to invoke general rules when it comes to acting in particular situations. The 'universalists' readily admit these claims but insist that general rules have an important role, both in the case of particular decisions and in moral education in general (Irwin 1980). If adjustments have to be made in difficult cases, the agent has to have something to 'adjust'—and reflections on the right course of action under normal circumstances have an important role to play in such considerations. Even exceptional cases must be justifiable in general terms so that every morally well brought-up person will agree that the right decision has been made. Reliance on one's own feelings and intuitions is therefore not sufficient. Furthermore: every morally well brought-up person will also have to know what it is to be just, courageous, liberal, etc. Moral training cannot consist in copying the behavior of role models only. It must also provide explanations, in general terms, of why a certain action is a just, courageous or a liberal action. In other words, moral education is not conducted in silence. Although Aristotle is not very explicit on this point, he refers to the need for knowledge of universal principles at various occasions in *NE* (see III

1, 1110b31–33; VI 7, 1141b23–26; VII 3; X 9, 1180b7–23). In the *Politics* (I 2, 1253a9–18) he states, quite generally, that it is because of language that human beings alone can communicate about what is beneficial and harmful, what is just and unjust, what is good and bad.

If universal principles do not receive much attention in *NE* it is because Aristotle treats the ability to make adjustments to the particular circumstances of an action as his prime center of attention. That is also the reason for his insistence, mentioned earlier, that the ‘right intermediate’ is not the same for all. Given that actions are concerned with particulars, it is necessary to fasten on the proper end as well as deliberate about the means in the right way: ‘what one should,’ ‘to whom one should,’ ‘in the way one should,’ etc. These questions cannot be settled by general rules, once and for all; they have to be calibrated by the agent so as to fit the situation and the means that are necessary and available.

The Separation of Ends and Means

Because habituation is first introduced as an explanation of the acquisition of virtues of character, it may seem as if moral training concerns only the right end. For, as Aristotle repeatedly asserts, it is the end that is determined by the virtues of character. But the fact that this training consists in ‘learning by doing’ speaks for the assumption that training by habituation includes the training of practical reason as well. For if we become courageous by doing acts of courage, just by doing acts of justice, such action cannot be confined to aiming for the right end; it must also include the calculation of the right means. The training of practical reason must, then, be part of the proper moral education as well. For that training does not just teach us what aspirations to have, but also how to carry them out concretely in action, and such actions require deliberation and choice. In his discussion of practical reason in book VI Aristotle does not explain how practical intelligence is attained. But it stands to reason that, unlike in the theoretical disciplines, it is not achieved by instruction only but requires practice. It is only by making decisions again and again, under different sorts of circumstances, that people will attain the requisite dispositions. Aristotle’s silence on this

question has led certain exegetes to conclude that only the end has moral value, while the means are morally neutral. But this is clearly a misunderstanding. The desire for the right end, rather, is what guides the search for the appropriate means and the decision to act. At one point Aristotle asserts that the means do not only concern the easiest way to attain the end, but also the best way (III 3, 1112b17: *kallista*). And when he says that the desired action will have to be given up if some means are impossible to attain, he must also mean ‘morally impossible.’ If the money to help a friend is not forthcoming, robbery is not an option.

The separation of means and ends, and the assignment of the end to the virtues of character and that of the means to practical reason is, then, an artifice for the purposes of analysis. But the assignment of the character-virtues to the non-rational part of the soul and the attribution of practical reason to the rational part, suggests that there is more to their distinction than just the need to keep their functions separate (see Coope, 2011). Interpreters have attempted to bridge the gap between the non-rational determination of the end and the rational choice of the means in various ways. Thus some have asserted that deliberation about the means starts out ‘high up,’ namely with the ‘interpretation’ of the end. The problem with this and similar solutions is that it has no evidence in the text. Instead, attention should be paid to the fact that Aristotle at one point states that ‘wish’ (*boulêsis*) is the capacity that determines the end (III 4). And wish, according to Aristotle’s treatise *On the soul* (III 9, 432b5–7; 10, 433a22–30) is a rational desire. This agrees well with the function that ‘wish’ has according to *NE* III 4:

The good person judges each class of things rightly, and in each case what is true appears to him. For each disposition of character has its own kind of noble and pleasant object, and the good person differs from others most by seeing the truth in each class of things, being, as it were, the norm and measure of them.

(1113a29–33)

There is talk here of both ‘judging’ as well as of ‘seeing’, and the question is whether this is a kind of ‘intellectual intuiting’ (see Irwin 1980) of the desirable good, or whether it is a kind of perceptual cognition, as has also been argued (see McDowell 1998a; Moss 2012).

The short chapter on wish seems to attribute to virtues of character both right judgment and right desire. And that observation contains the solution to the problem, as far as the scantiness of evidence permits one to say: in a morally mature person the affections and desires that accrue to human beings by nature, just as they do to animals, have become infused with reason in such a way that the respective good is both recognized and desired. The ‘listening to reason’ by the soul’s affective part is, then, no longer the listening to a foreign voice. That stage is reached only when both character-virtues and practical reason have been acquired, for the practice of moral actions—under the guidance of good persons and under the appropriate laws—will achieve both at the same time. Thus the morally mature person recognizes the good end to be desired and is, at the same time, able to figure out the means suitable to bring it about. For, as Aristotle explains in *NE* VI 12. 13, natural character-virtues without practical reason are blind, while effective reasoning without the guidance by moral virtues is either mere cleverness or villainy. The moral personality is conceived of by Aristotle as what we might call an ‘organic whole’; that is why he holds that the person of practical reason will, at the same time, possess all virtues of character.

Conclusions

The assumption that the human good is warranted by the cooperation of practical reason and the virtues of character leaves open the question of the justification of the standards on which both are based. What is the human good, and how can it be ascertained? Aristotle refers to the ‘function’ (*ergon*) that human beings have to fulfill in order to live a satisfactory life and explains that the exercise of practical rationality distinguishes humans from all other animals (I 7, 1097b22–1098a20; see Barney 2008). Since to live is to be active, to live a human life is to be active in the way that is specific for human beings. Does Aristotle’s ethics, then, have its foundations in biology? It does so in the sense that biology also rests on the metaphysical principle that to be a member of a species means to realize its specific potential. But biology does no more than show that reason is what separates human beings from all other animals; it does not prescribe how the human potential is to be

developed. For the special talents of humans do not come about naturally; they are acquired by instruction in the theoretical sciences and by practice under the guidance of reason in ethical matters. What, then, determines whether a certain practice is good or bad? Aristotle's conception of the best human life reflects his conviction that human beings are "animals born for citizenship" (I 7, 1097b6–14: *zôon politikon*), i.e. that life in a well-functioning *polis* is both necessary and sufficient for the attainment of happiness. In order to be fully active, human beings need to live together and to interact with each other. And only life in a *polis* provides the conditions that allow human beings both to acquire and to deploy their best abilities (virtues). A *polis* is therefore much more than a community of law, economic interest, and mutual defense; it both educates its citizens and allows them to pursue their talents. It is therefore clear that, and why, the virtues of character that Aristotle selects and submits to a close analysis are those that are required by communal life. And since politics is the 'master-science of life' and the statesman regulates by law what the citizens are to learn and to do, their happiness depends on the way the state is administered. Not all states are adequate, as confirmed in Aristotle's remark that there are many different constitutions, but only one that is by nature the best, i.e. the one that does justice to human nature (V 6, 1135a5). A study of the foundations of Aristotle's ethics would therefore require the study of his *Politics*, for ethics and political are, for him, two parts of the same discipline (see Frede 2013).

As a closer look would show, Aristotle's own conception of the best life is, to quite some degree, shaped by the social and political conditions of his own time, as witnessed *inter alia* by his defense of slavery as a natural institution and his explanation of the inferiority of the practical rationality of women. What aspects of his virtue ethics can, then, be relevant for present-day concerns? Most of us will agree with Aristotle's idea that all human beings should be given the opportunity to develop and to apply their best talents, although we are painfully aware that the chances for realizing that ideal are distributed quite unevenly. Most of us will also agree with Aristotle that there are positive and negative character-traits, virtues and vices, and that education, both private and public, should be concerned with their development and cultivation.

Although Aristotle's catalogue and analysis of the virtues to quite some degree reflects the values of his own time, his conception that character-virtues need cultivation and are acquired by practice within a community seems still valid, as is his notion that with respect to every virtue there is excess and defect. It is always possible to overdo whatever is good or to fall short of it. Finally, virtues of character provide no safeguard against the temptations by power, wealth, and mutual enmity. But for all that, they are indispensable mainstays of every well-functioning society. And that insight constitutes the perennial legacy of Aristotelian virtue ethics.

Related Topics

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Note

1. The translation is, with some modifications, that of W. D. Ross (2009) *Aristotle. The Nicomachean Ethics*, revised with an Introduction and Notes by L. Brown, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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3

THE STOIC THEORY OF VIRTUE

Tad Brennan

Introduction¹

Virtue, say the Stoics, is the finest of all things, outshining pleasure, wealth, and even life itself, as much as the sun outshines a candle. Indeed, it is the only good thing, and all of the things that we mistakenly value and pursue are merely indifferents, with no tendency to bring us happiness. Virtue is necessary for our happiness, and sufficient for our happiness, and indeed the sole component and contributor to our happiness. Whoever has virtue is perfectly happy, and indeed no less happy than Zeus himself.

Alas, that none of us have it! For virtue is so demanding, requires such a pitch of perfection, that no human beings known to us—not even the founders of the Stoic school themselves—are truly virtuous. Not even close. We are all entirely vicious, and entirely wretched and miserable as a result. Nor is any of us more virtuous than another: all vicious people are equally vicious. It is possible to make progress towards virtue, the Stoics insist, but during this progress you are still thoroughly vicious and not even partly virtuous. The person making progress towards virtue is like a drowning man some distance beneath the surface of the sea: whether you are five feet underwater or five miles, you are drowning in either case. You might be getting closer to a place where you will be able to breathe, but that doesn't mean that you are more able to breathe as you

get closer. So long as you are vicious, you are also insane, and enslaved, and an enemy of all mankind. Only the virtuous—whom the Stoics refer to as “Sages”—are sane, free, and friendly, and only they are wealthy, good-looking, and lovable.

These are some of the extraordinary and counter-intuitive theses that the Stoics maintained about virtue. Considered in isolation from their theoretical context in the Stoic system as a whole, they look laughably implausible. When understood in light of the Stoics’ broader commitments and theoretical framework, they do not (in my opinion) gain much plausibility, but they do at least acquire some philosophical motivation and rationale. Whatever philosophical interest the Stoic theory of virtue has, can only be seen through examining its role in the larger structure.

For that reason, I want to turn now to a general overview of the Stoic system, in order to collect some pieces of theoretical and analytical machinery, before we return to a deeper examination of their theory of virtue. I shall attempt both to give a general picture of the role of virtue in Stoic ethics, and also to argue that one common way of understanding the definition of virtue cannot be right.

Overview of Stoic System and Relevant Doctrines

The Historical Background

The Stoic school was founded by Zeno of Citium around 300 BC. It reached the height of its philosophical sophistication under its third leader, Chrysippus of Soli, between 232 and 206 BC. It reached the height of its popularity a few centuries later, when Seneca (1 AD–65 AD), Epictetus (55 AD–135 AD), and Marcus Aurelius (121 AD–180 AD) made it the moral conscience of the Roman empire. Despite the attempts of Tertullian (160 AD–225 AD) to incorporate Stoic metaphysics into Christian theology, its rigorous materialism and exclusion of incorporeal entities led to its rejection by mainstream Christians, as well as its condemnation by the resurgent Platonists who followed Plotinus (205 AD–270 AD). By the fourth century, very few still identified as Stoics. But Stoic ethical treatises continued to be read by non-Stoics, and

Epictetus' "Manual," with its numbered list of short, practical injunctions and prohibitions, was adopted wholesale by early Christian monastic movements, and set a pattern for the Rule of Benedict and later codes of conduct.²

Prior to founding the school, Zeno had studied with members of Plato's Academy and members of the Cynic sect. Aristotle's successor, Theophrastus, was active in Zeno's time, but the Peripatetic school left few discernible traces on Stoicism. Chrysippus studied with Zeno's successor, Cleanthes (331 BC–232 BC), and learned a great deal as well from the finest early critic of the Stoics, the Academic Skeptic Arcesilaus (320? BC–242 BC).

Chrysippus is said to have written over seven hundred books. Some hundred and fifty titles have been preserved in an ancient catalogue, including parts of his logical and ethical output; their range and variety, as well as the lacunae that they imply, make the total figure wholly plausible.³ Of this astounding output, nothing survives beyond quotations, paraphrases, and attributions in later authors, many of them critics of the Stoic school. Later Stoics always treated his views as authoritative, and when reports attribute a doctrine to unnamed "Stoics," we assume it stems from Chrysippus.

The Doctrinal Background

The Stoics divided their philosophy into Physics, Logic, and Ethics, and were, indeed, the first school to structure their system around this trichotomy. The contents of these three divisions differed to some extent from what their names might suggest to the modern ear. Stoic Physics, for instance, included theology, ontology, determinism, and the nature of causation, as well as topics such as cosmology and the study of plants and animals. Logic included what we would think of as epistemology, theory of language, and rhetoric, alongside path-breaking research in formal logic and semantics. Stoic Ethics differed less from its modern namesake, but did also include political theory.

Physics

Perhaps the most striking feature of Stoic Physics was its thoroughgoing

corporealism; the view that everything which exists, is bodily. Only bodies, the Stoics said, can act or be acted upon; since Zeus and the other gods are all active and interact with the cosmos, they must all be bodily; and since our souls both act and are acted upon by physical events, our souls, too, must be corporeal.

All corporeal entities are composed of the four elements: earth, water, air, and fire. Ordinary objects, such as a chair, a tree, or a human being, contain samples of all four elements. The first two, earth and water, were referred to as passive elements, while air and fire were referred to as active elements. Fire and air combine into a stuff called "*pneuma*," which is responsible for all of the cohesion and properties of any object; it is the *pneuma* in a stone which makes it one stone and also makes it hard, just as the *pneuma* in a tree makes it one tree and makes it a living thing. This active principle in each thing, which bestows on it its properties, is also in some sense Zeus or God; the sources are emphatic about this although far from clear about how the details worked out. Accordingly, the Stoics held that Zeus is present in every volume of the universe, no matter how small or mundane, and is actively making the mud muddy as well as making the heavens celestial. When considered as the universal moving agent in causal interactions, Zeus can also be called Fate or Destiny. Every event that occurs in the world, including every psychological event in our own minds, was caused by Zeus and has been determined to occur since the beginning of the cosmos.

When we ask what makes a ruby red, we are told first that currents of *pneuma* qualify it in this way.⁴ But, of course, sapphires are blue because of currents of *pneuma* as well; so we will wish to know why one parcel of *pneuma* makes things blue, when another makes things red. Here we learn that the *pneuma* acts differently in virtue of its internal disposition, where the difference of disposition is illustrated by such cases as the difference between standing and sitting, or the difference between a hand held open and the same hand clenched into a fist. A different school might have concluded that the cause of the ruby's redness was therefore the disposition, meaning by this an incorporeal element or structural property distinct from the body so disposed; and this was a conclusion that opponents of the Stoics sometimes pressed upon them. The Stoics, instead, claimed that dispositions should simply be identified with bodies

so disposed: the quality of redness in the ruby may be described equally well as the ruby's active elements (fire and air), or its *pneuma*, or its *pneuma* so disposed, or the disposition of its *pneuma*.⁵

Now there is a class of pneumatic currents that play a role somewhat analogous to the role of substantial forms in an Aristotelian ontology. The rational soul or reason (*logos*) of an adult human being is one instance of this class; other instances include the non-rational souls (*psykhai*) of lower animals. The souls of animals give them their essence and their unity; they are a principle of cohesion that also determines their other properties. In addition, plants were held to be animated by (not souls but) "natures," using the endlessly ambiguous word *physis*. Finally, coherent non-living substances such as a ceramic vase or a bronze bell were thought to gain their cohesion from their being held together by a "tenor," or *hexis*. Each of these pneumatic organizing principles—reason, soul, "nature," and "tenor"—was thought of as the source of the larger body's unity, identity, and properties.⁶ If we strike a bronze bell, it will produce a ringing tone, and in doing so it behaves as a unified mass rather than a heap of discrete particles. The complex vibratory motion that pervades a ringing bell can stand as an image for the currents of *pneuma* that the Stoics imagined at work in every macroscopic unified body. Here too, Zeus and Fate pervade: if the bell rings, then it was caused to ring by causes that stretch back to the beginning of the cosmos, and could not have resulted in any other event. In the hierarchical system of "tenor," "nature," soul, and rational soul, each more complex kind of principle is also a member of the less complex kind. So my rational soul is also a soul by which I am an animal, and is also the "nature" by which I am a living thing, and is also the "tenor" by which I am a cohesive unified body. All four kinds can be called "tenors"; three can also be called "natures"; two can also be called "souls."⁷

Logic and Epistemology

Perceptual data from the external world are channeled by the sense-organs to the soul, where they leave an impression (*phantasia*) which the Stoics (following Plato and Aristotle) compared to the imprint left in wax by a seal-ring. The impression in an adult human being is also correlated with some propositional content (an *axiôma*), which makes it not only an

impression of an apple, but the impression (e.g.) that the apple is red. If part of the content of the impression is conative, normative, or evaluative, then the impression will belong to the special sub-class of impulsive impressions. In an adult human, this might correlate with such propositions as “I want to eat that apple,” “eating that apple is what I should do,” or “that apple certainly looks good to eat.” But irrational animals, whose impressions are not correlated with propositional content, can still have impulsive impressions that represent objects, in some non-conceptual fashion, as desirable or dangerous, to-be-pursued or to-be-avoided.

When animals have such impressions they thereby have impulses to act, and act in accordance with them. Not so in humans; adult humans can entertain impressions, whether perceptual or impulsive, without thereby acquiring a belief, judgment, or impulse. Humans have the power to assent to impressions or withhold their assent from impressions. Belief and impulse (in humans) are species of assent, and without assent there is no belief and no impulse.

Some assents constitute cases of knowledge, e.g. my assent to the impression that this is my hand, when I know that this is my hand. There are two differences between knowledge-constituting assents and mere belief-constituting assents, one intrinsic to the assent involved, and one deriving from the impression towards which it is directed. For an act of assenting to count as knowing, the assent must be strong, rather than weak, where this means that no possible pressure could cause me to reverse my assent: not Socratic elenchus, not sophistical refutation-mongering, not the lure of pleasure, not the threat of torture. So far as the impression goes, it must have the special characteristic of being “*katalêptic*,” where this requires it to be true, made to be true by what is the case, and unlike any impression that could have come from what is not the case. (This is sometimes glossed in ancient sources as a matter of its being evident, clear, and distinct, but it is a matter of scholarly controversy whether the crucial differences between *katalêptic* and non-*katalêptic* impressions were internal to its content and accessible to introspection, or whether they also included its causal history and other external features that might not be introspectibly accessible.)

Katalêptic impressions are not terribly rare, and both virtuous and

vicious people receive them all the time, e.g. my perceptual impressions of clear and distinct perceptibles in normal conditions. Strong assents, however, are as rare as Sages are, since only Sages are entirely immune from changing their mind after they have assented to something *katalêptic*. They cannot be seduced by pleasure or daunted by torture, of course. But they also cannot be deceived by any sophistry, since they know how to solve all of the paradoxes, including the Sorites and the Liar. And they cannot be caught in any contradiction, because they have no false beliefs. Indeed, this is part of why they will give their assent only to *katalêptic* impressions, so that they would never assent even to the sort of impression that is similar to one that could be false. The Stoic Sage is best thought of as an idealized epistemic agent in the first instance; their ethical perfections all stem from their epistemic perfection. This is a Stoic specification of the traditional Socratic idea that virtue is knowledge, and vice a matter of defective belief.

There are *katalêptic* impressions of present perceptible states of affairs, so the Sage can have knowledge of the surrounding world. There are also *katalêptic* impressions of mathematical and logical axioms and arguments, so that the Sage has a ready store of those, as well as a stock of analytic truths on the order of “justice is a virtue” and “good things are not harmful.” But the Sage is not omniscient or prescient. She cannot receive a *katalêptic* impression of herself being alive tomorrow, and so she cannot know that she will be alive tomorrow, and must not assent to the impression (even if it is a true impression) that she will be alive tomorrow.

The Sages’ refusal to form beliefs about the future looks as though it might prevent them from engaging in ordinary deliberation, the formation of desires and intentions, and the initiation of actions. But the Stoics avoided this sort of paralysis by constructing their general theory of action in such way that it does not require beliefs about the future. When I do my shopping today, I do not need to believe that I will be alive tomorrow (and if I wish to avoid rashness and precipitancy, I ought not to believe it). All that I need is the belief that it is reasonable that I shall be alive tomorrow. This is a belief about a present state of affairs, i.e. the current reasonability of a proposition’s being true. And while I cannot have a *katalêptic* impression of a future contingent state of affairs,

I can have a *katalêptic* impression of a present contingent state of affairs, sc. its currently being reasonable that P. The evidentiary basis for this impression, like the truth-makers for it, will be a lot of particular perceptible facts, plus some general laws of nature. From her knowledge of the general workings of the world, the Sage cannot know that a stone released from her hand will fall to the ground, but she can know that it is reasonable that this should occur. She cannot know that bread will nourish her this evening, but she can know that it is reasonable that it will. And knowledge with this content is sufficient to ground action and impulse.⁸

The sequelae of impressions and assent are of three sorts. First, there are memories, which are stored-up impressions. Second, there are actions; when we assent to an impulsive impression that, e.g., we ought to eat now, then the action of eating follows directly on the impulse. Third, there are alterations to one's disposition to assent. The probability that one will assent to the impression, e.g. that this chocolate would be good to eat, is affected both by previous impressions of chocolate, and also by previous assents to similar impressions. Thus the Stoics can agree with Aristotle (e.g.) that we acquire our character by the actions that we perform, but they will analyze this by saying that we acquire our settled dispositions to assent to impressions through our earlier actual assents to impressions.

The Theory of Virtue

Our best account of the definition of virtue says that it is a “consistent disposition” or more literally an “agreeing disposition”: a *diathesis homologoumenê*. We shall learn more about the definition by pressing three questions:

1. What is a virtue a disposition of? What (in Aristotelian terms) is its substratum?
2. What is a virtue a disposition to do?
3. What is a virtue consistent with, or in agreement with?

What is a Virtue a Disposition Of?

Here are the most helpful pieces of primary evidence:

They say that virtue is an agreeing/consistent disposition. One sort of virtue is, generally, the perfection of any given thing, e.g. a statue. Another sort is untheorized, e.g. health. And a third sort is theorematic virtue, as for instance, wisdom.⁹

(SVF 3.197 = DL 7.89–90)

To suppose that the virtues are projected by opinion, and not grounded in nature, would be insane. For neither the virtue of a tree nor the virtue of a horse (as we call them, using the term loosely) is founded in opinion, but in nature. And accordingly, moral integrity and depravity must be determined by nature as well.

(SVF 3.311 = Cicero de Legibus I.16, 44)

Chrysippus made a massive mistake, not by his denial that any virtue is a capacity (for a slip like that is not big deal, and we do not disagree in that respect) but because he says that there are many knowledges and many virtues, but only one capacity of the soul. For there cannot be many virtues of one capacity, just as there cannot be many perfections of one thing. For each of the things that exist, there is one perfection, and a virtue simply is the perfection of the nature of each thing, as he himself agrees.

(SVF 3.257 = Galen PHP V.5.167, 446)¹⁰

Virtue is nothing other than nature, brought to perfection and developed to the highest extent.

(SVF 3.245 = Cicero de Legibus I.8.25)

Several things emerge from these quotations. One is that there is a sense of the term “virtue” in which it may be applied to any given thing that has a perfection. Whatever can have a perfection, can have a virtue in

this sense: even an artifact like a statue. This is the loosest and most general sense of the term “virtue,” familiar to us from (for instance) Socrates’ insistence in the *Republic* (353b) that a pruning-knife has a virtue.

There is a narrower sense of the term “virtue” in which it applies to natures and things that have natures, and so can be applied to trees and horses, but not to statues or pruning-knives. This sense is flagged in Cicero as still a loose or catachrestic sense, but not a sense wholly distinct from or unconnected with the sense in which we speak of human virtue. Indeed, he uses it as a premise to prove that human virtue must be grounded by nature, because the virtues (loosely speaking) of trees and horses are grounded in nature.

Now, in the strictest sense of “virtue,” only human beings can have virtues—indeed, only adult human beings. This is why the more general sense of virtue in which it applies to all natural things is loose or catachrestic. But the analytical connections between virtue and nature are the same, and need to be the same in order for the argument to go through. There is only one kind of nature whose perfection counts as a virtue in the strictest sense: rational nature, the nature of a rational being. A statue can be said to have statuesque virtues because of its perfection as a statue, and trees or horses can be said to have virtues because of the perfect development of their natures, but these perfections do not count as virtues, strictly speaking, because what is perfected is not the right sort of thing. Not just any nature can be perfected into a virtue in the strict sense. However, nothing can be a virtue, in the strict sense in which it applies to human beings, or even in the moderately loose sense in which it applies to horses and trees, except by being the perfection of that thing’s nature (and when we loosen the sense of “virtue” further, to speak of the virtues of statues and knives, we do so by a further loosening of our usage of “nature,” so that it can be applied metaphorically to the essence or function of the artifact).

What is the essence of a human being? Reason. When it is right and perfect, it constitutes the happiness of a human being. If each thing, when it attains its good, is praiseworthy and has reached the end of its nature; and if the good of a human being is reason; then if the

human being perfects this, she is praiseworthy and has grasped the end of her nature. This perfect reason is called “virtue.”

(SVF 3.200 = Seneca ep. 76.10)¹¹

Here again we see a general pattern, applicable to each thing (*omnis res*) that can be in better and worse states. When it has perfected whatever its essence consists in, then it has attained its good and reached its natural end and becomes praiseworthy (e.g. we say that it is a first-rate pruning-knife, or a fine horse). But the essence of humans is reason; so if the human perfects their reason, then they have attained their good and reached their natural end, and become praiseworthy in the terms that are uniquely applicable to human beings, e.g. when we say that this is a good, decent, admirable, etc., person.

If we consider humans, horses, trees, and statues, and what it is for each of them to be called virtuous, we will have the answer to our first question. For we saw earlier that each of these is made what it is, and given its cohesion and qualities, by pneumatic principles which are referred to as reason, soul, “nature,” and “tenor,” respectively. So, when we ask, “What is virtue a disposition of?” the answer will be, “It is a disposition of the pneumatic principle of the thing that has the virtue; e.g. the reason of a human being, or the ‘nature’ of a tree.”

We also noted the Stoic habit of maintaining their corporealism by identifying dispositions with the bodies that they are dispositions of. We can find an instance of that in a report that virtue is a disposition of the rational soul, which continues, “or rather, virtue simply is reason (*logos*) in agreement and stable and incontrovertible.”¹² So we could say that the horse’s virtue is a disposition of its soul, or we could say that its virtue simply is its soul, disposed in a certain way. We can say that the virtue of anything that has a nature is the correct disposition of that nature, or we can say (as Cicero does above), that the virtue simply is the nature, in a certain disposition, using “nature” here to refer to the kind of pneumatic principle possessed by each living thing.

What is a Virtue a Disposition to Do?

Our second question asked what the disposition is a disposition to do. In one sense the answer simply is: to agree. But “agreeing” or “in agreement” here functions more like an adverb than a verb. If you and I agree in our calculations, then you are calculating and I am calculating and we arrive at the same answers. If we agree in our mealtimes, then you dine and I dine and we both dine at eight. What we are doing, in the first instance, is not agreeing, but rather calculating or dining; the agreement is a property of the underlying actions.

The same applies to virtues. The badger that has the virtue of a badger will do very little first-order agreeing; rather, it will eat and sleep and hunt and burrow. What makes it a virtuous badger is the fact that it eats in agreement and it sleeps in agreement and so on; the agreement modifies the first-order actions that it undertakes. (We are postponing for a section the question of what its behavior agrees with.) We may give a more general characterization of the first-order activities such as hunting and eating by saying (as the Stoics do say), that the animal lives by impulse: it lives by taking in impressions of its surroundings and responding to them. All of its huntings and burrowings and matings, all of the activities that it performs as the animal that it is, are things that it does by the movements of its soul in response to impressions. And the question of the badger’s virtue is the question of whether its impulses are in agreement.

The same thought will apply to the plant, one level down, and the human, one level up. Plants cannot act: they do not take in impressions, and they have no impulses. But they do grow, and maintain themselves, and reproduce themselves, all under the guidance of their “natures,” and the question of whether a given plant is a virtuous one will be decided by whether its behavior in growth, reproduction, and self-maintenance is in agreement. Humans do have impulses, but only when they assent, and the totality of a human life may be rewritten as the history of its assents and suspensions (this is what Epictetus refers to as the “use of impressions”). A virtuous human is one all of whose assents are in agreement, one whose disposition to assent produces particular assents in a way that is in agreement.

So we have answered our second question: the disposition that is the virtue of a given substance is a disposition to do what that sort of

substance does—to assent, or to have impulses, or to grow, or to cohere—in an agreeing fashion, agreeing-ly, or consistently. Restricting our focus to the human case momentarily, we can note that Epictetus has a special term for an individual’s disposition to assent: their *prohairesis*.¹³ An individual’s *prohairesis* is simply the totality of their dispositions to assent to any possible impression. My tendency to believe that sweet foods should be eaten, as well as my fairly reliable tendency to assent to “3. 4 = 7,” are both part of my *prohairesis*. If my disposition were a virtuous one, then my *prohairesis* would be the same thing as my virtue. Since my dispositions are not virtuous, my *prohairesis* is the same thing as my vice. And in both cases, my virtue or my vice or my *prohairesis* are all the same thing as my rational soul, which in some sense is the same thing as me, thus allowing Epictetus to repeatedly insist that each person simply is, most essentially, their *prohairesis*.¹⁴

What is a Virtue Consistent With, or In Agreement With?

Finally we can ask: what is the standard of agreement or consistency? With what does the behavior of a virtuous aspidistra, antelope, or Athenian, agree or consist? A number of strands of evidence converge on the answer: nature. So a virtuous human will be one that assents in agreement with nature; a virtuous animal one that has impulses and acts in agreement with nature; and a virtuous plant will be one that grows in agreement with nature.

Before presenting the evidence in favor of this interpretation of the definition of virtue, I should note that my view is in conflict with a widely held view, according to which the definition is read as claiming that “virtue is a consistent disposition,” where “consistent” is understood as a short-hand for “self-consistent.” On this view, the right answer to the question, “with what does the disposition agree or consist?” is, “itself.” Here, for instance, are Long and Sedley explicating their translation “virtue is a consistent character.”

Virtue, then, is rational consistency, a character of the soul’s commanding-faculty . . . A person’s reasoning faculty is conceived as being either consistent or inconsistent; this consistency, or the

are part of the eight-fold Yoga program. *Yogasūtra* II.30 mentions five components of *yama*: non-injury (*ahiṃsā*), truthfulness (*satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*), continence (*brahmācārya*), and greedlessness (*aparigraha*). Of these five, *ahiṃsā* is held to be the most fundamental. As Vyāsa's *Yogabhāṣya* commentary puts it, the other *yama* and *niyama* are "rooted" in *ahiṃsā*.

[A]bstinence from injury [*ahiṃsā*] means the abstinence from malice towards all living creatures in every way and at all times. And the other abstentions [*yama*] and observations [*niyama*] are rooted in it. In so far as their aim is the perfection of it, they are taught in order to teach it.

(Woods 1927: 178)

And the later commentator Vācaspati Miśra goes so far as to gloss "rooted in it" as meaning that even if the other abstentions and observances are performed without performing abstinence from injury "they are as if they had not been performed, since they are quite fruitless" (Woods 1927: 179).

Since we take it that it is dispositions, not just actions, that are under discussion here, it seems natural to interpret the texts as advancing a substantive thesis about the structure of the virtues: namely, that *ahiṃsā* is the fundamental virtue and the other virtues are dependent upon it.

So far, we are in the realm of the external history of Yoga. The classical Yoga texts, however, do not explicitly discuss a rather different issue about the nature of the virtue ethics they present: namely, whether Yoga ethics is an *agent-based* virtue ethics or, like Aristotelian ethics, merely an *agent-focused* virtue ethics. This distinction was introduced by Michael Slote to distinguish his approach to virtue ethics from Aristotelian approaches. "An agent-based approach to virtue ethics treats the moral or ethical status of acts as entirely derivative from independent and fundamental aretaic (as opposed to deontic) ethical characterizations of motives, character traits, or individuals" (Slote 2001: 5). An agent-focused approach, on the other hand, might count some actions as virtuous, even though the person performing the action does not herself possess the virtue but is only acting in a way that resembles the actions of others who do possess the virtue. An agent-focused approach might