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Virtue in Virtue Ethics

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Abstract This paper represents two polemics. One is against suggestions (made by Harman and others) that recent psychological research counts against any claim that there is such a thing as genuine virtue (Cf. Harman, in: Byrne, Stalnaker, Wedgwood (eds.) Fact and value, pp 117–127, 2001). The other is against the view that virtue ethics should be seen as competing against such theories as Kantian ethics or consequentialism, particularly in the specification of decision procedures.

Keywords Character · Lapse · Psychological · Situation · Traits · Virtue

1 Virtue

Let us begin with three obvious truths, and a couple that are less obvious.

> Obvious truth 1: No one is perfect. Everyone will, in some imaginable circumstances, behave in a morally inadequate way. For any X there is a situation S such that X in S is liable to behave badly.
> Obvious truth 2: People do not always behave in the same ("consistent") way. They sometimes act out of character.[1] Further, character is rarely static. It can develop or be modified though a lifetime.

[1] When people do act out of character, can we subject the actions to moral judgment? Hume (1978) insists that "if any action be either virtuous or vicious, 'tis only as a sign of some quality or character. It must depend on durable principles of the mind… Actions themselves, not proceeding from any constant principle, have no influence on love or hatred, pride or humility; and consequently are never consider'd in morality" (Hume 1978, Book III, Part III, Section I, p. 575). What Hume says might seem plausible in relation to minor lapses—we often do forgive or "write off" minor lapses that are out of character—but at

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Obvious truth 3: Nevertheless, in the vast majority of cases, choices we make are likely to represent carrying on in an already established pattern of life.[2]

One reason for stating these obvious truths, especially the first two, at the outset is (to adopt the language of legal proceedings) to stipulate them, to regard them as not in dispute. This can be useful in a context in which philosophers sometimes adopt the strategy of arguing against the least plausible versions of views they oppose. It then is worth saying that one can hold that human beings have characters without (a) believing in human perfection, or (b) thinking that character is static. It also is worth adding that stipulation of human imperfection does not suggest then that people's characters do not differ sharply. The situations in which I am liable to behave badly may be different from the ones in which you are liable to behave badly. In traditional "folk" discourse of character, part of knowing what a person was like was knowing in what kinds of situation that person was likely to be at his or her worst.

Here are the less obvious truths, which seem to me to be important.

1. Virtues and vices often are interwoven, so that what might seem in themselves to be vices can lead to good moral choices and what might seem in themselves to be virtues can lead to bad moral choices.[3] For example, the desirable habit of punctuality can lead (when one is late for an engagement) to rushing past someone who appears to need help, and a strong tendency to be cooperative and to defer to knowledgeable people can lead to what might be giving excessive electric shocks. Conversely, an oppositional, surly person of the sort that ruins life in any group might be more likely to walk out of the Milgram experiment.
2. The previous truth suggests that virtuous choice sometimes requires deliberately *not* acting in the manner one usually does. There has to be the capacity to overcome habits and customary mindsets and *this* time not to be punctual (or do the thing that normally would be counted as kind or generous).

These latter truths indicate that, if there is such a thing as virtue, it is not as simple as we might like to think. But the first obvious truth will suggest to some that in reality no one does qualify as virtuous, and that the concept of "being virtuous"

Footnote 1 continued
first not so plausible in relation to major lapses. However what Hume says may not be so easy to interpret. It could be part of someone's character that he or she occasionally "snaps" or behaves carelessly in certain circumstances. The awful things that then are done are in a sense out of character, but all the same do issue from "durable principles of the mind." It looks unclear just what cases Hume has in mind as "never consider'd in morality."

[2] Cf. Sartre (1943, p. 453 ff.), and Kupperman (1984–1985).

[3] For recognition of this, see La Rochefoucald (1959), Maxim (182, p. 57). The interpenetration of vices and virtues follows from the fact that what appear as virtues may be the result of various springs of action (cf. Maxim 1), so that we need to look at the economy of virtues. Nietzsche's (1996) view was that reading La Rochefoucauld was like reading a grown-up after having read children. La Rochefoucauld hit "the bullseye of human nature" (Nietzsche 1996, p. 32). See also Confucius (1938 Book IV.7, p. 103). The thought that praiseworthy habits of mind can lead to undesirable choices is surely crucial to Confucius's insistence that his ethics (unlike that of various ancient worthies) emphasizes flexibility (Book XVIII.8, pp. 221–222). It also plays a part in his condemnation of the "honest villager" (Book XVII.13, p. 213), who "spoils true virtue."

makes more sense as an ideal than as a descriptive category. We do sometimes speak of people as virtuous. But (some may insist) it perhaps is a mistake, an indication that they have not been thoroughly tested.

1.1 When We Call Someone Virtuous, What do We Really Mean?

The first thing that needs to be said is that arguably there is no set of necessary and sufficient conditions for being virtuous. We may be left, as L. Wittgenstein argued for the word "game," with a set of overlapping resemblances rather than an essence (Wittgenstein 1953, p. 33e ff). In broad outline, of course, there are some necessary conditions. To be virtuous you cannot have frequent and recurring moral lapses. Even sporadic lapses of a clear and very serious sort could disqualify you. We would not say, "He is a really good person. There is the occasional mass murder, but he has not been doing that for a while."

Another factor that has to be taken seriously is an agent's response to having committed a moral lapse. Repentance is often thought to make a difference. Certainly we expect virtuous people to learn from mistakes, and to try to do better. There is a related matter of attitude that is emphasized by at least one major virtue ethicist, Confucius, and seems to me to be important. In the remainder of this paper I will make a few references to Confucius. This is not because of a taste for what most Anglo-American philosophers still see as the exotic, but is because Confucius arguably has the most highly developed virtue ethics (with a sophisticated moral psychology) on offer.

In a number of passages in the *Analects*, Confucius emphasizes that he is not a sage, makes mistakes, and tries to be open to criticism. He represents himself as disquieted by his shortcomings (Confucius 1938, Book IX.7, p. 140; Book IV.17, p. 105, Book VII.21 and pp. 33, 127 and 130; also Book V.26, p. 114).[4] The openness to criticism is important in two ways. One is that someone else, even a peasant, may have seen something (perhaps something that is faulty in your behavior) that you may have missed. The other is that it is imaginable (and seems a suitable hypothesis to be tested in a psychological research project) that very many people overestimate their degree of virtuousness as compared to the judgments of detached onlookers. There is a comparable psychological finding in relation to abilities: the only groups in society that do not overestimate their abilities are people suffering from severe depression.[5]

Let me suggest that most of us are likely to rate someone's virtuousness more highly if she or he is open to criticism and takes lapses seriously. The attitude of commitment to trying to be virtuous matters. Are there other attitudes that matter? There is a line of thought, in both the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Analects*, that insists that true virtue requires deeply internalizing virtuous impulses, so that virtue becomes second nature and a major source of satisfaction in life. It is well-known

[4] Confucius's denial that he is wise is especially striking. Baltes and Staudinger (1996) report evidence that suggests that wisdom requires the ability to listen to others. A further thought is that this in turn may require that you not think that you are wise.

[5] Frijda (1993) and Alloy and Abramson (1978).

that I. Kant regarded this as the wrong attitude, or at least as one that does not contribute to *moral* virtue (Kant 1981, p. 11).

This subject is pursued at some length in Kupperman (2007b). The word "sour" seems appropriate, because (as Kant himself points out) Kantian rational virtue is not conducive to happiness in life (but has a very different function) (Kant 1981, pp. 8–9). This makes it compatible with a sense of real disappointment in life. Let me here merely suggest what is argued in the other paper, that either Kant's attitude or the one recommended by Aristotle and Confucius, can be embodied in genuine virtue.

Aristotle and Confucius, I think, would have regarded, say, Job's constant kvetching as a sign that he was not truly virtuous. If he were genuinely virtuous, in their view, his life, even after misfortunes, would have seemed not so thoroughly unsatisfying. [One might compare Job in this with Oedipus as represented in Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonnus* (Sophocles 2001)]. But there is a strong case for supposing that Job may simply have been virtuous in a different way from theirs.

The last few paragraphs have explored ways in which ordinary people, and a few philosophers, discuss what it is to be virtuous. But we have to come to grips with the question of whether in the end there can be genuine instances of virtuous people, even though no one is perfect. We need to ask whether being virtuous is compatible with failing, or being liable to fail, a major test of virtue. Could someone who failed to walk out of the Milgram experiment, and gave electric shocks that (as far as one knew) could have been lethal, count as a virtuous person?

It is difficult to say "Yes," but there is a story that could justify a positive answer. Milgram himself claimed that his experiment in effect did some of its subjects a favor, giving them something that they could learn from (Milgram 1974, pp. 193–202). Someone who morally failed in the experiment, and was deeply upset as a result, could learn something about moral thoughtfulness and also the risks of automatic deference to experts and authorities.

Becoming morally virtuous would be for such a person, and should be for all of us, an ongoing process. It could be assumed that there are many things that one might not get right at first. There is a nice illustration of this idea in a well-known short novel, S. Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (Crane 1990). The hero gets the business of courage wrong at first, and then (given a second chance) gets it right.

When we call someone virtuous there is an implication that they have learned to get things on the whole right. Is there a more precise meaning than that? We should be careful not to assume that there must be. Often utterances that sound definite can admit of a somewhat indefinite assortment of exceptions and qualifications, that a speaker may not have in mind but all the same could acknowledge.

Here are two examples. Wittgenstein (1953, p. 33e) imagines a man asking him to teach the children a game, and that he (Wittgenstein) then teaches them to gamble with dice. The man expostulates that this is not what he had in mind. This leads Wittgenstein to ask whether the man would have had this exclusion in mind. Normally of course the answer would be "No."

A second one is provided by Donagan (1977, pp. 91–94). He qualified his general Kantian approach to ethics by insisting that of course some valid general moral rules have a range of implicit exceptions. Normally no one would expect you to keep a

promise if there was no real foreseeable hardship for the person to whom the promise was made, and if lives (or your own best opportunity for lasting happiness) would be lost by your keeping the promise. The range of implicit exceptions to the rule that promises should be kept is, again, not specifiable in advance; but there is some general understanding of it among competent users of the language.

In much this way, it is plausible to hold that moral lapses do not always count heavily against a claim that someone is virtuous. We might think, for example, that Socrates was a virtuous man, even though he tended to bully people he forced into philosophical discussions, and probably was not very nice to his spouse. No one is perfect. In cases of a more doubtful nature, much might depend on the person's reactions to his or her lapses.

Why might someone suppose that there is a problem here? True, there is the Ross and Nisbett (1991) idea of the Fundamental Attribution Error. Most of the psychologists I know appear to be skeptical of this, but nevertheless the idea has currency. It presumes that when we say that someone is virtuous, we are attributing something like an inherent, fixed quality to that person, which of course would be absurd. But consider a case that is somewhat parallel. One might describe a professional colleague as "a good philosopher." Probably no one performs without exception at a very high level: there will be the occasional weak argument or misunderstanding of the literature. (What really do we mean by "good philosopher"?) All the same, there are good philosophers. So why cannot there be virtuous people?

1.2 The Intertwining of Virtues and Vices

The Milgram experiments are, everyone agrees, an eye-opener. But an eye-opener for whom? Probably for most people at a "Virtue Ethics" conference. Someone who had lived through the Nazi occupation of most of Europe, or through the cultural revolution in China, would have been much less surprised. Socrates would not have been surprised at all. There is the story of how a group of citizens of Athens, including him, were ordered by the Thirty Tyrants to seize Leon of Salamis (presumably an innocent man, who was to be executed). The Thirty Tyrants, Socrates remarks, liked to implicate others in their crimes (Plato 1997, *Apology* 32c, pp. 29–30). The others did as they were ordered. Socrates simply went home, and as luck would have it escaped retribution. (The Thirty Tyrants lost power soon after the arrest of Leon.)

It probably is generally true for the human race, over time, that (as Doris reports) the great majority of lay character attributions are "undercontextualized and overconfident" (Doris 2002, p. 97). All the same, we should not assume that this tendency is uniform. There may be factors in the American experience and popular culture that rendered Wright's and Mischel's subjects, and students at Princeton (who it seems to me are the primary targets of Harman's (2001) "Virtue Ethics Without Character Traits"), especially attracted to oversimplified views. We also should not extrapolate too quickly from some facets of a culture's distinctiveness to other features in that culture. Doris reports a variety of interesting data that show that Asians often interpret behavior more in terms of situational contexts and less in terms of personal dispositions than is typical in the West (Doris 2002, p. 105). This is compatible with the emphasis in Confucianism and in virtually every major

Indian philosophy on the importance of having an integrated character. The integrated character is portrayed in these traditions as a difficult achievement that requires considerable sustained work, which leaves room open for a situationist account of the vast majority of people. A small example is Mencius's comment that "In good years the young men are mostly lazy, while in bad years they are mostly violent" (Mencius 1970, Book VI, A.7, p. 164). Confucius and Mencius (and I think Plato and Aristotle also) would have agreed with Vranas's recent argument that most people are indeterminate rather than virtuous or morally deplorable (Vranas 2005, p. 30). There also is a strong tradition in Chinese culture of what Vranas speaks of as "local evaluations of people in light of their behavior in relatively restricted ranges of situations" (Vranas 2005, p. 30).

There is one feature of the Milgram experiments, and of some related experiments, that fascinates me. We might assume that most of the people who misbehaved in the Milgram experiments were, in their ordinary lives, considered reasonably decent people. Why did they misbehave? A variety of features have been or could be suggested, including excessive trust in authority and perhaps confusion about what the situational etiquette of psychology experiments requires.[6] It also has been suggested that the experiment worked as well as it did because everything happened so fast.

Another possible factor is this that most of us, most of the time, operate on the basis of our habits of mind, especially if there is not much time to think about what we are doing.[7] As already remarked, someone whose habit of mind was to be cooperative, to go along with people who seemed to know what they were doing, might be very likely to follow the directions, more likely than someone whose habit of mind was more oppositional. It might be interesting to replicate the Milgram experiment (if this could be done within current ethical guidelines) as a test of these personality types. One reason for my expectation is found in the sociologist N. Tec's study of "rescuers," gentiles who helped to save Jews during Nazi occupation. A frequent feature of these people, she found, was that "they don't blend into their communities" (Tec in Block and Drucker 1992, p. 6; see also Tec 1986, pp. 188–189).

Part of my suggestion here is that any individual is likely to have drives and habits of mind that in some contexts can manifest themselves in virtuous behavior, and in other contexts in behavior that fails to be virtuous. This is yet another reason

[6] As Kamtekar (2004) has pointed out, "...obstacles to living and acting virtuously... (include) the difficulty of figuring out when to rely on the social cues that usually stand us in good stead" (p. 461). There is much in Kamtekar's paper that is important and very useful. Let me register though one small element of unease. Kamtekar writes on p. 477 of responses that "require the active involvement of the agent's powers of reasoning." This is very much the normal way a good philosopher would put the point. My unease stems from a view of the roles of reason and reasoning in ethics that is not the normal view. On one hand, there is a strong case for holding that there genuinely are reasons in ethics, and that some reasons that point to facts give logical support (weaker than entailment) to ethical conclusions- support that involves connections of meaning. (See Kupperman 2005.) On the other hand, emotional states typically play a major role in the awareness of reasons in ethics, as does sensitivity to relevant factors; and (as it seems to me) when we need to think further about our responses what is needed is often not what would normally be called "reasoning". (See Kupperman 2006, Chap. 4.) The most basic point is that having reasons is, generally speaking, not the same as reasoning.

[7] Kamtekar (2004) has made essentially this point.

for endorsing the contextual view of character traits recently advanced by Upton (2005). It also supports the view that sometimes virtuous behavior requires deliberately *not* acting in the ways one thinks virtuous in most circumstances.

The argument thus far can be summed up as follows. Even if evidence provided by situationist psychology undermines any assumption that a great many people count as genuinely virtuous, it is compatible with claims that there are and have been *some* genuinely virtuous people. One element in virtue is the way in which a virtuous agent copes with the liabilities of human imperfection.

2 Virtue Ethics

Much of this paper thus far might seem to have made the concept of virtue less simple and straightforward to use. Many people think of having a virtue as something like walking a straight line, not deviating from it despite temptations or pressures. There is an image a bit like that in the *Analects* of Confucius, in which becoming a virtuous person is spoken of as following a path in life (a *dao*). But there is a running implicit argument in the *Analects* that following a virtuous path requires intelligence and sensitivity, making judgment calls in a variety of situations, so that one does not always behave in what most people would consider to be the same way. This is why Confucius emphasizes his flexibility (Book XVIII.8), and one of the reasons why he has contempt for the "honest villager" (Book XVII.13), who presumably does walk a straight line, and hence is rigid and unresponsive to circumstances that are different from the usual in ways that are relevant to ethical judgment.

This extols ethical thought at a high level, and some might regard it as "elitist." But as Donagan's work makes clear, even someone with strong Kantian sympathies could turn out to have only limited use for any idea of virtue as walking a straight line. This is because judgment calls are inherent in the moral practice of even the average person, in such matters as when a promise should be broken. The discussion earlier of the relations between virtues and vices should reinforce the idea that in a variety of ways the division between actions that are virtuous and those that fail in virtue will not coincide with the lines that demarcate categories in our ordinary descriptions of human behavior.

All of this should undermine any idea that there is some simplicity in the concept of virtue that adds to the appeal of virtue ethics. What then is the appeal of virtue ethics? In order to see what it is, we have to move away from crude and simplistic models of the relations among major ethical theories or approaches.

Perhaps because of the agonistic character of so much philosophical discussion, there is a strong tendency in the profession to regard ethical theories or theoretical approaches as competitors. It is widely assumed that they represent competing (and conflicting) attempts to provide answers to the same set of questions. The thought often is that there can be one, and only one that is correct. Let me suggest that this would be a mistaken view of the relation of virtue ethics to, say, Kantian ethics and consequentialism.[8]

[8] Others have suggested this before me. For a particularly searching discussion, see Louden (1997).

As Schneewind very aptly says, a virtue-centered ethical view sees the central moral question as "what sort of person am I to be?" (Schneewind 1997, p. 179). Virtue ethics also treats choices as typically embedded in a pattern or path of life rather than presenting them (as both Kant and Mill do) atomistically, without reference to previous or future choices or to agents' personal goals. Kantian and utilitarian ethics are often regarded as if they offer something like moral software, that (provided that a case at hand can be put in language compatible with the software) will give any competent user moral advice.[9] Virtue ethics, it seems to me, does not offer anything like moral software.[10] It sometimes has been suggested that virtue ethics indicates that the right choice in any situation is the one that a morally virtuous person would make. In some sense this must be true, but it verges on the vacuous. Further, if one then asks "How did these virtuous role models make *their* choices?"—and keeps pressing the question re the role models of the role models, etc.—one must recognize the obvious truth that even virtuous role models will rely on such ethical aids as well-established moral rules and experience-sharpened sensitivity to the features of particular cases. As J. McDowell (1997) points out, a sense of what is salient is crucial.

Kantian and consequentialist (including utilitarian) theories do more, of course, than provide a basis for advice on moral decisions. They offer an interpretation of what ethics is concerned with. In Kantian ethics this is first and foremost principles, and also respect for rational beings (including oneself as a rational being). In consequentialist theories the concern is with values that can be attained or missed. The classical utililitarian versions of consequentialism tend to put this (very simplistically and misleadingly, in my view) in terms of pleasures minus pains.

Virtue ethics does offer a different interpretation of what ethics is concerned with. It centers on personal goodness and its manifestations. In some versions of virtue ethics, especially Aristotle's and Confucius's, there is great attention to a longitudinal view of virtues, with emphasis both on how people can come to be virtuous and on the rewards of a life that centers on being virtuous. This longitudinal view sharply separates virtue ethics from much in contemporary philosophical ethics, especially the emphasis on dramatic cases (e.g., the trolley problem) that lend themselves to atomistic consideration.[11]

[9] This is a common view, but should not be endorsed without qualifications. It fits the simplest versions of Kantian ethics: Kant's discussion of casuistry in the second half of the *Metaphysics of Morals* suggests a more complicated picture. It fits act consequentialism, but not the more sophisticated forms of what Pettit and Brennan have called "restrictive consequentialism" (see Pettit and Brennan 1986).

[10] It is true all the same that, as McDowell (1997) has insisted, virtue ethics offers guidance in how to live. But this is more in the way of orientation than by providing anything that might look useful in an algorithm.

[11] In my view, any attempt to create a virtue ethics that lacks any recognition of character traits deprives virtue ethics of its point. This point includes the relevance of longitudinal factors to most or all ethical decisions, and also the importance (both in aiding one's ability to carry through good choices, and also in providing felt value in the process) of the person one is. Clearly, very often behavior varies with the situation; and clearly also the vast majority of character traits are narrow rather than broad. But that does not mean that everyone will behave in the same way in a given situation, and we normally think that character traits are an important part of the explanation of differences.

Why are such cases so popular? Part of the reason of course is that they are dramatic, and some interesting things do emerge in discussion of them. They definitely should not be ignored. Above and beyond all of this, any case that lends itself to an atomistic treatment has the appeal and convenience of a good short story. A virtue ethics treatment of an ethical choice will have to be a long story, one that will be less convenient for use in teaching or in a journal article. All the same, I have argued elsewhere that consideration of the kind of person one is or would want to be is generally highly relevant to ethical decision, and also that any ethical decision requires both interpretation of the case being decided and also a judgment of relevant values that can be gained and lost.[12] These factors become invisible in cases like that of the trolley problem because both the interpretation and the values at stake seem so obvious that they do not need to be thought about.[13] Longitudinal factors also become easy to ignore because the case looks so unusual, so discontinuous from the rest of life.

Even if ethical theories do offer different interpretations of what ethics is concerned with, does this mean that the interpretations conflict? Is it at all clear that the interpretations are exclusive? Need a virtue ethicist dismiss the role of principles in ethical thought, or any thinking that attention to values has importance? For that matter, need a consequentialist (or a Kantian) deny the usefulness of socially inculcated principles or that of educating people so that they become virtuous? A sophisticated form of Kantian ethics or of consequentialism could well incorporate central insights of virtue ethics, although then the shape of the theory would look different. Nor should either Kantians or consequentialists deny that, in a great many important cases, it can help to have a sense of who you are and the kind of person you would like to be.[14]

[12] This is in Kupperman (2007a, Part 1).

[13] The trolley problem can be presented as a "one-off" decision because it is so discontinuous from most normal choices in life; also there is little worry that one might form habits of pulling the switch on runaway trolleys. Further, it can be argued that even in such a case (should one actually occur) factors of interpretation (along with thinking of alternatives besides the obvious ones), and also of judgment of values that are at stake, do play a major role. As presented in the philosophical literature, the trolley problem is exceptionally cunning in finessing such complications, conveying a sense that one does not have to think about such complications. Death is death, and in the problem as presented there would seem to be no room for interpretation or for complications. (In real life there might be more than two alternatives; and there also might be questions of who should leap to the switch, and whether it would be "playing God.") Further, there is widespread consensus on the judgment that dying is a misfortune. But what if the five people who are about to be run over are all terminally ill patients who would like to die, or alternatively one is convinced that these five people have excellent chances for entering paradise, chances that might well decline if they live longer?

[14] In Kupperman (2007a, Part 2) I discuss the attractions of Kantian ethics, contractualism, and a consequentialism more sophisticated than act or rule consequentialism. Part of what is argued is that each of these has some elements of truth, and none has the whole truth. The issues are complicated by the fact that intuitions of what is fair, or reasonable, or about what it is that counts as respecting persons are never infallible. (Think of the widespread medieval intuition that it was only fair that oldest sons inherited, and Kant's personal sense that executing murderers is highly consonant with respect for persons.) Also our knowledge of future consequences generally is, to varying degrees, unreliable. Morality as we know it can be seen as part of an evolving social contract arrived at by people who have scraps of real-world knowledge but were (and on the whole remain) semi-ignorant. We do the best we can, placing the most weight on the elements about which we seem least ignorant.

The competition model really looks inadequate. What I think a virtue ethicist, as opposed to some of the more narrowly focused representatives of other approaches, can and should insist on is this: we cannot get a clear view of either the function of ethics or of how it normally works unless we attend to the kinds of things that are emphasized in the virtue ethics literature.

Ethics of course has many functions. These include, arguably, making the world a better place (perhaps indirectly, and almost certainly not on each specific occasion on which ethical consideration might take place). They also include, more specifically, making us better people. Ethics works, when it does, not because people rush to their copies of Kant or Mill for guidance on how to decide, but rather because some people have developed a good sense of what is salient in some ethically problematic situations and of how to respond to them. Any real-world account of how ethics enters our lives and affects our behavior has to assign a major role to virtue ethics.

Furthermore, psychological research on the ways in which values enter our lives, and develop within them over time, suggests that many of the satisfactions in life (involving wealth or sensual gratifications) that are widely desired play less of an extended role in subjective well-being than is generally supposed. Experiences of losing oneself in skilled performances, or of meaningful personal relations, tend to loom larger; these both have a clear link with sense of self. There is every reason to suppose that values of being virtuous also often play a major role, and happiness studies in particular provide relevant evidence.[15] Virtue ethics in this way can shed more light on elements of a rewarding life than narrow forms of Kantian ethics or of consequentialism typically do.

2.1 Varieties of Virtue Ethics

A case for holding that virtue ethics is philosophically useful, and can provide insights not readily available elsewhere, has been outlined. It is highly general. This leaves room for the thought that it can turn out that the virtues of virtue ethics depend, at least to a degree, on the form that a virtue ethics takes. We need to look at the varieties of virtue ethics.

Here are two divisions within virtue ethics. Some works of virtue ethics focus on particular virtues, such as courage or generosity, and on the problems (many of them cognitive) associated with particular virtues. Much ancient Greek philosophy, including that of Aristotle, has this character. Classical Chinese philosophy, including that of Confucius, does not. If Plato is considered a virtue ethicist, it looks as if he (like Confucius) is far more interested in a general state of being a virtuous person than in particular virtues. Some contemporary virtue ethicists, such as Foot (2002), follow Aristotle in giving some close attention to particular virtues. It seems to me that some others are far more concerned (as I am, if I count as a part-time virtue ethicist) with the general state of being virtuous.

The other division, which will be looked at later, is between a virtue ethics that in effect assumes (as Aristotle seems to) that virtues are what psychologists call

[15] These data are discussed in Kupperman (2006).

"broad" character traits, concerned with certain kinds of choices. To be courageous, in such a view, is to function well across the range of choices that involve intelligent risk-taking, whatever the kind of risk might be. The alternative possibility (which I endorse) is that virtue involves mostly (although not always) "narrow" character traits, which involve a strong tendency to function well in certain kinds of choices in certain kinds of situations. A virtuous person, in this view, might turn out to be highly reliable in making choices in the face of physical danger, but sometimes shy away from unpleasant confrontations with unreasonable people (preferring not to risk insults and embarrassment even when a good deal could be accomplished by taking these risks). Even more narrowly, someone might be highly reliable in choices that involve risk of death from gunfire, but sometimes shy away from other kinds of physical risks, such as the risk of being tortured, even when (again) there are important reasons to take the risks.

Ethics that concentrates on particular virtues is somewhat comparable to genre criticism in literary studies, which focuses on the particular excellences to be expected from epics, lyric poems, tragedies, comedies, etc. One of the advantages of genre studies is that each genre frequently has its own problems and solutions, and criticism of a work in relation to a genre can be an aid in putting the strengths and weaknesses of the work in perspective. A disadvantage in some cases is that a work may not neatly fit its genre, or considerations that come up mainly for some other genre may have some relevance to the success of the work. There is much the same mixture of advantages and possible disadvantages in concentrating on particular virtues in ethics.

The advantages of virtue ethics of this sort would be great, and the disadvantages would be relatively small, if the thesis of the unity of the virtues (a view endorsed by Aristotle and others) were correct. Plainly this thesis would be plausible if (a) the skills crucial to any particular virtue were almost entirely cognitive (having to do with assessment of what is appropriate to each particular case), and (b) were almost entirely a matter of general cognitive ability. Both (a) and (b) though look false. Visceral elements can play a major role in when someone is likely to exhibit courage or generosity. Someone can have a visceral horror of torture, or knife wounds, or of possibly being ridiculed in public, which can play a huge role when those are the risks. Someone also can be almost instinctively repelled by certain sorts of people (who in fact do need help) and not by others, thus being quite generous to the latter but not the former. Even further, someone when in a hurry can be less thoughtful and generous than when there is abundant time.

If, as most psychologists appear to think, the thesis of the unity of the virtues is a non-starter, then we need to look at the various compartments of people's lives, and also to situations that they might find themselves in, in order to get some realistic sense of ways in which they are likely to behave well or badly. This will yield a far more complex picture of people's behavior than do judgments simply that so-and-so is a good person or is a bad person.

All of this needs to be taken seriously, but that does not mean that we should be carried away by situationalist evidence provided by psychologists and by our sense of the compartments in people's lives. Let me risk a generalization here. What psychology offers that is relevant to ethics consists of reports of what often, or

usually, is the case, and hardly ever of what is always the case. My guess is that there is hardly anyone who entirely embodies the thesis of the unity of the virtues. Traditional common sense held that virtually everyone had some situations in which that person was likely to be at his or her best, and some in which there was some likelihood of being at his or her worst. There seems to be something to that line of thought. Nevertheless, there would appear to have been some people who, through a great deal of self-discipline (and perhaps self-criticism as well) came closer than most of us do to having unified virtues. Socrates and Confucius come to mind as historical examples.

That said, one has to add that even people that we tend to respect and admire usually will turn out to have uneven distributions of good and not-so-good behavior, the quality varying among compartments of their lives and also sometimes depending on the situations they find themselves in.

When is virtue ethics most useful? We can begin by saying when it is least useful. Preoccupations with generalizations and abstractions, as in the traditional doctrine of the unity of the virtues, bog down inquiry. We need not to look at propositions as much as at phenomena. The phenomena will vary. Attention to the particularities of the individual case is essential for virtue ethics to be most useful. Interesting results then can be stated in sentences that begin with "sometimes" or "often," and occasionally with "typically."

Part of such an approach is that there are some unusual cases (such as those of Socrates and Confucius, or for that matter the small number of people who walked out of Milgram experiments at the outset) that deserve special attention. It is easy to believe that Gilbert Harman's students, like my students, tend to think that most people are virtuous, and perhaps think also that virtue involves a kind of perfection. (One moral lapse and you are out?) But we can get beyond the images associated with these currently popular views, recognize that the great majority of us represent a mix of good and not-so-good tendencies (which may be heavily situation-dependent), and at the same time appreciate that it is possible through reflection and self-discipline for someone to do a good deal better than the norm. Ethics traditionally has been about this kind of self-improvement at least as much as it was about ideals of perfection. Virtue ethics can contribute greatly by paying attention to this.

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