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VIRTUE ETHICS AND PRACTICAL GUIDANCE

By Jennifer Baker

For just as there is no need for medical discussion, unless it pertains to human health, similarly there is no need for a philosopher to hold or teach logical argument, unless it pertains to the human soul. Musonius Rufus[1]

I. Introduction

A description of virtue is not the same thing as recommending virtuous behavior. When Aristotle argues that virtue is what best makes sense of our lives, he is not doing the same thing as when he suggests that we should assist the elderly to their seats before taking our own. Yet, to understand classical virtue ethics, we need to recognize how practical recommendations fit into the overall ethical theory. In this essay, I want to counter the impression that virtue ethics operates through description of virtue and not much else. I do this by looking to how classical virtue ethicists addressed audiences regarding particular behavior (such as offering seats to the elderly). The manner in which ancient ethicists delivered practical advice can be seen to reflect and help illuminate the account of practical rationality that underlies classical, as well as classically styled, virtue ethics.[2]

Virtue, Julia Annas explains, is "not a mindless habit which bypasses the agent's practical reasoning." It is instead "a disposition to act, exercised through the agent's practical reasoning. It is a disposition built up as a result of making choices, not a casual deposit within the agent of the effects of past behavior."[3] Unlike other issues in ancient ethics, the claim that practical rationality explains the development of virtue is not a matter of interpretational controversy.[4]

[1] Cora Lutz, "Musonius Rufus: The Roman Socrates," in *Yale Classical Studies, Volume X,* ed. A. R. Bellinger (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), 110.

[2] Examples of contemporary but classically styled virtue ethics include Daniel Russell's *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Julia Annas's *Intelligent Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Lawrence Becker's *A New Stoicism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Rosalind Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). The most recent example is the largely metaethical focus on classical eudaimonism in Mark LeBar's *The Value of Living Well* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[3] Julia Annas, "Virtue Ethics and Social Psychology," *A Priori* 2 (2003): 20–34.

[4] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), 1145a31–2, cf. 1178a16–20.

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When updating classical virtue ethics, however, there are ways in which we might make too little use of practical rationality. Lawrence Becker's explanation is accurate when he writes that, for virtue ethics, practical reasoning is what solves "problems of clarifying and operationalizing the end (of our endeavors), finding effective means for reaching the end within the constraints of the project, and generating norms of reformative assessment."[5] Yet description at this level is not easily put to use in assessing or arguing for particular behavior.

In contrast, ancient virtue ethicists do seem to have put practical rationality to use. By this I do not mean that they simply recognized the complexity of our psychology and moral development (one could do this by merely making allowances for agents unable to follow some right course). Instead, as I intend to show, their practical recommendations were designed to be fit into practical rationality understood as a process.

Attention to this process might help to eliminate the impression that practical rationality is a "mysterious" component in virtue ethics about which we should be skeptical.[6] In an influential critique, Robert Johnson depicts Aristotle as having offered no further explanation of moral reasoning than that "the virtuous, simply in virtue of their virtues" know what they are to do. He takes Aristotle to regard a person who is honest as having done nothing "over and above simply 'deciding to tell the truth from now on.' "[7] John Doris also seems to be worried that virtue ethics fails to spell out (or even hides) what is involved in practical rationality. As he has put it most recently, what concerns him is virtue ethics' "preoccupation" with "personal dispositions that embody attempts to exercise practical rationality."[8]

[5] Lawrence Becker, *A New Stoicism,* 50.

[6] Instead, thinking in terms of virtue is so "unmysterious that it is easily seen to be open to anyone who embarks on learning to be virtuous to begin with." Annas, *Intelligent Virtue,* 56. Richard Sorabji had previously explained the misleading impression that reading select portions of Aristotle might give. He writes, "The emphasis on habit at the beginning of Book 2 is only one of many cases. Nonetheless, (Aristotle) does not always fail to prepare us for his total view, and I would in particular resist the suggestion that he has left us unprepared for the account of practical wisdom in Book 6. On the contrary, he begins to pave the way in Book 1, when he says in chapter 13 that the virtue of character belongs to the part of the soul that listens to reason. Books 2–4 continue with the preparation, by repeatedly saying that the mean in virtue is in accordance with logos or *orthos logos* [right reason]." Richard Sorabji, "Aristotle on the Role of Intellect in Virtue," *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics,* Amelie Rorty, ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 218.

[7] Robert Johnson, "Virtue and Right," *Ethics* 113 (2003): 818, 823.

[8] When John Doris first developed his "situationist" critique of Aristotelian virtue ethics, he was accused of leaving the role of practical rationality out of his description of Aristotelian ethics. Doris reformulated his critique to include practical rationality. John Doris, *The Moral Psychology Handbook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 370. Concerns about how realistic the recommendations of the classic accounts of virtue are can also be found in the following articles. Maria Merritt, "Character," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 6 no. 1 (2009): 23–49. Christian Miller, "Social Psychology and Virtue Ethics." *The Journal of Ethics* 7 (2003): 365–92. Also, "Social Psychology, Mood, and Helping: Mixed Results for Virtue Ethics," *Journal of Ethics* 13 (2009): 145–73.

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Yet we have so much more explanation than this. Aristotle's description of practical rationality acknowledges the role of agents' "discriminatory ability to 'read' a situation."[9] He recognizes that we deliberate differently during, before, and after an action. He describes emotional components of the process. He even points to a subprocess that engages in the determination that an issue has been settled.[10] So perhaps Aristotle's formal description of practical rationality should suffice in response to concerns that classical virtue ethics lacks an account of how we morally develop. But there is much further evidence besides, as those familiar with the ancient texts are aware. Readily available in the original versions, though it has received very little attention in the contemporary revival of virtue ethics, is the practical guidance given by virtue ethicists. The arguments made in support of particular behavior, the manner in which they are made and the resources they make use of, demonstrate how virtue ethics is supposed to work. To show this, I am going to turn to several examples of these arguments. They serve as models for how we can argue using virtue ethics today.

II. Ethical Argument in Virtue Ethics

David Wiggins, in a close read of Aristotle's description of practical rationality, makes clear an aspect of Aristotle's account that is crucial to practical recommendation. When we listen to ethical argument we do not do so as blank slates, ready to accept maxims and principles on trust; neither are we able to clear out our previous conceptions so that they can be replaced all at once.

> No theory, if it is to recapitulate or reconstruct practical reasoning even as well as mathematical logic recapitulates or reconstructs the actual experience of conducting or exploring deductive argument, can treat the concerns which an agent brings to a situation as forming a closed, complete, consistent system. For it is to be the essence of these concerns to make competing and inconsistent claims. (This is a mark not of irrationality, but of rationality in the face of the plurality of ends and the plurality of human goods.) The weight of the claims represented by these concerns is not necessarily fixed in advance. Nor need the concerns be hierarchically ordered. Indeed, a man's reflection on a new situation that confronts him may disrupt such order and fixity as had previously existed and bring a change in his evolving conception of the point, or at several or many points, of living and acting.[11]

[9] Daniel Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues,* 21.
[10] Ibid., 21–23.
[11] David Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Wisdom," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics,* ed. Amélie O. Rorty (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 233.

The first thesis (of an eventual three) that I would like to extract on how classical virtue ethics relates ethical arguments to our practical reasoning is this: If ethical arguments are to have an impact on people's practical rationality, they must address the actual "competing and inconsistent claims" with which agents are (and will continue to be) working. It is, of course, possible that psychologists will find that, when it comes to ethics, we are more effectively addressed in an indirect fashion. Perhaps diversion works. But classic virtue ethics is committed to the notion that our own moral reasoning responds to, along with other inputs, to be sure, *argument;* argument of a sort, that is.

A. Theophrastus

The ancient Aristotelian Theophrastus provided several arguments for abstaining from meat.[12] The textual evidence suggests that he explains, in a fairly intricate way, the type of value that animals have. He distinguishes this value from that of plants (animals have an animating principle that plants do not). He also points to the differences in how we procure food from plants and animals. (Plants would let go of their fruit anyway but animals would not give up their lives for us.) He discusses animals' pain on being hunted. He takes up religious reasoning. Even if, he explains, the gods are said to have given animals to us for our use, it does not make sense to use them unnecessarily. He looks to evidence that even the gods recognize the independent value of animals.[13] Finally, he takes up the topic of whether meat eating can be justified by the ancient Greek traditions. What of the rituals involving the sacrifice of animals? A proper interpretation of the purpose of these rituals, he argues, would lead to the elimination of the use of animals in them. This may even have been how they were originally performed, he points out.

We do not always associate virtue ethics with arguments that pick up on a large range of commonly held claims in the way that Theophrastus's argument does. Contemporary ethicists have in fact objected to virtue ethics as an approach because they have thought it would entail that any ethical behavior is done, ultimately, for the sake of the agent's own morality rather than (as is thought proper) for the sake of others. In the case of animal treatment, this concern could arise if animals are viewed as being spared not for their own sake, but for the sake of a person's virtue. Though Theophrastus does argue that refraining from eating meat will

[12] Porphyry, "On Abstinence from Animal Food, Book the Second," *The Select Works of Porphyry,* Thomas Taylor, trans. (London: T. Rodd 1823), 45–80, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/porphyry_abstinence_02_book2.htm

[13] "But if someone should say that God gave animals for our use, no less than the fruits of the earth, yet it does not follow that they are, therefore, to be sacrificed, because in so doing they are injured, through being deprived of life." Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Animal Food,* Book 2, pp. 45–80.

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contribute to temperance, it would contribute to temperance only due to the reasons he provides for why it is wrong. His argument does not depend upon the audience being precommitted to temperance. And the method Theophrastus uses demonstrates the standard argumentative range of classical virtue ethics.

B. Arguing from Virtue

Many contemporary articles on virtue have this argumentative structure: they explain why a chosen virtue "should be considered a virtue" and also account for several "dimensions of the word's (the specified virtue's) meaning."[14] Examples of behavior may be brought up in the course of such an analysis, but the point of these articles is to properly conceive of a virtue, not to assess examples of behavior. Another style of argument is better referred to as an "argument from virtue." This would be to make use of a description of virtue, or the virtuous, or a flourishing life, to make a case against some particular behavior.[15] It is this second type of approach on which I want to focus in order to draw a contrast between it and Theophrastus's method of making contact with the "competing and inconsistent claims" that Wiggins describes us all as holding. I will refer to Theophrastus's method as "addressing common claims" in the sense of taking up the views and arguments that already exist related to a behavior. Like the set Theophrastus represents, these "common claims" could be a matter of unreflective common sense ("eating meat is part of our evolution, and therefore good") or they may be carefully crafted by philosophers or scientists.

Rosalind Hursthouse has much to say on how to argue using virtue ethics. She demonstrates the flexibility of the approach, and at times certainly takes up common claims (as in her own classic work on abortion) but is also willing to use "arguments from virtue." She is unapologetic about the sophistication necessary for an audience to appreciate an argument from virtue. She admits that virtue- and vice-related terms are "difficult to apply correctly," and that "anyone" might challenge her "application of any of them." But the alternative, that we couch our ethics in only "terms that all clever adolescents can apply correctly," will not do.[16]

So it is not just any type of oversimplification that she intends when she refers to the following argument of hers as "oversimplifying." Here she

[14] Some examples of articles like this are quite wonderful. Irene McMullin, "A Modest Proposal: Accounting for the Virtuousness of Modesty," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 60, no. 241 (2010): 783–807.

[15] Another example of excellent work done in this manner: Rosalind McDougall, "Parental Virtue: A New Way of Thinking about the Morality of Reproductive Constraints," *Bioethics* 21 (2007): 181–90. McDougall develops an account of parental virtues and explains that they lead to different behaviors (such as not being ready to abandon a child who develops a disability).

[16] Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 244.

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makes the exact distinction on which I want to focus. The argument is (i) temperance is a virtue and (ii) "for most of 'us' eating meat is intemperate (greedy, self-indulgent)."[17]

This is clearly not an address made to an adolescent. For Hursthouse, the idea that we can argue "from virtue" assumes that we are addressing people with a sophisticated appreciation for what virtue is. Hursthouse herself takes pains to emphasize that when she makes a case (even a nonsimplified one) she is only effectively addressing those already partaking in an "ethical outlook." Such a person has already identified her interests with being moral, so terms of everyday opprobrium ("selfish, thoughtless, mean") already matter and make sense. Aristotle discusses similar expectations of his audience. What difference might be made if an audience for an ethical argument has a prior commitment or inclination toward virtue? There is one. Those with an "ethical outlook" may already be motivated to follow sound ethical recommendations. But I want to suggest that even people at a high level of moral development will need arguments that reference generalizable concerns, or "common claims" about any particular issue.

Even though when Hursthouse argues "from virtue" it is in the context of her greater theory (and in the example I used, also in the context of a distinct argument about the nature of naturalism), I worry that the impression it gives may not represent her basic commitments well. Here is how her simplified example has been interpreted.

> Hursthouse's analysis of meat eating exposes two key features of the virtue ethics approach to animals. First, according to virtue ethics, meat eating, and by extension a variety of other uses of animals such as experimentation on them for the benefit of human beings, is not inherently pernicious. Instead, the moral status of such uses of animals is determined in each case by the underlying moral outlook and specific virtues that it accommodates. Second, virtue ethics makes moral evaluations from the standpoint of the good life for human beings. It promotes the cultivation of character states that enable agents to live in moderation in regard to those virtues acknowledged by the prevailing moral outlook.[18]

[17] Ibid., 227. The immediate context of this "oversimplifying" is a discussion of naturalism and she points out that her methodology keeps her from begging the question by providing a naturalistic justification of (i). She does not want to "start with claims about how things are in regards to human beings eating meat." She wants to start with a well-justified account of temperance. Once she has that, meat eating can meaningfully be decried as a way of seeking excessive pleasure through eating.

[18] Gary Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 15. Contemporary environmental ethicists such as Holmes Rolston explain their general opposition to standard virtue ethics as follows, "We may say, before callous destruction of passenger pigeons, bison, or desert fish: 'No *self-respecting* person would do that.' Yes, but the reason is that my *respect for the other,* which ought to be realized and

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Theophrastus's approach to meat eating avoids suggesting that it is not meat eating per se that is at issue (but its impact on temperance) and that we only properly become vegetarian for ourselves. And of course, it is not just the impression given to ethicists that should be of concern. Agents themselves, even if already successfully committed to temperance, are going to need to engage common claims of the sort Theophrastus represents (though, of course, in modern variants). That is to say, we have misconceived the moral reasoning that underlies virtue, making it far more mysterious than it is, if we take a virtuous vegetarian to have tapped into a body of reasons ("reasons of temperance") that do not relate to the current body of thought concerning animal cognition research and related arguments in environmental ethics.

Hursthouse recommends a Theophrastus-like engagement with common claims often enough. As she writes, "If we are going to talk about good human lives, in the context of abortion, we have to bring our thoughts about the value of love and family life, and our proper emotional development through a natural life cycle." She dismisses the value of metaphysical speculation on when personhood begins (work not easily done by laypeople) for the relevance of all sorts of "familiar" facts about pregnancy.[19] In this way, and not through an analysis of some particular virtue, Hursthouse develops a virtue-based take on the morality of abortion.

C. *Aristotle*

Aristotle's own description of temperance provides yet one further illustration of the role common claims play in arguments concerning virtue. But this is not obvious when only his *definition* of temperance is cited. His definition takes temperance to be a matter of how we relate to pleasures.[20] This does not represent what characterizes his general approach, however. It is the rest of his discussion that does the work of sorting out when overindulgence is morally problematic and how to determine when it is. Note that this already shows us that Aristotle himself does not "argue from virtue."[21] He cannot be doing so, as he does not assume that anyone in his audience has yet analyzed what temperance is.

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respected within myself, is diminished, not that my self-respect per se has tarnished. It is virtuous to recognize the rights of other persons, but the motivating force is their rights that I appreciate, not my self-respect. With the fish in jeopardy, we should care for a form of life that has an intrinsic value." Holmes Rolston III, "Environmental Virtue Ethics: Half the Truth but Dangerous as a Whole," in *Environmental Virtue Ethics,* ed. Philip Cafaro and Ronald Sandler (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 68.

[19] Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20 no. 3 (1991): 223–46.

[20] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1107b5–9 and 1117b25–27

[21] Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), note 67, p. 264. Broadie's concern is that even Aristotelian scholars have inadvertently depicted Aristotelian moral reasoning inaccurately. She suggests that there is "no encouragement from examples in the texts" to "depict the good Aristotelian agent as aiming to do some-

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Aristotle begins his discussion by pointing out that some failings of temperance are very minor. He refers to people who have a weakness for a particular kind of thing. Aristotle is not very concerned about this. If we think of the mistake in terms of practical rationality, an interest in some type of short-term pleasure has been weighted too heavily. This might not infect other beliefs in the same way grosser misunderstanding could.

The "self-indulgent" are the type of people who are having difficulties. The difference is not that the self-indulgent delight in just *one* of the following: the wrong things, standard things but more than most people do, standard things but in the wrong way; the self-indulgent delight in things they ought not *and* more than they should. (I suppose this is worse than simply indulging, but in a standard manner.) Whether someone is in this bad of a situation is to be determined by answering a series of questions—questions Aristotle merely poses. Do those we are considering pursue something "hateful"? Is what they do unseemly? Is the person led to this indulgence at the cost of other good things?

Rather than regard these as rhetorical glosses, we should consider Aristotle's account of temperance completed only upon determining answers to these questions. Being able to explain what is hateful about eating meat, what is grotesque about it, and what is lost when we eat it, is crucial to understanding how temperance applies to meat eating. The matter cannot be settled until these issues are. It is not in endlessly revising the formal definition of temperance that we truly follow Aristotle's model.

The general thesis I would like to extract from these examples is this: If ethical arguments are to have an impact on people's practical rationality, they cannot be oversimplified so as to exclude "common concerns" regarding a topic. The content of an argument for virtuous behavior involves existing arguments and claims about a behavior. Developed practical rationality does not require a type of argumentation so advanced that a novice could not recognize it. Developed practical rationality involves well-understood responses to the questions we share in common.

Yet, of course, not just any response, even if it is well understood, is adequate. Classical virtue ethics has several means of testing our ethical claims and personal assumptions. Some of these can be thought of, simply, as external to an agent. A justification that is incoherent is inappropriate for just that reason. Other means of testing our ethical rationales make use of the description of practical rationality that underlies classical virtue ethics.

III. The Test for Content

It is easy to assume that kindness is a virtue, but classically styled virtue ethics requires that you put this assumption to a test. What type of

thing called "acting courageously," "acting generously," and so on. As she argues, virtue terms stand in as "surrogates" for actual practical rationality, p. 249.

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test? The following example from Epictetus helps illustrate a method of spelling out consciously taken steps that are necessary to the process of receiving an ethical recommendation. These steps only approximate and model the actual engagement in which agents themselves must be involved in order to recognize the pull of moral claims. Yet I hope to show that referencing a stepwise process, even if it is a mere schema, exposes the underlying criteria for the "consistency" that virtue ethicists so often invoke as justification for good behavior.

> Well then to leave your sick child and to go away is not reasonable, and I suppose that you will not say that it is; but it remains for us to inquire if it is consistent with affection. "Yes, let us consider." Did you, then, since you had an affectionate disposition to your child, do right when you ran off and left her; and has the mother no affection for the child? "Certainly, she has." Ought, then, the mother also to have left her, or ought she not? "She ought not." And the nurse, does she love her? "She does." Ought, then, she also to have left her? "By no means." And the pedagogue, does he not love her? "He does love her." Ought, then, he also to have deserted her? And so should the child have been left alone and without help on account of the great affection of you, the parents, and of those about her, or should she have died in the hands of those who neither loved her nor cared for her? "Certainly not." Now this is unfair and unreasonable, not to allow those who have equal affection with yourself to do what you think to be proper for yourself to do because you have affection. It is absurd.[22]

In dialogue with a father so heartsick over an ill child that he thinks it is best that he not see her, Epictetus puzzles out what matters to the development of virtue: that we recognize the claims we are making, that we look for conflicts among them or with other things we value, and that we consider a way to adjust. I want to describe how Epictetus's representation of this approach can be seen as a matter of taking four steps.

The first step has Epictetus asking the father if affection for one's child is indeed a good. This issue is easily settled as the father agrees that it is. The second step is a matter of checking to see if the assumed good of affection can indeed be used by the father to justify his decision. Is he using the label of "affectionate" in a way that fits other applications? If he did not believe that his wife was indeed being affectionate in staying with

[22] Epictetus, *Discourses of Epictetus,* George Long, trans. (New York: Appleton and Company 1904), 34–35. Epictetus is a Stoic, but as Annas makes clear in *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), the core notions of classical virtue ethics can be found in the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the later Aristotelians. At the level of generality with which I am working, these versions share the same basic theoretical structure with each other and with several contemporary formulations of virtue ethics.

the child, for example, the question of what affection itself is would not be contested. The inappropriateness of the father's own behavior would be harder to determine. The third step is a matter of considering what you would want if you were in a position similar to the afflicted. The fourth step is a matter of checking one's motivations. Epictetus is skeptical that affection will turn out to be, on reflection, what has motivated the father. The father ends up agreeing with Epictetus. He determines that if he loves his child, he should stay by her side.

Referencing a series of steps like this in our arguments allows us to fill out the sense of "consistency" (or "harmony" or "lack of conflict") that is often used to describe the status of reasons or motivations in developed practical rationality. Classical virtue ethicists, classically styled virtue ethicists, and their interpreters each make heavy use of these terms. Our most reliable sources tell us that virtuous character is "a more-or-less consistent, more-or-less integrated, set of motivations, including the person's desires, beliefs about the world, and ultimate goals and values." What distinguishes virtue from folk conceptions of character is that "motivations are organized so that they do not conflict, but support one another."[23] Descriptions like these are apt in that they reinforce the idea that virtue ethics refuses to determine right and wrong outside of considerations of the context and the agent. But they can be unpacked, and this helps the standards of classic virtue ethics to become more apparent.[24]

It is not that any particular set of steps is necessary. Whether the steps referenced would be involved in identifying what actually is guiding our behavior, or whether they instead represent what is minimally necessary for us to change our mind on an ethical issue, it is reference to a stepwise process that focuses the author making the recommendation on this: ethics always involves an agent who must be ready to pick it up.

IV. The Use of Norms

Properly virtuous attitudes are frequently described in recent work in general virtue ethics. Virtue certainly involves attitudes. Attitudes span our affective and cognitive responses and these are precisely what virtue is said to involve. How exactly virtue can be related to attitudes, however, remains very unclear. Neither contemporary nor ancient accounts of virtue have yet established this relationship. Some attitudes have certainly been correlated with bad behavior, and it would seem that we are on to

[23] Rachana Kametekar, "Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character," *Ethics* 114 (2004): 460. Also see Lawrence Becker, *A New Stoicism,* 56–58.

[24] As recently as Annas's *Intelligent Virtue* was reviewed, a reviewer expressed the concern that "The criminal may seem to be organizing her life in a way that fits the structure of eudaimonistic happiness as Annas sketches it." (Erica Lucast Stonestreet, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews,* 8/19/2011, http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/25503-intelligent-virtue/)

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something if we have figured that out.[25] But there are a few reasons why I would discourage a focus on attitudes in arguments concerning virtuous behavior. One is simply that attitudes are not the same as virtue. Virtue is not made up of attitudes. We may have the right attitudes but—for many reasons—fail to develop any corresponding virtue.[26]

One could grant this point and still suggest that attitudes are a proper focus. But social psychologists have found that predicting admirable behavior is difficult to do on the basis of attitudes. And, when it comes to good behavior, we have found combinations that might seem surprising. The research of those who have studied the European rescuers of those targeted by the Nazis in World War II (the fifty thousand people Yad Vashem has identified, through a careful method of authentication, as "Righteous Among the Nations") has found that people virtuous enough to have continually risked their lives for others were capable of maintaining racist attitudes at the same time.[27]

Add to this that there are new worries about our ability to acquire information about peoples' attitudes in the first place. Studies are beginning to show how malleable and easily manipulated attitudes are. A memorable example of this comes from Erik Helzer and David Pizarro of Cornell, who have found that using hand sanitizer can impact subjects' reports of political attitudes. If attitudes are this malleable, or if at least some attitudes are this malleable, it is some evidence that we should not yet be terribly confident that attitudes will ever be found to undergird the psychological development of virtue.[28]

Of course even if we could identify the best attitudes (according to whatever terms we set), and if these did not vary across persons, even

[25] Lars Hall, P. Johansson, and T. Strandberg, "Lifting the Veil of Morality: Choice Blindness and Attitude Reversals on a Self-Transforming Survey," *PLOS ONE* 7, no. 9 (2012): DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0045457. Discussed online: http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/09/120919190608.htm

[26] Tom Hill deftly argues for some of the right attitudes towards nature yet he cautions that these attitudes are "not themselves moral virtues." Instead, we should think of them as "a natural basis for appreciation of others and gratitude." (And neither of these are virtues.) Hill makes it clear that the virtue in question would be "proper moral humility," and that related attitudes are only "psychological preliminaries" to this virtue. Tom Hill, Jr., "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments," *Environmental Ethics: What Really Matters, What Really Works,* David Schmidtz and Elizabeth Willott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 189–99.

[27] Samuel Oliner and Pearl Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1992). Also Kristen Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[28] I do not mean to ignore the longer-term research on attitudes that psychologists have found to be more stable than these professed political attitudes. A type of moral attitude, referred to as moral mandates, has been found to be more predictive of a person's behavior than even their moral judgments. But even this type of moral attitude, which recognizes some basic moral claims as universal, objective, and matters of fact, has not been found to track value in any predictable way *across* persons. Linda Skitka, C. W. Bauman, E. G. Sargis, "Moral Conviction: Another Contributor to Attitude Strength or Something More?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 88 no. 6 (2005): 895–917.

psychologists simply do not yet know how to bring new attitudes about.[29] Finally, there is the issue of where to put the cart and the horse. Ethicists recommend attitudes, attitudes such as "respect for animals." Yet ethicists might be careful to focus on determining the appropriateness of the objects of any attitude. I want to suggest that one object of an attitude is a norm.

V. Norms and Goodness

In the ancient examples of virtue ethics, the alternative to a focus on attitudes would be a focus on particular stated norms, norms capable of being put to use by agents themselves. Norms can be distinguished from attitudes because they do not have to originate in or somehow be psychologically backed by an agent (she could just acknowledge a social norm). Norms concern a generalized, typically third person, description of some specified behavior. Aristotle's discussion of how to repay debts, in book nine, chapter two of the *Nicomachean Ethics* provides some charming examples of norms. As he writes, "To all older persons, too, one should give honor appropriate to their age, by rising to receive them and finding seats for them and so on."[30] Later virtue ethicists present their audience with norms like "educate one's daughters as one's sons."[31] How many benefits might come from framing moral recommendations in terms of norms? Quite a few as I see it.

For one, in a way we cannot do with attitudes, we can integrate these norms into the stepwise process of moral reasoning that can be offered along with any recommendation. The steps which we would take in focusing on this type of norm, if we followed ancient models, would involve first identifying the norms being used (or capable of being asserted as being of use). Next we could test these norms in a manner that seems rather standard: Are they coherent? Are they factually accurate? Do they reflect prejudice or bias? Then we would test them in a manner similar to that which has been detailed above in the example of the grieving father. Norms must be fit with other norms we consider to be endorsed. Finally, we can emphasize that we must become motivated to follow any recommended norm. Handily, norms have been found to have motivational effects, so rather than trying to motivate a person to have a better attitude (however that would be done), if we argue for one norm over another, we are dealing with constructs that already have motivational appeal.[32] This process is akin to the one that brings about virtue and improved morality. In contrast, it is not clear

[29] Ibid., 915.
[30] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1165a 27–30
[31] See Cora Lutz, *Musonius Rufus: The Roman Socrates,* 44–47.
[32] Chandra Sripada and Stephen Stich, "A Psychological Framework for Norms," *The Innate Mind, Volume 2: Culture and Cognition,* ed. Peter Carruthers, Stephen Laurence, and Stephen Stich (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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how recommending or developing attitudes fits into the account of moral development that classical virtue ethics provides.

For classical virtue ethicists, the work of assessing a practical situation begins by regarding it in the right way. Aristotle describes us as involved in "a search" when we deliberate using practical rationality. This is "not primarily a search for means. It is a search for the *best specification.* Till the specification is available there is no room for means."[33] Norms, of course, as they can be stated in sentence form, are easier to specify than attitudes or an outlook. Specified norms readily serve as objects for an agent's own moral deliberation. If we recommend an attitude, we are not leaving a role for the agent in terms of how to understand or apply it. As the ancients pointed out, when following any norm, an agent must still ask herself (or have already decided) whether (to use the ancient terms) she is doing so in a way that is honorable, beneficial, or if there is any conflict between either of these appearances.[34] In this way, specifying norms in our recommendations is yet another way to refer us back to the process involved in moral reasoning.

Usefully, we might assert a norm in explanation of our behavior even when we were not in fact making use of it. That we can do this allows us to acknowledge potential opaqueness about our motives. (It does not seem we can as easily say that an attitude we lacked explains past behavior.) If we have only, in retrospect, identified a norm, we can still proceed with it, despite the veracity of any self-report. This is to say that if our moral reasoning is, as psychologist Jonathan Haidt and colleagues suggest, in some sense *post hoc,* then norms assist the process of moral reasoning by giving us a handle with which to get at (*post hoc*) explanations of our behaviors.[35]

The recommendation of a norm moves us from a focus on narrowly defined self-interested explanations to more generalizable concerns. There are several aspects to this. When we follow social norms, researchers have observed that this leads to behavior which departs from simply defined measures of self-interest.[36] Furthermore, once we state a norm (which in itself is a way to generalize a recommendation) it is understood to *apply* generally. In this way it is subject to a few checks. One, it ought to apply to us all (including the author of the advice). Two,

[33] David Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Reason," 228.

[34] Cicero, *On Duties,* III.4, eds. M. T. Griffin and E. M. Atkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[35] Jonathan Haidt and C. Joseph, "The moral mind: How Five Sets of Innate Moral Intuitions Guide the Development of Many Culture-Specific Virtues, and Perhaps Even Modules," *The Innate Mind, Volume 3: Foundations and the Future,* ed. Peter Carruthers, S. Laurence, and S. Stich, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 367–91. Also, Jonathan Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment," *Psychological Review* 108 (2001): 814–34.

[36] Lawrence Becker, *A New Stoicism,* 57. Becker explains this process in contemporary terms.

any of us can test a norm in action. Over time, norms have come and gone as a result of not passing these tests. Some become obviously good and beyond question. Others we advertise as bad and eventually communally reject.[37]

Norms can be seen as useful in ways that suit recent suggestions about the second person normative force of virtue-based claims. Norms are better suited than attitudes for communicating our moral demands upon others since an attitude can be difficult to communicate. We, of course, commonly use norms to instruct others about proper treatment. As Mark LeBar puts it, virtue requires that we be able to insist our moral claims have some force that applies to others. As an example, when we determine that hurting someone needlessly is wrong, we must then be able instruct others to stop hurting us.[38] Norms are well suited to such analysis.

It also looks as if a reliance on norms can be found to explain the differences between those with exemplary ethical behavior and the rest of us. The careful research of those who have studied the European rescuers of Jews during World War II (the Righteous Among the Nations) presents what Kristen Monroe describes as "the puzzle" of deep altruism: it cannot be tracked to one source.[39] Samuel and Pearl Oliner, on the basis of repeated interviews with four hundred and six rescuers, have found that the difference was not a matter of empathy. It was not higher self-esteem (in fact rescuers on average had worse self-esteem). Respondents do not provide evidence that it was a matter of logic or reasoning. The notion of being high-minded and principled was something rescuers attributed to supporters of the Nazis.[40] The research has established that it was not any general type of upbringing, religious or not, that explains the behavior of these rescuers. Why did common effects, like the "bystander effect," not take hold of these people, who by all sorts of measures seem otherwise quite typical? (They did tend to keep helping people in their lives, but many of us do that.)[41]

A conclusion drawn in these longitudinal studies on The Righteous is that the most common motivation they had was "normocentric." The definition given is that "unlike an empathetic reaction, a normocentric reaction is not rooted in a deep connection with the victim, but rather in a feeling of obligation to a social reference group with whom the actor identifies and whose explicit and implicit rules he feels obliged to obey." The agent "perceives the social group as imposing norms of behavior, and

[37] Mark LeBar, "Virtue Ethics and Deontic Constraints," *Ethics* 119 (2009): 642–71. Also, "Aristotelian Constructivism," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 25, no. 1 (2008): 182–213.

[38] Kristen Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity,* 11.

[39] Oliner and Oliner, *Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe,* 257; Kristen Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity,* 185.

[40] "Significantly more rescuers are currently involved in community activities." Oliner and Oliner, *Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe,* 245.

[41] Oliner and Oliner, *Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe,* 199.

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for these rescuers, inaction was considered a violation of the group's code of proper conduct."[42] Monroe asserts that the recognition of and confidence in basic social norms was one thing that could be used to distinguish The Righteous from their neighbors. As she puts it, the commitment is to the idea that there is a normal course of social behavior and that such "normal behavior" is right and proper.[42] This outlook, this commitment to norms, Monroe writes, "translates into the idea that such behavior requires no explanation."[43]

Annas and Hursthouse each comment on how moral exemplars, when asked about their good behavior, should not be expected to provide explanations that sound like they were written for the page. Virtue is, instead, deeply internalized. Hursthouse writes that "[v]irtue must surely be compatible with a fair amount of inarticulacy about one's reasons for action."[44] Annas tells us our moral exemplars may, when asked why they did what they did, initially respond with mere nonmoralized details about the situation they saw themselves in. "He was going near the wasps' nest," is an example of such a response.[45]

A focus on norms can account for this feature of virtue, when a focus on attitudes would shift our attention to some other, missing, explanation. Have you ever run after a person who has dropped his wallet? Did you stop to check how much money was in the wallet before deciding to give it to its owner? Perhaps this behavior was supported by norms so well endorsed by you that you did not need to review them before you ran with the wallet. I imagine the response if you were asked about this behavior would be something like "Well, it was his wallet." Or, "You can't keep what isn't yours."

A "normocentric" approach suits classical virtue ethics. We can explain our least controversial examples of good behavior in terms of regard for norms. We can address "competing and inconsistent claims" through the discussion of norms. We can use norms to help us to think through our own motives. Even when we find virtue ethicists describing "principles" as structuring virtue, unless these principles are listed and easily described, I suspect they really intend to refer to what we mean by norms.

[42] Kristen Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity,* 11.

[43] Here are some examples of explanations provided in interviews: "Everybody does it." "That's what you're supposed to do." "What else was there to do?" Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity,* 11. The reasoning, as may be obvious, was not even indirectly explained in terms of self-benefit. Monroe did not interview one rescuer who believed her actions helping others were going to benefit her in the afterlife.

[44] Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics,* 127.

[45] Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue,* 28–29. Annas is great on the reasons moral exemplars might give. First they might just describe the details of the situation as they have found relevant to their action—these might be factual matters. When pressed they should be able to "give an account" but it will not be a formal account akin to one an ethicists would provide in a paper.

VI. Conclusion

The New York Times recently ran a contest seeking the best justification for meat eating.[46] It is a bit embarrassing to eat meat and not have a justification for it, and perhaps the enthusiastic effort in response to the contest shows as much. Classical virtue ethics gives us a slightly different expectation, however, when it comes to how we ought to approach our own behavior. In a recent interview, Martha Nussbaum was asked if she had any misgivings, writing on justice as she does, and still dining at the expensive restaurant in which the interview was taking place.

> "How do you justify eating in a nice restaurant or even reading a book, since those, too, are privileges that many cannot afford?"
>
> Nussbaum: "There are no legal barriers to anyone eating in a restaurant, but still, the point you raised troubles me, and I think we are obliged to promote greater economic equality."[47]

Nussbaum's response is a good example for classical virtue ethics. When moral points are raised against us, they should trouble us. That is, they should trouble us as agents. Any solution is not one we can take part in passively or merely intellectually. Even after we have been alerted to the difficulty (not having a justification for fine dining), any resolution will take time and involve a process. This is a process that has us specifying norms, sharing them, testing them, and then changing our own behavior. Nussbaum could have, of course, responded with a sophisticated justification for eating in the restaurant, one similar in complexity to the defenses of meat eating the newspaper received. Yet, as Aristotle tells us, if ethics is for the sake of better action, it seems appropriate to admit, at certain points, that we are indeed at the stage of being simply "troubled."

This is not only on our own behalf, of course. If we address common claims on a subject and focus on offering a proposed norm, this pulls the focus from the agent's own justification to, instead, a recommended practice that we might all try out. ("It is acceptable to dine out when . . . .") This invites feedback, which is appropriate in a field like ethics. It avoids faux sophistication. It discourages finger pointing and self-congratulation. We are encouraged to "test out" solutions on ourselves, and we are pushed to explain what has gone wrong in a person for whom the determined right course of action is not obtainable.

Much of the work in communicating classical virtue ethics has been a matter of choosing what aspects of the ancient view to bring forward and communicate to a contemporary audience. We now have multiple, exqui-

[46] Ariel Kramer, *New York Times,* March 10, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/25/magazine/tell-us-why-its-ethical-to-eat-meat-a-contest.html?_r=2&ref=dining&

[47] Deborah Solomon, *New York Times,* December 10, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/13/magazine/13FOB-Q4-t.html?_r=0

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sitely argued accounts of the theoretical structure of virtue ethics. The ancient philosophy relevant to these projects has been carefully referenced and has become familiar to ethicists generally. There remain, however, ample stores of ancient advice and admonition. Perhaps these were just saved for last, but I hope that bringing examples of these to contemporary audiences can help round out the view and make it seem more plausible.

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