“Till we have faces” – second-person relatedness as the object, end and crucial circumstance of perfect or ‘infused’ virtues

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"Till we have faces" – second-person relatedness as the object, end and crucial circumstance of perfect or 'infused' virtues

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Does any child ever first acquire virtue in an Aristotelian manner? A subtle interpersonal play is the more typical locus of initial ethical formation. Moreover, many modern experiments, such as a picture of a pair of eyes being glued to an 'honesty box' (Bateson et al., 2006), reveal how virtuous actions by adults are also subtly encouraged by 'second-person relatedness' (SPR). Classical virtue ethics does not easily accommodate these phenomena, but I have argued previously (Pinsent, 2012) that the 'infused' dispositions described by Thomas Aquinas are already second- rather than first-personal. In this paper, I propose that these insights, with parallels in contemporary social neuroscience, highlight the need for a 'Copernican Revolution' of virtue ethics. I also review briefly some implications and propose ways in which the role of infused or second-person dispositions might be tested.

Introduction

> … but excellences (virtues) we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do, we learn by doing, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts (*Nichomachean Ethics* [*EN*] 2.1.1103a31-b1 (Barnes 1984, 1743)).

Aristotle's account of the acquisition of virtue by habituation, in the manner of learning an art or playing an instrument in the text above, is familiar and plausible to the point of being taken for granted. Indeed, until comparatively recently the term *habitus*, in medieval accounts of virtue ethics inspired in part by Aristotle, was often translated as 'habit' rather than a more neutral word like 'disposition'. This close association of virtue acquisition and habit is not without considerable justification, given that certain kinds of virtues, such as temperance with respect to food and drink, are clearly formed at least in part by habituation. Nevertheless, Aristotle's account raises some puzzling questions even within its own terms of reference. For example, do we really become brave by doing

brave acts, as stated above? As Rebecca Konyndyk de Young, for example, has pointed out (DeYoung 2003, 171), a courageous death is not an action that a person can perfect by repetition, but even apart from the practical obstacles involved in setting up situations in which persons habitually face mortal danger, those who survive may acquire the confidence of the professional, inhibiting them from exercising genuine courage in future. How, then, is courage acquired?

Even the acquisition of temperance, typically regarded as exemplifying the Aristotelian narrative in the clearest manner, may be less straightforward than it seems. For example, there is the long-standing problem of the mutual dependence of practical wisdom and moral virtue, which makes it hard to explain precisely how any virtue gets started. In addition, even temperance that observes a mean between excess and deficiency is not always acquired in the manner that Aristotle suggests, namely by the exercise of the practical wisdom by the person acquiring the virtue. Consider, for instance, how young children first acquire temperance at meals. I have written elsewhere that,

> Infants often have a lack of interest in eating what they should, when they should, and are often far more interested in the food belonging to their parents or to others than the food that is set before them. To encourage the child to eat, a parent will often have to play a game with the infant, such as pretending that a spoonful of food is a train while ignoring the large quantity of food that is ending up on the floor. Such activities suggest that what motivates the infant to eat the food does not arise directly from the infant's judgment of reason, but from a delight in an activity with the parent, an activity in which nourishment plays an incidental role (Pinsent 2012, 106).

The role of interpersonal interaction described in this text is not simply the provision of incentives of pleasure or pain, to nudge the child's choices towards a prudent mean perceived by another. Instead, the interaction with the other person is the end, at least as sought by the child, with the consumption of food being 'beside the intention' (to borrow a celebrated phrase from discussions of 'double effect').

The example of a child's dispositions towards food changing as a result of an interaction with a second person is but one instance of a broader phenomenon in which all kinds of dispositions change as a result of such interactions. Sometimes even the crude representation of a personal presence is

sufficient to elicit a virtuous response. For example, gluing a picture of pair of eyes to an 'honesty box' (Bateson et al., 2006) has been shown to elicit measurably greater honesty in making payments for items consumed from a shared fridge. The role of eyes and more broadly faces in promoting virtuous behaviour is also attested by the *via negativa* of certain cultural practices. For example, the temporary hiding of the face is associated, in some cultures, with the tacit understanding that certain virtuous inhibitions are to be suspended for a period, as in the case of the Venetian Carnival. Given that interaction with a second person, the mere representation of a face, or even just a pair of eyes, are sometimes sufficient to modify dispositions towards some third party or object of moral choice, can this phenomenon be studied, clarified and accommodated within some variety of virtue ethics?

Infused dispositions

A disposition that is concomitant with some mode of relatedness to a second person is also a disposition capable in principle of changing immediately when that relatedness is lost or re-engaged. Such an attribute makes a 'virtue' of this kind extremely peculiar from the point of view of much of the history of virtue ethics. As it happens, however, there is a kind of virtue with the characteristic of immediacy and an association with interpersonal relatedness in the work of Thomas Aquinas. Indeed, according to Aquinas, this kind of virtue, which he calls an 'infused virtue' is perfect or proper virtue, rather than acquired dispositions, which are virtues only in a qualified sense (*ST* 1a2ae q.65 a.2 c.). Infused virtues are infused all at once, unified by love (*caritas*), and can be lost all at once by one action that is vicious enough to drive out love. Aquinas refers to the infused virtues in this state being cut-off or excluded (*ST* 1a2ae q.71 a.4), even though their acquired dispositional counterparts persist.

As I have argued in detail elsewhere (Pinsent 2012), infused virtues for Aquinas are one of two perfective dispositions, the other being the 'gifts' appended to the virtues. Although the addition of the gifts might seem to add more interpretative challenges, these dispositions in fact help provide a means to understand the entire approach. Aquinas builds his virtue ethics around the principle and goal of

friendship with God and, within this theological framework, the gifts have the special role of enabling a person to be 'moved' by God. The details of this movement, as Aquinas describes the operation of specific gifts, suggest an interpretation that contemporary psychologists associate with 'joint attention', a broad term to describe a range of familiar phenomena in which there is a shared awareness of shared focus with another person, a focus that also involves some appropriation of the stance of the other person (Hobson 2005, 185). Everyday examples, studied especially in the context of parent-infant interactions, include pointing our objects to a second person and turn-taking.

A person is not a puppet, however, and being moved freely by God also requires self-movement, for which virtues are needed. The forms of these *infused* virtues, however, differ in many subtle ways from dispositions acquired in the absence of the relationship. As Aquinas describes them, the infused virtues exhibit many re-ordered priorities of good and evil because they reflect the appropriation of God's stance to all things. In broad terms, one can say that the infused virtues and gifts, according to Aquinas, enable a person to love with God (to some small extent) the things that God loves.

Aquinas's theological claims might seem esoteric and of little interest to those who do not share his theological premises. Nevertheless, the approach he describes to the formation of virtues in the context of joint attention with God has arguably broader applicability, given that others such as parents, friends and caregivers may also be virtue-infusing second persons. Indeed, Aquinas insights may help to draw attention to aspects of everyday virtue ethics that have long been overlooked.

Some *prima facie* support for this claim comes from the type of everyday evidence cited previously, namely the close association of interpersonal interactions with the initial formation of virtuous dispositions, beyond simply the provision of information or pleasure and pain incentives. More recently, a growing body of work in social neuroscience and experimental psychology appears to be relevant to the specific characteristics of joint attention, in which the second person is generally on the periphery of direct experience. The two key aspects of such attention, namely shared awareness of

shared focus and appropriation of another person's stance would seem to require at least the following capacities: (1) cognition of a second person; (2) cognition of harmonisation with a second person, and a pre-disposition to favour such harmonisation; (3) some appropriation of the other's stance towards an object. If joint attention plays an important role, at least in the formation of dispositions required for living well in society, one would expect to find evidence for such built-in capacities.

Cognition of a second person: as might be expected, the ability to differentiate persons from other kinds of beings in the world is manifested in a wide range of human behaviour starting from newborn infants, who show a preferential interest in human faces within minutes of being born (Meltzoff and Moore 1977). More recently, there have been identifications of neuronal activities that correlate with face cognition specifically (see, for example, Thompson 1980; Yin 1969; Assal 2001; Bodamer 1947; Farah et al. 1995; Freiwald et al. 2009; Perrett et al. 1985; Rolls 2007). Other "neural conditions and concomitants" (Bennett and Hacker 2003) for picking out persons include, for example, evidence of neural processes that correlate with hearing the sound of human voices (Belin 2011).

Cognition and enjoyment of harmonisation with second person: there is a wide range of evidence for specific abilities to cognise, align with and enjoy harmonisation with a second person. The newborn infants who recognise human faces also soon imitate such faces (Meltzoff and Moore 1977) and infants as young as three months shift their visual attention to follow the direction of gaze of an adult who is present (Hood et al. 1998). As I have noted elsewhere (Pinsent 2014), this ability to engage in aspects of joint attention appears at roughly the same time, or perhaps slightly precedes, an infant's first-person ability to orient attention to objects (Kirwan et al. 2011). Cognition and enjoyment of harmonisation with a second person typically continues throughout life, often subliminially as in the case of the 'chameleon effect' and the fact that being imitated increases liking (Chartrand and Bargh 1999).

Disposition infusion via stance appropriation: there is a wide range of evidence supporting the principle that a stance towards some object of joint attention is different to what the stance would be in

the absence of such relatedness, even when it is the object, and not the other person, that is the focus of attention. The gaze-following by infants to focus on an object that is also the focus of attention by a second person is also, in effect, a manifestation of an alignment with the stance of the second person. After all, the object of focus is selected preferentially at that moment precisely due to joint attention. More sophisticated appropriations are made possible by the implicit emotional content of speech, which in effect invites and enables a second person to share a stance towards some concrete or abstract object. Evidence for this communication in the context of joint attention includes the particular tones and melodic contours of what is sometimes called 'motherese', responsiveness to which precedes sensitivity to the segmented words of language (Donald 2001; Falk 2009). Other evidence, continuing into adulthood, includes the rich emotional content of prosody (cf. Heilman et al. 2004). The essential point is that a person's stance towards some concrete or abstract object is shaped, at least in part, by an appropriation of the stance of a second person in a situation of joint attention. Hence, although still some way short of the notion of an infused virtue towards a matter of moral choice, there is evidence at least for some kind of infused dispositions via stance appropriation in everyday life.

Testing the hypothesis of infused virtues

Beyond simple, momentary dispositions via the appropriation of a stance in the context of joint attention, are there genuine infused virtues in everyday life comparable to the infused virtues in the theological anthropology of Aquinas? Could one develop a natural philosophy of the infused virtues to complement those virtues acquired by habituation described in the *Nicomachean Ethics*?

One approach to help answer this question is to assess the specific impact of joint attention on the formation of virtues, but how is this possible? Shared awareness of shared focus is so interwoven with social interaction generally that it seems challenging to disentangle the specific effects of infusion by appropriation of a stance on the formation of the virtues generally. Fortunately, however, there may be both a means and motive for such study by considering cases in which joint attention is atypical or

inhibited. In particular, autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) is closely associated with – and may even be specified by – atypical joint attention, early symptoms of which often include a comparative absence of pointing out objects, turn-taking or attention to faces. On this basis, it is possible to ask what happens to the formation of virtue in these situations in which joint attention is atypical or inhibited.

This question is not easy to answer directly because there has been little direct interdisciplinary work that relates cases studied in social neuroscience with the formation of virtues, and even when the same or similar phenomena are being described, the terminology is often radically different. Nevertheless, there is considerable *prima facie* evidence that the inhibition of joint attention does impact on the formation of virtuous dispositions, sometimes with serious consequences. Consider, for instance, the formation of temperance described at the beginning of this paper in the familiar context of a game with food played with another person. What happens if the child does not play games with others? One might think that the child will then simply eat when he or she is hungry enough – an Aristotelian appeal to natural prudence which is more or less the advice given to the parents of autistic children facing this challenge: after all, what child would willingly starve herself? Nevertheless, evidence suggests that the child in this situation does not always manifest prudence and start eating without intervention (Legge 2002, 56). In the absence of an infused disposition of desire for the food in the context of interpersonal interaction, acquired virtue does not seem to get started. In these instances a failure to engage in joint attention not only inhibits social development but threatens life itself.

How might this research be developed further in future? Continuing with ASD, it might possible to investigate the impact both on the formation of other virtues as well as vices, focusing especially on dispositions that might be expected to have a strong or interesting connection with the appropriation of the stance of another in joint attention. Candidates for investigation might include gratitude, mercy, revenge, envy, covetousness, modesty, responsiveness to counsel/advice and 'truth' (i.e. the virtue of saying what is true). In some of these cases, such as gratitude, mercy and modesty, a role for second-

person relatedness appears clear, insofar as actions associated with such virtues appear to involve sharing in another's stance towards something, and beyond this, a feeling 'for' the other. In other cases, the influence is more speculative. The case of truth is worth investigating because of the suspected need for interpersonal *means* to acquire the concept of 'holding as true', and corresponding social-developmental reasons for the elusiveness of this concept among persons with autism (Hobson 1993). The case of envy is interesting insofar as it involves relatedness to another person in a negative fashion, since another's good is felt to be one's own evil. The case of revenge, treated in classical texts as a special kind of virtue, is another character trait for which the impact of second-person relatedness is more uncertain, especially given that certain aspects of relationship (e.g., attachment) are relatively intact among children with autism. Some of this research might also be extended to the formation of virtues in situations in which joint attention is atypical in other ways than in ASD, such as cases of Williams Syndrome or prosopagnosia, or those for whom joint attention is the dominant mode of interpersonal interaction, as in the moral stances seemingly acquired by babies (Bloom 2013).

Regardless of precisely how this work is developed, there is at least sufficient evidence to suggest that the long-dominant Aristotelian narrative requires revision. Indeed, a work on theological virtue ethics in the thirteenth century may help to inspire a pattern for new approach to the virtues today: a 'Copernican Revolution' in which the locus of interest shifts from the first to the second person.

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