

Character and Moral Choice in the Cultivation of Virtue

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Virtue and judgment

To be caught in the complex web of human association, freedom and constraint—especially as parent, teacher, magistrate or other authority figure—is to bear the burdens of moral judgment. Indeed, on a currently influential virtue-ethical approach to understanding moral life and agency, such judgments are the very stuff of those states of character from which human moral virtue is itself forged. From this perspective, in so far as the wisdom of virtue rests on situated practical discernment of specific needs in precise circumstances, it cannot be just a matter of the disinterested imposition of (Platonic, Kantian, utilitarian or other) generalities upon experience: virtuous agents are those who respond at the right time, to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive and in the right way¹.

Still, although the issue of how we may determine rightness in such respects is crucial for any ethical theory, it may seem a special problem for virtue ethics—not just because the focus of moral reason shifts from ‘external’ (Platonic, Kantian, utilitarian or other) universal or abstract rules and principles to individual judgment, but because right moral judgment serves to promote the character of the judging agent as well as the interests of others: a moral decision which served the flourishing of others but undermined the character of the author of that decision would not conduce to the cultivation of virtue. But such decisions seem especially fraught in cases where a judge may feel the pressure of different and conflicting imperatives. Thus, a magistrate is faced with passing sentence on a guilty party for whose misdeeds there are nevertheless extenuating circumstances: on the one hand, the crime is significant and we need to make an example of this sort of thing; on the other, the accused has no previous record, and was clearly under enormous

¹ Aristotle *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925) Book II, Part 6, p. 38.

stress at the time of the offence. Whether to inflict no-nonsense retribution, or to show sympathy and mercy: that is the question.

Of the various ways in which we might here seek to help virtue-ethics out of an awkward corner, some might take the form of ‘externalizing’ the sources of virtuous judgment. For example, one might embrace the kind of social-theoretical reconstruction of virtue-ethics which grounds moral judgment in the cultural conditioning of this or that ‘rival moral tradition’². On this view, there is no moral ‘view from nowhere’, and the moral choices of agents are inevitably conditioned by principles embedded in the particular traditions of virtue into which they have been socio-culturally initiated. Whereas if one belongs to a pre-Christian heroic culture it may be virtuous to require an eye for an eye, it will be virtuous in a Christian culture to forgive at least seventy times seven.

Far from settling the difficulty, however, the key problem merely resurfaces in new social-theoretical guise. To be sure, unless agents are merely acting in blind obedience to this or that social code—in which case any talk of moral choice or virtue seems mostly idle—there will still be occasions on which agents will face the pressure of competing virtue-imperatives. It is anyway hardly credible to suppose that in pre-Christian heroic cultures warriors never have to face choices between competing imperatives to (say) vengeance and mercy—and ancient Greek tragedy is full of such choices. But a more serious problem is that a rival traditions conception of virtue no longer looks very much like virtue-ethics. For, at least in its mainstream Aristotelian form, an ethics of virtue seems to turn mainly on the idea that virtuous choices follow, not from obedience to social convention, but from reflection upon objective considerations of human harm and flourishing. If virtue-ethics is anything, it is a form of ethical naturalism rather than any kind of social constructivism.

This thought may tempt us towards another, more instrumental, attempt to ‘externalize’ the grounds of virtuous choice. For if, like utilitarianism, virtue theory is both a teleological and a naturalistic ethics, could we not measure the virtue of actions by their utility or other consequences? Some of the problems of any such utilitarian construal of virtue ethics would seem to be those of consequentialism as such. At the very least, we cannot know with any certainty

² For the idea of ‘rival’ moral traditions, of course, see A.C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1981); *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1987); and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1992).

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what the consequences of our actions are likely to be: the judge cannot be sure of the consequences of his harshness or his leniency, and it could be that the criminal is ultimately unmoved by either. At worst, consequentialism also inclines to an unsavoury ethical laundering of common moral usage: if good consequences regularly followed from murderous or adulterous actions, then might not murder and adultery sometimes be regarded (at least in theory) as morally virtuous?

On the other hand, the more particular problems of consequentialist or utilitarian construals of virtue mirror those of social-constructivist versions. Briefly, the more any such account resembles utilitarianism, the less it looks like virtue ethics, and in so far as it does retain any distinctive virtue-ethical flavour the problems that any appeal to consequences was meant to solve simply resurface in the new account. After all, virtue ethics aims to reflect the basic moral intuition that the judgments of virtuous agents have no less consequences for them than for those affected by their judgments. From this viewpoint, it is not enough that an agent's judgment seems 'correct' according to some abstract calculation of human benefit (were this possible), for it should also be the sort of decision that a virtuous judge would make. But the original problem remains untouched. Would this be a lenient or a punitive judgment? If it is a punitive judgment, then it is not one that a virtuous judge would make, since a virtuous judge would also be generous and merciful. If it is a generous or merciful judgment, then it also seems to fall short of a virtuous one, since a virtuous judge should ensure that the punishment fits the crime. In short, in circumstances requiring the appropriate exercise of different and conflicting virtues, which virtue are we to say embodies the 'right' virtuous response?

At this point, one might complain that I am unreasonably seeking a general solution to a problem that may only be adequately addressed at the particular level. I will be reminded that the wise moral deliberation of the virtuous agent goes to work on the details of the particular case: as said, it aims to respond at the right time, to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive and in the right way. On this view, virtuous judges are those who recognize that it is appropriate to be punitive in this case—to impose a harsh sentence on the recidivist—but to exercise the virtue of mercy or forgiveness in cases where circumstances extenuate. But though there is much truth in this—virtuous agents are indeed those who proportion responses to particular circumstances—the objection misses the key difficulty. This is that no judge can in principle avoid a choice between proportioning the punishment to what the

crime appear to deserve, or being lenient in a spirit of generosity or mercy: judges who act either way might be equally justified, but they cannot be considered equally generous.

Moral dilemma and the disunity of virtue

It may also be that the main issue is occluded by a perhaps rather too utilitarian location of moral value in particular decisions and actions more than in states of character. The key virtue-ethical point would be that just as one swallow does not make a summer, a single generous act does not make a virtue of generosity: indeed, that since acts are genuinely generous acts only in so far as they are those that a generous person would choose, more sporadic generous decisions or acts are so only by courtesy. In this light, neither a calculating machine which always delivered the right moral verdict after processing the appropriate data, nor some human agent of extraordinary moral prescience who always made the right decision by intuition would count as a virtuous agent, because these would not be acting from just, honest, temperate or generous characters. But virtue ethics is also the source of a familiar and plausible story about the provenance of virtuous character—according to which we are not born with virtuous characters, but acquire them in the course of various kinds of social and other training necessitating some voluntary effort and application³. Indeed, according to the virtue-ethical mainstream, it is only to the extent we are responsible for the formation of our characters that we can claim any credit or esteem for our virtues⁴: it is appropriate to praise or honour me as a generous, honest or just person only to the extent that I have chosen and worked hard to cultivate such qualities.

But now, to act generously from a generous character is to be generally disposed to adopt a sympathetic or generous attitude to the plight of others: to try to see things from their point of view, and/or to give them the benefit of the doubt. To act thus as a matter of virtuous disposition, however, would seem to be in some tension with other dispositions with a fair claim to be called virtues—perhaps, for example, with an attitude of scrupulous fairness that normally aims

³ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925), Book II, Part 1, p. 28

⁴ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925); see also, J. Jacobs, *Choosing Character* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001)

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to ensure that all are given their exact desert. We may here recall the parable of the workers in the vineyard, and the landlord who—as he rebukes others for being resentful of his generosity—may precisely strike us (in temporal terms) as generous but not just. Indeed, this parable may seem symptomatic of a deep paradox at the heart of Christianity. On the one hand, the divine-human son of God preaches the virtue of infinite forgiveness (on a figurative interpretation of seventy times seven), but God the father everywhere looms as a figure of harsh retribution who will ensure that our sins are finally found out and properly punished. On the more impersonal views of divinity to be found in some monotheistic and other religions, it may be less problematic to conceive of God as an impersonal dispenser of reward and punishment on the basis of merit. However, on any (Christian or other incarnational) construal of the divine-human relationship as a personal encounter with a god who assumes human form and virtues, it may seem more difficult to comprehend how one and the same divine judge might reconcile the character of the forgiving agent with that of the strict dispenser of justice.

This difficulty may indeed be regarded as a rather less commonly noticed aspect of the problem of the unity of virtues. Although it is likely that such founding fathers of western ethics as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle subscribed to some version of this view, and the idea has also been defended by distinguished modern virtue ethicists⁵, the thesis is clearly not without difficulties. The most frequently noted of these is that of why we cannot say of someone who has not acquired *all* the virtues, that he or she has nevertheless acquired *some*. A commonly cited example is that of the criminal who appears to have self-control and courage but yet lacks justice or compassion—to which, however, the point may fairly be made that blind courage in the pursuit of morally wicked ends is perhaps closer to recklessness or fearlessness than true valour. All the same, most of us could surely point to examples of friends or acquaintances who are scrupulously honest, but not very self-controlled in this or that way, or genuinely kind and sympathetic, but occasionally ‘economical’ with the truth. Indeed, the literature of recent moral psychology is replete with examples of famous past and present figures—politicians, novelists, social

⁵ For a stout modern defence of the unity of the virtues, see P. T. Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); see also, B. Kent, ‘Moral growth and the unity of the virtues’, in D. Carr and J. Stuebel (eds), *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education*, (London: Routledge, 1999).

reformers and so on—who seem to have been rich and colourful mixtures of virtue and vice (6).

That said, the present point is significantly different. It is not just that it may be possible—as a matter of contingent fact—for virtues and vices to co-exist in the particular characters of individuals, but rather that the possession of this or that virtue might actually make it harder, if not impossible, to acquire some other virtues. On this view, it seems that the logical space taken up by virtues is not just such as to exclude certain vices, but also apt for the inhibition of certain other *virtues*: it is not just that the virtue of justice precludes any possibility of becoming a courageous criminal, it is that it may also preclude full acquisition of virtues of generosity, forgiveness and/or mercy. The problem arises in the context of particular moral dilemmas, and with the moral loss that anything worth calling a moral dilemma cannot but entail. For example: my mother has bought a new hat and asks my opinion; I think that the hat is awful, but do not want to say so in order to avoid unnecessarily wounding her feelings. I am therefore faced with a choice between honesty and considerateness in which it seems I can only be considerate at the price of honesty, or honest at the cost of considerateness. The example is trivial, but it is easy to see how such conflict could become more seriously compromising in the more complex rough and tumble of human moral association.

Indeed, some danger of overlooking the hazards engendered by such moral dilemmas for virtue ethics may lie in regarding it as central to naturalistic or teleological views that they provide fairly clear criteria of moral action in such dilemmatic circumstances. In one sense, this seems to be true. Does the invitation to judge my mother's hat really present me with a significant moral choice between honesty and considerateness? Well no, not really. Would anyone but a fanatic about the truth really want to say here that I should break my mother's heart for the sake of strict honesty? And is this not compatible with recognizing that there are other circumstances in which I (morally) should not prefer sparing someone's feelings—where, say, someone is clearly in the grip of a self-destructive illusion—to telling them the truth? We are thus brought back to the particularist emphasis in virtue ethics: virtuous agents are those who—rather than applying general principles in all circumstances—judge what is appropriate in the particular case by wisely weighting moral costs and benefits. The moral costs of my white lie to

⁶ Owen Flanagan's, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) is a rich source of examples of this kind.

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mother are not great, but the costs of massaging the deluded ego of a murderous tyrant rather than telling him the truth may be more significant: the moral horses should fit the courses.

On the face of it, then, virtue ethics does seem to provide us with a decision procedure for difficult cases. But it should also be clear that any such decision procedure does not rest upon discerning the *right* thing to do in cases of dilemma, but only the *best* thing to do—or, perhaps more accurately, the *least worst* option. For, of course, my dishonesty to my mother—trivial as this may seem in the great moral scheme of things—is none-the-less a moral loss no matter what good may come of it. This is likely to be so on any moral theory whatsoever, since it is impossible to purge any moral dilemma of all moral loss. Indeed, if a practical difficulty should be resolvable without any moral loss, it would be something other than a moral dilemma—perhaps a technical problem. However, the problem of moral loss assumes large significance in the context of virtue ethics—precisely because the moral consequences of practical decisions are no less measurable by their effects on the agents of those decisions than by their consequences for other agents. But now, any appeal to the moral decision procedure of the least worst option—as picked out by the contextualized judgments of this or that would-be virtuous agent—threatens to reduce virtue ethics to a kind of consequentialism in which the effects of such actions on the characters of those who perform them are eliminated from the moral equation. For a consequentialist, a white lie to my mother may harm no-one, but for a virtue-ethicist each such lie diminishes the character that not just mine but *me*.

Judgment, choice and character

Above all, for virtue ethicists, such lies—no less than the acts of honesty that they displace—do not and cannot stand alone. On the contrary they play a part in that gradual consolidation of moral decision and preference which contribute to the characterological sedimentation of virtues and vices: just as I become a builder or a pianist by repeated acts of building or piano-playing⁷, so I become temperate by repeated acts of self-control and dishonest by repeated acts of untruth. Again, it would rather miss the point to suppose that the problem of morally dilemmatic choice is solved by claiming

⁷ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925), Book II, Part 1, pp. 28–9

that I can lie to my mother when it doesn't matter, and tell the truth in circumstances where it does. Whilst I can do so, I can so do only by ignoring the full range and force of virtue-ethical imperatives in such circumstances. This problem shows up perhaps most conspicuously in those circumstances where it may actually seem to be a matter of moral *indifference* what I do—either because although a lot may hang on my decision, this option seems no less bad than that one, or because whatever I do is unlikely to make much difference at all.

Although one might say that it hardly matters what I decide in such circumstances, this cannot be so for a virtue ethicist precisely because my decision is both a cause and a consequence of that moral character whose construction is itself a prime objective of moral choice. I want to act rightly (towards others), partly of course because I want to act rightly—but also because I want to be the kind of (virtuous) person who acts rightly. But now, acting rightly in circumstances in which the practical consequences of my actions are a matter of apparent moral indifference would nevertheless be a matter of choosing what I would take to be conducive to the formation of virtuous character. As a would-be virtuous agent, the magistrate knows that both strict and lenient sentences are at least consistent with, if not required by, the (respective) virtues of justice and mercy or forgiveness. He also knows that his sentence will make no difference to what the accused goes on to do: the latter is already bent on reforming or relapsing whatever anyone says, and neither the judge nor anyone else has much reason to suppose he will do the former rather than the latter. However, although he knows that strict and lenient judgments are equally consistent with the virtues of justice and charity, that just and charitable judgments both reflect and reinforce character, and that in choosing anything (as he must) he is therefore inevitably choosing character, he cannot be both strict and lenient.

Similar considerations seem also to apply in those cases where, although the world cannot help being morally changed by whatever one does, there is still little room to choose between the adverse consequences of one's choices. For example, one may be unsure whether in going to war against a vicious tyrant the damage sustained by innocent civilians and/or the invading forces is not greater than the damage the tyrant may cause if left to his own devices. Indeed, such dilemmas seem to lend a decidedly virtue-ethical flavour to Hamlet's uncertainty: 'whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take up arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them'. On the

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face of it, the Prince of Denmark's problem is not that of what he should do in order to make a bad situation better—for whatever he does has its moral downside—but that of which virtue, just retribution or forgiveness, is most consistent with nobility of character or virtue.

The waters can here again muddy with the thought—characteristic of recent fashionable idealist and communitarian construals of virtue ethics—that different weightings of just retribution and forgiveness as virtues are likely to be the outcomes of different kinds of social or cultural conditioning. On this view, Hamlet stands at some point of cultural collision between an heroic conception of virtue which emphasizes the centrality of honour and just retribution, and a 'rival' Christian conception which emphasizes forgiveness and turning the other cheek. But such a view seems variously problematic. First, although Hamlet's appreciation of his predicament may have arisen as a result of some such culture clash, it is less clear either why it would need to have done, or what precise role any such social factors might play in any virtue-ethical resolution of his difficulty. On the latter point, as already noticed, it may be doubted whether any such socio-cultural construal of virtue is a virtue-ethical conception at all: for if the warriors of an heroic Homeric culture are simply conforming to some local social code, or Christians are simply acting in servile obedience to ecclesiastical law, it would seem simply mistaken to regard the so-called 'virtuous' conduct of such warriors or Christians as *virtue-ethical* in any serious theoretical sense.

For it is surely a key virtue-ethical claim that virtues are principled dispositions that are needed in any culture to offset the excesses to which natural human instincts and inclinations are otherwise prone⁸. On this view, we need the virtue of courage or resolution to help us to act resolutely in spite of fear or timidity, and we need virtues of self-restraint and justice to help us act with proper concern for others—not least, perhaps, when others are subject both to our authority and to possible intemperate exercises of our power. But then difficult choices about how to act rightly—or about which virtue to exercise on a given occasion—are likely to arise within no less than between particular 'rival' conceptions of virtue. The

⁸ For a clear account of this kind, see P. T. Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); see also M. C. Nussbaum 'Non-relative virtues: an Aristotelian approach', in M. C. Nussbaum and A. Sen (eds), *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) for a similar, albeit more socially contextualized, view.

problem for Hamlet is therefore not to choose between just retribution and forgiveness, it is how to balance two virtues—in the best interests of nobility of character—that appear equally morally compelling. Likewise, the problem for the magistrate is not to decide between just retribution and forgiveness as virtues, but to know whether in this case justice is better served by observing the letter of the law, or by a more sympathetic appreciation of the pressures that may have driven this offender to the crime, and which also finds a place for mercy and forgiveness.

Again, the particular problem for virtue ethics is not that the virtuous judge or chooser may get it *wrong* on a particular occasion: inappropriate acts of severity or leniency are the common lot of fallible moral agents. It is rather that in the making of particular choices to lay down the law or give the benefit of the doubt, we are making particular kinds of persons of ourselves. We are choosing character, not only in choosing between good and bad characters, but also in choosing between different incompatible or not simultaneously realizable virtues. Indeed, although we may sometimes regret a given act of forgiveness on generosity on the grounds that it comes to seem undeserved, we may as genuinely charitable or forgiving characters also wish to stick to our guns and insist that the act had real virtue: it is what every virtuous person should do in the circumstances, and it is a cause for sorrow more than embarrassment that our friends can see our action only as one of weakness or folly. But this is not to say that one's preference for charitable more than punitive treatment on this occasion is incompatible with holding that it is sometimes morally important to make people face up to their wrongdoing. Indeed, such preference may be reflected more in one's readiness to extend clemency more widely than others would, or perhaps only in one's inclination to listen and sympathize before passing much the same final judgment as one's less sympathetic colleague.

Varieties of virtue

If this is not too far astray, it supports what seems to be a not implausible view that there are different kinds of virtuous characters. Such characters are different, not in the sense that they exhibit, recognize or subscribe to different (socio-culturally or otherwise defined) virtues, or in the sense that they are just alternative kinds of imperfectly virtuous agents, but in the more profound sense that they are as virtuous as they can be—given scope for further

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development of the virtues they have—in *different* ways. On this view, there are diverse moral characters not just in the sense that there are better moral characters than others—which is uncontroversial enough—but in the sense that there are different moral characters which could not become better without being other than the moral characters they are. Again, the point is liable to misconstrual. It is not the familiar complaint against the unity of virtue that agents can apparently be virtuous in some respects, but not in others: this man was a great champion of justice, but he was also an adulterer; this woman was a wonderful mother, but a dishonest employee. In such cases, after all, we could and should want to say that the man would have been more virtuous for fidelity to his wife, as the woman would also have been for being a more honest employee. The present sense of diversely virtuous character, is rather that in which those who are more likely to tell white lies in order to spare feelings—though they are otherwise generally honest when they can be—could not become more honest except at the cost of becoming characters who generally reverse these dispositional priorities.

In short, insofar as becoming virtuous means genuinely trying to be honest, courageous, self-controlled, generous, tolerant *and* so-on for other familiar but potentially conflicting virtues, there seem to be just different ways in which we can aspire to this goal. Many of us will doubtless number among our friends those who with best moral intentions nevertheless respond quite differently to this or that moral dilemma from the way we ourselves would, but we may also see that to respond otherwise—out of another moral character—would not necessarily make them better people, it would only make them different: that, so to speak, what is gained on the moral swings of this virtue may be lost on the roundabouts of that one. To make of oneself the kind of person who would choose—in cases where there is little to choose consequentially between moral gain and loss—a more sympathetic or supportive approach to the needs of others, over a certain tendency to no-nonsense forthrightness, is not to choose a morally better over a worse way of responding to others, but just *one* way of morally responding *among* others.

One might indeed suggest that regarding morality as focused more on the cultivation of character traits than on the observance of rules—in a virtue-ethical rather than (say) deontological manner—is also to recognize that the life of virtue has a significant *aesthetic* dimension. To ground moral development in character formation, and to regard character as a matter of the consolidation of past preferences, may be to view it as part of that larger process of self-

creation which also includes the development of personality. To be sure, it may also appear less appropriate to regard character development as an aesthetic matter than to regard personality development in this way. There can be no moral imperative to make ourselves witty, vivacious or cheerful, and we cannot be blamed if (by dint of natural temperament or social conditioning) we fail to develop such qualities—whereas we may be praised for developing honesty and self-control, or blamed for our malice or sloth. That said, it is often difficult to draw clear lines between features of personality and traits of character, and we may sometimes be hard put to know whether to attribute an agent's sympathy or generosity to personality or character.

Indeed, one may be drawn to regard the key difference here as turning on choice and effort. After all, Aristotle rightly warns us that 'natural' patience or generosity are not themselves constitutive of virtuous character until they have been submitted to the discipline of practical wisdom⁹. On this view, someone may be sympathetic or generous as a matter of temperament, but this does not count as virtue until they can express generous and sympathetic tendencies in appropriately restrained ways—and, indeed, good character for such people may be largely a matter of some suppression or denial of innate tendencies. All this is true enough, and any aesthetics of character development should not be based on confusion between natural and acquired virtue. All the same, in so far as 'naturally' sympathetic agents are still faced in morally problematic circumstances with a choice between choosing the sympathetic response (I am given to sympathy, but this is a morally valuable quality which I should seek to cultivate) or the less sympathetic one (I am given to sympathy, but this is a tendency that I should seek to control in the interests of justice), and such choices are in the long run choices of character, any such choosing may seem nevertheless bound up with the general process of free-self-creation which is no less a matter of personal (albeit moral) *preference* than of obedience to 'external' imperative.

Virtue diversity and moral theory

What, if any, are the moral theoretical implications of such observations for virtue-ethics? On the positive side, it seems to bring virtue-ethics in line with the plausible but often poorly articulated

⁹ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925), Book VI, Part 13, pp. 56–8

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moral intuition that there are different kinds of moral agents *qua* moral characters. On this view, we can count quite different sorts of people—people who would make quite different choices with respect to a given dilemma—as nevertheless all (and perhaps equally) virtuous agents. This idea is prone to crudest distortion on non-cognitivist construals of moral response according to which moral judgments are little more than expressions of emotion or (at best) consistent commitment to this or that subjectively chosen value. On a virtue-ethical view, however, such differences are neither differences of undisciplined sentiment, nor are they choices of one value over another: virtuous agents are forced to ‘choose’ sympathy over honesty only in the sense that they cannot in certain circumstances choose both, and for virtuous characters such choices still involve significant moral loss. But the idea that there are different kinds of virtuous character is also prone to distortion on those communitarian or social constructivist accounts according to which different virtuous characters are products of different kinds of normative conditioning. The trouble with this view is that it leans precisely towards the kind of socially grounded moral relativism that mainstream virtue-ethics also aims to avoid.

Indeed, what may be regarded as especially plausible about virtue-ethics is that it offers clear criteria of moral value and virtue that precisely cut across any and all culturally grounded normative differences. To be sure, we can see that people from different parts of the world have very different—even contradictorily opposed—moral beliefs, but we are nevertheless able to recognize certain cross-cultural criteria of moral attitude and conduct. The Moslem shopkeeper down the road has different beliefs from me, but I am well able to appreciate his honesty, integrity, courage and industry; on the other hand, I may have no trouble recognizing the racist bigots who persecute him—albeit in the name of my own culture—for the liars and cowards that they are. It is also clearly important that some such cross-cultural criteria of moral value are recognizable if there is to be the possibility of holding some cultures to moral account precisely for their injustice, mendacity, intemperateness or cruelty. From this viewpoint, it seems a mistake to index virtues to rival moral traditions in the manner some recent neo-idealist moral and social theories—for the language of virtue is arguably the cross-cultural ethical currency of humankind.

On the other hand, mainstream virtue-ethics might appear less persuasive with respect to its rather monolithic or uniform view of moral agency. Just as deontology seems to require inflexible conformity to some common set of general moral principles, so the

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standard dispositional repertoire of virtue-ethics might appear to impose a rigid moral template on agents which leaves relatively little room for individuality of moral personhood. This may well seem counterintuitive: looking around us we seem to discern much moral individuality among those we both love and hate. This paper has sought to identify reasons why—given the choices with which moral agents are faced in dilemmatic circumstances, and the role that such choices have to play in the cultivation of individual moral character—this could hardly be otherwise. These reasons, however, do not in the least weaken or undermine the fundamental *objectivity*—grounded as it is in proper attention to the natural circumstances of human harm and flourishing—of a broadly Aristotelian conception of virtue ethics. Although the view for which we have here argued may be considered a form of value pluralism, it does not seem to be in any ethically problematic way morally relativist. Some such view may be necessary, all the same, to confer greater scope for moral individuality as well as a more recognizably human face upon virtue ethics.

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