'Formal' Excellences and Familiar Excellences

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I hope the term 'familiar excellences' needs no definition – in any case, I am not going to offer one. I just mean that open-ended list of excellences of character – that is, virtues – which are familiar, and in particular those which are familiar from the substantial overlap between Aristotelian, Christian and post-Christian catalogues of virtues, and from philosophical discussions within 'virtue ethics'. Liberality, honesty, kindness, justice, fidelity to promises, temperance, patience are all examples, but there are many more. Of course there is room for controversy as to whether any given familiar excellence really *is* an excellence – chastity, and modesty with respect to one's own achievements, being cases in point. But that is not a kind of controversy I want to enter into.

I'm going to take as a starting point the thought that much (though not all) of what Aristotle says about the *concept* of a familiar excellence – the concept of excellence that these familiar excellences or putative excellences fall under – is right. That is, for an action to manifest such an excellence it must be done knowingly (so keeping a promise thanks to a mere slip of the tongue doesn't manifest fidelity). It must be done from a relatively stable state of character (though there is much room for discussion as to what counts as stable here) – this hangs together with the thought that excellences of character, like skills, are features one can rely on people for, rather than features that come and go unpredictably, or for reasons that (like moods) are irrelevant to the demands of the situation. Finally, to the extent that divisions between excellences are robust – and there's room for disagreement about that too – a familiar excellence is a disposition to respond (perhaps in action, or in judgment, or emotionally etc.) to a class of reasons: in the case of fidelity to promises, primarily the fact that someone has promised; in the case of liberality, something like the pleasure others take in one's gifts, and so on. Crucially, these reasons for action are, or are related to, presumptive goods. If it turned out that, quite generally, keeping promises was – as some people say of understating one's own achievements – not good, then fidelity to promises would have the structure of a familiar excellence but not actually be an excellence. But even if it is an excellence, *that I promised* isn't on every occasion a reason to do what I promised, because on some occasions promise-keeping isn't good. On such occasions (I assume) fidelity won't require it. In any case, a central part of the excellence or virtue will be sensitivity to when a reason of a certain class *is* a reason, that is, to when (say) keeping promises – or others' pleasure in one's gifts - is and isn't good. That's the main point I want to bring out here: that central to the concept of a real or presumptive 'familiar' excellence are the possessor's thoughts, and capacity to think, about the good.

Of course familiar excellences could hardly go out of fashion: fairness, kindness, honesty have a well-entrenched place in ordinary discourse. But it is striking how well contemporary philosophical, or more generally theoretical, discourse about good and bad character seems to be able to get along *without* mentioning these and other familiar excellences. This would not strike you if your only source on these questions was neo-Aristotelian ethical writing, or perhaps indeed if you spent most of your time in the special surrounds of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values. But outside certain quite tightly circumscribed intellectual *milieux*, it seems to me that though there is a continued intensive focus on character – on how people should be quite basically put together – 'familiar' excellences have very often given way, and without any explicit announcement that this is happening, to something else. The 2013 CBI Education and Skills survey, for example, reports that 85% of employers list 'character and attitude to work' as the most important factor in recruiting school and college leavers, way ahead of any other factor. But the character-traits they list as important are 'self-management' and 'resilience'.[1] Again, the Character and Resilience Manifesto from the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Mobility prizes 'a belief in one's ability to succeed, the perseverance to stick to a task and the ability to bounce back from life's set-backs'.[2] These are not 'familiar' excellences. In fact they are what I shall call 'formal' excellences, a term I

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[1] http://www.cbi.org.uk/infographics/education-survey-2014/
[2] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-26118581

shall explain in a moment. My aim here is to try to understand why in so much discussion of character the one type of characteristic has given way to the other, and to evaluate this direction of thought.

I do not want to claim that, historically, Nietzsche is the originator of the contemporary focus on formal excellences, though I suspect he has been influential, but a look at Nietzsche will be helpful in understanding what 'formal' excellences are. Nietzsche was, of course, a critic in the name of human flourishing of at least some familiar excellences: as he put it, 'the virtues (such as diligence, obedience, chastity, piety, justice) are mostly harmful to their possessors …. When you have a virtue … you are its victim!'[3] That is, he's saying there's nothing at all excellent *for you* about having those characteristics. But he did not for all that turn his back on the very idea of human excellence. Indeed his work is a rich source of thought on what the real human excellences might be, and all the more valuable for the fact that when we look back to it we see how like him a great deal of twentieth- and twenty-first century thinking about human excellence sounds. For though the name of one well-known Nietzschean excellence - will to power – belongs to his idiosyncratic vocabulary, many of them have a currency well beyond Nietzschean contexts. I am thinking for example of creativity;[4] the capacity to give form to things, in particular to oneself;[5] health;[6] self-love or self-affirmation;[7] freedom or self-rule;[8] self-overcoming;[9] and the capacity to seek out and overcome obstacles.[10] These are all examples of what I mean by 'formal'[11] or 'process' characteristics[12]– 'formal' characteristics will do as a convenient label for both. (Nietzsche also makes quite a lot of what might be called 'adverbial' characteristics, characteristics of the manner in which something is done, such exuberance or overflowing,[13] but I won't have a great deal more to say about these.)

The 'formal' label needs to be understood in two ways. Negatively, a formal excellence is one that brings with it no end or good of its own. Thus for example one can manifest creativity in making a harmless object of beauty, or a low-cost system for rehabilitating serial offenders, or an atomic bomb. (That is not to say that any particular manifestation of creativity imports no end – it's hard to imagine creating without trying to create something. But there is no particular end that actions need to have to manifest creativity.) That is the chief point of contrast with my 'familiar' excellences, which essentially involve a good or range of goods like that of keeping promises (when that is good). More positively, these formal excellences pick out ways in which a person relates to his attitudes or to other parts of his psyche, or in which these are related to one another, either at a time or over time. Though many of these terms might be explained in more than one way, it is plausible to see self-overcoming as the

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[3] Nietzsche, Friedrich (1882/2001), *The Gay Science.* Tr. J. Nauckhoff. Ed. B. Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 43 [§21]

[4] Nietzsche, Friedrich (1886/2002) *Beyond Good and Evil.* Tr. J. Norman. Ed. R.-P. Horstmann and J. Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 107 [§212].

[5] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*, op. cit., pp. 163-4 [§290]; Ridley, Aaron (1998), 'What is the Meaning of Aesthetic Ideals?' In S. Kemal et al. (eds.), *Nietzsche, Philosophy and the Arts*, pp. 128-47. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 136

[6] Nietzsche, Friedrich (1887/1994). *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Tr. C. Diethe. Ed. K. Ansell-Pearson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 18 [I:7], 97-101 [III:15-16].

[7] Nietzsche,*The Gay Science*, pp. 194-5 [§341]; Janaway, Christopher (2007). *Beyond Selflessness.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 253.

[8] Nietzsche, Friedrich (1888a/2005). *Twilight of the Idols.* Tr. J. Norman. In *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings* ed. A. Ridley and J. Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 213-14 [IX:38]; Pippin, Robert B. (2006). *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy.* Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, p. 108

[9] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, op. cit., p. 151 [§257]; Pippin, op. cit., p. 120

[10] Swanton, Christine (2005). 'Nietzschean Virtue Ethics'. In Stephen M. Gardiner (ed.), *Virtue Ethics Old and New*, pp. 179-192. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, p. 189.

[11] Hurka, Thomas (2007). 'Nietzsche: Perfectionist'. In B. Leiter and N. Sinhababu (eds.), *Nietzsche and Morality*, pp. 9-31. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 22, 27

[12] Guay, Robert (2007). 'How to be an Immoralist'. In G. von Tevenar (ed.), *Nietzsche and Ethics*, pp. 55-88. Oxford/Bern, Peter Lang, p. 73; Swanton, Christine (2006). 'Can Nietzsche be both an Existentialist and a Virtue Ethicist?' In T. Chappell (ed.), *Values and Virtues*, pp. 171-188. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 188

[13] Solomon, Robert C. (2001). 'Nietzsche's Virtues: A Personal Inquiry'. In R. Schacht (ed.), *Nietzsche's Postmoralism*, pp. 123-148. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 141

capacity to transform oneself over time (in the teeth of inner resistance), i.e. a 'process' excellence; self-love and self-affirmation are attitudes to aspects of oneself; self-rule is less an attitude to oneself than a relationship between parts or aspects of oneself (the relationship in which reasoned decision dominates countervailing desires which reason fails to extinguish). The same could be said, more complicatedly, of the virtue of form-giving with respect to one's own character, as manifested for example in the capacity to tolerate conflicting attitudes within oneself – such as positive and negative attitudes towards the same person without taking refuge in idealization. This excellence has had a long subsequent career in Kleinian psychoanalytic thought.[14] One might add Bernard Williams's 'integrity',[15] and the excellence – whatever it is called – that we possess, according to Harry Frankfurt, when we are identified with our attitudes, or when our attitudes are 'internal' as opposed to 'external' to our psychic life: witness the contrast between a rational ('internal') and a phobic (external) fear.[16] Add to these autonomy, authenticity, the features on the CBI's list and, perhaps, 'mental health', and you will, I hope, grasp that Nietzsche is introduced not as an object of study in his own right but to draw attention to the pervasiveness of formal virtues in modern thought about character.

Modern-sounding though they are, though, the prominence of formal excellences in recent thinking about character could also be said to be the fulfilment of an ancient promise. For alongside and underlying Aristotle's (and indeed Plato's) thought about 'familiar' excllence(s) are their moral psychologies – Plato's tripartite conception of the soul, and Aristotle's more complicated account, with moral virtue consisting in the proper arrangement of the parts. The moral psychology is needed to make good the claim that virtue is the health of the soul and vice its disorder.[17] For unless a conception is supplied of the soul's parts, and so of how they can be properly or improperly arranged, the claim that virtue is the health of the soul is just a decorative redescription. The modern, 'formal' conception of human excellence should, I think, be seen as an attempt to supply such a conception – not a supplanting of a concern with familiar excellences by something quite else, but an effort to think about the psychological structures that underlie familiar excellence. Still, if the underlying moral psychology isn't in the end related back to familiar excellences, the question arises as to what is so excellent about the mind's being arranged this way rather than that.

It might be objected that formal excellences are not so new after all, because there is one very familiar excellence which they resemble, and which I omitted from my original list, namely courage. For courage, familiarly, is an executive virtue – a virtue which brings no characteristic good or end of its own but rather displays itself in the capacity to control fear in pursuit of an end supplied from elsewhere, by a distinct virtue. It may take courage to act justly, though it needn't; but it may equally take courage to keep a promise, to be kind etc. etc.. But there is no end or good, or class of ends or goods, for the sake of which courageous acts *per se* are done (they are not, *pace* Aristotle, typically done for the sake of courage): the end or good is supplied by the virtue which, on any given occasion, it takes courage to manifest. But that is part of what I said about 'formal' excellences. So aren't the formal excellences just elaborations of a very familiar thought? Freud after all, in many ways very Nietzschean in his approach to human excellence, said 'courage and truthfulness' are the virtues chiefly required for mental health[18] - for us to be basically put together as we should be. (Wittgenstein too: philosophy requires 'courage' because it requires us to 'overcome resistances of the will'.[19])

In one way this objection falls wide of the mark, in another it is on target but doesn't affect the argument. It falls wide of the mark because the word 'courage' undergoes a large-scale shift in meaning between Aristotle on the one hand, and Freud and Wittgenstein on the other. For

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[14] Klein, Melanie, 'Some Theoretical Conclusions Regarding the Emotional Life of the Infant' (1952), in Klein, *Envy and Gratitude* (London: Hogarth Press, 1975)

[15] Williams, 'Utilitarianism and Moral Self-Indulgence', in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: CUP, 1981), pp. 40-53.

[16] Frankfurt, Harry, 'Identification and Externality', in his *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 59-68

[17] Plato *Republic* 444; cp. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1166b25-1166b29 p. 1844

[18] Hale, Nathan G., Jr. 1971. *James Jackson Putnam and Psychoanalysis: Letters between Putnam and Sigmund Freud and Others*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, p. 171

[19] 'Big Typescript', p. 410 in Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, ed. James C. Klagge and A. Nordmann (Cambridge/Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993)

Aristotle, courage is the fear-control virtue, needed because fear can get in the way of our doing worthwhile things. In psychoanalytic thinking, by contrast, 'resistances of the will' are themselves defences, i.e. themselves means, though of course involuntary, of controlling inconvenient states of mind, including fear. But Freud and his followers also need to explain why these states of mind – which may be very various – need controlling, and it's as if 'fear' operates as a general label for whatever it is such that being the object of *that* explains the need. This is a very different emotion from Aristotle's since, to the extent that the defence stays in place fear (Aristotelian fear) won't be experienced, and to the extent that the defence is penetrated, once again what's experienced won't be Aristotelian fear, but whatever it is that's defended against (which might of course be Aristotelian fear, but could be guilt, excitement, shame, envy etc. etc.). To the extent, therefore, that what Freudian or Nietzschean courage is needed for is the overcoming of inner resistances, it isn't just the Aristotelian executive virtue all over again.

This is not, however, to say that some or all 'formal' excellences *aren't* executive virtues, albeit not 'familiar' ones. But this simply serves to focus the question whether the twentieth- and twenty-first century focus on 'formal' excellences is, on its own, a coherent conception of human excellence. If 'formal' excellences are all executive virtues – even if not courage itself - the answer is that it at least cannot be a self-standing conception of human excellence, for the same reason that Aristotelian courage isn't self-standing: it's a virtue that helps its possessor to pursue goods or ends that are supplied from elsewhere.

One possible interpretation of the modern 'formal' focus, then, is as follows. Consider for example self-overcoming. In the case of an artist fighting inhibition or complacency in order to create still greater works of art, it is surely an excellence. But what about in someone fighting their relaxed open-handedness in order to become more parsimonious and circumspect? It's unclear of course why anyone should attempt that self-transformation, but if it doesn't readily spring to mind when we think of self-overcoming as an excellence, that is probably because we are assuming that the ends in the name of which the self-overcoming is effected are worthwhile. Once that assumption is made explicit, the suggestion that a catalogue of excellences could consist solely of formal (including "process") excellences loses its plausibility. Of course if self-overcoming really is an executive *virtue* (like courage), the reason it would not be displayed in the laborious transition from generosity to parsimony is that – unless some special explanatory story is filled in – the ends in question would not be good, so they wouldn't be chosen by someone with an executive *virtue* (just as fearless kidnappers or stunt men aren't brave). But still, the silence of many of our contemporaries on *which* ends the good ones are is puzzling.

A second and related possibility is that formal excellences fall short of being executive virtues, because they can be displayed indifferently in relation to good or bad ends. They would thus be analogous to the stunt man's fear-control capacity, i.e. without the capacity for judging the ends in the name of which fear is controlled. In some sense a human being able to control fear is no doubt excellent relative to one who can't do this, and the point could be generalized to other 'formal' excellences. But if the possession of the various formal excellences may fall very far short of moral virtue, there is a question – and I think a pressing question – as to why programmes of character education, or schools of psychotherapy or of self-help, seem so often to be geared towards the production of excellence of this sort *without* asking how it relates to familiar virtue. One doesn't have to be as sceptical as Nietzsche – who thought advances in familiar virtue militated against advances in the excellences that captured his interest – to feel the need for an answer here.

An highly optimistic answer, which keeps some theoretical autonomy for the 'formal' moral-psychological level but doesn't throw out the interest in the moral, is found both in Christine Swanton's reading of Nietzsche and (though he's not much discussed by philosophers) in Erich Fromm. According to Swanton, the Nietzschean traits of health, creativity, self-love, 'undistorted will to power' and so on are "depth-psychological" traits, whose presence or

absence is the key to distinguishing substantive (though not necessarily familiar) excellences from non-excellent characteristics which superficially resemble them.[20]

Thus it's the presence of undistorted will to power that makes the difference between the substantive virtues of "turning the other cheek" and "overflowing generosity" on the one hand and, on the other, "being a doormat" and "pity"; and, more generally, the difference between "mature egoism" (good) and either "immature egoism" or "self-sacrificing altruism" (bad).[21] Meanwhile Fromm, citing Aristotle, says that 'virtue is … identical with the realization of man's nature':[22] there is the link between 'familiar' virtue and our psychologies being the way they should be. And like Swanton, Fromm appeals to the presence or absence of the 'productive … total character-organization' – which ciontrasts with the various 'neurotic' or 'non-productive orientations', to explain the difference between being 'accepting', 'devoted', 'self-confident' or 'economical' (good), and being 'passive', 'submissive', 'arrogant' or 'stingy' (bad). The question facing this new alliance of 'depth psychology' with Plato and Aristotle, however, is whether there is available to us a conception of "depth psychology' and its various formal excellences that is sufficiently independent of the familiar excellences to make the Platonic-Aristotelian identification of virtue with mental health more than merely decorative, but that's not so independent as to challenge the connection between virtue and human excellence more broadly understood.

[20] Swanton, Christine (2011). 'Nietzsche and the Virtues of Mature Egoism'. In S. May (ed.), *Nietzsche's* On the Genealogy of Morality: *A Critical Guide*, pp. 285-308. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 308; Swanton, Christine (2003). *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 10.
[21] Swanton 2011, p. 295; 2005, p. 181; 2011, p. 288
[22] Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself*, London: Routledge, 1947/2003, p. 19; subsequent quotations are at pp. 42, 60, 82.