

## *Virtue Ethics*

The excellency of hogs is fatness, of men virtue.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, *POOR RICHARD'S ALMANACK* (1736)

### **12.1. The Ethics of Virtue and the Ethics of Right Action**

In thinking about any subject, it matters greatly what questions we start with. In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (ca. 325 B.C.), the central questions are about *character*. Aristotle begins by asking "What is the good of man?" and his answer is "an activity of the soul in conformity with virtue." He then discusses such virtues as courage, self-control, generosity, and truthfulness. Most of the ancient thinkers came to ethics by asking *What traits of character make someone a good person?* As a result, "the virtues" occupied center stage in their discussions.

As time passed, however, this way of thinking became neglected. With the coming of Christianity, a new set of ideas emerged. The Christians, like the Jews, viewed God as a lawgiver, and so they saw obedience to those laws as the key to righteous living. For the Greeks, the life of virtue was inseparable from the life of reason. But Saint Augustine, the influential fourth-century Christian thinker, distrusted reason and believed that moral goodness depends on subordinating oneself to the will of God. Thus, when medieval philosophers discussed the virtues, it was in the context of Divine Law, and the "theological virtues" of faith, hope, charity, and obedience occupied the spotlight.

After the Renaissance period (1400–1650), moral philosophy again became more secular, but philosophers did not return to the Greek way of thinking. Instead, the Divine Law was replaced by something called the "Moral Law." The Moral Law, which was

said to spring from human reason rather than from God, was a system of rules specifying which actions are right. Our duty as moral persons, it was said, is to follow those rules. Thus, modern moral philosophers approached their subject by asking a question fundamentally different from the one asked by the ancients. Instead of asking *What traits of character make someone a good person?* they asked *What is the right thing to do?* This led them in a different direction. They went on to develop theories, not of virtue, but of rightness and obligation:

- *Ethical Egoism*: Each person ought to do whatever will best promote his or her own interests.
- *The Social Contract Theory*: The right thing to do is to follow the rules that rational, self-interested people would agree to follow for their mutual benefit.
- *Utilitarianism*: One ought to do whatever will lead to the most happiness.
- *Kant's theory*: Our duty is to follow rules that we could accept as universal laws—that is, rules that we would be willing for everyone to follow in all circumstances.

And these are the theories that have dominated moral philosophy from the 17th century on.

**Should We Return to Virtue Ethics?** Recently, however, a number of philosophers have advanced a radical idea. Moral philosophy, they say, is bankrupt, and we should return to Aristotle's way of thinking.

This was suggested by Elizabeth Anscombe in her article "Modern Moral Philosophy" (1958). Anscombe believes that modern moral philosophy is misguided because it rests on the incoherent notion of a "law" without a lawgiver. The very concepts of obligation, duty, and rightness, she says, are inseparable from this self-contradictory notion. Therefore, we should stop thinking about obligation, duty, and rightness, and return to Aristotle's approach. The virtues should once again take center stage.

In the wake of Anscombe's article, a flood of books and essays appeared discussing the virtues, and Virtue Ethics soon became a major option again. In what follows, we will first take a look at what Virtue Ethics is like. Then we will consider some reasons for preferring this theory to other, more modern ways

of approaching the subject. Finally, we will consider whether a return to Virtue Ethics would be desirable.

## 12.2. The Virtues

A theory of virtue should have several components: a statement of what a virtue is, a list of the virtues, an account of what these virtues consist in, and an explanation of why these qualities are good. In addition, the theory should tell us whether the virtues are the same for all people or whether they differ from person to person or from culture to culture.

**What Is a Virtue?** Aristotle said that a virtue is a trait of character manifested in habitual action. The word “habitual” here is important. The virtue of honesty, for example, is not possessed by someone who tells the truth only occasionally or only when it benefits her. The honest person is truthful as a matter of course; her actions “spring from a firm and unchangeable character.”

But this does not distinguish virtues from vices, for vices are also traits of character manifested in habitual action. The other part of the definition is evaluative: virtues are good, whereas vices are bad. Thus, a virtue is a *commendable* trait of character manifested in habitual action. Saying this, of course, doesn’t tell us which traits of character are good or bad. Later we will flesh this out by discussing the ways in which some particular virtues are good. For now, we may note that virtuous qualities are those qualities that will make us seek out someone’s company. As Edmund L. Pincoffs (1919–1991) put it, “Some sorts of persons we prefer; others we avoid. The properties on our list [of virtues and vices] can serve as reasons for preference or avoidance.”

We seek out people for different purposes, and this affects which virtues are relevant. In looking for an auto mechanic, we want someone who is skillful, honest, and conscientious; in looking for a teacher, we want someone who is knowledgeable, articulate, and patient. Thus, the virtues of auto repair are different from the virtues of teaching. But we also assess people *as people*, in a more general way, so we also have the concept of a good person. The moral virtues are the virtues of persons as such. Thus, we may define a moral virtue as *a trait of character, manifested in habitual action, that it is good for anyone to have*.

**What Are the Virtues?** What, then, are the virtues? Which traits of character should be fostered in human beings? There is no short answer, but the following is a partial list:

benevolence	fairness	patience
civility	friendliness	prudence
compassion	generosity	reasonableness
conscientiousness	honesty	self-discipline
cooperativeness	industriousness	self-reliance
courage	justice	tactfulness
courteousness	loyalty	thoughtfulness
dependability	moderation	tolerance

This list could be expanded, of course.

**What Do These Virtues Consist In?** It is one thing to say, in general, that we should be conscientious, compassionate, and tolerant; it is another thing to say exactly what these character traits are. Each of the virtues has its own distinctive features and raises its own distinctive problems. Let's consider four examples.

1. *Courage.* According to Aristotle, virtues are midpoints between extremes: A virtue is "the mean by reference to two vices: the one of excess and the other of deficiency." Courage is a mean between the extremes of cowardice and foolhardiness—it is cowardly to run away from all danger, yet it is foolhardy to risk too much.

Courage is sometimes said to be a military virtue because soldiers so obviously need to have it. But soldiers are not the only ones who need courage. We all need courage, and not just when we face a preexisting danger, such as an enemy soldier or a grizzly bear. Sometimes we need the courage to *create* a situation that will be unpleasant for us. It takes courage to apologize. If a friend is grieving, it takes courage to ask her directly how she is doing. It takes courage to volunteer to do something nice that you don't really want to do.

If we consider only ordinary cases, the nature of courage seems unproblematic. But unusual circumstances present more troublesome cases. Consider the 19 hijackers who murdered almost 3,000 people on September 11, 2001. They faced certain death, evidently without flinching, but in the service of an evil cause. Were they courageous? The American political commentator Bill Maher implied that they were—and so he lost

his television show, *Politically Incorrect*. But was Maher correct? The philosopher Peter Geach wouldn't think so. "Courage in an unworthy cause," he says, "is no virtue; still less is courage in an evil cause. Indeed I prefer not to call this nonvirtuous facing of danger 'courage.'"

It is easy to see Geach's point. Calling a terrorist "courageous" seems to praise his performance, and we do not want to do that. But, on the other hand, it doesn't seem quite right to say that he is *not* courageous—after all, look at how he behaves in the face of danger. To resolve this dilemma, perhaps we should just say that he displays two qualities of character, one admirable (steadfastness in facing danger) and one detestable (a willingness to kill innocent people). He is courageous, as Maher suggested, and courage is a good thing; but because his courage is deployed in such an evil cause, his behavior is *on the whole* extremely wicked.

**2. Generosity.** Generosity is the willingness to give to others. One can be generous with any of one's resources—with one's time, for example, or one's money or one's knowledge. Aristotle says that generosity, like courage, is a mean between extremes: It falls between stinginess and extravagance. The stingy person gives too little; the extravagant person gives too much; the generous person gives just the right amount. But what amount is just right?

Another ancient teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, said that we must give everything we have to the poor. Jesus considered it wrong to possess riches while other people are dying of starvation. Those who heard Jesus speak found his teaching too demanding, and they generally rejected it. Human nature has not changed much in the last 2,000 years: today, few people follow Jesus's advice, even among those who claim to admire him.

On this issue, the modern utilitarians are Jesus's moral descendants. They hold that in every circumstance it is our duty to do whatever will have the best overall consequences for everyone concerned. This means that we should be generous with our money until further giving would harm us as much as it would help others. In other words, we should give until we ourselves become the most worthy recipients of whatever money remains in our hands. If we did this, then we would become poor.

Why do people resist this idea? The main reason may be self-interest; we do not want to become destitute. But this is about more than money; it is also about time and energy. Adopting such a policy would prevent us from living normal lives. Our lives consist of projects and relationships that require a considerable investment of money, time, and effort. An ideal of “generosity” that demands too much of us would require us to abandon our everyday lives. We’d have to live like saints.

A reasonable interpretation of generosity might therefore be something like this: We should be as generous with our resources as we can be while still carrying on our normal lives. But even this interpretation leaves us with an awkward question. Some people’s “normal lives” are quite extravagant—think of a rich person who has grown accustomed to great luxuries. Surely such a person can’t be generous unless he is willing to sell his yacht to feed the hungry. The virtue of generosity, it would seem, cannot exist in the context of a life that is too opulent. So, to make this interpretation of generosity “reasonable,” our conception of normal life must not be too extravagant.

3. *Honesty.* The honest person is someone who, first of all, does not lie. But is that enough? Lying is not the only way of misleading people. Geach tells the story of Saint Athanasius, who “was rowing on a river when the persecutors came rowing in the opposite direction: ‘Where is the traitor Athanasius?’ ‘Not far away,’ the Saint gaily replied, and rowed past them unsuspected.”

Geach approves of the saint’s deception, even though he would disapprove of the saint’s telling an outright lie. Lying, according to Geach, is always forbidden: someone possessing the virtue of honesty will never even consider it. Honest people do not lie; so, they must find other ways of attaining their goals. Athanasius found such a way, even in his predicament. He did not lie to his pursuers; he “merely” deceived them. But isn’t deception dishonest? Why should some ways of misleading people be dishonest, and others not?

To answer that question, let’s think about why honesty is a virtue to begin with. Why is honesty good? Part of the reason is large-scale: Civilization depends on it. Our ability to live together in communities depends on our ability to communicate. We talk to one another, read each other’s writing, exchange information and opinions, express our desires to one another, make

promises, ask and answer questions, and much more. Without these sorts of exchanges, social living would be impossible. But people must be honest for such exchanges to work.

On a smaller scale, when we take people at their word, we make ourselves vulnerable to them. By accepting what they say and modifying our behavior accordingly, we place our well-being in their hands. If they speak truthfully, all is well. But if they lie, then we end up with false beliefs; and if we act on those beliefs, then we do foolish things. We trusted them, and they betrayed our trust. Dishonesty is manipulative. By contrast, honest people treat others with respect.

If these ideas account for why honesty is a virtue, then lies and “deceptive truths” are both dishonest. After all, both types of deceit are objectionable for the same reasons. Both have the same goal: the point of lying *and* deceiving is to make the listener acquire a false belief. In Geach’s example, Athanasius got his persecutors to believe that he was not in fact Athanasius. Had Athanasius lied to his pursuers, rather than merely deceiving them, then his words would have served the same purpose. Because both actions aim at false beliefs, both can disrupt the smooth functioning of society, and both violate trust. If you accuse someone of lying to you, and she responds by saying that she did not lie—she “merely” deceived you—then you would not be impressed. Either way, she took advantage of your trust and manipulated you into believing something false. The honest person will neither lie nor deceive.

But will the honest person *never* lie? Geach’s example raises the question of whether virtue requires adherence to absolute rules. Let’s distinguish two views:

1. An honest person will never lie or deceive.
2. An honest person will never lie or deceive except in rare circumstances when there are compelling reasons to do so.

Despite Geach’s protest, there are good reasons to favor the second view, even with regard to lying.

First, remember that honesty is not the only thing we value. In a specific situation, some other value might get priority—for example, the value of self-preservation. Suppose Saint Athanasius had lied and said, “I don’t know where that traitor is,” and as a result, his pursuers went off on a wild-goose chase. Now the

saint would get to live another day. If this had occurred, most of us would continue to regard Saint Athanasius as honest. We would merely say that he valued his own life more than the telling of one lie.

Moreover, if we consider why honesty is good, then we can see that Athanasius would have been justified in lying to his pursuers. Obviously, that particular lie would not have disrupted the smooth functioning of society. But wouldn't it at least have violated the trust of the people who were pursuing him? The response is that, if lying is a violation of trust, then for lying to be immoral, the person you're lying to must *deserve* your trust. But in this case, the saint's pursuers did not deserve his trust, because they were persecuting him unjustly. Thus, even an honest person may sometimes lie or deceive with full justification.

4. *Loyalty to friends and family.* Friendship is essential to the good life. As Aristotle says, "No one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all other goods":

How could prosperity be safeguarded and preserved without friends? The greater our prosperity is, the greater are the risks it brings with it. Also, in poverty and all other kinds of misfortune men believe that their only refuge consists in their friends. Friends help young men avoid error; to older people they give the care and help needed to supplement the failing powers of action which infirmity brings.

The benefits of friendship, of course, go far beyond material assistance. Psychologically, we would be lost without our friends. Our triumphs seem hollow without friends to share them with, and we need our friends even more when we fail. Our self-esteem depends in large measure on the assurances of friends: By returning our affection, they confirm our worth as human beings.

If we need friends, then we need the qualities that enable us to *be* a friend. Near the top of the list is loyalty. Friends can be counted on. You stick by your friends even when things are going badly and even when, objectively speaking, you should abandon them. Friends make allowances for one another; they forgive offenses and refrain from harsh judgments. There are limits, of course—sometimes only a friend can tell us the hard truth about ourselves. But criticism is acceptable from friends because we know that they are not rejecting us.



None of this is to deny that we have duties to other people, even to strangers. But those duties are associated with different virtues. Generalized beneficence is a virtue, and it may demand a great deal, but it does not require the same level of concern for strangers as for friends. Justice is another such virtue; it requires impartial treatment for all. But friends are loyal to one another, so the demands of justice are weaker when friends are involved.

We are even closer to family members than we are to friends, so we may show family members even more loyalty and partiality. In Plato's *Euthyphro*, Socrates learns that Euthyphro has come to the courthouse to prosecute his own father for murder. Socrates expresses surprise at this and wonders whether a son should bring charges against his father. Euthyphro sees no impropriety: For him, a murder is a murder. Euthyphro has a point, but we might still be shocked that someone could take the same attitude toward his father that he would take toward a stranger. A close family member, we might think, need not be involved in such a legal matter. This point is recognized in American law: In the United States, one cannot be compelled to testify in court against one's husband or wife.

**Why Are the Virtues Important?** We said that virtues are traits of character that are good for people to have. This raises the question of why the virtues are good. Why should a person be courageous, generous, honest, or loyal? The answer may depend on the virtue in question. Thus:

- Courage is good because we need it to cope with danger.
- Generosity is desirable because there will always be people who need help.
- Honesty is needed because without it relations between people would go wrong in all sorts of ways.
- Loyalty is essential to friendship; friends stand by one another even when others would turn away.

This list suggests that each virtue is valuable for a different reason. However, Aristotle offers a general answer to our question—he says that the virtues are important because the virtuous person will fare better in life. The point is not that the virtuous will always be richer; the point is that we need the virtues in order to flourish.

To see what Aristotle is getting at, consider who we are and how we live. On the most general level, we are social creatures who want the company of others. So we live in communities among family, friends, and fellow citizens. In this setting, such qualities as loyalty, fairness, and honesty are needed to interact successfully with others. On a more individual level, we might have a job and pursue particular interests. Those endeavors might call for other virtues, such as perseverance and industriousness. Finally, it is part of our common human condition that we must sometimes face danger or temptation, so courage and self-control are needed. Thus, the virtues all have the same general sort of value: They are all qualities needed for successful living.

**Are the Virtues the Same for Everyone?** Finally, we may ask whether a single set of traits is desirable for all people. Should we speak of *the* good person, as though all good people come from one mold? Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) thought not. In his flamboyant way, Nietzsche observes:

How naive it is altogether to say: “Man *ought* to be such-and-such!” Reality shows us an enchanting wealth of types, the abundance of a lavish play and change of forms—and some wretched loafer of a moralist comments: “No! Man ought to be different.” He even knows what man should be like, this wretched bigot and prig: he paints himself on the wall and comments, “*Ecce homo!*” [“Behold the man!”]

There is obviously something to this. The scholar who devotes his life to understanding medieval literature and the professional soldier are very different kinds of people. A Victorian woman who would never expose a leg in public and a woman who sunbathes on a nude beach have very different standards of modesty. And yet all may be admirable in their own ways.

There is, then, an obvious sense in which the virtues may differ from person to person. Because people lead different kinds of lives, have different sorts of personalities, and occupy different social roles, the qualities of character that help them flourish may differ.

It is tempting to go even further and say that the virtues differ from society to society. After all, the kind of life that is possible will depend on the values and institutions that dominate a region. A scholar’s life is possible only where there are institutions, such as universities, that make intellectual investigation

possible. Much the same could be said about being an athlete, a priest, a geisha, or a samurai warrior. The character traits that are needed to occupy those roles will differ, and so the traits needed to live successfully will differ. Thus, the virtues will be different.

To this, it may be answered that *certain virtues will be needed by all people in all times*. This was Aristotle's view, and he was probably right. Aristotle believed that we all have a great deal in common, despite our differences. "One may observe," he says, "in one's travels to distant countries the feelings of recognition and affiliation that link every human being to every other human being." Even in the most disparate societies, people face the same basic problems and have the same basic needs. Thus:

- Everyone needs courage, because no one (not even the scholar) can always avoid danger. Also, everyone needs the courage to take the occasional risk.
- In every society, there will be some people who are worse off than others; so, generosity will always be prized.
- Honesty is always a virtue because no society can exist without dependable communication.
- Everyone needs friends, and to have friends one must be a friend; so, everyone needs loyalty.

This sort of list could—and in Aristotle's hands it does—go on and on.

To summarize, then, it may be true that in different societies the virtues are given different interpretations, and different actions may be counted as satisfying them; and it may be true that the value of a character trait will vary from person to person and from society to society. But it cannot be right to say that social customs determine whether any particular character trait is a virtue. The major virtues flow from our common human condition.

### 12.3. Two Advantages of Virtue Ethics

Virtue Ethics is often said to have two selling points.

1. *Moral motivation.* Virtue Ethics is appealing because it provides a natural and attractive account of moral motivation. Consider the following:

You are in the hospital recovering from a long illness. You are bored and restless, and so you are delighted when Smith

comes to visit. You have a good time talking to him; his visit really cheers you up. After a while, you tell Smith how much you enjoy seeing him—he really is a good friend to take the trouble to come see you. But, Smith says, he is merely doing his duty. At first you think he is only being modest, but the more you talk, the clearer it becomes that he is speaking the literal truth. He is not visiting you because he wants to or because he likes you, but only because he thinks he should “do the right thing.” He feels it is his duty to visit you, perhaps because you are worse off than anyone else he knows.

This example was suggested by the American philosopher Michael Stocker (1940–). As Stocker points out, you’d be very disappointed to learn Smith’s motive; now his visit seems cold and calculating. You thought he was your friend, but now you know otherwise. Commenting on Smith’s behavior, Stocker says, “Surely there is something lacking here—and lacking in moral merit or value.”

Of course, there is nothing wrong with *what* Smith did. The problem is *why* he did it. We value friendship, love, and respect, and we want our relationships to be based on mutual regard. Acting from an abstract sense of duty or from a desire to “do the right thing” is not the same. We would not want to live in a community of people who acted only from such motives, nor would we want to be such a person ourselves. Therefore, the argument goes, theories that focus on right action cannot provide a completely satisfactory account of the moral life. For that, we need a theory that emphasizes personal qualities such as friendship, love, and loyalty—in other words, a theory of the virtues.

**2. Doubts about the “ideal” of impartiality.** A dominant theme in modern moral philosophy has been impartiality—the idea that all persons are morally equal, and that we should treat everyone’s interests as equally important. The utilitarian theory is typical. “Utilitarianism,” John Stuart Mill writes, “requires [the moral agent] to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.” The book you are now reading also treats impartiality as a fundamental ethical requirement: In the first chapter, impartiality was included in the “minimum conception” of morality.

It may be doubted, though, whether impartiality is really such a noble ideal. Consider our relationships with family and

friends. Should we be impartial where their interests are concerned? A mother loves her children and cares for them in a way that she does not care for other children. She is partial to them through and through. But is anything wrong with that? Isn't that exactly the way a mother should be? Again, we love our friends, and we are willing to do things for them that we would not do for others. What's wrong with that? Loving relationships are essential to the good life. But any theory that emphasizes impartiality will have a hard time accounting for this.

A moral theory that emphasizes the virtues, however, can easily account for all this. Some virtues are partial and some are not. Loyalty involves partiality toward loved ones and friends; beneficence involves equal regard for everyone. What is needed is not some general requirement of impartiality, but an understanding of how these virtues relate to one another.

## 12.4. Virtue and Conduct

As we have seen, theories that emphasize right action seem incomplete because they neglect the question of character. Virtue Ethics remedies this problem by making character its central concern. But as a result, Virtue Ethics runs the risk of being incomplete in the other direction. Moral problems are frequently problems about what to *do*. What can a theory of virtue tell us about the assessment, not of character, but of action?

The answer will depend on the spirit in which Virtue Ethics is offered. On the one hand, we might combine the best features of the right-action approach with insights drawn from the virtues approach—we might try to improve Utilitarianism or Kantianism, for example, by supplementing them with a theory of moral character. This seems sensible. If so, then we can assess right action simply by relying on Utilitarianism or Kantianism.

On the other hand, some writers believe that Virtue Ethics should be understood as an *alternative* to the other theories. These writers believe that Virtue Ethics is a complete moral theory in itself. We might call this *Radical Virtue Ethics*. What would such a theory say about right action? Either it will need to dispense with the notion of "right action" altogether, or it will have to give some account of the idea derived from the conception of virtuous character.

It might sound crazy, but some philosophers have argued that we should get rid of such concepts as “morally right action.” Anscombe says that “it would be a great improvement” if we stopped using such notions. We could still assess conduct as better or worse, she says, but we would do so in other terms. Instead of saying that an action was “morally wrong,” we would say that it was “intolerant” or “unjust” or “cowardly”—terms derived from the vocabulary of virtue. On her view, such terms allow us to say everything that we need to say.

But advocates of Radical Virtue Ethics need not reject notions such as “morally right.” These ideas can be retained but given a new interpretation within the virtue framework. We could still assess actions based on the reasons that can be given for or against them. However, *the reasons cited will all be reasons connected with the virtues*. Thus, the reasons for doing some particular action might be that it is honest, or generous, or fair; while the reasons against doing it might be that it is dishonest, or stingy, or unfair. On this approach, the right thing to do is whatever a virtuous person would do.

## 12.5. The Problem of Incompleteness

The main objection to Radical Virtue Ethics is that it is incomplete. It seems to be incomplete in three ways.

First, Radical Virtue Ethics cannot explain everything it should explain. Consider a typical virtue, such as dependability. Why should I be dependable? Plainly, we need an answer to this question that goes beyond the simple observation that being dependable is a virtue. We want to know *why* dependability is a virtue; we want to know why it is good. Possible explanations might be that being dependable is to one’s own advantage, or being dependable promotes the general welfare, or dependability is needed by those who must live together and rely on one another. The first explanation looks suspiciously like Ethical Egoism; the second is utilitarian; and the third recalls the Social Contract Theory. But none of these explanations are couched in terms of the virtues. Any explanation of why a particular virtue is good, it seems, would have to take us beyond the narrow confines of Radical Virtue Ethics.

If Radical Virtue Ethics doesn’t explain *why* something is a virtue, then it won’t be able to tell us whether the virtues apply

in difficult cases. Consider the virtue of being beneficent, or being kind. Suppose I hear some news that would upset you to know about. Maybe I've learned that someone you used to know died in a car accident. If I don't tell you this, you might never find out. Suppose, also, that you're the sort of person who would want to be told. If I know all this, should I tell you the news? What would be the *kind* thing to do? It's a hard question, because what you would prefer—being told—conflicts with what would make you feel good—not being told. Would a kind person care more about what you want, or more about what makes you feel good? Radical Virtue Ethics cannot answer this question. To be kind is to look out for someone's best interests; but Radical Virtue Ethics does not tell us what someone's best interests are. So, the second way in which the theory is incomplete is that it cannot give a full interpretation of the virtues. It cannot say exactly when they apply.

Finally, Radical Virtue Ethics is incomplete because it cannot help us deal with cases of moral conflict. Suppose I just got a haircut—a mullet the likes of which have not been seen since 1992—and I put you on the spot by asking you what you think. You can either tell me the truth, or you can say I look just fine. Honesty and kindness are both virtues, and so there are reasons both for and against each alternative. But you must do one or the other—you must either tell the truth and be unkind, or not tell the truth and be kind. Which should you do? If someone told you, "Well, you should act virtuously in this situation," that wouldn't help you decide what to do; it would only leave you wondering which virtue to follow. Clearly, we need guidance beyond the resources of Radical Virtue Ethics.

By itself, it seems, Radical Virtue Ethics is limited to platitudes: be kind, be honest, be patient, be generous, and so on. Platitudes are vague, and when they conflict, we must look beyond them for guidance. Radical Virtue Ethics needs the resources of a larger theory.

## 12.6. Conclusion

It seems best to regard Virtue Ethics as part of our overall theory of ethics rather than as being a complete theory in itself. The total theory would include an account of all the considerations that figure in practical decision making, together with their

underlying rationales. The question is whether such a theory can accommodate both an adequate conception of right action and a related conception of virtuous character.

I don't see why not. Suppose, for example, that we accept a utilitarian theory of right action—we believe that one ought to do whatever will lead to the most happiness. From a moral point of view, we would want a society in which everyone leads happy and satisfying lives. We could then ask which actions, which social policies, *and which qualities of character* would most likely lead to that result. An inquiry into the nature of virtue could then be conducted from within that larger framework.