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DISPOSITIONS, HABITS AND VIRTUES:  
COMMENTS ON MULDER AND KELLY

I begin by thanking Jack Mulder and Michael Kelly for their insightful essays. I should also note that I have no expertise in either author's subject matter. Thus I do not know very much about Kierkegaard, or "Kierkegaard's heritage and legacy in later continental philosophy." Neither have I thought much about the topics of envy and emulation. For example, I do not know the relevant literatures.

With the forgoing caveat in mind, however, it seems to me that just about everything that Mulder and Kelly say in their essays gets things right. I find their analyses insightful and their arguments largely persuasive. In particular, I find Mulder's claims plausible when he argues that, while Kierkegaard explicitly critiques the classical virtue tradition, he also tacitly employs a virtue-theoretic framework on certain topics, and that therefore "Kierkegaard cannot always have everything that he wants." I also found plausible Mulder's claim "that some ways of construing problems in ontotheology are actually themselves ontotheological problems," and I am sympathetic to his concern "that really leaving the agenda open to God's own appearing in the manner God might choose requires us to be open to the idea that such an appearance might coincide with some of what has been given to reason . . ."

As for Kelly's essay, I found his analysis of the difference between emulation and envy to be insightful. Kelly writes, "The lived-through pain of *emulation* and *envy* indicate, in the phenomenological sense, very different attitudes, desires, and outlooks in these agents, outlooks that motivate very different possible behaviors. In a somewhat obvious sense, the pain in *emulation* seems to say, 'I want to be as good as her' or 'I deserve to be as good as her', whereas the pain in *envy* seems to say, 'I don't want her to be better than me' or 'I deserve such good fortune but never have had it'." And I agree that this nicely explains Aristotle's observation that "emulation makes us take steps to secure the good things in question, envy makes us take steps to stop our neighbor having them" (*Rhetoric* 1388a35).

So, what can I contribute here? Probably not very much. But my plan is to step back for a moment and to lay out what I take to be a good analysis of "dispositions, habits and virtues," a more detailed analysis than either Mulder or Kelly offer themselves. My hope is that, by doing so, we can make some further progress in our understandings of both Kierkegaard on love and virtue (Mulder's topic) and the emotions of emulation and envy (Kelly's topic). My own contributions by this means will be friendly. They are meant to add to the accounts that Mulder and Kelly have given (and this in admittedly small ways) rather than to criticize them.

## AN ACCOUNT OF DISPOSITIONS, HABITS AND VIRTUES

Both of our authors seem to be working with broadly Aristotelian notions of habit and virtue that I am happy to accept. On this account, *habits* are person-level dispositions formed in a particular way; i.e. with a certain history, involving the intentional/voluntary performance of relevant actions. For example, the habit of courage is a person-level disposition to act courageously, brought about by engaging in courageous acts. *Virtues* are good habits. As such, both habits and virtues are *dispositional*, and as such have a modal structure. We can make that modal structure more explicit by means of the following definitions.

Let  $\Phi$  range over actions, properties, products, etc.

$S$  has a *disposition*  $[D, \Phi]$  (in relevant range of conditions  $C$ ) = In close worlds where  $S$  is in  $C$ ,  $S \Phi$ s at a (relevantly) high rate. Alternatively, in a range of relevant condition  $C$ , if  $S$  were in  $C$ ,  $S$  would  $\Phi$ .

$S$  has a *habit*  $[H, \Phi]$  (in relevant range of conditions  $C$ ) = (i) In close worlds where  $S$  is in  $C$ ,  $S \Phi$ s at a (relevantly) high rate, and (ii) this is a result of  $S$ 's earlier  $\Phi$ -ing. Alternatively, in a range of relevant condition  $C$ , if  $S$  were in  $C$ ,  $S$  would  $\Phi$ , and this is due to  $S$ 's earlier  $\Phi$ -ing.

$S$  has a *virtue*  $[V, \Phi]$  (in relevant range of conditions  $C$ ) = (i) In close worlds where  $S$  is in  $C$ ,  $S$  displays  $\Phi$  at a (relevantly) high rate, (ii) this is a result of  $S$ 's earlier  $\Phi$ -ing, and (iii)  $\Phi$  is good.

Our broadly Aristotelian account, together with these definitions, has the following implications.

First, a disposition/habit/virtue is always understood (at least implicitly) as relative to some relevant *range of conditions*. For example, it does not count against a vase being fragile that it does not break when standing still on the table. Likewise, it does not count against one's having the virtue of courage if one does not act courageously while taking a leisurely walk in the park. Neither does it count against one's having the virtue of courage if one does not act courageously while one is sleeping. Rather, one has the virtue of courage if one is disposed to act courageously *in relevant conditions or relevant situations*.

Second, one has a disposition/habit/virtue so long as one displays the relevant property (or performs the relevant action, or produces the relevant result) at a relevantly high *rate* in relevant conditions. For example, a vase might be fragile even if it does not shatter on *every* occasion that it is dropped. Likewise, one might be courageous even if one does not successfully act courageously on *every* relevant occasion. Rather, one has the virtue of courage if one is disposed to act courageously *often enough*, i.e. *with sufficient regularity*, in relevant conditions.

Third, one has a disposition/habit/virtue so long as one displays the relevant property (or performs the relevant action, or produces the relevant result) in

relevantly *close* worlds; that is, in worlds that are similar enough to the actual world, at least in relevant ways. For example, it does not count against a vase's being fragile (here and now) if it does not break in worlds where all solid objects are always covered in layers of foam rubber. Likewise, it does not count against one's having the virtue of courage (here and now) if one does not act courageously in worlds where ubiquitous atmospheric gasses attack the nervous system so as to create panic attacks. Rather, a person of courage is disposed to act courageously *in the world as it is, or in environments as they are*.

Finally, the manifestation of virtue always requires *cooperation from the world*. This last result falls out of the first three. First, to manifest her virtue S must be in the right conditions. For example, one cannot manifest courage if one's conditions are very safe or overwhelmingly dangerous. Second, even in the right conditions, S is not guaranteed to succeed. For example, a firefighter's best efforts to rescue a victim might still be thwarted. One's best attempt at kindness might fall short of its intended result. Rather, virtue is manifested only when the world allows it to be, only when circumstances are enabling.

With these points in place, we are in a position to make some further comments on our two essays.

#### MULDER'S CLAIM (CONTRA KIERKEGAARD) THAT LOVE COMES IN DEGREES

Mulder writes,

Kierkegaard associates habit with the deadening of zeal and ardor, whereas he sees truly Christian love as a pure response to the command of God to love the neighbor. This command is either heeded or it is not, and there seems little room for degree here . . .

Mulder's response is that love (and other habits) need not be static properties. Habits can develop; one can progress by degrees in the formation of habit.

But need Kierkegaard be so suspicious of habit? . . . Indeed, it has become something of a truism that a mark of love is that it grows. What lover would not want to be *more* ready and disposed to love precisely in obedience to the command, or perhaps better, the wish, of his beloved? This does require constant recommitment, and a willingness to be transformed by that commitment. In that sense, we are always beginning, but each day the race begins at a new point. It is always possible to disqualify oneself and need to be reinvited to join this race, but it is not impossible to envision *progress* in it.

Our Aristotelian account displays another way that love can be degreed: it can have varying degrees of modal robustness. That is, it can be displayed over a lesser or greater range of conditions or circumstances. This resonates nicely with our common-sense conception. Thus many people act with love when the conditions for that are particularly friendly or enabling. In those conditions, love is "easy," and many people act accordingly. We think that a person is more loving if they love when the going gets tougher, if they still act with love when it

is harder to do that. Likewise, Jesus counsels us to love our enemies, and not merely our family, or friends, or those who are good to us. That is, Jesus endorses and displays a more robust disposition to love.

#### KIERKEGAARD'S CLAIM THAT LOVE IS UNCONDITIONAL

Mulder writes,

Kierkegaard sees love as only enacted when it is unconditional; a participation in the love of God . . . There are many impostors when it comes to Christian love, but there is only one genuine article. That is unconditional love and it comes through the submission of faith and the immediate response of love. Since love must be unconditional, it cannot await any particular characteristics that it might deem lovely or not.

Our Aristotelian account gives us a take on what that means. In effect, Kierkegaard is claiming that love is not relative to a range of relevant conditions. In other words, he is denying that love has the structure of virtue that was defended above:

$S$  has a *virtue* [ $V, \Phi$ ] (in relevant range of conditions  $C$ ) = (i) In close worlds where  $S$  is in  $C$ ,  $S$  displays  $\Phi$  at a (relevantly) high rate, (ii) this is a result of  $S$ 's earlier  $\Phi$ -ing, and (iii)  $\Phi$  is good. Alternatively, in a range of relevant condition  $C$ , if  $S$  were in  $C$ ,  $S$  would respond in a loving way.

Rather, Kierkegaard claims,  $S$  has the virtue of love only if *in all conditions C*,  $S$  would respond in a loving way. To my mind, the present analysis nicely displays the implausibility of Kierkegaard's "all or nothing" conception of love.

#### A FURTHER DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EMULATION AND ENVY?

Note that emulation always takes a person-level trait (for example, a virtue) as its intentional object, whereas envy can be directed at goods more generally. For example,  $S$  can envy  $T$ 's wealth, house, or good looks, but cannot emulate them. And as Kelly points out, one cannot emulate just any good trait. Thus one can imitate, but not emulate, another's "fine hair, deep voice or accent, bronze skin-tone." And so envy can take a broader range of objects in this respect as well. Plausibly, this is not a mere "grammatical" point, but rather signals a deeper and more important difference between the two emotions. Accordingly, it would be interesting to know *why* envy takes a broader range of goods as its intentional object than does emulation, and what this tells us about the nature of envy and emulation.

Second, if envy can have goods in general as its object, then not all envy involves a negative self-assessment, or a self-attribution of inferiority. For example,  $S$  can envy  $T$ 's wealth (or fine hair) without thinking that  $T$ 's possession of said good is grounded in  $T$ 's superiority. That is, virtue and good results can come apart, and it is only the difference in virtue that should motivate an assessment of inferiority.

One might reply: In cases where virtue and good results come apart, we should have *indignation* rather than envy, since now the good result must be viewed as

unmerited. But that is not right, and the analysis of virtue set out above shows why. That is, that analysis shows how it is possible to have equal virtue and different results, and for the good result to be nevertheless merited. This is because success from virtue is never success *only* from virtue, but rather always requires cooperation from the world.

For example, a home run is to the credit of the hitter even though the world must cooperate by not blowing against the ball with a strong wind. Suppose now that we have two equally good hitters, but the second hitter fails to hit a home run because he is unlucky—a strong wind does blow his ball back (maybe the two come to bat in different innings and therefore under different conditions). That does not show that the first hitter did not merit his homerun, or that we should somehow be indignant that he enjoyed that success.

Again, I don't take this to be a criticism of Kelly's account. I mean only to claim that reflection on the nature of dispositions, habits and virtues can add further insight to the differences between indignation, envy and emulation. More generally, I have argued that a good analysis of dispositions, habits and virtues (and in particular, the one that I have defended) can contribute to the discussions of both our authors.

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