

Some Questions about Virtue

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Abstract. So far as Anglophone academic study is concerned, interest in the idea of virtue as a central concept in ethical theory only dates from the late 1950s beginning with Elizabeth Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy" but getting its first specific discussion in Georg Von Wright's 1963 book *The Varieties of Goodness* in which he writes: "Virtue is a neglected topic in modern ethics". As the present essay shows, these words became a common refrain through the 1970s, 80s and 90s. The rise to prominence of ideas of virtue in philosophy and then in educational theory and in psychology, as well as in schemes for establishing good practice in various fields of professional and public life raises questions about how a focus on virtue relates to other ways of evaluating agents and actions, and of how virtue itself may be identified and assessed.

Key words: Anscombe, Aquinas, Situationism, Von Wright, Virtue Ethics.

I. Ideas of virtue and of its role in schooling, in the conduct of personal and social life, and in the achievement of mental well-being are now prominent in areas of educational theory, philosophy, and psychology, as well as in schemes for establishing good practice in various fields of employment, and professional and public life. This rise to prominence in areas of academic study and practical application is quite recent and it raises questions about how a focus on virtue relates to other ways of evaluating agents and actions, and of how virtue itself may be identified and assessed. A particular version of the latter point relevant to psychological studies and to the evaluation of practical efficacy is whether virtue (and vice) can be measured. One of the factors that gives current relevance to this question is the increasing interest and investment in character education and in the estimation of its benefits. Here I am concerned with aspects of these questions: in particular with how a virtue-centred ethics might be conceived of in relation to other kinds of normative ethical theories, and with whether degrees of virtue can be quantified.

II. I begin, however, with an exploration of the history in recent Anglophone philosophy of orientations towards virtue as being the primary ethical category. Given the currency of “virtue ethics” and the suggestion that it is an alternative to consequentialist and deontological ethical theories it is perhaps surprising that so far as mainstream, secular English-language academic study is concerned, interest in the idea of virtue as a central concept in ethical theory only begins to emerge at the end of the 1950s. I set aside here discussions of virtue(s) among mid-twentieth century moral theologians, though these were not prominent outside neo-scholastic circles¹, and among historians of philosophy who were not in any case much concerned with ethics. But even among the latter group, those who wrote broad histories of ethics did not make much of virtue other than in their accounts of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics. The precedent was set by Sidgwick in his very widely read *Outlines of the History of Ethics for English Readers* first published in 1866, revised several times in his lifetime and supplemented by the American philosopher Alban Widgery in the 1930s. Sidgwick writes of Augustine’s efforts “to Christianise the old Platonic list” and mentions Aquinas’s scheme of virtues mainly to point to the influence of the ancient schools on his thinking. Given the frequency with which Aquinas is now cited in accounts of virtue ethics, second only among historical figures to Aristotle, it may again surprise readers to learn that even the Thomistic philosopher Vernon J Bourke in his 1968 *History of Ethics* makes little mention of virtue outside his account of the ancients. He has no entry on “virtue” in the index and while his chapter on the medieval writers describes the reception of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* he characterises the theories of the period as instances of ‘right reason ethics’ *recta ratio*, and his discussion of twentieth century ethics up to the up to the mid 1960s which includes the work of Kurt Baier, Richard Brandt, William Frankena, Stuart Hampshire, Richard Hare, John Rawls, Peter Strawson, and Stephen Toulmin, makes no mention of virtue. The exception among Anglo-American writers on the history of moral philosophy is Alasdair MacIntyre. His *A Short History of Ethics* was first published in 1966 two years before Bourke’s book and it has many entries on “virtue” and “vice” as well as on particular virtues and vices. One may think this is not so surprising given that in the following decade he began the work that would be published in 1981 as *After Virtue*, but I think that apart from a greater sensitivity to the diversity of moral concepts reflective of a diversity of cultural assumptions, another factor is that he was aware of ideas developing within analytical moral philosophy, particularly in reaction to various kinds of emotivism.

¹For an exemplary neo-Thomist philosophical rather than theological treatment of ethics in which the virtues are extensively discussed see Oesterle 1957, reprinted in Haldane, 2004.

III. The most commonly cited source of the rise of interest in virtue is Elizabeth Anscombe's 1958 article "Modern Moral Philosophy"; but while this is rightly celebrated for its philosophical energy, insight and imagination the discussion of virtue is only a small part of her concern and it is not introduced as part of a moral theory, though what is said is certainly interesting and reflection on it continues to bear fruit.² By way of brief reminder, her first stated concern was with the failure of moral philosophers, as she saw it, to develop an adequate philosophy of psychology. She introduces the issue by considering the question of why it is bad to be unjust and returns to the general concern about moral psychology later, again focussing on the case of justice which is the only virtue that she actually discusses. The reason for this restriction, I believe, is that she thought that other traditional virtues (prudence, temperance, and courage) could be given broadly instrumental justifications in terms of the interests of the agent whereas injustice is intrinsically bad. She writes as follows:

In present day philosophy an explanation is required how an unjust man is a bad man, or an unjust action a bad one; to give such an explanation belongs to ethics; but it cannot even be begun until we are equipped with a sound philosophy of psychology. For the proof that an unjust man is a bad man would require a positive account of justice as a "virtue." This part of the subject-matter of ethics, is however, completely closed to us until we have an account of what type of characteristic a virtue is – a problem, not of ethics, but of conceptual analysis – and how it relates to the actions in which it is instanced: a matter which I think Aristotle did not succeed in really making clear. For this we certainly need an account at least of what a human action is at all, and how its description as "doing such and such" is affected by its motive and by the intention or intentions in it; and for this an account of such concepts is required³

It is clear from this passage that Anscombe's interest was less in proposing a new (or renewing an older) theory for ethics, than in understanding the different factors that contribute to determining the value of an action. In the previous year or so she had published a pamphlet entitled *Mr Truman's Degree*; the text of a BBC radio talk "Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?"; the short book *Intention*; and extracts from it as an academic paper of the same title.⁴ The first two items are ablaze with indignation at what she clearly regarded as the immorality of

² See Anscombe 1958, reprinted in Geach and Gormally (eds) 2005, and related essays there and in Geach and Gormally (eds) 2008. See also Gormally, Jones and Teichmann (eds) 2016.

³ Anscombe, 1958, pp. 4-5.

⁴ See Anscombe 1956, 1957a and 1957b.

attitudes taken by academic moral philosophers towards the killing of the innocent; but her reaction included an element of puzzlement which was partly resolved by seeing that they had a shallow view of action. These concerns reappear in “Modern Moral Philosophy” again in the form of moral indignation and criticism of erroneous philosophical ideas about action. Later in the essay she returns to the latter, writing that:

«It might remain to look for “norms” in human virtues ... so perhaps the species *man*, regarded not just biologically, but from the point of view of the activity of thought and choice in regard to the various departments of life – powers and faculties and use of things needed – “has” such-and-such virtues: and this “man” with the complete set of virtues is the “norm” ...

...

But meanwhile is it not clear that there are several concepts that need investigating simply as part of the philosophy of psychology and, as I should recommend – banishing ethics totally from our minds? Namely – to begin with: “action”, “intention”, “pleasure”, “wanting”. More will probably turn up if we start with these. Eventually it might be possible to advance to considering the concept “virtue”; with which, I suppose, we should be beginning some sort of a study of ethics. »⁵

Somewhat characteristically of Anscombe’s work, her hard, compact, and sometimes fragmentary thoughts took time to be appreciated and developed; and her idea about how virtue might be related to human nature as a species norm only got its first proper development as late as the 1990s in the work Michael Thompson.⁶ That Anscombe herself has relatively little to say about virtue and that what she says is more from the side of philosophical psychology is due to the fact that she had not then thought about how to locate it within a larger scheme of moral evaluation, and nor did she explicitly address that issue in later writings; but her broad suggestion about how one might turn towards virtues as sources of norms did have influence in the thought of others.

IV. Where the idea of virtue as a central concept for secular moral philosophy gets its first specific discussion is in chapter VII of Georg Von Wright’s 1963 book *The Varieties of Goodness* which is based on his 1960 series of St Andrews Gifford

⁵ Anscombe, 1958, pp. 14-15.

⁶ See Thompson, 2008 Chs. 1-4 & 10 & 11.

Lectures. The Chapter title is simply “Virtue” but the opening sentence of the first section runs “Virtue is a neglected topic in modern ethics”. As we will see, these or similar words became a common refrain through the 1970s, 80s and 90s, though as already noted the recent situation is very different and attention to virtue is now a prominent feature in motivational psychology and educational theory as well as in moral philosophy. It is worth reading a bit further into Von Wright’s discussion of the topic. He continues:

«The only full-scale treatment of virtue known to me is by Nicolai Hartmann. When one compares the place accorded to it in traditional moral philosophy, one may get the impression that virtue as a topic of philosophic discussion has become obsolete, outmoded. This impression may gain additional strength from the fact that traditional discussion has – with rather few notable exceptions – followed the footsteps of Aristotle without much variation or innovation or controversy. Kant’s famous dictum that formal logic had no appreciable progress since Aristotle, could be paraphrased and applied – with at least equally good justification – the ethics of virtue. ...

The relative neglect of the discussion of virtue is certainly connected with the predominance, for a long period, of that which could be called the (purely) *axiological* and *deontological* aspects of moral philosophy. Good and bad are value terms. Right and wrong are normative terms. But courage, temperance, and truthfulness we would not ordinarily call value concepts nor normative concepts. Some people would call them psychological concepts, but this too is not a very fitting name.»⁷

This passage and the account of virtue that follows it, is interesting for a number of reasons. First, it contains what may be the earliest purposeful use by an analytical philosopher of the expression ‘the ethics of virtue’. Second, it suggests, in line with earlier writers, that virtue as an ethical concept belongs most centrally within the Aristotelian tradition, and that later writers for whom virtue is a significant concept also belong within that tradition. Third, it implies that this tradition had not much developed from its ancient Aristotelian foundation. Neither Von Wright nor MacIntyre mention Anscombe in connection with the development of thinking about virtue, though they were both aware of her work and in the case of the former he was writing in a period during which it had attracted much attention

⁷ G. Von Wright, 1963, pp. 136-7.

particularly in relation to its seeming derivation of prescriptions from statements of fact. . He does, however, mention Philippa Foot as having “challenged Hare with prima facie convincing counterexamples [to his thesis that “evaluations are governed by no criteria but those which we ourselves choose to impose upon them”]. Philippa Foot’s attention has been concentrated on evaluative expressions connected with the virtues and vices, such as rude and courageous ...”⁸. The essay to which he is referring is ‘Moral Arguments’ published in the same year as “Modern Moral Philosophy”. Von Wright does not mention Foot but it is significant that she authored one of the most prominent reviews of his book, in which she writes «Von Wright devotes a whole chapter to the concept of virtue, remarking rightly that this is a neglected topic in modern moral philosophy. Unfortunately this is one of the least satisfactory parts of the present work, and in places the author seems to reject without good reason the teaching of the ancients.»⁹

A decade or so later Foot gathered “Moral Arguments” and a number of other essays developing the anti-subjectivist arguments around analysis of criteria for the application of evaluative concepts publishing them in the collection *Virtues and Vices* for which she wrote an opening essay of the same title. She begins with the now familiar refrain:

For many years the subject of the virtues and the vices was strangely neglected by moralists working within the school of analytic philosophy. The tacitly accepted opinion was that a study of the topic would form no part of the fundamental work of ethics ... However that may be, things have recently been changing. During the past ten or fifteen years several philosophers have turned their attention to the subject; notably G.W Von Wright and Peter Geach. Von Wright devoted a not at all perfunctory chapter to the virtues in his book *The Varieties of Goodness* published in 1963, and Peter Geach’s book called *The Virtues* appeared in 1977. Meanwhile a number of interesting articles on the topic have come out in the journals.

In spite of this recent work, it is best when considering the virtues and vices to go back to Aristotle and Aquinas. ... It is certain, in any case, that the most systematic account is found in Aristotle, and in the blending of Aristotelian and Christian philosophy found in St Thomas. By and large Aquinas followed Aristotle ... However, there are different emphases and new elements in Aquinas’s ethics: often he works things out in far more detail than Aristotle did, and it is possible to learn a great deal from Aquinas that one could not have got from Aristotle. It is my opinion that the *Summa Theologica* is one of the best sources we have for moral

⁸ MacIntyre, 1966, pp. 262-3

⁹ Foot, 1965, p. 242.

philosophy, and moreover that St Thomas's ethical writings are as useful to the atheist as to the Catholic or other Christian believer.¹⁰

Her mention of Geach (and not of Anscombe whom she otherwise acknowledges in the preface as an influence on her ethical writings) is interesting. It is to some extent a returned compliment, for at the outset of *The Virtues* Geach writes «For some time, for reasons I need not discuss, moral philosophers rather neglected the virtues; Philippa Foot has recently made what I take to be a move in the right direction by discussing the virtues rather than goodness in general» and later he writes «There are frequent attacks from this side [“D.Z. Phillips and others of that [Swansea Wittgensteinian] school”] upon Philippa Foot for trying, and of course failing, to show at this level of discourse that virtues ‘pay’ their bearers.»¹¹ Also of interest is that Foot represents Aquinas in the familiar way as providing an essentially Aristotelian ethical theory be it Christianised, and as differing from Aristotle not in approach but in the attention given to the various virtues, to which of course St Thomas adds distinctively Christian ones. Note that she does not talk about “an ethics of virtue” or “virtue ethics” but only of “the virtues and the vices”.

V. If, however, one is looking for *the* source of the idea of virtue ethics as a *distinct kind of moral theory* then I think that Rosalind Hursthouse who was a student of Foot and Anscombe, but followed more in the wake of the former, is the best candidate with her 1999 book *On Virtue Ethics*. There, in a form reminiscent of Von Wright's way of locating matters, she writes:

“Virtue ethics” is a term of art, initially introduced to distinguish an approach in normative ethics which emphasizes the virtues, or moral character, in contrast to an approach which emphasizes duties or rules (deontology) or one which emphasizes the consequences of actions (utilitarianism). ...

Up until about thirty years ago, normative ethics was dominated by just two theories: deontology ... and utilitarianism ... In the hundreds of books and articles on normative ethics published during the sixties and seventies, it was common to find versions of one or both of these theories outlined, discussed, amended, applied, compared and criticized – but no mention made of any third possibility which harked back to the ancient Greeks.

Gradually a change was observable ... various articles critical of the prevailing orthodoxy were cited as calling for a recognition of the

¹⁰ Foot, 1978, pp. 2-3.

¹¹ Geach, 1977, pp. 1 & 16.

importance of the virtues, and a few paragraphs on “what a virtue ethicist would say” were inserted. At first, the mentions tended to be short and dismissive. Virtue ethics was regarded not as a third approach in its own right, but as emphasizing a few interesting points – such as the motives and character of moral agents – that deontologists and utilitarians could usefully incorporate into their approaches. Then, as more articles were written in its defence, it acquired the status of the “new kid on the block” – yet to establish its right to run with the big boys, but not to be dismissed out of hand. The modern philosophers whom we think of as having put virtue ethics on the map – Anscombe, Foot, Murdoch, Williams, MacIntyre, McDowell, Nussbaum, Slote – had all absorbed Plato and Aristotle, and in some cases also Aquinas. ...

Describing virtue ethics loosely as an approach which “emphasises the virtues” will no longer serve to distinguish it. ... I doubt that any short answer to “What is virtue ethics?” would provide a satisfactory solution. What is needed is familiarity with virtue ethics comparable to that which everyone in the profession has with deontology and utilitarianism.¹²

This is an interesting and I think influential reflection. Notice the way in which it moves from talking about 1) the neglect of the virtues, and 2) of virtue ethics as an approach that emphasized moral character in contrast to rules and consequences, to 3) its being a rival theory to deontology and consequentialism, “a third approach in its own right”, and both “a new kid on the block” and 4) as having been “put on the map” by Anscombe, Foot etc who “had all absorbed Plato and Aristotle, and in some cases also Aquinas”. I think that we see history (and second-order ethical theorising) being written in these passages and in related writings. A narrative has been constructed of a Greek tradition of virtue-centered ethical theory being further developed in the middle ages, particularly by Aquinas, and then being rediscovered in the past fifty years and coming to self-consciousness as an autonomous theory to rival the existing occupants of the field.

This history and the associated conception of how ethics is structured is now widely shared, but it is not unproblematic. Here I will not explore the narrative as it runs from Aristotle and the recovery of Aristotelianism in the middle ages, but I do want to consider the position of Aquinas who in the usual account is represented as a prime example of a virtue ethicist holding a view akin to Aristotle’s save with a religious addition by which the proper end (*telos / finis*) of life is taken to extend beyond natural happiness (*eudaimonia*) to reach supernatural blessedness (*beatitudo*). This topic is a large one parts of which I have addressed elsewhere¹³

¹² Hursthouse, 1999, pp. 1-5.

¹³ See Haldane, 1989; 1991 and 2017, some parts of the following section draw from the

and here I restrict myself to considering points in Aquinas's treatment of ethics that are of special interest in the present context.

VI. In very general terms this is a teleological theory of right action. There is a good for human beings corresponding to the fulfillment of their natures, and the elements of this good can be discerned by looking to natural inclinations. The general form of this approach corresponds to the *ergon* argument of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1.7), and the place of virtue is as a habituated disposition to choose in accord with practical rationality where the content of this is specified not by its logical form but by the 'object' over which it is defined, namely the human good as that related to human nature.

What Aquinas is insistent upon, however, is that true virtue is only present where there is practical wisdom. His moral epistemology recognises three kinds of thoughts or forms of understanding corresponding to degrees of generality in ethical judgements:

1) *synderesis* which involves grasping the most general principles of practical reason beginning with the first and extending to those relating to the fundamental inclinations beginning with the good of life itself, and thereby of reason to preserve it other things being equal. Aquinas writes:

«the first principle of practical reason is one founded on the notion of good, viz. that "good is that which all things seek after." Hence this is the first precept of law, that "good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided." All other precepts of the natural law are based upon this: so that whatever the practical reason naturally apprehends as man's good (or evil) belongs to the precepts of the natural law as something to be done or avoided.»¹⁴

2) *scientia moralis* which relates to the working out of secondary moral rules derived from these previous ones, e.g. that theft should be punished. He writes: «The study of Morals, therefore, since it treats of human acts, should consider first the general principles; and secondly matters of detail».¹⁵

3) *conscientia*: which is the drawing of particular judgements in accord with right reason which in the practical case is an exercise of prudence or practical wisdom. He writes:

Moral virtue can be without some of the intellectual virtues, viz. wisdom science, and art; but not without understanding and prudence. Moral virtue cannot be without prudence, because it is a habit of choosing, i.e.

last of these essays.

¹⁴ *Summa Theologiae* Ia, IIae, q 94, a 2 responsio.

¹⁵ *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, IIae, q 6, prologue.

making us choose well. Now in order that a choice be good, two things are required. First, that the intention be directed to a due end; and this is done by moral virtue, which inclines the appetitive faculty to the good that is in accord with reason, which is a due end. Secondly, that man take rightly those things which have reference to the end: and this he cannot do unless his counsel, judge and command aright, which is the function of prudence and the virtues annexed to it, as stated above (57, a 5, 6). Wherefore there can be no moral virtue without prudence: and consequently neither can there be without understanding. For it is by the virtue of understanding that we know self-evident principles, both in speculative and in practical matters. Consequently just as right reason in speculative matters, in so far as it proceeds from known principles, presupposes the understanding of those principles, so also does prudence, which is the right reason about things to be done.¹⁶

These remarks about the necessity of prudence for moral virtue provide a basis on which to respond to some of the ‘situationist’ criticisms of the idea of stable character traits that arise at the interface of psychological and philosophical theories of action, and to which I return below. To put it briefly what they may show is not that there is no such thing as virtue but that the subjects whose behaviour is reported may be partially formed in their moral psychology, or have some grasp of certain rules but lack prudence in the exercise of them.

Two further points are relevant to present concerns. First, in contrast to other medieval authors such as Abelard and Scotus who argue that actions and character traits may, in themselves, be indifferent, showing that that the locus of virtue resides in consent and intention, Aquinas insists that while some action types may be classified as neutral any particular action will be drawn by some aspect of the situation to the side of either the good or the bad inasmuch as it advances or impedes the good of life. He further holds that any moral character trait as it exists in an actual agent will be either a virtue or a vice depending on whether it conduces to or is partly constitutive of human good or evil. He writes:

It sometimes happens that an action is indifferent in its species, but considered in the individual it is good or evil. And the reason of this is because a moral action ... derives its goodness not only from its object, whence it takes its species; but also from the circumstances, which are its accidents, as it were; just as something belongs to a man by reason of his individual accidents, which does not belong to him by reason of his species. And every individual action must needs have some circumstance that makes it good or bad, at least in respect of

¹⁶ *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, IIae, q 58, a 4 responsio.

the intention of the end. For since it belongs to the reason to direct; if an action that proceeds from deliberate reason be not directed to the due end, it is, by that fact alone, repugnant to reason, and has the character of evil. But if it be directed to a due end, it is in accord with reason; wherefore it has the character of good. Now it must needs be either directed or not directed to a due end. Consequently every human action that proceeds from deliberate reason, if it be considered in the individual, must be good or bad.¹⁷

This interesting passage tells us two things about Aquinas view of virtue and its relation to the question of the primary locus of moral value. First, since virtues are dispositions to choose the good, the explanation of their value is given in part by the good to which they are ordered. Second, where the consequentialist gives evaluative primacy to the *outcome* of an individual action, and the deontologist locates primary value in the *act-type*, Aquinas invokes choice and intention, and since these are the powers shaped by virtue presumes it also, but he does not assign evaluative priority to these either. Rather, he is a *pluralist* about the sources of moral rightness: disposition of agent, action type, intended (and to some degree foreseeable) outcome and particularities of circumstance. Certainly he takes virtue seriously and develops a moral psychology into which he fits it; but if ‘virtue ethics’ is to be a distinctive approach it has to accord evaluative priority to traits of character and that Aquinas does not do. This along with other aspects of his thinking touched on here is of more than historical interest and could usefully be brought to bear in contemporary discussions.

VII. At this point I wish to return to the issue mentioned at the outset of the assessment of virtue (and vice) by asking how they can be identified and whether they can be measured? These questions naturally arise in the context of early character education or later professional training if one thinks that character consists in, or is closely related to the possession of virtues and vices, and is also interested in the possibility that education and training may inculcate or develop the former and inhibit or diminish the latter, and seeks experimental evidence of such effects.¹⁸

I am sympathetic to the aims of the character education movement and appreciative of the good scholarly and practical work done in supportive of it (pre-eminently by the Jubilee Centre For Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham in England), and I believe that the most common psychological and philosophical criticisms of character as a determinant of action are misplaced.

¹⁷ *Summa Theologiae* Ia, IIae, q. 18, a 9 responsio.

¹⁸ For a discussion of these themes see Snow, Wright, and Warren forthcoming.

There is, however, an assumption shared by most advocates and critics which it is important to correct in part because it underlies some of those criticisms. This is the idea that, in one formulation “Character is a set of personal traits or dispositions that *produce* [my emphasis] specific moral emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct”.¹⁹ The relations between character and disposition, and between these and feeling, motivation and action are not *causal* but *constitutive*. Dispositions are elements of character: what character you have is a matter of what dispositions you have; likewise feelings, motivations and actions are actualisations of dispositions not effects of them. To explain someone’s action by reference to her having a certain virtue is not to explain an effect by reference to a *cause*, it is to identify the action as being of a certain *kind*, manifesting that character. Also, character and dispositions are not things but dynamic structures. There is no independent description of character save in terms of dispositions, nor of dispositions save in terms of what they are tendencies to do.

Scepticism about determining the efficacy of character training may take the form of doubting that virtue and vice can be ascertained because, while they are real, they are intangible characteristics, or more radically of doubting, as some situationists appear to do, that there are any such things at all. The latter suspicion might arise in at least four ways: first, from encountering recurrent difficulties in developing methods for measuring the presence of a virtue; second, from the repeated failure of psychological measurement to detect any relevant candidate feature; third, from the success of psychological methods in fully identifying patterns of action, and changes in these, without reference to anything like virtue; or fourth, and relatedly, from the belief that the very idea of character traits as sources of action rests on a methodological error of attributing action to an enduring feature of the agent rather than to the agent’s response to external factors.²⁰

I approach these issues from the point of view of a traditional conception of virtue and consider its place in the explanation and evaluation of action. This provides reasons to think that while in some respects virtue may be measured, this is liable to be a complex matter. Here I do not have space to discuss at any length the idea that the attribution of character traits in general rests on a methodological fallacy, nor the claim that action can be explained without reference to such

¹⁹ Jubilee 2017, p. 2.

²⁰ On the last see Ross, 1977, and for philosophical applications of this to the case of virtue see Doris 1998 and 2002 and Harman, 1998-99 and 1999-2000. In the face of this kind of scepticism it is worth noting the enormous range of terms for character traits, and in particular for virtues. Talk of the four cardinal virtues may distract from the very large number identified, for example, in the *Analects of Confucius* – many more than are named in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Indeed Confucian moral direction would be impossible if these terms were removed.

features. It is appropriate, however, having noted these suggestions to indicate lines of reply. Situationists typically take as a given features of virtue-based explanations of action the idea that “virtues are those character traits that enable human beings to respond appropriately to situations in any area of experience”²¹ and argue in response that it is a mistake to think that what explains people’s behavior is their character, rather it is the *situations* in which they act. In support of this counter-claim they cite empirical findings that *situations* are a better predictor of behavior than *character* attributions. Thus, in accounting for or predicting behaviour one should look not to types of person but to types of circumstance as explanatory. A further suggestion is that, in consequence, so far as moral training is concerned it is better to inculcate observance of rules encouraged by situational nudges, and by social incentives and penalties.

This involves an oversimplified understanding of the relation of character, situation and action. As noted, dispositions are orientations of powers towards certain states. Whether a disposition is manifest depends on other factors including features of the situation. Water dissolves sugar but there has to be sugar present for the disposition to be actualized, and other factors are relevant to whether and how it is. Likewise, how an agent acts depends upon features of the agent *and* of the situation. Both are relevant to explanation. Moreover, virtues require prudence which judges where, when, in what way, to act, so how someone will act in the face of danger depends not just on them having courage but also having prudence. Yet while habituated powers of recognition and response are part of the explanation of moral agency explaining action in terms of moral motivations involves recognizing factors *additional* to character. So even if the latter can be measured that is insufficient to determine the broader moral competence of an agent because, as Aquinas indicated, virtue is only *part* of the story. Morality also involves considerations external to agents’ motivations, such as issues of welfare and autonomy, and measuring understanding and responsiveness to the demands of these is a yet more complex issue.

Classically conceived of by Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas, virtues and vices are settled dispositions with regard to capacities or powers relating to certain ranges of features or situations. Active and passive powers, i.e. powers to effect or to be affected, or as we might say ‘abilities and liabilities’ are defined by their exercises, which in turn are defined by their proper objects. Consider an analogous point about a perceptual capacity: that of sight, say. The power of sight is defined by reference to its exercises or operations, and these are identified by their proper objects. Light is the medium of sight but its objects are colours and shapes. So sight is the power to discern these specific sensibles.

Non-rational beings evidently have sensory and other active powers, and

²¹ Jubilee 2017, p. 3.

non-sentient beings also have capacities to act and react, but so far as the last of these is concerned these capacities are uni-directional: they can only be exercised in one way. If an acid is placed on blue litmus paper, and there are no countervailing powers at work, it turns it red; if a flame is applied to dry paper, and again no impeding factor is operating, it ignites it. A person possessed of a virtue has a capacity to act in a certain way with respect to the object of that capacity. Consider courage, and let us say that its proper objects are threats and dangers. The courageous agent has a power to act appropriately with regard to these. But what is appropriate action? Is it to engage the threat or confront the danger? Is a person not courageous - either simply lacking it or being positively cowardly - if they choose to evade the threat or escape the danger?

To get clearer about this we need to distinguish two aspects of a virtue, or two kinds of constitutive capacities in the general power that is the virtue. First, its *recognitional* aspect, i.e. the capacity to identify an object as being of the relevant sort – this is analogous to the capacity of sight being defined in relation to colours and shapes. Second, however, there is its *responsive* aspect. In the case of the acid or the flame we might say figuratively that each “*recognises*” the presence of the litmus or of the dry paper and then *responds*, but this is misleading not only because there is no cognition involved but because to the extent that one may speak of “detection” and “response” they are really the same thing and their operation is one way. Acids neutralize, flames burn. There is no question of them not responding or of responding differently, which is why talk of “response” is misplaced.

In the case of the courageous person, however, there is a real difference between detecting danger and responding to it. This is not to say that there need be a temporal gap, there may or may not be; rather the point is a logical one. It is implied by the fact that the coward may share the same recognitional capacity, where he or she differs is in their response: in what they feel, or fail to feel, and in what they do, or fail to do. Some philosophers will deny this, saying that the recognitional capacities are different, but then they face the problem of equivocation in saying that the courageous and the cowardly respond differently to perceived danger. If there is no equivocation here, as I believe there is not, then the assumption of difference in objects of recognition is false, though of course the same object may be differently “coloured” in the experience of different observers but that is not a matter of “sense” (*sinn*) but of associated “idea” (*Vorstellung*) in Frege’s terminology.²²

I asked rhetorically whether a courageous person might not choose to evade a threat; and if that is exactly what the coward may be expected to do how can we tell them apart? One answer is by asking what it is the agent takes themselves to be doing. But there are difficulties with this since a person may lack self-knowledge,

²² Frege 1892.

or be self-deceived, or simply be inarticulate. We can make some progress, however, by posing certain counterfactuals: asking what the agent would have done had other features been different. How, though, are we to frame these counterfactuals? what is to be held constant and what varied? The general answer is surely clear enough: we vary the scenarios so as to try to elicit or determine what a suitably situated courageous person would do. But then this looks as if we have to have at least the same recognitional and responsive capacities. This is indeed the case, or at least we have to have some reasonable imaginative grip on these, and in particular we need to have a conception of the object of the recognitional capacity as being good or bad, and of the response-object, what the agent would aim at, as being good.

So the first conclusion is that any effort to measure virtue (or vice) cannot proceed by simply observing behavior, including what is said. This has to be interpreted in light of a conception of good and bad. Here someone might say that one doesn't have to share that conception, it could simply be a matter of looking at conventional norms and standards. But then one could not claim to draw any conclusions about *virtue* as such and about the capacity of education to induce or develop *it*.

VIII. Nothing so far says that virtue is unmeasurable, only that any attempt to measure it means sharing in the evaluative business of recognition and response and this implies that any measurement has qualitative presuppositions and cannot be a purely quantitative exercise, as might be the case in determining how quickly someone recognized and responded to the presence of coloured shapes on a screen. Implicit in what I have said so far, however, is something that puts the prospect of establishing extensive and systematic measurements in question, and this is the holistic character of virtues. The recognition of a situation as dangerous, say, is already a relativised evaluation. Nothing is dangerous *per se*. Some aspect of a situation is dangerous in a respect and to a degree in relation to a range of subjects. Likewise, the response to danger has to factor that evaluation into a broader judgement about whether confronting the danger is worth it. A courageous person is not just fearless, rather they are prepared to face down a threat in the interest of some good and whether we judge their repose virtuous more broadly will depend on the evaluation of this other good – an evaluation we need to enter into. It will be no use just saying “well it mattered greatly to her and she was prepared to risk danger for the sake of it” since for one thing “being prepared to risk danger” may be the mark of a reckless person; and for another if we think the good in question is one than any sensible person would judge trivial or no good at all then we might be reluctant to call the disposition “courage”; and even if we did we would not want to say that the behavior was virtuous all things considered since part of what needs to be considered is whether it was prudent.

Here I am not insisting upon the so-called “unity of the virtues”: that you only have one if you have all; but only that no power of recognition and response is a virtue unless it is ordered in specific situations towards such good as should be aimed at in these circumstances, and if there are several possible goods then to the best of these, if there is one. And it cannot be so ordered unless it is under the direction of prudence or practical wisdom.

So what kind of measurement of virtue could be feasible? First, one would need to fashion a way of determining what would count as a virtue being present in someone. That has certain formal conditions. The subject has to have

1) a *conception* of a feature or state of affairs as having a positive or negative valency;

2) a *disposition* to protect or promote some good that is liable to be affected by that valency,

3) an *ability* to situate this conception and that disposition within a deliberative framework that has as its object some good.

Whether satisfying these conditions actually amounts to possession of virtue will depend on how this formal framework is completed in respect of its evaluative elements. Recall that a coward may recognize that a situation poses a threat, be disposed to protect his own skin, and be able, in virtue of having a broader end in view to conclude that he should run away. This conclusion is not guaranteed by the disposition since the latter may only incline and not determine, and be defeated by another fear, say that of being branded a coward.

It is not impossible to construct means of measuring virtue given what I have said about it, but it cannot be either a value free, a behaviouristic, or a determinate business. Here it may be helpful to think of the analogous situation of determining whether someone has a specific artistic ability, let us call it ‘colour virtue’ by which I mean the capacity to make fine colour discriminations and the ability to respond to these by acting with regard to shades and hues, typically by arranging them in certain ways - what in art criticism would be described as having a strong colour sensibility and palette. It is not impossible to say whether someone is better at this than another, or whether a process of aesthetic education or artistic training might effect improvements in these respects. Art teachers do this kind of thing much of the time. It would be quite unreasonable, however, to think that there might be a general framework and set of quantitative tests by which it could be determined unambiguously that certain actions demonstrated improvement in this aesthetic virtue. For, first, one’s evaluations in this field would be those of a partial participant in the judgements one was trying to measure, and second that participant perspective would quickly reveal that what counts as virtue depends on other aesthetic factors, including what one would do in counter-factual situations and at later, possibly unrealized, stages which one imaginatively took into account in

deciding to act in such and such a way. None of this, however, gives reason for doubting that there is such a thing as aesthetic virtue. On the contrary the difficulties I have identified and discussed presuppose the reality of it. Returning to the prior and more familiar case and putting the matter somewhat paradoxically, one may say that encountering recurrent difficulties in developing methods for measuring its presence and extent may be good evidence for the reality of virtue.

IX. I have suggested, however, that virtue is only one part of what is involved in moral competence so let me return to the issue of the structure of moral thinking. The most common form of moral decision-making remains that of utilitarianism: looking to determine which of among the range of available courses in a given situation would produce the greatest utility (and factoring into the choice of action the relative probabilities of realizing the various outcomes). Beginning with Bentham and Mill utility was first identified with pleasure, then with happiness, and later by others also influenced by Sidgwick with either preference satisfaction or welfare. There is an evident oscillation here between subjective and objective conditions explicable by a concern to avoid two problems: first, that mere pleasure or satisfaction are themselves open to evaluation as good or bad depending upon their objects; but, second that happiness and welfare are contested notions and seemingly immeasurable.

More to the point, however, is the thought that utilitarianism instrumentalises individuals by treating their state as simply a component of overall utility and warranting harm and destruction for the sake of the general good. In recognition of this it has become increasingly common to observe that even where the promotion of welfare is at issue there are constraints in its pursuit arising from requirements of justice and respect for rights. Mill had written “happiness is the only thing desirable, as an end, all other things being desirable as means to that end”; but the fact is that we recognize, even where we choose to override other kinds of value, the desirability of which is not as means to happiness. In particular there is the idea that one should never treat others solely as means even for the sake of achieving a good. This idea of respect for persons lies behind, for example, the concern for providing information and securing consent, and again for observing privacy. But if utilitarianism is problematic in neglecting the integrity of the individual, the imperative of respect for others, understood as observing their autonomy, seems at risk of neglecting the demands of welfare and of failing to allow for the idea of legitimate paternalism.

An important lesson from the debates between advocates of these seemingly conflicting ethical outlooks is, I suggest, the need to recognize the inadequacy on one-dimensional moral thinking, both in respect of its deliverances on particular issues, but more importantly in its failure to recognize the plurality and

incommensurability of kinds of moral considerations.²³ Furthermore, in addition to there being considerations deriving from the desirability of attaining human goods, and others deriving from demands of justice and respect there are also considerations relating to motivation and character. Mill himself recognizes this writing that:

It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it. ... desires and impulses are as much a part of a perfect human being, as beliefs and restraints²⁴

This third dimension of moral thinking corresponds, of course to the category, with I began, that of virtue. This is not simply acting in accord with the good (utility) or the right (duty) but with a certain quality of character. The logic of moral evaluation and deliberation is three dimensional; and there is a further feature which also indicates the need to bring diverse considerations into play: namely that when thinking about the good, and here it will be sufficient to take the case of that human well-being, it is necessary to distinguish between *promoting* that good and *protecting* it and to observe the asymmetry between them in the respect that the latter takes priority: *first do no harm*.

Morality, and moral consciousness, involves considerations external to agents' motivations, such as issues of welfare and autonomy. Measuring a subject's understanding and responsiveness to the demands of these is a complex issue and since the relation between the three kinds of considerations is not simply additive but interactive, the resulting complexity and variation renders the task of measuring moral competence all the more demanding, but that does not exclude as common practice confirms, the possibility of making evidenced-based comparative judgements; and surely that is enough for the purpose at hand. As Aristotle says in *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 3 (1094b):

«...we will speak adequately if we make things clear to the extent to which the subject matter allows, for precision is not to be found in all discussions alike...we must be satisfied then in speaking of such subjects to indicate the truth roughly and in outline form».

Such a way of speaking as well as often being indeterminate is always evaluatively engaged, which is part of the reason that there cannot be a science of ethics, or a scientific ethics; but far from undermining the presuppositions of moral thinking

²³ For discussion of these issues see Haldane, 2000, 2011 and 2013.

²⁴ Mill, 1859 Chapter II, 5.

this is further reason to believe that in respect of their openness and responsiveness to meaning and value, human persons cannot be scientifically described or explained.²⁵

²⁵ For further discussion see Haldane, 1996.

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