



THE
JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Understanding and Cultivating the Virtues of Respect

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 4th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 7th – Saturday 9th January 2016. These papers are works in progress and should not be cited without author's prior permission.



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Introduction

To cultivate any substantive virtue, understanding the goods it is for and how best to promote those goods is crucial. One cannot make it very far down the road of cultivating the virtue of generosity, for example, if one takes generosity to involve giving away money to anyone who asks for it, or giving elaborate gifts to one's friends with the expectation of repayment. Likewise, in an effort to cultivate the virtue of respect or respectfulness, it is important to start with an accurate understanding of the nature of the virtue. The term "respect" can refer to an attitude, a judgment, a manner of behavior, or a feeling—a family of concepts the unifying theme of which is *the esteem of excellence or worthiness*. However, there are also virtues of respect. While distinguishing and enumerating closely related virtues is a difficult task and one which I cannot resolve here, I take it that there are multiple distinct virtues of respect that together make up a kind of family of respect traits. Here, I begin by offering a brief analysis of the various virtues of respect. Then, based on that analysis, I will discuss some strategies for becoming virtuously respectful. In addition to drawing on my recently published paper, "Respect for Human Dignity as an Emotion and Virtue" (*Res Philosophica* 92, 4 [2015]), much of the material in this paper is derived from a paper in progress that I am co-authoring with Ryan West titled, "Respect as an Intellectual Virtue" (for inclusion in *Intellectual Virtue and Civil Discourse*, ed. Gregg A. Ten Elshof, Thomas M. Crisp, and Steve L. Porter).

1. Understanding the Virtues of Respect

My analysis begins with two distinctions. The first is Stephen Darwall's distinction between two species of broadly moral respect: "recognition respect" and "appraisal respect."¹ Whereas all persons deserve recognition respect in virtue of their equal moral worth (or, dignity), one's

¹ Stephen L. Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," *Ethics* 88, no. 1 (1977): 36–49.

worthiness of appraisal respect depends on the comparative value of one's excellences and achievements. Insofar as the inherent, non-comparative worth of all humans and the comparative excellences of some humans are both broadly human excellences, each properly inspires respect. As Robert Roberts puts the point, "If we are rational, we feel greater respect for persons of integrity and high moral achievement than for moral slackers and the vicious. But the moral life, in some traditions, requires a respect for persons that is blind to such differences (while still being an attribution of a broadly moral property)."² The person with the virtue of respect is intelligently disposed to egalitarian respect for all humans in virtue of their basic human dignity and to comparative respect. I have argued elsewhere that it is conceptually appropriate and morally beneficial to treat respect for human dignity as distinct from a broader moral virtue of respect. There I argued that even if the virtue of respect for human dignity is a sub-species of a more general virtue of respect, the (sub-)virtue of respect for human dignity deserves special moral attention because it is a bulwark against violations of human dignity, the moral significance of which typically far outweighs that of failures to respect the comparative excellences of those who possess rare talents or virtues. While it can be prideful, arrogant, and boorish to fail to appreciate or show proper deference to the "best" among us for their rare excellences or positions of authority, failures to properly respect the inherent human dignity of even the "least" among us are typically inhumane, cruel, and brutal. A virtue that protects us from participating in and condoning such atrocities is worth considering on its own. Yet, for the purposes of this paper, I shall treat the moral virtue of respect as a broad virtue that includes dispositions to respect human dignity, as well as special human excellences and authorities (though I take it that respect for human dignity is the morally weightier aspect of the virtue).

As Darwall points out, basic respect for others essentially involves a willingness to take into account in our moral deliberations the personhood of others and the moral restraints on our own action that their personhood entails. While the moral virtue of respect certainly must involve such

² Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 266–67.

deliberative regard for the personhood of others, an account of respect in terms of such an attitude will be incomplete if it does not also include a concern for the worthiness of others for their own sakes and the emotions to which such a concern gives rise. A moralistic would-be murderer might regard the fact that his desired victim is a person with dignity as reason enough not to kill her, even while begrudging that same fact. It seems right to say that the would-be murderer has some respect for his desired victim's dignity (would that more murderers had such moral hang-ups!), but his respect for her dignity is far less than ideal since he does not have a sense or feeling of respect for her as a person with moral worth. We might say that his respect for her dignity is indirect since he feels a respect for the moral law and he recognizes that the moral law requires that he not murder persons (of which she is one), but he feels no direct respect for her as a person.

The moral virtue of respect thus essentially involves dispositions not only to show respect through one's actions, but also to think respectful thoughts and feel emotions of respect toward oneself and others. Indeed, the virtues of respect will be incomplete without a disposition to *feel* respect for all who are worthy of it. Here, I take it that the feeling of respect is an emotional feeling and I follow Roberts (2003) in thinking of emotions as "concern-based construals," or evaluative perceptions.³ According to this perceptual account of emotions, when someone feels the emotion of respect for another, she is experientially struck by that person's worthiness in much the way that we ordinarily are struck by the appearance of the objects in our visual fields. That is, in the emotion of respect, the subject does not merely judge that the object of her emotion is worthy of respect and commit to treating her appropriately; rather, the object of respect really *appears* or *seems* to the subject to be worthy of her emotion of respect and deserving of certain kinds of respectful treatment (or at least deserving of protection from ill-treatment).

On this view, respect, like other paradigmatic emotion types, is not merely a physiological "feeling" since, in addition to whatever physiology might be involved, it also has conceptual content, which can be expressed in the form of a proposition. Roberts offers the following "defining

³ For complimentary analyses of the emotions, see Pelsner 2014 and Zagzebski 2004, ch. 2.

proposition” for the generic emotion of respect: “*X is worthy in Y important way and deserves benign attention and good treatment on account of Y; may he (it) be so treated*” (2003, 266). When the respect in question is respect for human dignity, the “important way” in which the object of respect is worthy is precisely the inherent dignity she possesses in virtue of her humanness or, if you prefer, her personhood. Just as we would not call a person ideally generous who gives to the needy begrudgingly or merely out of a sense of moral duty and not out of love and concern for the needy themselves, so too we should not think of a person as ideally respectful if she treats others with respect outwardly, but feels condescension or is indifferent toward their value as human persons. In addition to being disposed to treat others respectfully and to judge that they are worthy of respect, the person with the full virtue of moral respect will be perceptually attuned to the basic worthiness and moral excellences of others; that is, she will be disposed to perceive their worthiness directly through her emotions of respect.

The second distinction on which my analysis relies is the broadly Aristotelian distinction between moral and intellectual virtues. The intellectual dimension of human life is so central to human activity and flourishing that many virtue theorists have found it helpful to reflect on traits that make for excellent human functioning in the intellectual domain. While there are some intellectual virtues like open-mindedness that do not have a more broadly moral counterpart, other intellectual virtues like intellectual humility and intellectual courage are very similar to their broadly moral counterpart virtues, except for the fact that they are excellences relevant to the domain of intellectual activity. As with humility and courage, there is an intellectual variant of the broadly moral virtue of respect. In keeping with Darwall’s distinction between recognition and appraisal respect, Ryan West and I distinguish two kinds of *intellectual* respect: equal basic respect for all epistemic agents, and special respect that is properly reserved for subject-matter experts, the intellectually virtuous, and the otherwise intellectually excellent. Both varieties of intellectual respect can be differentiated from their broadly moral counterparts in at least two ways. First, the *basis* for intellectual respect—the reason such respect is due—is itself an intellectual matter:

namely, some intellectual excellence of the respected person. And second, intellectual respect applies directly to, and/or is fittingly expressed in, an intellectual *context*. (We use the term “intellectual” broadly here, as having to do with the life of the mind, the exchange of ideas, etc., not necessarily formal settings of teaching and learning). The person with the intellectual virtue of respect is intelligently disposed to both egalitarian and comparative intellectual respect.

The intellectually respectful person appropriately respects all epistemic agents *as rational persons*. Minimally, this involves believing that others might have ideas worth considering and, therefore, listening to them or reading what they’ve written carefully and charitably. Rather than dismissing another’s views at the first sign of a flaw in her reasoning, the intellectually respectful person listens patiently, with the assumption that the other might have arrived at a valuable insight, *because* she takes the other to be *worthy* of such treatment. Like moral respect, the virtue of intellectual respect involves not only dispositions to treat others with respect in intellectual contexts, but also dispositions to perceive the intellectual worthiness of others through emotions of respect. Also, while she will feel and show intellectual respect to all people, the intellectually respectful person is not blind to differences in people’s epistemic excellence. No, she is also intelligently disposed to feel and give *special* respect—Darwall’s “appraisal respect”—on a sliding scale, so to speak, in cases where epistemic authorities, the intellectually virtuous, and the otherwise intellectually excellent are “more worthy” of such respect than are the uninformed, the intellectually vicious, and the unintelligent.

So, to sum up, there are at least two virtues of respect – a moral virtue of respect and an intellectual virtue of respect. Each of these virtues involves dispositions to feel and show respect to all people in virtue of their basic worth (dignity) as persons, as well as dispositions to feel and show special (appraisal) respect to the morally and intellectually excellent.

While I do not have space to illustrate all of the various features of the moral and intellectual virtues of respect, a narrative will be helpful here. In her book, *Team of Rivals*, Doris Kearns Goodwin highlights the ways Abraham Lincoln exemplified virtuous habits of both moral and

intellectual respect toward even his most virulent critics. Frederick Douglass, for instance, publicly denounced Lincoln for failing to address discriminatory military policies that inhibited the recruitment of black soldiers, such as unequal pay and no opportunity for commission as officers. Still, as the following account of their first meeting suggests, Lincoln's respect for Douglass was palpable.

Finding a large crowd in the hallway, Douglass expected to wait hours before gaining an audience with the president. Minutes after presenting his card, however, he was called into the office. "I was never more quickly or more completely put at ease in the presence of a great man than in that of Abraham Lincoln," he later recalled. . . .

Douglass laid before the president the discriminatory measures that were frustrating his recruiting efforts. "Mr. Lincoln listened with earnest attention and with very apparent sympathy," he recalled. "Upon my ceasing to speak [he] proceeded with an earnestness and fluency of which I had not suspected him." Lincoln first recognized the indisputable justice of the demand for equal pay. When Congress passed the bill for black soldiers, he explained, it "seemed a necessary concession to smooth the way to their employment at all as soldiers," but he promised that "in the end they shall have the same pay as white soldiers." As for the absence of black officers, Lincoln assured Douglass that "he would sign any commission to colored soldiers whom his Secretary of War should commend to him."⁴

Given Lincoln's greater political power, and the intimidation that naturally accompanies meeting the President, a less respectful Lincoln might have sought the intellectual upper hand by belittling Douglass, say, by letting him sweat it out in the waiting area, or by putting on airs to keep him from feeling at ease. And, given the desire for (eventual) justice that secretly motivated the indisputably unjust (but intentionally temporary) remuneration policy, a less respectful Lincoln might have contemptuously disregarded a complaint so insensitive to the ways of incremental justice. And, given the racial sensibilities of the day, a less respectful Lincoln might have allowed the culture's systemic devaluation of African Americans to taint his reception of Douglass.⁵ But the real Lincoln was alive to Douglass's dignity, and demonstrated it through remarkably respectful conduct. This was not lost on Douglass.

In subsequent speeches, Douglass frequently commented on his gracious reception at the White House. "Perhaps you may like to know how the President of the United States

⁴ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 551-552. Thanks to Paul Carrese for pointing us toward Goodwin's book.

⁵ As Miranda Fricker points out, societal prejudices can push even non-racists toward unjust underestimations of the epistemic credibility of members of another race. See her *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

received a black man at the White House,” he would say. “I will tell you how he received me—just as you have seen one gentleman receive another.” As the crowd erupted into “great applause,” he continued, “I tell you I felt big there!”⁶

As Douglass’s reflections illustrate, one of the upshots of demonstrating respect is that it helps the one being respected truly feel her own worth. As we help people to see and feel their own worth, we contribute to the formation of a community of respect wherein all people give and receive respect for one another.

2. Cultivating the Virtues of Respect

But how might we go about cultivating the moral and intellectual virtues of respect in the first place? In good Aristotelian fashion, we can begin by developing habits of respectful behavior. In an effort to cultivate a culture of respectfulness, the U.S. military places a high premium on respectful manners and customs. Military members must, for example, salute any superior officer in uniform whom they pass and they may not lower their salute until the superior officer has saluted them back and lowered her salute first. They must also address all superiors as “Sir” or “Ma’am.” At the Air Force Academy where I teach, the freshman, or “fourth-class,” cadets learn early on that they must visibly and audibly demonstrate their respect for all superior officers as well as more advanced cadets. In an attempt to acclimate the freshman cadets to this culture of respect for authority, when they first arrive on campus, a bus delivers the freshman cadets into the restricted cadet area and as they exit the bus they are greeted by a cadre of advanced cadets who shout and blow loud whistles in their faces, yell at them to tuck in their shirts while they are jogging to their spot in the training line-up, and then yell orders at them which they must follow obediently or else receive even worse orders. Freshman cadets must also follow several rules about how they conduct themselves while in uniform and on campus – rules that are designed to remind them of their lowly status. For example, they are not allowed to wear their backpacks on their backs or walk along the central quad of the campus – they must carry their backpacks and, while they are on the quad, they

⁶ Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, 553.

must jog to their destination. Failure to follow any of these rules, or failure to abide by the communal standards of respectful address can result in serious punishments.

Unfortunately, many overt efforts to cultivate the virtue of respect sacrifice respect for humanity on the altar of respect for rank and authority. In a culture that prizes overt “excellence” (note the scare quotes), often encouraging respect for putative dignitaries over respect for dignity, it is all too easy to allow the evaluative category of comparative appraisal to overwhelm its egalitarian counterpart.⁷ And even when we retain some capacity for recognition respect, that capacity can be desensitized over time. (I worry that some of the military practices aimed at fostering respect for authorities actually contribute to such desensitization, even at a military academy that in principle endorses “respect for human dignity” as a core value of the institution.) After all, even if it doesn’t always breed contempt, familiarity has a way of blinding us to the infinite worth embodied in the precious ones who call us Dr. So-and-so, or Ma’am, or Daddy, or Boss. Many of us sometimes suffer from a kind of emotional blindness, and end up failing to treat those “below us” in a way that befits the dignity we (should) know they have. When this (hopefully occasional) shortcoming grows into a vice, it goes by the name “aloofness.” It isn’t that the aloof think badly of others. They’re just emotionally numb to others’ inherent value, and (mis)treat them accordingly.

Respectful manners can help us to regain an emotional sense of the value of others, whether basic human dignity or some comparative excellence, by reminding us of their value and placing it before our eyes—that is, the eyes of our hearts. For instance, when we act as if our seven-year-old student struggling with her math has inherent dignity—say, by listening attentively and patiently to her explanation of how she got the answer she did, in the hopes of really understanding what isn’t clicking for her, rather than simply trying to get her to say the right answer so we can get on with the rest of the lesson—the educational exchange takes on a respectful appearance, to both teacher

⁷ Of course, in an overreaction against the overemphasis on comparative excellences, some elements of our culture downplay *all* interpersonal comparisons, attempting to promote self-respect (self-esteem) by celebrating mediocrity, or mere participation, as much as real greatness. Just as cultures that measure personal worth in terms of comparative achievements or physical appearance can erode proper respect for human dignity, so too cultures in which everyone gets a trophy can erode a proper appreciation for *extraordinary* human excellence, whether physical, moral, intellectual, or spiritual. We should avoid both extremes.

and student. In a way that parallels Douglass's oval office experience, by behaving as if the student were "big," both she and we find it more natural to see her bigness emotionally. In other words, *treating* others with dignity increases our *sense* of their dignity by making it salient to us.

While the cultivation of respectful manners can be an important first step in the cultivation of more robustly virtuous dispositions, however, communities that emphasize the importance of behavioral propriety and politeness run the risk of treating good manners as a substitute for more robustly virtuous character traits that essentially include internal aspects of thought, emotion, and motivation. And communities that emphasize the importance of respectful manners toward authorities, in practice if not in preaching, run the risk of actually encouraging aloofness (or, worse, contemptuousness) for those below one in station or status. It is only when respectful manners are informed by a proper understanding and appreciation of the grounds of respect (i.e., moral and intellectual worthiness) that they begin to become virtuous habits. Thus, we would do well to supplement behavioral practices with contemplative ones. Indeed, appreciative understanding of the dignity and excellences of others, together with wisdom about how best to honor such worthiness, is central to the virtues of respect. It follows that deepening such understanding (wisdom) by contemplating the psychological structure of the virtue itself, together with the goods it is for and the vices opposed to it, can be an especially fruitful way to cultivate respect. This can be done through careful philosophical analysis, or by fixing one's imaginative gaze upon virtuous exemplars and their vicious counterparts, whether real or fictional (say, by openheartedly reading a biography of an exemplar of respect like Abraham Lincoln or Nelson Mandela). The underlying thought here is that, in some measure, we become what we behold. That is, by setting our minds (hearts) upon what is truly excellent, the object of our contemplation will tend to shape us in its image.

In addition to contemplating the lives of exemplars of respectfulness, we can grow in appreciative understanding of the grounds for respect (especially respect for human dignity) by reflecting on clear violations of respect and sensitively attending to the features of those violations that make them so bad. Insofar as she is attuned to notice the worthiness of herself and others, the

virtuously respectful person is also prone to notice and detest disrespectful treatment, especially when that disrespectful treatment violates basic human dignity in the form of degrading and humiliating treatment. We can enhance such attunement by watching movies that depict degrading realities, such as slavery, genocide, or apartheid, in ways that help viewers to feel empathy and compassion for the victims and indignation toward the perpetrators. If the movies are subtle and do not flatten out the characters of the perpetrators of these atrocities, they can also help to reveal the features of the perpetrators' psychologies that helped lead to such atrocities. Similar effects might be elicited through face-to-face interviews with the victims (and perhaps even with repentant perpetrators) of such disrespectful treatment. As we watch the movies or engage in the interviews, our hearts "go out" to the victims and we thus further dispose ourselves to emotionally perceive the worth of all human beings and to notice and protest violations of their worth.

The foregoing might be thought of as off-the-spot contemplative practices, since we engage in them independently of opportunities to practice respect directly (though we could, of course, behave respectfully or disrespectfully toward a victim we're interviewing, or toward the fictional characters in a film). For those of us habituated to less-than-respectful patterns of action and perception, though, it will often be necessary to take the conceptual lenses we've endeavored to form via contemplative study and perhaps other contemplative practices like prayer or meditation (but which have not yet been fully integrated into our heart's default perceptual apparatus) and *actively peer through them*, seeking to correct our thoughts, emotions, and actions *in situ* by contemplating ourselves and our interlocutors on-the-spot, as it were. Some contexts of discourse call for special vigilance in this regard. Since I illustrated the last set of strategies by focusing on moral respect, let us illustrate this new set of strategies with reference to the cultivation of intellectual respect.

For better or worse, social media such as Facebook and Twitter have become primary avenues for public discourse on topics ranging from the trivial and inane to the timely and important. Unfortunately, these modern modes of communication are breeding grounds for

disrespect. As we've seen, disseminating our ideas and listening to criticisms and opposing viewpoints in ways that befit our interlocutors' dignity are key aspects of intellectual respect. These are lost arts; and certain aspects of social media discourage us from reclaiming them. Such outlets are essentially platforms for self-publication, with no filter or editorial standards: we can write whatever we want, in whatever tone we want. And, because our audience is hidden from view behind a digital web, we can avoid the kind of interpersonal and social sanctions on disrespectful engagement that arise more naturally in face-to-face interactions. When in the physical presence of others, their apparent dignity naturally confronts us in a way that it does not when we view them through the lens of their profile pictures on our smart phone. For those with any sensitivity at all to others' intellectual dignity, this feature of face-to-face interactions serves as a built-in sanction against blatantly disrespectful behavior. The digital medium weakens this sanction. Additionally, in flesh-and-blood interactions, our interlocutors have the ability to correct us or offer opposing arguments. But in the virtual world of disembodied digital discourse, we can simply choose not to read their responses (a kind of willful anti-listening), or even forcefully silence them by "blocking" their posts from view.

In light of these temptations to disrespectfulness, public discourse via social media can provide opportunities for on-the-spot contemplation aimed at the cultivation of intellectual respect, as well as more broadly moral respect. For starters, we can engage in a practice of watchfulness in which we attend to our own patterns of thought, emotion, and action. We might ask ourselves questions like: "Are there certain people, or groups of people, whose intellectual worth I am inclined not to respect?" If the answer is "yes," we must learn to repent—literally, to think again—in the moment of temptation. For instance, when we catch ourselves illicitly contemning another, or find our fingers furiously formulating an unnecessarily nasty reply before we've really had a chance to think, we pause. We breathe. And we look again with fresh eyes, this time actively looking for

whatever intellectual goods might characterize the other.⁸ Toward this end, we might form a habit of asking ourselves respect-driven questions like: “What can I learn from her?”, “What intellectual virtues or skills does he have?”, “Am I treating them as fellow human beings?”, “How can I communicate my ideas in a way that better befits the intellectual (or moral) worth of my audience?”, and so on. It might also prove helpful to seek out opportunities to read books or articles (and, yes, even social media posts) by these people, or to talk with them (face-to-face, if possible!), explicitly on the watch for insights to admire, rather than mistakes to demolish. In this way, we actively resist the natural current of digital discourse (and of our own malformed hearts) by deliberately attending to the intellectual worthiness of others. Of course, such on-the-spot contemplation can be useful in other moral and intellectual settings as well. But for many people today (especially young people), social media platforms provide a particularly fecund context for contemplating and cultivating their character.

We’ve been treating the foregoing practices as activities for individuals. But they can take on a social dimension as we seek to build communities of respect in direct defiance of the vice-conducive social trends noted above. For instance, institutions like The Bear Creek School in Redmond, WA, Intellectual Virtues Academy in Long Beach, CA, and Rosslyn Academy in Kenya have done pioneering work re-imagining curricula, classroom practices, syllabi, and institutional awards in ways that support and communicate intellectual respect (and other virtues).⁹ Short of such large-scale institutional changes, small groups of teachers (or parents, or even Facebook friends) might take the time to think together about ways their discourse is insufficiently respectful, to brainstorm solutions, to encourage one another to act respectfully against the grain, and to hold each other accountable.

⁸ Note that looking again can itself express respect. After all, the Latin root of the English word ‘respect’ literally means “to look again” (Bell, *Hard Feelings*, 169).

⁹ For specific practical ideas for reshaping educational institutions, see Philip E. Dow, *Virtuous Minds: Intellectual Character Development for Students, Educators and Parents* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), especially Part Three and the Appendices. The websites of the schools mentioned above also provide helpful resources: <<http://www.tbcs.org>>, <<http://www.ivalongbeach.org>>, and <<http://rosslynacademy.org>>.

Intentional communities focused on the moral formation of their members, such as some residential colleges and churches, can provide opportunities for much growth in the virtues of respect. By living respectfully together, we demonstrate for one another what it *means* to live respectfully, and thereby mutually enhance each other's understanding of and capacity for respect. This is one reason Aristotle argued that friendships based on mutual admiration of character are schools of virtue.¹⁰ As Talbot Brewer explains, even if it were possible for people to achieve something approaching the deep understanding and practical wisdom necessary for living virtuously on their own—that is, without witnessing the virtues lived out by others—such individualists' understandings of the good life would be sorely lacking:

They would be in the position of the accomplished ballet dancer who has never actually watched a ballet: they would lack full appreciation of the nature and point of the activity at which they excelled. (Though of course it strains credulity to imagine that there could be an accomplished dancer who had never seen others dance well, just as it strains credulity to imagine that anyone could become a consistently praiseworthy agent without having attended to, and developed an appreciation for, the way in which other praiseworthy persons navigate their changing circumstances.)¹¹

In our day, it strains credulity to imagine a thoroughly respectful community. Nevertheless, if we are serious about the task of cultivating the virtues of respect, churches, schools, and families *must* endeavor to be such.

¹⁰ *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX.

¹¹ Talbot Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 242.