Virtue, reasons and intuition

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Preface

Thanks for reading this. Sometimes it is hard to tell how far a line of thought can be taken

without just giving it your best articulation and sharing it. I have been intrigued by the central

idea of this paper for some time, though I realize it will strike many as a complete nonstarter,

even absurd. This writing was a first effort to see just how far I can take it. My hope for the talk

is to receive feedback that will help me see in fact just how far it can go. Please read in that spirit

and please do not share without my permission.

1. Introduction

Theories of virtue provide an answer to the question, "What is it that makes a trait a virtue?" In recent literature three broad types of theory are common. *Eudaimonistic* theories identify the virtues with the qualities that enable us to flourish as human beings (Hursthouse, 1999). Sentimentalist theories identify the virtues with the qualities that can win the approbation of an ideal observer (Kawall, 2009). Consequentialist theories identify them with love of intrinsic goods (Hurka, 2001).

In this session I wish to explore an alternative that is intuitionist in both a methodological and epistemological sense: The criteria for virtue are plural and we can know what they are intuitively. While obviously not naturalistic in the same way as the most canonical approaches to virtue ethics, I will argue that "virtue intuitionism" is plausibly a form of virtue ethics and not nearly so absurd as some may take to be. It is a possible, interesting and plausible approach to virtue ethics apparently having distinct advantages relative to competitors like *eudaemonism*.

I begin by discussing why virtue intuitionism may seem like a nonstarter, then draw on resources in the thought of W.D. Ross to elaborate the view and show why it is actually possible, interesting and plausible. I then contrast it to *eudaemonistic* virtue ethics, particularly relative to virtues germaine to justice between relatively distant generations. I conclude with a brief remark on particularism.

2. An intuitionist theory of virtue

"Virtue ethics" is often developed as an alternative, autonomous approach to "act ethics," or traditionally consequentialist and deontological forms of ethical theorizing (Baron, Pettit, &

Slote, 1997). Act ethics first supplies one or more standards for right action, and virtue is just the disposition to act rightly so understood. Virtue ethics first supplies a standard for distinguishing the qualities of persons that are virtues from those that are vices—a standard putatively independent of any traditionally act ethical standard of right action—and right action (very broadly) is just being virtuous so understood. This mapping of the conceptual universe may seem to leave no space for a "virtue ethical" approach that is intuitionist. Intuitionism has historically been a deontological form of act ethics, and so the idea of an intuitionist theory of virtue may seem uninteresting, even absurd. What more can such a theory say besides that virtue is acting rightly according to one or more principles of right action?

But quite a bit more of interest can be said, I think, where "intuitionism" involves something like the pluralistic ideal articulated by W.D. Ross. I want to say, in fact, that a *variant* of Ross's theory (not Ross's theory itself) is a plausible and interesting form of virtue ethics.

Ross's theory is a form of intuitionism in two ways, methodologically and epistemologically. Methodologically, Ross denied that "intrinsically good" could be reduced to a single value, like pleasure. Rather virtue, knowledge, justice and pleasure each constituted distinct intrinsic goods (Ross, 2002, Chapter IV). More famously, Ross maintained that no single first principle, particularly the principle of utility, could comprehensively account for all of our ethical obligations (Chapter II). Multiple first principles are needed. Moreover these principles cannot be ordered to provide a decision-procedure for resolving all conflicts of duty between two or more principles. Rather, each fundamental principle indicates a merely *pro tanto* duty, or a consideration that invariably but not decisively counts in favor of acting in whatever way the principle specifies, i.e. a merely contributory reason.[1] When different principles provide contributory reasons for conflicting courses of action, we must rely on our understanding of the

values (purposes? aims? goods?) served by the principles and exercise our judgment to determine what we have most reason all-things-considered to do, or what our all-things-considered duty is.

Epistemologically, Ross held that our knowledge of the first principles is *a priori*. We can know that the first principles are *pro tanto* duties, i.e. supply contributory reasons for action, non-inferentially, just by understanding them. In that sense the truth of the first principles is self-evident (2002, p. 29). This is not to say Ross thought that their truth is obvious, nor that we *must* or *can only* arrive at them non-inferentially. We may come to believe that considerations of certain kinds, e.g. that something would be deceitful, invariably count against certain things through a reflective process involving induction from isolated experiences or observations. We see what happens in these instances, we decide that it is generally undesirable, and therefore form a belief that we have a *pro tanto* duty of fidelity. Still, once we have formed the belief, justification for it is derivable directly from our reflective understanding what that duty is. This is not the case for knowledge of our duty all-things-considered in any given instance, however. Here Ross held that our knowledge is constrained by a few common sorts of ignorance, including knowledge of the full list of *pro tanto* duties relevant to our situation, the full consequences of our actions, and knowledge of the stringency of the various relevant duties (2002, p. 30).

I largely agree (I think?!) with Ross on these points, though Ross's full theory involves many other claims I do not straightforwardly accept. Like Moore, Ross believed that the predicative rather than the attributive use of "good" (as in "music is good" rather than "Mahler's Seventh is a good symphony") is the primary notion of goodness for ethics. With Moore, he also maintained that "right" and "good" are simple, indefinable non-natural properties. In *The Right and the Good*, he seems not to have even considered "goodness for" or welfare a distinct or

useful notion at all.

I believe Ross was mistaken not to distinguish a separate notion of "goodness for," and strongly suspect that "goodness for" is more fundamental than predicative "good." That knowledge, pleasure and the like are *good for us,* make our lives go better, is a far more transparent reason why they are normative for us. And in failing to distinguish "goodness for" from good, Ross misclassifies justice as a good. Justice is surely usually *beneficial*, but this is not what he meant, and if it is simply good at all (predicative use), that is because it is a virtue or a duty. He also fails to see the full structure of the good, omitting arguably fundamental goods like autonomy, attachment to others, or accomplishment.[2] This is not to say that predicative good can be done away with entirely. Deliberation about what we ought to do, including first-personal deliberation about what's best for us, commonly proceeds in terms of this notion, and "moral goodness" in persons or character might be just another phrase for "virtuous." But then predicative good turns out to be definable in terms of other notions like welfare and virtue, and so natural or complex after all.

On the other hand, I take "right" and "good for" to be essentially normative properties not reducible to other natural properties, but supervening upon them. To that extent I doubt that "goodness for" is a much less tendentious notion than predicative goodness metaphysically or epistemically.[3] It only seems to be because being well off is a property of us natural beings and so is apparently susceptible of empirical investigation. And lots of wonderful and interesting empirical work on well-being is being done. But what is investigated empirically is what people believe makes life go well, what ways of living enable us to meet that normative standard, and whether or when individuals in fact meet it. What is not clearly investigated, nor investigable (can I have this nonword???), is the normativity of the standard itself. And this is also true of

predicative "good." Knowledge of what is good for us is ultimately arrived at in just the same reflective way we would have to arrive at knowledge of predicative good if it marked an indefinable, non-natural property.[4]

Connecting this now to virtue ethics, let me return to the point at this section's opening. Again, it is typically held that an autonomous virtue ethics would involve a theory of virtue in which the standard for distinguishing virtues from vices would be distinct from any standard for right action, such as the principle of utility or Kant's categorical imperative. And this correct, I think, just as long act ethics means a singular principle (or ordered set of principles) of right action understood to supply decisive reasons for acting (in whatever way the principle specifies). If the principle of utility tells me what I must do in all circumstances, no space is left over for the notion of virtue to do any interesting philosophical work. Nor is there any interesting role for practical reasoning in moral agency besides applying the principle to every new situation and discerning the most efficient means of its realization.

But Ross's structure, or any methodological intuitionism, is not like this. *Pro tanto* duties supply contributory reasons for action. They are functionally equivalent, if not identical, therefore to the sorts of considerations to which practically intelligent persons are responsive in their thinking about what to do all-things-considered. The good has a similarly complex structure that practically intelligent persons will have to comprehend in pursuing its various components. First principles and intrinsic goods thus function as clues to the qualities of the virtuous person, i.e. the virtues, for virtuous persons will have the qualities that make them responsive to the contributory reasons provided by those principles and goods. A virtue of practical intelligence will also be needed, through which the various virtues are integrated in the virtuous person's psyche and through which she moves from what she ought to do *pro tanto* to what she ought to

do full stop. But the nature of this virtue is specified through an account of the reasons that feed into it and through the general conception of practical sense as reasons responsiveness.

One adaptation of Ross's view then—the one I am working up to—involves uncovering and elucidating the virtues by reference to the fundamental principles and intrinsic goods providing *pro tanto* reasons for action, or more directly, by enumerating the sorts of things we invariably have some reason to value or do. These principles and goods do not simply specify *pro tanto* duties and interests. They reveal (what Christine Swanton has called) items within the field of the virtues (roughly, something the virtue is typically concerned with) alongside the bases of moral responsiveness and modes of responsiveness, like love, promotion, or respect, that comprise their exercise (Swanton, 2003). In doing this, they supply a rich set of criteria for status as a virtue as well as a rich guide to some of the content of and interrelationships between the virtues.

An illustration will be helpful here, both for elaborating the technical and substantive ideas.[5] Suppose it is a principle (call it "moral universalism") that the bare humanity of other people (a basis of moral responsiveness, and possible item in the field of a virtue) is some reason always to give serious consideration to their interests (a mode of moral responsiveness). Then any qualities that involve our routinely doing so in some way, such as respect, benevolence or thoughtfulness, are virtues having humanity as such as one item within their fields. The principle supplies some content for the virtues of respect, benevolence and thoughtfulness. But these virtues are different in other ways given that humanity is just one item within their fields, each having other items as well, and given that they involve additional other modes of responsiveness. Benevolence has not just the humanity but also the welfare of the other as an item in its field, and promotion, rather than mere status recognition, as the mode of responsiveness belonging to it.

Thoughtfulness is a distinctive mode of responsiveness to bonds of friendship. Moral universalism supplies some content to these distinct virtues and to that extent unites them. But the linkage of the principle to each also reveals the complexity of virtue and the other sorts of concerns that might sometimes compete with impartial concern for human beings generally. This is quite a bit richer than saying simply that virtue is just doing whatever is right according to a principle, for the principle points to content for several virtues, and exactly what someone having those virtues and adhering to this principle ought to do all-things-considered in any given situation (besides give serious consideration to the interest of others) can be determined only through the exercise of virtue and practical sense.

In this way, virtue intuitionism merges the projects of uncovering principles of right action and the criteria for the virtues. It is a Janus-faced theory, appearing to be an act ethics when viewed from one angle and a virtue ethics viewed from another. Virtue intuitionism so understood is (admittedly) a formalistic view. It does not specify what our duties or the virtues are, but rather the structure into which we must elaborate these. A fully worked out instance requires filling in by way of substantive reflection about what is intrinsically good generally—or good for us or good of its kind—and what we must, for reasons of principle, generally do or avoid. It is not my goal here to undertake this substantive task, though something like Ross's own effort in this is a good start (subject to at least the qualifications registered above) and Christine Swanton's recent treatment of virtue is an interesting related recent effort (2003). But even left unspecified, only a subset of potentially infinitely many (!) different views are possible here and virtue intuitionism is hardly uninformative. Traditionally consequentialist or Kantian views are of course ruled out. So is "virtue consequentialism" in which virtue is promotion of the nonmoral good; even a promoter of the nonmoral good might fail to respond to some of the sorts

of reasons that move virtue intuitionist agents, namely reasons given by considerations of principle rather than good. Similarly, welfarist conceptions of ethics—in which the only reasons for action are given by considerations of what is good or bad for someone—are not compatible with virtue intuitionism. Insofar as *eudaemonist* theories are welfarist then, they are key competitors here, too.[6]

Sentimentalist approaches—in which qualities that would win our approbation if our reasoning was informed and internally coherent are virtues—are in principle methodologically intuitionist, though obviously not epistemologically so. The ideal observer could think that qualities embodying diverse and potentially conflicting aims, like benevolence and single-minded obsession with self-perfection, are equally virtues for different reasons. She could also admire qualities that are unhinged from practical reasoning, such as being the sort of person who jumps for joy on joyous occasions. Swanton seems to conceive her own pluralistic approach to virtue as a sentimentalist theory in this sense, citing precisely this sort of quality as a virtue not possibly accounted for by competing approaches (2003, p. 93).

A longer treatment of virtue intuitionism would have to say why virtue theorists enamored of methodological intuitionism can and should take the further plunge into epistemological intuitionism rather than sentimentalism. One brief reason is that virtues, to my understanding, are qualities expressive of agency or exercises of the will, and do not include every possible admirable quality, like being the sort of person who jumps for joy on joyous occasions. I also believe that the putative metaphysical and epistemological advantages of sentimentalism are also either illusory or too costly in terms of the conception of practical reason they accommodate. I cannot fully defend this highly tendentious view here, but they are too costly insofar as some preferences, such as informed and coherent preferences for self-deception,

are above the criticism of our idealized selves but nevertheless can merit rational criticism; they are illusory insofar as the norms for criticizing such preferences trivially cannot be traced back to our idealized selves, but must be discovered elsewhere.[7]

For these reasons I will focus in the rest of the paper on comparing virtue intuitionism to a different competitor, *eudaemonism*, particularly relative to virtues associated with justice between distant generations. This is virtue intuitionism's most attractive competitor, I think, but for my money, it is less attractive precisely because it lacks the resources available to intuitionism.

3. *Eudaemonia* and justice between distant generations

'Eudaemonism' as I refer to it here is a brand of *teleological theory* according to which the virtues are all those qualities that enable us to flourish or live well as human beings. *Eudaemonism* is teleological because *eudaemonist* virtues have the purpose of promoting the end of human flourishing (or living well or well-being).[8]

Many different thinkers have advanced quite different variants of a *eudaemonistic* theory, including Gary Watson (1990), Philipa Foot (2001), Martha Nussbaum (1988) and Rosalind Hursthouse (1999). However most variants are united as forms of welfarism, or the view that only considerations of well-being provide ultimate, non-derivatively normative reasons for action (or reasons that directly justify actions). This is reflected in the structure of *eudaemonism* inasmuch as the only considerations that matter in determining whether a quality is or is not a virtue are considerations of well-being. Are we better or worse off when individuals have the quality?

Eudaemonism is a powerfully attractive view for many reasons. By grounding the virtues

in the good life, it give us powerful reasons to want virtue. Virtue makes us both better people and better off. It also supplies an apparently clear set of criteria for what makes a trait a virtue grounded in ethical naturalism. A character trait is a virtue if and only if it conduces to collective human flourishing. This has the attraction that *eudaemonists* can justify their beliefs about the virtues to skeptics free of the looming circularity in Humean sentimentalism and allegedly without appealing to ethical non-naturalism (but see again my doubts on the naturalistic credentials of "goodness for" above).

I have two related concerns about *eudaemonism*. On the one hand, I worry that in fact valuable human qualities, or important ways of construing some of them—particularly for our time—are not needed, or aren't needed in the right way, by the end of flourishing. On the other hand, I suspect that otherwise plausible looking ways of accounting *eudaemonistically* for the good of these qualities obscures importantly different reasons for valuing them, including reasons not available to the welfarist. This is especially clear if individuals, and not humans collectively or some amorphous subgrouping thereof, are supposed to be the addressees of *eudaemonism*, such that it sets out the standard of virtue for humans generally.

Qualities associated with sustainability and justice between relatively distant generations provide a way into this. I assume that *eudaemonists* agree that humans are social creatures with powerful welfare reasons to participate in cooperative social arrangements and pursue deep personal relationships in their private lives. I also assume that the relationship between present and distant later generations is minimally cooperative (or noncooperative) insofar as the quality of life available to distant later generations is influenced by the actions of earlier generations. Still, even if HUMANS (writ large) cannot get by heading into the relatively distant future unless they come to recognize the claims of future persons and collectively adapt, and they therefore

have a reason to develop just, sustainable virtue, all of us in this room can get by just fine and what reason we are given by considerations of welfare to be justly sustainable is not clear. I can have deep personal relationships and cooperate democratically with my contemporaries without agreeing that I must reduce my consumption and the like solely for the benefit of distant future generations. It is also possible that some dimensions of my pursuit of these goods with my contemporaries (holiday socializing, attending international conferences, maintaining a political blog) might be in competition with what would be in the interest of the distant future.

Of course, I can engage in a counterfactual exercise—such as Kant does in the Groundwork in rejecting anti-beneficence maxims or Rawls does via the veil of ignorance in Theory of Justice—in which I imagine how terrible life would be for me if no one were altruistic, or in which I reflect on the fact that the welfare of others is as important to them as my own is to me and that it is sheer dumb luck that I am well off. But then the role that considerations of welfare alone are playing anymore in favoring altruism over egoism is not clear. Whether considerations of welfare are acting here as ultimate or non-derivative reasons in particular is unclear. Certainly that my failing to live more sustainably harms future persons is operating as a reason to live more sustainably. But that I may have to give up some of my own practices or enjoyments to prevent those harms is acting as a reason for refusing.

It is possible, I suppose, to say that if my practices are not sustainable (given current conditions) then they must conflict with my own flourishing in some way and so giving them up would in fact improve my life along some other more valuable dimension. Maybe I spend too much time watching TV or working rather than communing with others. But then there are others who maybe reconnect by watching TV and taking Sunday drives in their Hummers. The *eudaemonist's* point here is question begging and I do not see how to break the tie between these

considerations on the side of altruism on grounds of welfare alone without deciding, e.g. that the good of the greater number is more valuable, in an impartial, agent-neutral sense, than the good of the one or few, or that it is wrong to cling to your goodies when giving them up will impact matters of life and death for others. Some consideration of principle creeps in here, either one grounded in a notion of what is good absolutely (or agent-neutral good), and not just good for others, or else in what I owe to others in virtue of their humanity or other status.

The worry I am pressing here is not that virtue ethical agents must be egoists because they value virtue only insofar as it serves their flourishing (though I do think this is more of a problem than virtue ethicists admit). The worry is closer to the familiar complaint that teleological approaches to virtue cannot account for the authority of constraints, or the reasons we have for constraining our conduct in the pursuit of our aims. I am not sure that even this is quite the right characterization, since I am asking as much about whether they can account for the normative reasons we have to give any weight at all to the interests of distant others (again, I agree that the *eudaemonist* has reason to care about the interests of contemporaries and intimates especially). Still, supposing that it is, certainly I have not backed the eudaemonist up against a wall. Mark LeBar believes that the authority of constraints can be accounted for by the limitations on our options, or opportunity costs, imposed by the very choices we make in pursuing our ends alone. Hence LeBar: "Insofar as the end of obtaining a college degree (say) is of high value to me, it constrains me from realizing a lower-valued standing end of enjoying myself as best I can; it imposes just the sorts of limits that count as imperative" (2013, p. 12). Except that it does not, for the constraint on my ditching the library for the pub while at university is pragmatic and not normative, not even for the eudaemonist, unless she is ready to insist that enjoyment is not a component of flourishing. I am at liberty to break free of this

constraint just whenever I decide it would be better for me to enjoy rather than perfect myself. This is not constraint in the sense relevant for the critic of teleology and so LeBar misses the point.

Other ways of responding to my worries might be available to *eudaemonists*. The discussion here is hardly conclusive. The main point I want to make anyway is that justice between distant generations is not nearly so problematic for virtue intuitionism. If something like the principle of moral universalism is true, and the bare humanity of others is invariably some reason to give serious consideration to their interests, the claim the principle makes on us is insensitive to the linkages between our welfare and those of others, either temporally or spatially. Therefore the qualities through which people enact this principle, including qualities associated with integenerational justice, are virtues.

I take it that something like this principle is true, and therefore that being just, benevolent, respectful and the like require responsiveness to the interests of others whatever the interdependence of my welfare and theirs. What precisely this means relative to my duties to relatively distant generations is not of course decided by this insight alone. Indeed a fierce debate has raged over the extent to which individuals should be held responsible for altering their consumption in order to reduce burdens on future generations from problems like climate change. Some, like Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, have argued that individuals cannot be held responsible (for altering their individual habits of consumption) because the effects of their actions taken singly are infinitesimal (2005), others that they are quite sufficient to bear responsibility (Hiller, 2011). And numerous "nonidentity" puzzles have sprouted up, about what our obligations are in circumstances in which we face a dilemma between doing things that will bring about the existence of people whose lives will be unavoidably flawed (a harm) and doing

something different and thereby bringing about the existence of entirely different people (a different harm to the first group) (FitzPatrick, 2007; Parfit, 1984). But none of these contravene the principle of moral universalism nor its relevance to intergenerational justice (the nonidentity problem does not get off the ground without it) and no one is denying that it is ethically incumbent upon us to do something, potentially including compromise some of our interests, in order to be the sorts of persons who are concerned about the impact of our actions on the future. Intuitionists at least have got this far.[9]

4. Conclusion

I have argued that an intuitionist approach to virtue is possible, interesting and plausible. It also seems to have clear advantages relative to teleological and welfarist approaches when it comes to virtues associated with certain kinds of justice.

This is merely an initial case in favor of virtue intuitionism. The basic framework articulated here needs much more elaboration. And then many of its components are highly tendentious. I have to some extent addressed worries about epistemological intuitionism, suggesting how even welfarist approaches are not less epistemically controversial. But too many other issues remain. Virtue intuitionism is notably a mixture of ethical particularism and generalism (according to which some considerations invariably function as reasons for action) and I have said nothing to defend the generalist component. This will have to wait for another day, though I take it that ambiguities like these always give us some reason to ask questions and try out new ideas.

NOTES

[1] I avoid Ross's phrase *"primia facie"* here since, as commentators have noticed, this suggests that the reasons provided by a first principle are silenced when they conflict with and are weaker than those provided by another. That does not seem to be how Ross thought of things. Rather, in his view, the reasons provided by a weaker duty are not silenced but outweighed. In this sense we can do the right thing by doing what we have most reason to do and still have reasons for regret, namely that we were not able to act on every reason we had.

[2] These are elements of James Griffin's list in (Griffin, 1996).

[3] Fascinating further discussion of this can be found in (Regan, 2003).

[4] I discuss the related matter of the objectivity versus subjectivity of welfare in (Ferkany, 2012).

[5] I draw here on Christopher Gowans's illuminating discussion of naturalism in virtue theory in (Gowans, 2008).

[6] Richard Kraut's recent work in ethics is exemplary here. See particularly (Kraut, 2011) and (Kraut, 2009).

[7] I discuss this sort of case in (Ferkany, 2012), arguing that information constraints on ideal observers cannot possibly control for preferences for certain kinds of self-deception. If so, even ideal observers could have rationally preferences.

[8] Some scholars, such as Thomas Scanlon, distinguish flourishing/living well, from well-being (1998). This distinction may create conceptual space for variants of *eudaemonism* not subject to some of the worries I will pursue below. These will have to be for another day, however.

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[9] Incidentally what Sinnott-Armstrong concludes we must do in the climate change case is focus our efforts on paneling governments and corporations to restructure energy systems so as to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Altering our individual habits of consumption in order to reduce GHG emissions is supererogatory in his view.

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