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Virtue and moral knowledge

It is arguable that the all-time most vexed issue of ethics or moral philosophy is that of the epistemic status of moral agency or virtue – or the role therein of reason and knowledge. In the first place, notoriously, moral philosophers continue to be divided between non-cognitivists or sentimentalists – who accord limited intrumental role to reason as a means to the satisfaction of forms of (albeit pro-social) desire or affect – and rationalists or cognitivists who regard some or other form of reasoning as enabling the discernment or discovery of objective moral knowledge or truth. However, even if some form of moral rationalism or

cognitivism is considered more compelling than sentimentalism, there would seem to be a rich *smorgasbord* of varying perspectives on the role of reason and the precise status of any knowledge implicated in the deliberation and judgement of moral virtue or agency. Here, for example, one might distinguish (see, for example, Kristjansson 2009) between hard rationalists – who take the deliberations and judgements of moral virtue to depend on reason alone – and soft rationalists or ethical realists who would give some moral role to feeling, affect or other less explicitly rational aspects of human psychology. Or, again, one might distinguish between moral realists who take moral knowledge to be a matter of access to moral truths on a par with scientific discernment of empirical truths, and ethical naturalists, who – while denying moral truth or fact in any such epistemically strong sense – would yet regard moral enquiry as grounded in what is objectively conducive to human moral good or ill.

To be sure, such distinctions take one inevitably back to the philosophical classics of Greek antiquity. Here, it might seem that what we encounter in the great Socratic dialogues of Plato is something akin to both hard rationalism and moral realism

whereby virtue or moral agency is equated with wisdom and wisdom defined in terms of knowedge as freedom from 'cognitive' error. It would seem that for Plato's Socrates – here understood as a historical figure whose views, at least in the early dialogues, Plato is more or less rehearsing – morally vicious or other errant bhaviour can be explained ony in terms of epistemic ignorance of what is morally right or just: if the vicious tyrant really knew the evil of what he was doing – was aware of the plain injustice of his conduct – then he would not so act. This view, of course, is deeply problematic and counterintuitive: first; it has the troubling implication that if the wicked are ignorant, they cannot be blamed for their actions; secondly, common experience seems to support the view that agents often act badly in the light of clear knowledge of what they should morally do – so that backsliding is a common form of moral fault. Both of these considerations clearly continue to worry both the mature Plato and his great pupil Aristotle.

Still, despite his attempt to address these issues in his tri-partite account of the soul (Plato 1961) – whereby the morally enlightened might yet lack the qualities of spirit required for

right action – Plato clearly persists in a generally hyper-rationalist view of virtue as the pursuit of moral knowledge or truth and much of his later work sruggles to discern the basis of knowledge in general and of moral knowledge in particular. Still, notwithstanding the profound insight of his divided line epistemology that moral enquiry cannot be reduced to everyday empirical knowledge or mere opinion (which Plato did not recognise as grounds for knowledge at all), it seems fair to say (as we shall see anon) that he never grasped the distinctive *normative* character of reasoning about (especially) human justice and failed to give a morally satisfactory account of either it or its universal character. All that Plato therefore finally has to offer is a rather questionable analogy between political justice and a no less dubious moral psychology of faculties (reason, spirit and appetite) supported by a somewhat elaborated Socratic conception of moral enquiry as the basic philosophical pursuit of formal definitions of such concepts as virtue and justice.

It is, of course, this conception of moral enquiry that Plato's star pupil Aristotle (1941) roundly denounces in the opening pages of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. On Aristotle's view, Plato

has confused or conflated different forms of rational enquiry or deliberation. Unlike the knowledge-focused reasoning of theoretical enquiry, moral deliberation and judgement are forms of *practical reason* concerned with the ordering of human feelings, desires and appetites in the particular and shifting circumstances of human association and conduct. From this viewpoint, it is futile to seek epistemically exceptionless moral generalizations of the kind for which Plato sought in his theory of universals, and such formal definitions of 'the good' or virtue could anyway be of little practical use to us. It is therefore not the purpose of moral enquiry to define the good, but to assist us through appropriate practical deliberation to become moral or *virtuous* agents. Thus, in book 6 of his *Ethics*, Aristotle draws a fairly sharp line between theoretical reasoning and the truth-seeking epistemic virtues on the one hand and the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) of moral virtues on the other. The deliberation and judgements of *phronesis* cannot be captured in the general rules or principles of science, and are subject to the rather less certain guidance of the golden 'mean' of avoidance of humanly detrimental extremes of affectiely defective or excessive response.

To be sure, Aristotle does not always seem entirely consistent in this separation of the moral from the epistemic and in his own exploration of moral failure in book 7 of his *Ethics*, talks in a more morally realist Socratic manner – of some influence on some modern virtue ethicists (see, for example, McDowell 1997) – of vice as a kind of ignorance or failure of correct perception. But it is far from clear how such talk of failure to discern moral truth squares with his more general denial that *phronesis* is not generally about universal moral truth but about judgements of contextually determined and appropriate conduct. At all events, in the present view, neither the quasi epistemic Platonic construal of 'the good', nor Aristotelian grounding of moral values and virtues in the practically variable circumstances of natural human benefit or ill, suffices for any very satisfactory account of the defining moral virtue of justice, though – insofar as Aristotle's justice of positional merit seems even more archaic, parochial and (certainly to modern sensibilities) normatively unsatisfactory than his master's – Plato may have been at least on the right track.

Virtue and ignorance

With the recent revival of virtue ethics over the past half century or so, however, it is clear enough that it is the star of Aristotle – rather than Plato – that is in the ascendent in contemporary moral theory. Indeed, from the outset, this Aristotelian turn has been crucially marked by repudiation of the more abstract moral theorising of both Platonism and modern ethics of duty and utility in favour of a conception of moral enquiry and deliberation as a more particular response to the practical complexities of human association and conduct. In this light, Aristotle's sharp separation of the moral wisdom of *phronesis* – as exhibited in the deliberations of good or virtuous character – from the theoretical reflection of epistemic virtues, is virtually axiomatic in contemporary virtue ethics. Likewise, conceiving cultivation of virtue along the lines of skill acquisition – following Aristotle's own explicit comparison between the two in the second book of his *Ethics* – is also commonplace in much recent work on virtue (for example, Annas 2011). On this view, insofar as cultivating virtue or the virtues may be said to involve knowledge, such knowledge – like that presupposed to or

governing the acquistion of practical skills – appears modelled as a kind of (practical) ‘knowing how’ rather than (theoretical) ‘knowing that’ and hence justified less by the truth of known propositions, more by its consequences for human good or ill.

Moreover, while many if not most contemporary virtue ethicists are still inclined to stress the *intrinsic* value of moral virtue and good character, there is also a worrying *instrumental* drift to conceiving virtuous reflection, deliberation and judgement in terms predominantly of procedural rather than substantive knowledge. Unsurpisingly, perhaps, this instrumental turn seems taken to its furthest extreme in recent attempts to develop something like *ultilitarian* versions of virtue ethics in which any virtuous knowledge has value only insofar as it is productive of humanly beneficial – self-sustaining or pro-social – effects. In such terms, indeed, knowledge need play no significant role at all in the practice of virtue if it, as it were, ‘gets in the way’ of the effective achievement of practical results. In some extreme and provocative work in this vein, Julia Driver (1989, 2001) has agued for a class of ‘virtues of ignorance’ in which

knowledge deficit is an actual *requirement* of genuinely possessing a virtue of this kind. Her showcase example of such virtues is *modesty*, which – so she claims – no-one could *knowingly* possess (since to consider oneself modest would seem immodest) and wherein accurate estimate of one's acheivements is also precluded by the need of the modest to *underestimate* their achievements. This seems about as far as one can get from the old Socratic equation of virtue with knowledge.

While some of the critical responses to Driver's virtues of ignorance has been tentatively supportive (for example, Slote 2004), it seems fair to say that most has been much less so. In a particularly strong critique of Driver's suggestion, Owen Flanagan (1990) resists her case at almost every point. He first takes issue with Driver's argument that the possibility of virtues of ignorance (should there be such) refutes the traditional assumption that virtue requires knowledge on the grounds that it equivocates between stronger and weaker senses of knowledge. He precisely argues – rather tellingly in the present context – that few philosophers would take moral virtue to entail knowledge in the strong theoretical or

propositional sense that she takes to be refuted by her virtues of ignorance. In any case, with particular regard to her favoured example of modesty, he persuasively argues not only that genuine modesty is inconsistent neither with accurate knowledge that one is modest nor with accurate assessment of one's achievements, but that deliberate *underestimatio*n of such achievements or worth could hardly count as modesty or any other virtue. Briefly, in place of Driver's 'underestimation' view of modesty as a (putative) virtue, Flanagan – again not implausibly – is drawn to a 'non-overestimation' account: while, on the one hand, deliberate underestimation of one's worth or achievements hardly counts as virtuous, over-estimation of them is no less morally objectionable. Modesty therefore aims at an appropriate Aristotelian mean between these. However, before turning to some further consideration of Flanagan's observations about the place of knowledge in virtue, we may give some attention to a response to Driver at some odds with his.

In his paper 'Ignorance and virtue', Ronald Sandler (2005) also rejects Driver's virtue that some virtues actually *require* ignorance in favour of a view that there are – or at least may

be – virtues that need to *accommodate* ignorance. Although Sandler includes modesty among such potential ignorance-accommodating virtues, his own favoured example of such a possible disposition is *tolerance*. While also leaving it open whether there is such a virtue, he offers to define it as follows:

> ‘The virtue of tolerance is (would be) the disposition to respond excellently in instances when one maintains a negative evaluation of some object and believes one possesses some capacity to eliminate or interfere with that object.’

In brief, Sandler defends tolerance against familiar complaints about the morally ‘paradoxical’ nature of any such tolerance – namely, that we could not consistently deplore some object or perspective and yet not take steps to prevent it – on the essentially ‘liberal’ grounds of human epistemic limitation. Given such limitation prevents our certain knowledge that what we believe is correct, and that the contrary beliefs of others are wrong, a level of tolerance of views we dislike (assuming, presumably, that such views are not actually harmful to others) seems reasonable in the interests of (amongst other things) social harmony and cohesion.

Sandler holds that modesty is (or may be) appropriate on much the same grounds of epistemic limitation: the fact that we cannot, in the larger scheme of human affairs, be sure of the precise significance or value of our own worth or achievements – especially by comparison with those of our fellows – speaks in favour of a degree of reasonable modesty. But Sandler departs from Driver in roundly rejecting her view of modesty as a disposition to ignorance: on his view, ignorance is neither a goal of nor necessary to modesty and modesty is – in agreement with Flanagan – quite consistent with accurate asseeessment of our worth or achievements, and/or even with a fair view of ourselves as modest. On the other hand, however, Sandler interestingly distinguishes his own view of such ignorance-accommodating virtues as tolerance and modesty from what he calls 'cognitive' conceptions of these virtues, in which he includes both Driver's underestimation and Flanagan's non-overestimation accounts. His point seems to be that a virtue such as modesty should be construed in terms of neither knowledge nor ignorance of worth or achievements: on the contrary, it should be understood as a reasonable response to appropriate

agnosticism about such qualities in due recognition of human epistemic limits. The same needs to be said of tolerance which is likewise grounded, less on substantial *knowledge* of anything, more on the impossibility of our knowing *everything*. We shall return in due course to this significant point about the procededural more than substantive nature of virtues such as tolerance.

The epistemic complexity of virtue

Generally, however, we can agree with Flanagan and Sandler – despite their differences – in rejecting as incoherent or normatively intolerable Driver's case for virtues of ignorance as dispositions concerned to foster or promote ignorance. That said, their responses to Driver are of considerable interest in their own right and raise significant issues about the epistemic and rational complexity of virtue and virtues. To begin with, as already noted, in taking to task Driver's claim that virtues of ignorance undermine the time-honoured view that virtue requires knowledge, Flanagan distinguishes between 'strong' and 'weak' senses of knowledge and maintains that virtue

ethicists (presumably past and/or present) have not by and large required knowledge in the strong sense for virtue or virtues. So far as one can see, such strong knowledge woud include accurate assessment of one's status regarding the possession or otherwise of some virtue and/or of the more specific conditions of heart and mind on which such assessment might be accuately based – and Flanagan does explicitly refer to this as 'propositional' or 'declarative' knowledge. Thus, the suggestion here seems to be that most if not all virtue ethicists would take the knowledge involved in or presupposed to virtue to be the practical or procedural knowledge of 'know-how'.

However, leaving aside the question of how many past or present virtue ethicists have adopted such a view, it would seem that Flanagan himself takes precisely what Sandler calls a 'cognitivist' view of virtuous modesty as entirely consistent with (if not requring) an accurate assessment of one's own worth and/or achievements. All the same, as previously suggested, it may be a large problem with the practical or procedural drift of much latter day virtue epistemology that it places too much weight on Aristotle's comparison of the

cultivation of moral virtues to the acquisition of skills. Still, Aristotle's analogy at this point is only partial and needs to be viewed alongside his equal insistence – for, example, in Book 6 of the *Ethics* – that acquiring virtue is not at all like mastering a skill and is part of us in a way that no skill can be. Generally, the forms of deliberation and ends and purposes of skill and virtue are different and distinct. Thus, while it may be tempting to compare skill and virtue with regard to their common adoption of practical means to certain productive (artistic or moral) ends, it should not be forgotten that a key goal of virtuous practice is the formation of virtuous character. Indeed, while there may be virtuous – or virtue-like – conduct without good character, there can be no genuine virtue without virtuous character.

In short, virtue is explained more in tems of good characer, than virtuously appropriate conduct. From this viewpoint, while we should and need not deny that wise or virtuously appropriate conduct is a significant end of moral virtue, it is strictly neither sufficient *nor necessary* for genuine virtue: precisely, it is conceivable not only that non-virtuous agents might sometimes behave in virtuous ways, but that someone

possessed of genuine virtues of courage or generosity might never actually be called upon to exercise such dispositions. But, in that case, what might the measure of virtuous character be? The most plausible answer to this question is that the agent of virtuous character is one of right attitudes, understanding and values. While much evidently needs to be said about the particular content of such psychological states, it seems clear enough that these could hardly be defined other than *cognitively* or without reference to knowledge or right belief (since, prcisely, it is not clear that they could be right or knowledgeable as mere states of feeling or affect). Yet more precisely, it is not clear how agents of virtuous character could be *dishonest* or indifferent to the truth of matters bearing on virtuous conduct. So, for example, the virtuously courageous agent would have to be committed to and capable (as far as possible) of a sober and realistic assessment of the *real* hazards of a potentially dangerous situation, and the charitable agent of a a similar assessment of the *real* needs of others for which his or her charity is required – because, absent such knowledge, such courage or charity could only be misplaced and/or flawed.

All this, to be sure, is is not inconsistent with what Aristotle seems to say generally about virtue in his *Ethics* – apart from, that is, those points at which he sharply separates the practical virtues of *phronesis* from the truth-seeking virtues of *episteme* – and consistent enough with what Sandler regards as Flanagan's 'cognitive' account of the virtue of modesty. On this view, far from being disposed to the pursuit of ignorance as advocated by Driver, the virtuously modest agent would seek a sober and accurate assessment of his own worth and achievements consistent with not overestimating these. But what goes here for modesty would appear to go for a very wide range of other commonly accepted virtues. In order to be truly brave, self-controlled, generous, charitable, patient, grateful, sympathetic and so on, epistemic capacities for correct discernment of circumstances relevant to the exercise of such virtues – crucially, for the correction of affectively sourced *misperceptions* of such circumstances (for example, for appreciating that one's jealousy is misplaced) – would seem to be a basic (necessary) requirement. Thus, while virtues are no doubt subject to the limits of available human knowledge – so that such excercise may, in Sandlers's terms, have to accommodate some inevitable ignorance – they would

all appear to require as much knowledge of the world, ourselves and our relationships with others as humanly possible, in order to be exercised accurately and wisely.

The normative basis of moral virtue

This said, it is yet far from clear that such Socratic-Platonic re-affirmation of the contribution of knowledge to virtue is enough to secure its normative status as precisely *moral*: in this regard, something crucial seems missing. Precisely, the trouble is that – despite a widespread modern association of the term 'virtue' with morality – the Greeks (at least prior to Socrates) did not invariably or commonly make this connection. So, for example, while they held such virtues (*aretes*) as courage or self-control to be admirable or commendable human excellences whereby people might fare well in their various enterprises, agents might well be courageous or self-controlled in enterprises that were quite self-serving or antipathetic to the interests or rights of others or to the real public good. Indeed, despite the highly moralised (post-Socratic) notion of virtue of modern

inheritance, few today would have difficulty regarding the courage or self-control of fictional or real-life villains or criminals as admirable character qualities despite the disreputable ends to which these may be directed. Indeed, no general contradiction seems involved in supposing that someone has all the knowledge of world, self and others necessary for the exercise of a wide range of virtues of courage, self-control, generosity, charity, patience, gratitude, sympathy and so on and yet fails to act *morally* – at least to the end of other-regarding *fairness* or *justice*. This, to be clear, is not to say that one might have the knowledge required for such virtues, but fail to exercise them (which might also be true); it is rather that one's exercise of such virtues might well be self-interested or locally-confined in a way that could not be readily regarded as *moral*. In short, the knowledge required by Socrates for virtue – while it may well be *necessary* for virtue (and might even deliver results describable as virtuous) does not seem *sufficient* for *moral* virtue.

This, of course, is the root of the enormous difficulty that the Platonic character of Socrates has in persuading his sophistical and other opponents that other-regarding justice is

necessary for a truly excellent life: that, in short, one could not live happily and well in a spirit of total self-regard and self-interest. This is what basically drives Plato's search in the *Republic* and later dialogues for a rationally compelling account of justice that would show the self-interested agent (for example, the self-seeking tyrant) that there can be no truly fulfilling or flourishing human life without other-regarding justice. It should be clear enough that Plato's best shot at this – the rather feeble 'Republican' analogy between political justice and the balanced tri-partite soul – is not adequate to this task. Of course, it seems that to a significant extent people *need* other people – for purposes of social cooperation and economic functioning, or for simple human contact: but such associations may be quite partisan and self-interested and fall well short of *general* regard for others, regardless of one's firm attchments to some. In the present view, Aristotle's subsequent attempt to ground virtue – including justice as just another virtue among others – in some more 'naturalistic' conception of human well-being or flourishing is doomed to failure by virtue of much the same considerations. In any response to the inevitable question 'whose flourishing or wellbeing?', one can only admit that

there are widely diverse conceptions of this circumstance – and Aristotle's own accounts of justice in the *Ethics* and *Politics* only succeed in showing that some people's flourishing or wellbeing matters more to him than others.

In this light, it seems that what neither Plato nor Aristotle fully appreciated – though it is arguable that Plato does better in this regard than Aristotle – that justice is a rather different kind of character quality or 'virtue' from such other dispositions or capacities as courage, temperance or (even) generosity. It this is so, it arguably requires – as Plato comes very close to realising in his epistemology of the 'divided line' – a different form of rational warrant. While Aristotelian ethical naturalism goes a long way to showing the 'natural' grounds of much human value and virtue – since the natural circumstances and conditions of human life and experience explain well enough the extent to which our flourishing depends on such qualities and virtues as courage and self-control – it falls well short of providing any normatively compelling grounds for justice as general or universal regard. A simple way to put this might be to say that while Aristotelian naturalism sucessfully crosses the notorious

Humean gap between ‘fact’ and ‘value’, it leaves the equally notorious (but different) Humean gap between ‘ought’ and ‘is’ – between the space of normativity and the space of factual or non-normative description – *wide open* (on this distinction, see Carr 1995, 1996; also Kristjansson 2013).

Interestingly, however, this difference between many regular Aristotelian virtues and such more ‘normative’ virtues as justice seems precisely appreciated – or at least suspected – by Ronald Sandler in his critique of Driver’s virtues of ignorance and in his own defence of tolerance as (at least tentatively) an ignorance-accommodating virtue. As seen, Sandler’s point is that tolerance does not require wisdom or knowledge in quite the manner of such other virtues as courage or generosity – wherein one would seem to need to know things in order to exhibit the virtue according to the desirable Aristotelian mean or degree – but a quality or capacity that there are rational grounds for exercising despite or even because of the limits or dearth of our knowledge. Such grounds, however, can only be of a quite different order from any that rely on natural facts or empirical evidence. In the event, Sandler appears to regard tolerance – in the spirit of classic modern defences of this

‘virtue’ – as normatively crucial to promoting and sustaining a just liberal-democratic polity based on universal regard and respect for the rights and liberties of all citizens irrespective of their local differences. (As it happens, Sandler also seems to regard Driver’s ‘modesty’ as a ‘procedural’ virtue in the vein of his own account of tolerance; but this seems questionable and Flanagan may well give a better account of this.)

On this view, we should not seek justification of tolerance in anything that we know substantially about the world, ourselves or others: on the contrary, it has its roots in honest appreciation that there are inevitable limits to what we can humanly know and in a spirit of reasonable humility that we may be wrong and others may be right on humanly significant issues. But then, why – one can hear Socrates ancient sophistical (if not Nietzschean) opponents saying – *should* we exhibit such humble tolerance, if it does not serve to promote our own personal interests and flourishing, especially if we are among those in power and control? To be sure, we have just now linked tolerance to a modern liberal-democratic conception of justice as the promotion (as far as possible) of equal regard and liberty for all citizens. On this view,

tolerance may be regarded as one procedural virtue serving the interests of *justice* – another procedual virtue – as universal concern for the rights of others. But, again, *why* should we have such concern – especially if it does not, as it often does not, feather our own nests?

Moral reason in search of justice

It is this question – perhaps *the* most pressing in the long history of ethics – that neither Plato nor Aristotle satisfactorily address or answer. To be sure, the great genius of Plato seems on the right track in his 'divided line' epistemology by clearly appreciating that while this question admits of a 'rational' solution – and therefore cannot, precisely, be addressed via feeling, sentiment or intuition – such reasoning must be of a quite *different* (he evidently thinks 'higher') logical order than that of natural (empirical) scientific or even logico-mathematical enquiry. In short, as lately noted, there is a genuine gulf fixed between reasoning about how the world is as sensorily experienced and reasoning about what should or *ought* to be done in the name of universal and truly *moral*

justice. Arguably, it is this deep difference between fundamentally diverse forms of human discourse and ratiocination that has never been better appreciated in the course of ethical history than by those philosophers in the modern *deontological* tradition, of whom the key pioneers and architects are undoubtedly Rousseau and Kant.

The essence of Rousseauian deontology (see Rousseau 1973) is first: (in line with Plato) that no adequate (universal) concept of justice can be derived from the evidence of scientific or empirical enquiry; second, that such justice is nevertheless rationally accessible and justifiable. Like Socrates and Plato, Rousseau holds that the unjust agent is fundamentally mired in self-delusion and rational self-contradiction – though such irrationality should not be understood as lack of knowledge or ignorance in any Socratic epistemic sense. For Rousseau, the point is that the basic freedoms, entitlements and rights to which human agents lay claim are not – like such other human natural properties, endowments and capabilities such as height, hair colour or intelligence – given by nature. Precisely, one cannot rationally claim to have rights, liberties or privileges by virtue of this or

that natural fact – such as superior physical strength or the lightness of one's skin colour – insofar as such liberties and entitlements require to be granted and/or earned in the name of some essentially *normative* or *moral* law or authority.

The point is that in the absence of recognition or submission to such moral authority, all claims to such rights or liberties are null and void in default of any genuine rational warrant. Indeed, the minimum normative requirement of such recognition is appreciation that any and all of one's own claims to freedom and rights are entirely conditional upon some willingness to acknowledge the claims of other rational agents to these self-same rights. This is precisely why (for example) slave owners – who deny freedom to others while nevertheless claiming this for themselves are ultimately implicated in vicious self-contradiction: the freedom to which they lay claim cannot be justified by physical coercion or by bogus and irrelevant assertions of racial superiority and depends ultimately and entirely upon its recognition and acknowledgement by other rational agents. To be clear, this is not just the empirical consideration noted earlier that people need or cannot do without co-operation with other people for

personal or social flourishing: it is a more fundamental point about the very logical grammar of any and all discourse of liberty, rights and entitlement. In the standard deontological formulation: there can be no rights without *duties*.

There can be little doubt, however, that the all-time most sophisticated attempt to explore the logical grammar of such Rousseauian insights concerning human freedom, rights and the moral duties that these engender, is made – with due acknowledgement of debt to Rousseau – by Immanuel Kant (1967). In the spirit of Rousseau, Kant's great critiques firmly divide the practical discourse of free agency and moral obligation from the theoretical discourse concerned to provide objective empirical knowledge of the world – and, to be sure, this may also recall for us Aristotle's not dissimilar distinction of the practical wisdom of moral virtue from the theoretical knowledge of *episteme*. Moreover, like Aristotle – and contrary to the sentimentalism of Hume and other empiricists – Kant insists that the practical discourse of moral life constitutes a significant (if not the most significant) form of human *rationality* – though (perhaps again not unlike Aristotle) he does *not* take its deliverences or conclusions to

constitute *knowledge* as such.

At this point, however, any and all resemblances between Aristotle and Kant virtually cease: whereas the main purpose of Aristotle's *phronesis* is to order the non-rational appetites, feelings and desires to the end of a personally and socially prosperous life and character, Kant's practical wisdom seeks to disclose the conditions under which such a life or character might count as genuinely *moral* or just. To be sure, Aristotle does include other-regarding justice among the virtues of a flourishing life. But there is little in his ethics, beyond the expediency of social co-operation, to show – against the sophistical appeal to self-interest against which both Socrates and Plato so strongly inveigh – why the interests, claims and rights of others should be of great concern to the would-be flourishing agent. Indeed, Aristotle's actual account of justice is consistent with ignoring the interests, claims and rights of the vast majority if it is to the advantage of the well-placed 'virtuous' to do so. Kant, on the other hand, is concerned to show that such disregard cannot be consistent with or follow from the proper exercise of authentic *moral* reason. The moral law of the categorical imperative is prescribed for all and

sundry citizens of his ‘kingdom of ends’ – by which is meant all capable of the powers of reason in terms of which the human species has been (from the Greeks onwards) significantly defined.

It is of some importance here to get Rousseau and Kant – as the great pioneers of deontology – right in the face of later developments which have often given a more instrumental and humanly self-interested spin on this ethical perspective. From this viewpoint, perhaps the main strategy of broadly ‘empiricist’ (and pointedly un-Rousseauian) ethics at least since Hobbes has been to try to show the individual rational agent why respect for the fundamental rules of social order might be to his *personal* advantage – and this drift has clearly had its influence on much latter day analytical ethics claiming Kantian or other deontological descent (for example, much work in the wake of Rawls 1985). Thus, it seems routinely held on modern contractual or ‘sociologised’ versions of deontology that upholding such social practices as truth-telling or promise-keeping serve individual advantage insofar as repecting these increases the probability that others will also tell the truth and keep their promises. But the Rousseau-

Kant position is that those who only keep promises in the hope that others reciprocate just does not *understand* what a *promise* is. Likewise, those who speak of justice while exploiting or demeaning others – specifically other sentient and rational agents – just do not understand what *justice*, or morality more generally, *means*. To understand this is to have some grasp of the distinctive grammar of the human normative discourse of moral rights and duties that Rousseau and Kant sought with some success to expose.

The conceptual sins of modern virtue ethics

The modern revival of virtue ethics is conventionally dated to Elizabeth Anscombe's typically confrontational 1958 article 'Modern moral philosophy' (see Anscombe 1981) in which she was largely contemptuous of the modern ethics of duty and utility of her day. As now familiar, Anscombe dismissed the special '*moral* ought' of Kantian and other deontology – as a survival or relic of a largely outmoded 'divine command'

morality – and, by contrast, urged modern return to an Aristotelian ethics of virtue and to the more particularistic virtuous deliberation of *phronesis*. In this regard, while herself never apparently a virtue ethicist, Anscombe would appear chiefly responsible for the largely adversarial stance of the 'new' virtue ethics towards other ethical perspectives (despite more recent scattered virtue ethical attempts to take other than Aristotelian perspectives on board). But while there may well be some truth in Anscombe's diagnosis of the historical provenace of the moral 'ought' of modern deontology, her complete dismissal of the ethical significance of this notion seems extreme and can hardly be considered the last word on the matter.

To begin with, while the historical debt of modern deontology to the divine law ethics of the Judaeo-Christian tradition seems clear enough – indeed, the philophical rationale for the ethics of duty of Kant's moral law is often (though perhaps not entirely accurately) traced to or identified with the Christian golden rule 'not to do as you would not be done by' – it seems more problematic to regard the special 'moral' ought of this tradition as entirely separate or conceptually

dissociated from a more humanly fundamental sense of ought undoubtedly familiar to pagans or members of other religious traditions. Indeed, the ancient Greeks and members of other pre-Christian societies would certainly have been familiar with a concept of duty or obligation based on loyalty or gratitude to family, tribe or clan or to friends or beneficiaries: how, indeed, might any human community survive absent this? The difference, of course, between such more common-or-garden obligation and the deontological and/or (perhaps) biblical variety is that it was rather more local and not extended or 'universalised' to apply to all comers. Precisely, the obligated of barbaric or 'heroic' societies could be dutiful to and/or protective of their own kind while killing and enslaving others.

The great moral innovation – or, one might well say, the actual progress to morality – of the Judaeo-Christian tradition consisted not in abdication of the 'ordinary' sense of obligation, but in its extension (at least in principle) to humanity in general. To love one's neighbour, in the teaching of Christ and his apostles, was to love each and all, his sister as well as his brother. It is doubtless this idea that – as a

matter of contingest historical circumstance – informs the ethics of duty of Rousseau and Kant. But it is also arguable that this later largely secularised moral perspective is closer in spirit to both the Christian and pre-Christian senses of obligation than to the pre-reformation 'divine command' morality from which Anscombe disassociates it. For both pagan and early Christian were encouraged to respect and feel obliged to others, not because they were commanded to do so by some external or imposed authority, but *for its own sake* in a spirit of genuine attachment to, affiliation with or love for others. From this viewpoint, insofar as Anscombe's divine command morality would seem to be – in the later moral terminology popularised by Kant and his followers – *heteronomous* as opposed to autonomous or authentic, it is arguably hardly a genuine *morality* at all.

At all events, Anscombe seems mainly responsible for the damaging opposition between virtue ethics and other moral perspectives that has characterised 'post-modern moral philosophy' – not least, the large scale modern virtue ethical dismissal of some of the greatest insights of enlightenment ethics. To be sure, the modern Aristotelian turn of attention to

the contribution of virtuous character to moral life – not least to Aristotle's innovative concept of *phronesis* or practical deliberation as the key ordering principle of good character – has been timely and important. But it is probably a common modern mistake to regard virtuous character in any ancient Greek sense as synonymous with *moral* character, since we can see that even Aristotle's virtuous justice is consistent with a range of attitudes and practices that we can no longer regard as moral. In this regard, no-one today could reasonably be an unreconstructed moral or political Aristotelian. In the present view, indeed, Aristotle's moral naturalism may be considered a backward step from Plato who seems to have had at least a strong intuitive grasp of the later deontological insight that the essentially *normative* and (by implication) universal drift of genuine human moral sense and sensibility is not to be grounded in or comprehended in terms of the natural facts or circumstances of human life.

In consequence, however well Aristotelian naturalism successfully shows the connection (made much of by contemporary neo-naturalists) between the facts and circumstances of human life and some fundamental human

values – that, for example, we value self-control, courage and co-operation because such qualities help us (evolutionarily) to survive, prosper or flourish – it should be clear that not all flourishing is *moral* and the price of morality (as Socrates clearly saw) may well be to decline or perish. From this viewpoint, the currently much vaunted notion of flourishing is – as Kant held of natural human non-cognitive feelings and sentiments – far too fickle and protean to ground morality: just as agents may have different and conflicting feelings about how they should act in this or that circumstances, so they may be guided (as MacIntyre 1981, among others, has shown) by quite diverse and competing conceptions of flourishing. In short, as said, if Aristotelian naturalism sucessfully crosses the (alleged) gulf between facts and values, it is in principle unable to cross that between factual description – of, say, what does or does not conduce to our survival in this or that situaton – and any real wisdom or advice about how we should morally or otherwise live. From the viewpoint of how we should live *morally*, indeed, it should be clear that the notion of flourishing does *no* substantial ethical work whatsoever, since we can have no idea how to flourish morally in the absence of some prior

conception of what *morality* is. It would appear to have been this idea that Plato attempted (unsuccessfully) to spell out in the *Republic* and other works, and at which Kant (drawing on Rousseau) has a better stab in his *Groundwork* and *Second Critique*. The bottom line of this perspective is that there can be no morality in the absence of *justice* conceived as according – without fear or favour – respect to *all* other sentient and rational agents regardless of whether this might or might not conduce to one's Aristotelian or other interests and flourishing.

Towards ethical reconciliation

Insofar, one significant lesson of the story so far is that the battle lines drawn up in recent days between such 'rival' ethical perspectives as Kantian deontology, virtue ethics and utilitarianism are unhelpful. This is not, of course, to advocate some eclectic and indiscriminate philosophical free-for-all: in the present view, for example, most forms of moral non-cognitivism and sentimentalism are simply mistaken. The point is that the work of the truly great moral philosophers

from Greek antiquity onwards contains indispenable insights which we ignore only at great cost. The major philosophical task is to see how these insights might be fitted together to form some overall coherent moral story. To begin with, Socrates and Plato make a significant connection between (moral) virtue and knowledge: on this view, it is at least a necessary (if not sufficient) condition of full (moral) virtue that moral agents are epistemically free as possible from self-deluding ignorance and as clear-sighted as possible about themselves, the world and their relations with others (for some recent defence of this view, see Carr 2016). To this extent, while virtue may need to accommodate some human ignrance, Driver's idea that there are actually 'ignorance-seeking' virtues should be judged ethically incoherent and objectionable.

But now, while Aristotle's identification of a distinctive conception of practical deliberation (*phronesis*) – specifically concerned with the judicious ordering of the non-rational aspects of human character – may be considered (as Anscombe 1959, p. 58 called it) a major discovery, his sharp distinction of this from knowledge-seeking reason and virtues,

and occasional comparison of practical reason to the know-how of practical skill rather unhelpfully blurs the Socratic-Platonic view of the role of *episteme* in virtue. In the present view, however, his associated repudiation of Plato's search for a universal justice-based conception of the moral good should also be considered ill-advised. While Plato spectacularly fails to identify the normative sources of such a defining conception of moral good, it should be no less clear that no such conception can be derived from the practical deliberations of *phronesis* – or from the problematic naturalistic concept of *eudaimonia* to which this is linked – and that there can be no conception of *moral* deliberation or virtue in the absence of something of the universal account for which Plato nevertheless sought. In sum, the moral theorising of the Greeks is *archaic* (though, arguably, Plato's rather less than Aristotle's) and neither of these great philosophers was historically well placed or philosophically equipped to appreciate quite the distinctive normative character of moral enquiry that Kant (with more than a little help from Rousseau) identifies and addresses in his great critiques. Kant has a distinctive theory of *morality* – that, for all their merits and genius, Plato and Aristotle do not quite provide.

Still, as mentioned, while it might be seen as the major task of contemporary moral theory to see how these various bits and pieces of moral insight can be fitted together into a coherent pattern, the ethical wisdom of the day would suggest that this cannot be done. In this regard, as we have again seen, it might seem the main stumbling block that the work of Plato-Socrates, Aristotle and Kant contains apparently rather different and conflicting views about the roles of reasoning and knowledge in moral life. For one apparently sharp contrast – laboured to death in much contemporary moral theory – there may seem to be an unbridgeable gulf fixed between the practical and particularistic deliberations of Aristotle's *phronesis* and the more universalistic reasoning of Kant (and/or Plato). But there also seem to be cross-purposes here. For one thing, we have already noted that Aristotle's view of moral deliberation may need some correction in favour of a Socratic-Platonic account of the role of *episteme* in moral wisdom. For another, while latter day neo-Aristotelians have sometimes defended a radically *particularist* view of moral deliberation – whereby Aristotle denied that there can be any *general* moral or virtue-

sustaining rules or principles – this was clearly not Aristotle's own view: in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he precisely insists that some forms of conduct – such as murder, theft and adultery – are generally or *absolutely* wrong.

Again, while Kant evidently regarded good character as secondary to obedience to the moral law, he neverthelsss saw (and wrote about) character as morally significant (see Munzel 1999) and there is no compelling reason to suppose that a broadly Aristotelian account of the operations of practical deliberation might not be fitted into an overall Kantian or other deontological conception of just moral regard for all – especially where general moral imperatives (as they often do) conflict. Indeed, some such idea is already present in latter day deontological conceptions of *reflective equilibrium*. This might, to be sure, revive the vexed question of the primacy or otherwise of character or virtue in moral theory – but it may be that this has generated more philosophical heat than light. If the question is that of whether the reflections, deliberations and/or judgements of virtuous character are general or abstract or context-specific and particular, the sensible answer is surely that they are *both* –

since particular judgements (for reasons already given) could hardly be moral absent more general normative principles.

However, if the question is whether – given that Kantian character seems a *means* to fulfilment of the moral law – virtues might still be regarded as *intrinsically* valuable in an Aristotelian spirit, there is again no good reason to suppose that they might not. Indeed, the case against here may well turn on confusion between rather different considerations of normative ethics and moral psychology. Thus, from the viewpoint of moral theory, Kant (or Plato) might well regard appropriately principled moral conduct as the end and moral character as the 'mere' means to its reinforcement; but from the viewpoint of Aristotelian moral psychology it would be a key – and far from inconsistent aim – to encourage agents to value moral virtue *for its own sake* as the route to a truly fulfilling human life. In any case, to regard X as a means to Y is not necessarily to regard it as of only *instrumental* value, since the relationship may also be understood more constitutively or conceptually: that is, X may contribute to what Y *means*. At all events, there seems no reason in principle why such accommodations might not be made to the

end of a better theoretical account of the rich epistemic and normative complexity of the wisdom of moral virtue for which we have argued in this paper – and to which much recent moral theory seems to have done less than complete justice.

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