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Which Variety of Vitue Ethics?

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Which Variety of Virtue Ethics?

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This conference's theme helps us to recognize that the initial surge of interest in virtue ethics, after making virtue ethics a settled part of ethical discussion, then broadened out. At first it was natural for those interested in virtue ethics to take their cue from the famous Elizabeth Anscombe article and the work of Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse, and to think of Aristotle's as the central example of a theory of virtue, and of virtue ethics. (There are of course aspects of Aristotle's ethics which have not been taken up into contemporary, neo-Aristotelian ethics, such as the doctrine of the mean, and what we would class as the meta-ethical claim that the virtues are grounded in human nature.)

Different versions have been developed of virtue, and hence of virtue ethics. Looking at the field now, we can see not only neo-Aristotelian accounts of virtue, but consequentialist accounts, target-centred accounts, exemplarist accounts, agent-based accounts and sentimentalist accounts, to name some. Renewed attention to the history of ethics has produced accounts of virtue which are Humean, Kantian, Smithian (from Adam Smith) and Nietzschean, not to mention Confucian. And these accounts fit, as we would expect, distinctive kinds of virtue ethical theories.

Looking at this great and continuing proliferation, it's tempting to cheer, and to welcome the blooming of a thousand flowers where before there was a desert. But, while continuing to cheer, we should notice that the appearance of different versions of virtue, and of virtue ethics, complicates the task for those of us who work in virtue ethics. Given the large differences between these varieties of virtue, and hence of virtue ethics, problems emerge as to which virtue ethical theory to promote. Generally it's neo-Aristotelian theory which has been most promoted in educational efforts (such as those for which the Centre is responsible), and it's that version of virtue, and virtue ethics, which most people, both philosophers and non-philosophers, tend to take as the default. But could that be just because it, so to speak, got a head-start in the revival of virtue ethics? Proponents of, for example, Humean virtue ethics are quite sure that the Humean

version is superior to the Aristotelian version. What are the grounds on which we could agree or disagree with them?

Supporters of different versions of virtue ethics have not gone in for the kind of dispute intended to ‘knock down’ other theories or to ‘blow them out of the water’. This is understandable, given that this kind of unhelpful approach is typical of much of the philosophy that virtue ethics has thankfully replaced. There has of course been a growing number of discussions of different aspects of the theories, particularly the role of virtue in the theories, but we still have many varieties of virtue, and of virtue ethics, and we don’t yet have a systematic discussion of the differences between them.

Some may think that this is fine; why should we go in for comparing theories? If we pay no attention to the differences between theories, however, there is a risk that virtue may appear to be, to both its supporters and its non-supporters, a pliable concept, one which can just as easily be construed in a Kantian version as an Aristotelian one, and just as easily taken to be built up from acquaintance with exemplars, or pure sentiment, as from habituation. Any central ethical concept will take different forms in different theories – flourishing is different for the Stoics from what it is for Aristotle, to take an obvious example – but virtue may look exceptionally plastic, and this raises the worry whether a concept at home in so many different theories can be robust enough to serve as a central ethical concept in any of them.

It’s worth our while, then, to have a look at the ways in which different theories answer to our basic requirements on an ethical theory, and the extent to which theories differ in the degree of success in meeting these. The point is not to establish ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ among different virtue theories. Rather, it is to examine ways in which theories satisfy us when we ask what we want an ethical theory to do. It is likely that some will do better in one way and worse in others; rather than finding any overall ‘winners’ we will probably end with a network of ways in which theories succeed or fail for us.

What, though, are our basic requirements for an ethical theory? Many textbooks on ethics start by laying out the requirements for a theory to be a good theory and then proceed to examine ethical theories to see the extent to which they satisfy these requirements, or fail to. This approach is unhelpful, because it is the wrong way round. If we start out with abstract requirements on theories just as theories, we may be pressing ethical theories into Procrustean moulds. It is more useful to look directly at the virtue theories themselves and notice which

points of comparison suggest themselves as we compare them. In line with this, I will in this paper compare two different versions of virtue ethics and then ask some questions as to how well each fares in what have emerged as points of difference. This is obviously just a beginning in what will prove to be a highly complicated project. As often, it would be a lot *simpler* to begin with a list of requirements and then check off the two accounts in terms of how they meet them or not, but it wouldn't get us much further forward in understanding what the theories do for us. The longer way round is the more fruitful.

The two accounts of virtue I propose to compare are those of Aristotle and Nietzsche, which I choose because they are usefully distinct on a wide spread of issues. I shall not be arguing that Nietzsche actually is a virtue ethicist; there is a robust debate about this, but I don't want to make what I explore here dependent on claiming that he is. He has distinctive things to say about virtue, from which we can readily see what a Nietzschean virtue ethics would look like, and that is enough. I shall spend longer on Nietzsche because Aristotle's account of virtue is so widely known and studied. There are contemporary theories which are Nietzschean in spirit, and I shall get to these, but I prefer to introduce the ideas through Nietzsche himself because he is so much more outrageously attention-getting.

Although the Aristotelian kind of account is familiar, I shall recall its main outlines very briefly.¹ A virtue is a disposition, that is, a lasting, not a temporary state of the person. It is a disposition to act reliably in certain ways (bravely, generously, etc.) as the result of a process of learning to think, decide, act and feel in certain ways (bravely, generously, etc.). We cannot understand what a virtue is without grasping how we learn to acquire it; unlike some other ethical theories, virtue ethics takes ethical education to be part of the theory, so that we don't understand virtue just from examining virtuous adults; we need to know how they got that way. Virtue is acquired like a skill (like building, says Aristotle). We start as learners, copying a role model and learning to do what he or she does; this presupposes a specific social and cultural context. The learner needs to understand what in the role model to follow, so as to grasp for herself the point of thinking and acting in this way, and to improve when necessary on her teacher; thus learning involves a drive to aspire, and is never simply mimicking. Virtue is the product of nature, habituation and reason, as Aristotle says compactly at *Politics* VII 13.

¹ I omit here references to studies of Aristotle's ethics, of which there are very many.

Habituation forms the natural tendencies we have; it begins as education, but continues through life as self-improvement, since virtue is always developing to meet our ever-changing circumstances.

This is virtue, rather than mere routine, because it is informed by reason. For on this conception of virtue it is crucial that virtue involves the development of our ability to reason, and to mould our responses ever more intelligently. It is practical intelligence (*phronesis*) which unifies the different expressions of a virtue. Fighting in battle and coping with cancer are both examples of bravery, despite the extreme differences in the contexts, because both involve the same kind of reasoned response about what is and is not worth enduring. It is also practical intelligence which unifies the different virtues. A generous response is not just an impulse to give money away; it is an intelligent response to need, and thus requires proper appreciation of what is required in responding to need, for example tact and fairness. Since we don't encounter the world in compartmentalized ways, a virtue will not have its own little practical intelligence, limited only to generosity or bravery; rather, the person will respond generously in an intelligent way which generosity shares with the other virtues. And so we find ourselves on the way to some form of the unity of the virtues.²

This strikes many people as a rather intellectual view of virtue, so it is worth stressing that it does not imply that the virtuous person is busily reasoning and consciously thinking all the time. As with a practical skill, the better we get at it, the less we need conscious thinking about what we are doing, and so the virtuous person's response will be direct and unmediated by deliberating about what to do (only the non-virtuous and learners need to do this). Further, the theory is not intellectualist in the sense of denying the importance of feelings: the virtuous person's feelings and emotions have been educated to be in agreement with her reasoning and its results. Indeed it is the Aristotelian account of virtue which more than others emphasizes the importance in ethical education of educating our feelings and emotions. This is the basis of the important distinction between the virtuous person, whose emotional side is in harmony with her

² Strictly, to the reciprocity of the virtues: if you have one (fully, not just as a natural, pre-moral tendency) you have them all. Unfortunately this position is standardly referred to in contemporary discussions as the unity of the virtues. In ancient discussions the unity thesis is the thesis that all the virtues are actually one virtue, practical reasoning.

practical judgement, and the merely 'enratic' or 'continent' person, who acts virtuously but has to get herself to do it, perhaps even inwardly regretting it.

Nietzsche does not seem like much of a candidate for producing an ethics of virtue, given comments like

'You will have to forgive me for having discovered that all moral philosophy so far has been boring and should be classified as a soporific – and that nothing has done more to spoil "virtue" for my ears than this *tediousness* of its advocates.' (BGE 228)

His hostility to established forms of ethical theory is notorious; he regards the desire to establish and live by a systematic ethical theory as a kind of failure to develop.³ Still, as I stressed, we do not need to take up a position here on how systematic Nietzsche's thought is, or whether he can be regarded as an ethical thinker; I am simply going to pick out various strands of thought in him about virtue which do hang together in various ways (as we can see from contemporary philosophers who have similar thoughts).

Nietzsche rejects the Aristotelian account of virtue in several respects. Firstly, he doesn't like the idea of virtue as a reliable disposition to act:

'I love brief habits and consider them invaluable means for getting to know *many* things and states down to the bottom of their sweetnesses and bitternesses...*enduring* habits, however, I hate, and feel as if a tyrant has come near me and the air around me is *thickening* when events take a shape that seems inevitably to produce enduring habits' (GS 295)⁴

He is thinking of a habit as simply an established way of reliably and predictably doing the same thing, where 'doing the same thing' is taken to be performing the same kind of action - regularly giving money, or regularly standing up for what you believe. He is repelled by the idea of always

³ 'What is a thinker worth if he does not know how to escape from his own virtues occasionally! For he ought not to be only "a moral being"!' (D 510)

⁴ Cf D 102 : the permanence of others' qualities is one of the mistakes we allegedly make about other people.

doing the same thing, or thinking the same way, taking this to be stifling and mindless. He extends this attitude even to something he does unhesitatingly regard as a virtue:

‘Honesty – granted that this is our virtue, from which we cannot get free, we free spirits – well, let us labour at it with all love and malice and not weary of “perfecting” ourselves in *our* virtue, the only one we have; may its brightness one day overspread the ageing culture....Our honesty, we free spirits – let us see to it that our honesty does not become our vanity, our pomp and finery, our limitation, our stupidity! Every virtue tends towards stupidity, every stupidity towards virtue....let us see to it that through honesty we do not finally become saints and bores! Is life not a hundred times too short to be – bored in it?’
(*BGE* 227)

The enemy is repetition, which leads to stultification, which is threatening even when the attitude is itself valuable. Clearly Nietzsche thinks that even a virtue like honesty is under threat if it becomes an established and reliable way of acting and thinking. He fears that it will become routine, and thus ‘stupid’, insensitive to the variety of situations and people that we encounter and the perspectives from which life can be considered. If we are reliably honest, he thinks, we will start to act and think honestly in mindless and routine ways, becoming ‘saints’ and ‘bores’ who act without reflection or responsiveness to their surroundings.⁵

Aristotelian habituation is not routine. We learn to be virtuous as we learn to build, and a builder had better not build routinely. As we learn to build, or to be brave, better, we learn to respond ever more intelligently to fresh situations; skill is lost if it degenerates into routine. Hence a virtue does not imply acting or thinking in the same way every time, except in the sense of always acting or thinking *bravely*, *generously* or whatever. But this will precisely involve *different* responses to differing situations.

⁵ Cf *BGE* ‘Maxims and Interludes’ 107: ‘To close your ears to even the best counter-argument once the decision has been taken: sign of a strong character. Thus an occasional will to stupidity.’ In this distrust of habituation Nietzsche seems ironically close to Kant. However, at *D* 339 he says, ‘To demand that duty must *always* be something of a burden – as Kant does – means to demand that it should never become habit and custom; in this demand there is concealed a remnant of ascetic cruelty’.

Nietzsche is unhappy with this kind of response, according to which people in very different situations – a firefighter putting out a blaze, say, and a patient coping with a painful treatment - *are* in fact exhibiting the *same* virtue, even though we call them both brave.

Strikingly, he says,

‘Courage as cold valourousness and intrepidity, and courage as hotheaded, half-blind bravery – both are called by the same name! Yet how different from one another are the *cold virtues* and the *hot!*’ (*D* 277)⁶

It seems *odd* to Nietzsche that we use the same word for courage in radically different kinds of situation. He is happier with virtues which are already characterized in relation to something, as with his own rather strange four ‘cardinal’ virtues:

‘*The good four. –Honest* towards ourselves and whoever else is a friend to us; *brave* towards the enemy; *magnanimous* towards the defeated; *-polite* – always; this is what the four cardinal virtues want us to be’ (*D* 556)⁷

These virtues are characterized in terms of certain relationships we are or can be in. It is apparently not a virtue to be honest to enemies, or brave in the face of disease, or magnanimous towards the equally strong (though politeness has apparently no limits) He even finds it striking and misleading that we speak of the same virtue in different relationships.

Nietzsche’s relativization of virtue takes two forms. Sometimes he talks of virtue as relativized to *kinds of people*:

‘What helps feed or nourish the higher type of man must be almost poisonous to a very different and lesser type. The virtues of a base man could indicate vices and weakness in a philosopher’ (*BGE* 30)⁸

Nietzsche’s concern here is that to try just to be brave, or generous, say, is to ignore your own individuality and to aim only to be the same as other people, the ‘herd’ which flattens out and reduces individual lives. He sees it as crucial, then, to seek virtues which properly

⁶ Cf. ‘Courage before the enemy is one thing: it does not prevent one from being a coward and indecisive scatterbrain.’ (*GS* 169)

⁷ The choice is partially defended at *D* 392: ‘Politeness is a very good thing and in fact one of the four cardinal virtues (if the last of them).’

⁸ Cf ‘Some ages seem to lack completely some talent or virtue, just as some people do’ (*GS* 9).’

express the kind of person you are, and rejects the idea that in so doing you are developing in any robust sense the *same* virtue as that developed by a very different kind of person. Hence his frequent contrasts between contemporary virtues and those of ancient Greeks, Christians and previous generations.⁹

On some occasions he even talks of virtues as individualized by the person whose virtues they are:

‘A virtue needs to be our *own* invention, our *own* most personal need and self-defense: in any other sense, a virtue is just dangerous.’ (A 11).

It is not clear whether he means the stronger claim that the virtue is actually unique to the person, or the weaker claim that to develop a virtue properly, a person must work at it for himself, without taking over opinions and reactions from other people uncriticized. The idea of a virtue actually individualized to the person is not worked out.¹⁰

Secondly, Nietzsche talks of virtues as relative to *kinds of situation*:

‘Of all pleasures, which is the greatest for the men of that little, constantly imperilled community which is in a constant state of war and where the sternest morality prevails?...The pleasure of *cruelty*; just as it is reckoned a *virtue* in a soul under such conditions to be inventive and insatiable in cruelty’ (D 18).¹¹

⁹ In the ‘Our Virtues’ section of *BGE* Nietzsche contrasts the ‘trusting and muscular virtues for which we hold our grandfathers in honor’ (214) with the confused virtues of his complex and hybrid contemporaries: ‘We are unassuming, selfless, modest, brave, full of self-overcoming, full of dedication, very grateful, very patient, very accomodating – but for all that we are, perhaps, not very “tasteful”.’ (224)

¹⁰ Cf *GS* 120, where Nietzsche claims that the adage that virtue is the health of the soul should be changed to “your virtue is the health of your soul”. ‘Deciding what is health even for your *body* depends on your goal, your horizon, your powers, your impulses, your mistakes and above all on the ideals and phantasms of your soul’ – and *a fortiori* for the health of the soul. Once again, it is not clear that Nietzsche really thinks that there is no general norm, rather than that a thoughtful person applies the norm to herself in a way that fits her individual circumstances.

¹¹ Cf *D* 30 on ‘refined cruelty as virtue’, where Nietzsche speculates on its origins. Less startlingly: ‘Outside of Europe the virtues of Europe will go on their wanderings with these

Some passages underline the importance of our circumstances. Of our ability to achieve our aims we find:

‘We can estimate our powers but not our *power*. Our circumstances do not only conceal and reveal it to us – no! they magnify and diminish it. One should regard oneself as a variable quantity whose capacity for achievement can under favorable circumstances perhaps equal the highest ever known: one should thus reflect on one’s circumstances and spare no effort in observing them’ (*D* 326).¹²

We thus find both an emphasis on the importance of developing *your own* virtues and character rather than trailing after others, and an emphasis on the different kinds of response called for in different contexts and situations.

These lines of thought can actually conflict. To the extent that my character is formed by responding to a particular type of situation I am precisely not developing *my own* virtues, for insofar as I am just proceeding reactively the idea of my unified developing self is undermined,¹³ but Nietzsche does not follow this up. When he discusses the virtues of the prehistoric past and those of the future both considerations, relativity to types of situation and relativity to types of person, seem to be playing a role.¹⁴

For Nietzsche, then, we are misled by the fact that we use a single word into thinking that there is something robustly similar about the very different kinds of response that we make in different kinds of situation. He prefers to think of a virtue exercised by different kinds of people, or in two different types of situation, as two virtues. Further, if ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ bravery, for example, are so different, we can see already why Nietzsche does not much like the idea of lasting and reliable dispositions. We need, he thinks, different kinds of honesty and bravery for the different relationships we are already in (friends and enemies, for example), and in new relationships and contexts we need to be ready to develop appropriately new virtues.

[emigrating] workers, and that which at home was beginning to degenerate into dangerous ill-humour and inclination for crime will, once abroad, acquire a wild beautiful naturalness and be called heroism’ (*D* 206).

¹² Cf *D* 264, 468.

¹³ The contemporary version of this problem will be discussed later.

¹⁴ *D* 18 and 551.

Another point central to the Aristotelian account that Nietzsche rejects is the idea that to have a virtue is to be able to exercise it in an appropriately intelligent way, getting right the appropriate occasion, object, degree of feeling and so on. The generous person, for example, isn't, on the Aristotelian view, just someone who gives a lot, but someone who gives appropriately, without intrusiveness or condescension, neither overwhelmingly lavish nor stingy, and with a due receptiveness to the recipient's dignity. This is the *intelligent* account of virtue, and it answers to the fact that we don't, for example, think that generosity is just giving, for we don't think that someone is more generous just by giving more; in some circumstances giving more might well be insulting or otherwise inappropriate. On this view virtue does not come in degrees.

Nietzsche adopts a *simple* view of virtue, which is that it is just a tendency to act in a certain way, a tendency which comes in degrees. There can be too much or too little of a virtue, and if so the tendency can be a virtue in one situation and not in another:

‘Not to be stuck to our own virtues and let our whole self be sacrificed for some one of our details, our “hospitality”, for instance: this is the danger of dangers for rich souls of a higher type, who spend themselves extravagantly, almost indifferently, pushing the virtue of liberality to the point of vice.’ (*BGE* 41)¹⁵

Politeness, a cardinal virtue in one work, turns up in another as a ‘mischievous and cheerful vice’.¹⁶ Impatience, a ‘defect of character’, becomes ‘a school of genius’ as the impatient person is driven to seek ever new fields of enquiry.¹⁷ The same state, then, can be a virtue in one person or situation, but not a virtue, or actually a vice, in another person or situation.

¹⁵ Cf also, of politeness, one of his four cardinal virtues: ‘[B]ut if it is not to make us burdensome to one another, he with whom I have to do has to be a degree more or a degree less polite than I am – otherwise we shall get nowhere, and the salve will not only salve us but stick us together, (*D* 392) Cf. ‘One grain of gratitude and piety too much: - and one suffers from it as from a vice, and, for all one’s honesty and independence, falls prey to a bad conscience.’ (*D* 293)

¹⁶ *BGE* 284 (contrast *D* 556). In the same passage we get a completely different list of four virtues: courage, insight, sympathy, solitude. Presumably solitude is the capacity not to be needily dependent on others.

¹⁷ *D* 452.

A virtue, then, is a tendency to act which may well get things right at some point but, when increased or decreased, can get them wrong and turn into a vice. Nietzsche thinks of virtues predominantly in kinds of relationships or contexts (honesty to yourself and your friends) – rather than as virtues simpliciter (honesty); and he doubts that there is much if anything in common between what we call the same virtue in its different types of relationship or context. And the reliability and lastingness of a virtue is for him a liability, not an advantage.

Unsurprisingly Nietzsche is hostile to the idea that the virtues form a unity. Much in him encourages the view that they actually conflict.¹⁸ If virtues are just tendencies to act in certain ways, with nothing internal to them to integrate, they will tend to compete as much as to cooperate, and this will make them a source of instability in life rather than harmony. For Nietzsche this is a good thing, since it encourages the kind of growth that comes from struggle and challenge. Tension and shifting power-balances between your virtues, as opposed to harmony, will keep you actively developing and pushing forward.

Finally, Nietzsche denies that the development of virtue is under our control in the way that we think it is. He denies that we have ‘free will’ as he conceives it; there is no such thing as stepping back from my motivations and then ordering them rationally. We act because of the way our motivations, which he calls ‘drives’, develop, and much of this happens beneath the level of rational control.

‘However far a man may go in self-knowledge, nothing however can be more incomplete than his image of the totality of *drives* which constitute his being. He can scarcely name even the cruder ones: their number and strength, their ebb and flood, their play and counterplay among one another, and above all the laws of their *nutriment* remain wholly unknown to him.’ (*D* 119)

¹⁸ In *Z I* we find: ‘It is distinguishing to have many virtues, but it is a hard lot... But this evil is necessary, envy and mistrust and slander among your virtues are necessary. Look, how each of your virtues is greedy for the highest. It wants your entire spirit, to be *its* herald; it wants your entire strength in rage, hatred and love. Each virtue is jealous of the other, and jealousy is a terrible thing. Even virtues can perish of jealousy.’

We think that we are deliberating and then choosing to act on the strongest rational motive, but Nietzsche claims that this is an illusion:

‘What is clearly the case is that in this entire procedure our intellect is only the blind instrument of *another drive* which is a *rival* of the drive whose vehemence is tormenting us: whether it be the drive to restfulness, or the fear of disgrace and other evil consequences, or love. While ‘we’ believe we are complaining about the vehemence of a drive, at bottom it is one drive *which is complaining about another*; that is to say: for us to become aware that we are suffering from the *vehemence* of a drive presupposes the existence of another equally vehement or even more vehement drive, and that a *struggle* is in prospect in which our intellect is going to have to take sides.’ (D 109)

And virtues are not special types of motivation; they are just drives themselves. Speaking of society prior to the introduction of morality Nietzsche says,

‘Suppose that even in this state of society all the drives that would later come to be called by the honorable name of “virtues” (and, in the end, basically coincide with the concept of “morality”) – suppose that they are already active: at this point they still do not belong to the realm of moral valuations at all’ (BGE 201).

There is, then, nothing special about ethical development; it is just what people do as societies develop, and happens in the same way, through a number of causes which affect our motivations in complex ways most of which we are unaware of. It does not happen, as it does on the Aristotelian account, through rational formation and education of the self.

Nietzsche thinks of virtues in a number of ways, in all of which he tries to counter the Aristotelian account (presumably taking it to be the commonsensical one). Virtues for him are not stable, reliable dispositions. They are local – localized to a type of person, or even to an individual. They are also localized to a type of situation. He thinks of a virtue as a disposition to act in certain ways which can come in degrees, so that there can be too much or too little of it. Virtues operate on their own, as drives like other drives, and there is no reason why they should be unified or even integrated. There is no practical reasoning of the Aristotelian kind which operates both within a virtue and between and among them. This point is underlined by Nietzsche’s acceptance that virtues are motivations which combine in various ways to get us to act, but whose result is not the product of the intervention of a special kind of motivation, reason.

Our self-conception as motivated by rational considerations, particularly with virtue, is an illusion.

Many of these points will remind you of some contemporary theories of virtue. Among philosophers Christine Swanton has drawn attention to Nietzsche as a virtue ethicist, and many points in her own theory align with his views. For her, virtues are modes of response to the demands of the world, and so they are local and unintegrated. She also recognizes a large range of virtues which are relativized to types of situation. She adopts what I have here called the simple view of virtue, according to which virtue is scalar. She also thinks, as Nietzsche does, that virtues spring from a personality which can be called healthy, strong and creative, and like him she thinks that we will discover the nature of psychological health by engaging in depth psychology, rather than by paying attention to contemporary view about virtue, many of which encourage repression, weakness and mediocrity. Her own account is informed by modern psychology and differs from Nietzsche's own.¹⁹

Some Nietzschean views about virtue are also to be found among some critics of contemporary virtue ethics. The first wave of so-called 'situationists' attacked the idea of a virtue as a robust disposition to act in certain ways.²⁰ More recently opponents of virtue ethics have restated their objections in terms of alleged problems with the idea of practical reason. Referring to some work in psychology they claim that our thinking takes place on two levels, one conscious, in which we react slowly and thoughtfully, and one fast and unconscious, in which we take a variety of short-cuts and frequently make what are by rational standards mistakes. It is the second system, some claim, which is what gets us to act more of the time than we like to think, so that much of our action, and the ways in which we think that we direct our actions by our reasoning, is in fact the product of instinctive forces which are not under our conscious control. The fact that we think that it is the product of conscious reasoning and control is just one of the ways in which we fool ourselves by after-the-fact rationalizing.²¹ The similarity of these

¹⁹ Swanton (2003), (2005), (2006).

²⁰ For an excellent survey and criticism, see Russell (2009), part III.

²¹ See Kahneman (2011), Haidt, especially (2001), (2006). One difference not usually noticed is that Kahneman's interest lies in the short-cuts and typical errors that we make in thinking. Haidt

positions to Nietzsche's reductive views of our moral psychology has been pointed out by Nietzsche scholars.²² With such a reduced view of the powers of practical reasoning, virtue can only be a type of activity produced by the conflicting drives within us, which is not the product of a rational attempt to educate and form ourselves to have a character of a certain kind. This result would be welcome to Nietzsche, namely that our picture of ourselves as freely and rationally makes choices which have a forming effect on us is largely self-consoling fiction. For Nietzsche this picture is part of a rebellion against the rationalist assumptions and norms in his own society. Why contemporary psychology has developed these views, and why some philosophers have eagerly taken them up, I have no idea.

Faced by such systematically divergent pictures of virtue as we find in Aristotle and in Nietzsche (which, as I hope to have brought out, both have resonances today), can we decide between them without committing ourselves to larger Aristotelian or Nietzschean positions? To begin with, there is one big consideration which seems at least relatively independent of theory: Virtue can be taught. This claim need not be the implausible position that the teaching is, or is like, school or university teaching; what is in mind is the teaching we get from our families and friends and the social culture surrounding us, of which a significant portion comes through books and various forms of the media. It need not imply that the teaching is explicit and formulable; much of what we learn from our parents, for example, comes from imitation of activities rather than explicit direction. Nor need it imply a rejection of all genetic impact on the formation of character, something which is very controversial and not yet well understood. The claim is that a necessary condition of becoming virtuous is that you learn to be virtuous by being taught. This is not a controversial claim, though seldom made explicit; parents assume it all the time in the way they bring up their children.

One reason for the popularity of the Aristotelian picture of virtue is that it explicitly takes part of the account of what a virtue is to be an account of how we acquire it. Learning is thus built into the Aristotelian account of habituation as the process of acquiring virtue. Nietzsche's is

thinks of the fast/slow contrast in terms of an intuitive contrast between our emotional side and our cognitive and rational side, and many philosophers likewise find this move obvious.

²² See Knobe and Leiter (2007).

one among many accounts which talk only of formed virtues in adults, and thus leave us to ask the questions as to how such virtues can be learned and acquired. How, however, can a virtue be taught if it turns out to be a bad thing for it to be stable and reliable? ‘Enduring habits’ of response (even of response to differing situations) are seen by Nietzsche, and by some contemporaries, as stifling and incurious, and also as letting us comfortably think that is good to be settled in character, while our natural curiosity and creativity require us to remain ready to break free of settled ways of responding to the world. How, though, do we teach children to respond reliably to, say, the needs of others while we simultaneously teach them that reliability is a bad thing?

There is an obvious response to this, but it does not do the work it promises to do. It might be responded that we can teach children to be reliably, say, brave, and introduce later the point that their responses should be more selective and less a product of past teaching. This response is not available to those who follow Nietzsche in thinking that the power of practical reasoning to determine character is far more limited than we think. But even if we think that later mature reasoning can make originally settled dispositions less reliant on past teaching, this underestimates what needs to be done. It is not just that in mature adults stability and reliability can be boring. The point is that virtue is on this view necessarily not stable and reliable – these are signs that something has gone wrong - so that even early training is going wrong if it favours reliability and stability of response. We would then have to teach children not to get used to helping others in distress, or to standing up for a good cause, since this would encourage tendencies to get into settled habits, and to weaken thoughts that would enable us to go against these. But how does teaching virtue get off the ground if stability of response over a variety of situations is a warning sign, a red flag that should divert the teaching into another direction? What is on the Aristotelian picture a sign of progress becomes on a Nietzschean view a problem, with no obvious way to deal satisfactorily with it.

Here we may be told that virtues can be taught as *local* dispositions or habits. Instead of being taught to respond to others’ needs over a variety of situations, we can be taught to respond to other’s needs only in a selected variety of situations – when they ask for aid, for example. This seems to be what Nietzsche has in mind when he talks of being honest to ourselves and friends (and implicitly not to others), and it is the model of virtue that many ‘situationists’ think that we are left with if virtue is not to be a matter of responding over a variety of situations. We can at

least see what it would be like to teach children virtues in this way. It would be like teaching them practical skills, such as athletic or performance skills, in which responses to act, think and feel in a certain area are educated to become intelligent ways of dealing with the particular challenges of that area. Practical skills are local in the obvious sense that you can acquire one without this affecting other areas of your character: an untrustworthy person, for example, can acquire a practical skill like playing a sport without this affecting her trustworthiness. Advocates of local virtues hold that this is true of virtues also: you can be brave without this having any impact on your character in respect of generosity or other virtues. It is this localization to marked-off areas of life which is behind Nietzsche's relativizing virtues to certain kinds of situation.

The problem here is that this account of virtue limits it to the result of the early stages of teaching, where the child gets that a certain response is appropriate to a certain sort of situation: helping people when they ask for help. On the Aristotelian view, this is merely the beginning, since this is obviously so far a relatively mechanical response. The idea that learning to be brave stops here seems oddly premature: this is the point at which the child needs to go on to learn what is crucial for the virtue, namely to respond generously to new situations, to develop greater sensitivity to others in being generous, to distinguish between the genuinely needy and the merely complaining, and so on. If virtues are local, generosity and the rest simply reach a plateau of coping with a certain kind of situation and then stop there. This is unsatisfying, not so much for philosophers as for ordinary people. Nietzsche expresses amazement that 'cold valourousness and intrepidity' and 'hotheaded, half-blind bravery' are both called courage; but the appropriate response is that it is not an accident that we use the same term, and so we look for what is in common to the two kinds of bravery, and find it in some form of resistance or endurance for the sake of something worthwhile. On the local virtue position, it is either chance or actually a mistake that we use the same term for dispositions to respond to such different kinds of situation. But since this happens across the range of virtues, the more reasonable response is not to posit a host of local, short-sighted virtues which mysteriously have the same name.

Again, this raises a problem for teaching the virtues. If a child has learnt that the Spartans at Thermopylae were brave, and then asks whether his friend who is suffering an illness is also brave, it seems as though on this view the answer has to be no, or brave in a different way or even different sense. But this takes no account of what led the child to make the connection in

the first place, namely her discernment that utterly different kinds of situation were being faced in similar ways. If there is little in common between bravery in battle and bravery in illness, children are being misled if they are taught to call them both by the same term, so again the lesson seems to be that we ought to discourage children from making connections like this, and instruct them to stick to the initial situations in which they have learnt a virtue and to refrain from extending it to new kinds of situation. We obviously can't do this; we don't have a multitude of terms for the host of distinct virtues that spring up where virtue is local to a kind of situation.

An answer to this suggests a middle way. We learn that responses to battle and to illness can both express bravery, but insist that bravery must always be relativized to a kind of situation, so that we have 'bravery-in-battles', 'bravery-in-illness' and so on. This sounds satisfying until we ask what is meant here by bravery. Does it mean some version of the disposition to resist or endure for the sake of something worthwhile? Then it looks as though this same point has to be taught identically in a huge variety of different situations, reduplicated endlessly as we account for battlefield responses, illness responses, political responses and so on. But this rapidly loses any plausibility. The child is being taught the same thing in different contexts, and it is the different types of situation which differentiate the different requirements ('hot' or 'cold') of bravery. In fact, it is striking how we learn virtue terms in ways that take different situations in stride, moving from battles to illness with no struggle. If virtues were really local in the sense being discussed, children wouldn't learn virtues in these ways; and it looks as though a Nietzschean account of virtue here should imply that children should be taught to *ignore* the way they go on to connect very different kinds of situation as they learn about bravery. The 'local' account of virtues turns out to collide with a very deep point about the ways we learn and teach virtues, and once again the issue is that we learn virtues in terms of responses to situations, not in terms of the situations themselves.

There is also the more local problem for Nietzsche's own account of virtue, that, as already noted, relativizing virtues to situations will tend to complicate and weaken, rather than go along with or reinforce, relativizing virtues to kinds of person, or to individuals. This is not a problem for more broadly Nietzschean kinds of account, however.

The Nietzschean picture might seem to have more basis in the ways we think about virtue when it comes to the difference between the intelligent and simple ways of thinking about virtue. On the simple view, a virtue is a tendency to act in certain ways, and so there can be too much or too little of it. And we certainly do think in terms of being too brave or generous or not brave or generous enough, so it may look as though the simple view is our default. However, the fact that we talk in this way does not in itself show that the simple view is our considered view. It is certainly strange to think that someone is acting wrongly, but doing so not only in exercising a virtue, but actually *because* she is exercising a virtue. The thought goes deep, that acting virtuously is getting things *right*. So the idea of getting things wrong, acting in a mistaken way, creates immediate tension with the idea of acting virtuously.²³

This raises another problem for teaching virtue on the Nietzschean view. We are to teach children to be brave, fair, patient and generous. We are also, however, to teach them that these virtues may lead to their acting wrongly as well as rightly. Acting wrongly comes with too much or too little bravery. This obviously requires us to give a sense to the idea of degrees of bravery which is independent of acting rightly or wrongly; and none is forthcoming. To act too generously is just to get things wrong with respect to generosity in some way (giving too much, giving the wrong things, being too gushing about it, etc.); there is no independent sense to ‘too generous’. We find that when we look at teaching virtue, the intelligent rather than the simple view is the one that makes most sense of the way we connect virtuous disposition to acting rightly.

We have found three ways in which on the Nietzschean view the teaching and learning of virtue turn out to be deeply problematic: the stability of virtue, the way virtue involves responses across type of situation and the distinction between simple and intelligent virtue. I claimed that the teachability of virtue, in the sense indicated, can be appealed to as a basis on which we can distinguish types of virtue and judge their usability in an ethics of virtue. I have argued that in three ways a Nietzschean kind of account of virtue renders it difficult or impossible to

²³ This could be the case only on a completely non-intellectual view of virtue, on which the person who is brave, intelligent and generous could also be a complete practical idiot, naïve about the ways of the world. Few think that this is a tenable account of virtue.

comprehend how we can teach and learn to be virtuous, and in this way cuts itself off from our ordinary understandings of what virtue is.

It may immediately be replied on Nietzsche's behalf that he is not offering a theory or even account of virtue which is meant to meet the constraint of teachability; it can be argued that he is not offering a theory of virtue at all, or any kind of ethical theory, but trying to wake us out of complacency and mediocrity to become aware of the ways in which conventional notions of ethics and morality complicate or prevent our flourishing as creative beings. Even if this is the case, the influence of Nietzschean views on some contemporary ethical philosophers seems comparable to that of Aristotle on others, and so it is as reasonable to examine a Nietzschean as an Aristotelian view of virtue. The point that a Nietzschean account runs into systematic problems over the teaching and learning of virtue is a relevant consideration even if Nietzsche himself was uninterested in it. It is in any case a weakness in an ethical theory, whether Nietzsche-inspired or not, to give no account of how the theory is to be taught and learned, for this is to ignore the issue of how the theory is to be applied, how we are to get from our present way of life to a way of life in which we live by the theory in question. It is unsatisfactory to think that this is a subsequent merely practical question which is quite distinct from the theory itself.²⁴

There are two further ways I would like to consider briefly in which a Nietzschean account of virtue collides with widespread ways in which we think of virtue and its role in our lives. They are not as immediately problematic as the points about teaching and learning virtue, but they are worth considering.

One is the contrast between the centralizing tendency of Aristotelian accounts of virtue, and the strongly local nature of virtues on the Nietzschean kind of account. On the Aristotelian view, the more a person's practice of the virtues is informed by developed practical reasoning, the more integrated the virtues themselves will become; Aristotle himself claims, as mentioned

²⁴ Annette Baier was the first to put this issue clearly in Baier (1994); an account of how you can learn to acquire and live by an ethical theory does not just come free with the theory; it is something that the theory itself ought to give an account of. '[A] decent morality will *not* depend for its stability on forces to which it gives no moral recognition.' (7).

above, that the virtues are reciprocating, a position often today called the ‘unity of the virtues’. Here I think that practical application of the virtues finds a mixed position. On the one hand, we readily recognize that many virtues may be relevant to coming to a single decision, so that some kind of negotiation among them is required, whether deliberative or some other kind. Internal conflict is a standard sign of process in a person – progress, regress or instability. Any theory in which the virtues become more integrated, and hence in which the person’s character becomes more harmonious, as ethical progress increases, is positing an ideal which we recognize, but also recognize as being quite far from everyday life. We might say that we have the inklings of an idea that integration of the virtues is to be desired, but no more.

It is another thing entirely, however, for virtues to be so local and unintegrated in the person that they can operate independently, as though they were merely practical skills, the exercise of which need not affect the exercise of others. And it is still another thing for virtues to be so local that they can actually be brought into conflict without this requiring resolution. As already stressed, Nietzsche himself values inner conflict without resolution, on the grounds that struggle between parts of one’s psychology is a valuable sign of growth; inner harmony is a sign of feeble giving up in the interests of a quiet life. This is in contrast to the ordinary view that inner conflict is the sign of something that needs resolution, which is a sign of progress. Contemporary defenders of merely local virtues tend to differ from Nietzsche on this score, claiming merely that our characters are in fact fragmented and disunified, and that virtues are no different from any other character trait in this respect. The implications of this for valuation are often not followed through.²⁵

The other way in which a Nietzschean account of virtue collides with our widespread positions and attitudes about virtue is in regard to practical reasoning. Nietzsche’s reductive

²⁵Merrit, Doris and Harman (2010) rest content with the conclusion that ‘internal cognitive processes’ ‘interact’ with ‘social and organizational settings’ in ways that allegedly undermine Aristotelian accounts of virtue; further implications are left hanging. Alfano (2013) holds that our characters are held together only by our subscribing (why?) to a fiction (authorized by whom?) with the status of a ‘noble lie’. Adams (2006), coming to virtue ethics from a very different direction, holds that our virtues are fragmentary and compromised because of our inability fully to appreciate the Good at which virtues aim.

account of our practical reasoning has met with a surprisingly widespread agreement (often implicit) among many contemporary philosophers, frequently for the same reason that he has, namely a fervent acceptance of science as unveiling truths about ourselves which we don't want to accept. In Nietzsche's case this is acceptance of virtues as part of a theory of 'drives' whose conflicts produce our actions in ways that bypass our reasoning, which then constructs face-saving stories about itself and its power. Contemporary philosophers are often strongly influenced by some psychological experiments whose results are taken to show that our thinking is made up of two systems, one conscious slow reasoning and one fast instinctive and automatic, and that much of the time we give credit to the conscious system for what is in fact produced quite independently of it by the automatic system. I have mentioned this above, and can't here go into details, or the reasons why I think that its relevance to virtue is far less than commonly thought. Here I shall just make two points.

Firstly, some psychological research does show us that we are less rational than we think we are, in that our everyday thinking tends to rely on heuristics and short-cuts which can lead us to make mistakes, as well as biases and stereotypes; and we are prone to make standard mistakes in reasoning. However, none of this research shows that *all* our thinking is really no more than instinctive automatic reasoning that goes on below the level of conscious thought, with consciously rational thinking limited to confabulating and rationalizing the result. Secondly, there is a deep problem of making sense, on this picture, of our agency as practical beings.²⁶ If our actions are just the result of drives within us fighting it out, with the strongest winning,²⁷ the notion of my agency becomes problematic. Whether or not this is a result that we ourselves need to take seriously, it is hard to integrate it with the idea of the person who learns to become virtuous, the self who acquires even local virtues as habits or dispositions of a kind. The more the role of the agent's practical reasoning is reduced, the harder it is to see the acquisition and exercise of virtue as anything other than the product of conflicts between drives within the person, the drives in turn nourished by the surrounding culture's pressures. If that is all that it is,

²⁶ Nietzsche himself faces this issue, and accepts the idea that what we think of as the self is a fiction.

²⁷ Reason itself is, on this picture, just another drive; see the *D* 109 quote above, p 12.

it does not seem to merit the regard in which we hold it, or to be robust enough to be at the centre of an ethical theory.

Can we make sense of ourselves on this picture? This is a large question to which I cannot contribute much here. I think it is interesting, however, that a popular picture of our agency among some contemporary philosophers is that of a person trying to control an elephant, an image introduced by Jonathan Haidt. ‘The image I came up with for myself, as I marvelled at my weakness, was that I was a rider on the back of an elephant. I’m holding the reins in my hands, and by pulling one way or the other I can tell the elephant to turn, to stop or to go. I can direct things, but only when the elephant doesn’t have desires of his own. When the elephant really wants to do something, I’m no match for him.’²⁸ So we are self-deceived when we think that we can rationally educate and form ourselves; what we think of as a single self is really a bulky mass of instincts which are in control of us in ways we are not aware of. If this is what is really going on, then the endeavour to become virtuous appears hopeless self-deception; the elephant will do what it wants to do, and our reasoning abilities will rationalize the result.

I find it interesting that Cicero draws an entirely different lesson from the picture of the man on the elephant. ‘The man of foresight is one who, as we often saw in Africa, sits on a huge and destructive creature, keeps it in order, directs it wherever he wants, and by a gentle instruction or touch turns the animal in any direction.’²⁹ For Cicero the striking point about the huge strength of the elephant and the puny size of the man is that this pictures the way that despite the force and massive presence of our desires reason can in fact control them and educate us to follow rational direction. Hence learning to be virtuous is all-important; it leads to the elephant acting in purposive ways rather than lurching around following whatever desire wants to be fulfilled. (Of course the image has the problem that rational control of the animal is imposed by a human, whereas what we really want is a *self*-controlled being.)

Philosophers agree that control and education of ourselves by rational means is a difficult job, and reason can seem small and feeble by comparison with the forces it has to deal with. But this does not force us to picture ourselves as motivated by instinctive forces with reason able only to follow along weakly, fooling itself that it is in charge. We can have a more

²⁸ Haidt (2006), 4. The third chapter of his (2012) is titled ‘Elephants rule’.

²⁹ Cicero *On the Republic* Book 2, 67.

realistic picture (note that Cicero's claim, unlike Haidt's, is based on experience of seeing men guide elephants).

I have traced a number of ways in which I have claimed that a Nietzschean account of virtue suffers in comparison with an Aristotelian one. As stressed, this has not been an attempt to do justice to Nietzsche's own thought; I have been bringing out in (I hope) a clear way a number of ways in which we can discern in Nietzsche aspects of thought about virtue which have considerable contemporary appeal among philosophers. I have tried to compare the views in respect of the ways they account, or fail to, for virtue's being learned and taught, and for two ways in which they relate to our ideas about the unification of virtues in a character, and to our views about practical reason. This is of course just a start on the issue of the varieties of virtue, and there is a great deal yet to do, as well as ways in which the present attempt can be criticized. I hope it will help to begin more thought on these comparative issues.

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