Putting Ideals in Their Place

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What is the use of ideals like Aristotle's ideal of "the virtuous person," for understanding what the virtues of character are? Two responses suggest themselves. One is that aspiration towards an ideal is beside the point. The point of understanding the virtues, as Aristotle himself observes, is to do better (*NE* II.2), so we want to know what excellences might be possible for humans, not for the sorts of creatures humans can't be. Furthermore, since our time, attention, and energy are scarce, wisdom works at the margin; to think of doing better, or anything else, as a matter of constantly striving for an ideal, regardless of the costs at the margin, overlooks this basic fact about human wisdom, so that can't be what virtue is in humans. And anyway, doing better is a response to a problem, and that problem is not falling short of an ideal but dismay at one's own shortcomings; ours is not so much a *flight to* an ideal as a *flight from* what we should refuse to accept.[i] So what we really need to know is how it is feasible for humans to do better, given our human limitations, our finite resources, and our inevitable shortcomings.[ii]

The other response is that there is no doing without ideals. If we mean to do better, then we need to know in which direction "better" lies. Shortcomings are inevitable, but we cannot build them into that direction without promoting them to excellences. Shortcomings have to count as shortcomings, so we need a model of "better" that is free of our shortcomings.

So, which is it? The answer, I think, is both: the excellences we aim to understand must be non-ideal, and yet we cannot understand excellences without ideals. Our aim is to improve, starting where we have to start, rather than daydreaming about aspiration. The role for ideals is to illuminate what changes in character would count as improvements, what would be truly aspirational. What we want to know is to what improvements we might aspire, from where we actually have to start and along the paths that are actually available to us.

So the first question is whether and what kind of character development is *psychologically feasible* for us: where do we have to start, and what paths of development are available to us (Part 1)? Second, which of the possible directions for development would count as genuinely *getting better*? What does it make sense for us to aspire to given what is feasible for us (Part 2)? And lastly, which of the possible directions for action in concrete circumstances would count as genuinely *doing better*? How is it wise to respond to the constraints of *worldly feasibility*—of what actually works (Part 3)?

In response to the first two questions, I argue that ideals play the important role of revealing what counts as getting better in our character and doing better in our actions. Even so, ideals do not tell us about doing better in a sufficiently determinate way for action. So, in response to the third question, we need to know not just that doing better involves (say) acting generously but also just what acting generously would actually look like in our concrete circumstances. Understanding what one ought to do in order to act generously requires practical intelligence, which is about what really works in the world as we find it. In short, my first contention is that ideals do the crucial work of showing the direction in which "better" lies (Parts 1-2), and my second is that that really is all the work ideals do (Part 3).

My approach throughout is to develop a number of key insights from Aristotle on the virtues, the cultivation of the virtues, and acting virtuously. In technical parlance, the approach I outline here is a neo-Aristotelian non-ideal virtue theory, so by implication I am also arguing that such a thing is actually possible. More than that, I think that a non-ideal virtue theory is most in the spirit of Aristotle's own thinking about the virtuous person.

Part 1. What paths are available?

1.1. A path-dependent approach to the virtues[iii]

Anything we say about how people come to do better will be invested in both a normative philosophical question about what counts as doing *better*, and a descriptive psychological question about how people develop—how they *come* to do better. There is therefore a division of labor between psychologists, who ask "What paths are available for people to change and develop?" and philosophers who ask "What changes and developments count as improvements?" But besides that division of labor, there is also the crucial matter of its *sequence*. Ideal or *path-independent* theory puts philosophical labor first, constructing an ideal of moral maturity and then asking, "How do we get there from here?" The problem is that since we don't yet know the available paths, the psychologist may well answer with the flat reply that "We don't get there from here." By contrast, non-ideal theory is *path-dependent*, because it works in the opposite direction, asking "To what improvements might people aspire, *given* the paths that are actually available?"

So, what paths are available for improving? That is the question that opens Aristotle's treatise on the nature of virtue, in the second book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*). And Aristotle begins with the disarmingly simple observation that acquiring a virtue is one instance of something people do all the time: getting better at doing things through practice and training, as when people acquire skills like building or playing an instrument (II.1).

Aristotle thinks that the nature of virtue is something mundane—part of the everyday world, like skill. A virtue (*aretē*) in the generic sense is a long-lasting attribute by which a living being is good as the kind of being it is.[iv] Virtues of character, specifically, are long-lasting attributes of reasoning and emotion (*NE* I.13, 1102b13-1103a7) that are practical, like skills, both in being concerned with things we can change through action (VI.1, 1138b35-1139a17) and in being acquired through practice (II.4, 1105a17-26). Now, Aristotle doesn't think that virtues *are* skills, because he thinks skills are concerned with making things (VI.4), and those artefacts, unlike actions, can be assessed independently of the process that brings them about (II.4, 1105a26-b5).[v] But the similarity with skill suits Aristotle's idea that virtue is also about doing things well—doing well at living one's life—and that attributes that people acquire in learning to do things well are among the things there are in the world.

Aristotle also thinks that the process of acquiring a virtue is mundane, and is again like acquiring a skill. Aristotle poses a paradox: one acquires a virtue, like fairness, by doing fair things, but how can doing such actions precede the *capacity* for doing such actions? His response is that it happens all the time, because we learn to play an instrument or write a sentence in an expert way by first playing or writing in a beginner's way (*NE* II.4, 1105a17-26).[vi] So here we see Aristotle explicitly considering a question about becoming virtuous, and answering by grouping that process with other everyday ways in which we get better at doing things by becoming more skillful at them. Good character, like skill, is the result of repeated actions that have the appropriate focus and guidance (II.1, 1103a18-b25; II.2, 1104a10-27).

Aristotle also thinks that what one learns to do in acquiring a virtue is mundane, and again is like what skilled people can do. Virtue and skill are alike because they are both goal-oriented attributes. For one thing, each involves reading one's surroundings and extracting information for deciding what it would be best to do towards one's goal, in one's actual situation (*NE* VI.10-11). For another, each involves making the crucial move from an indeterminate goal—like helping a friend, or fixing a wall—to a determinate specification of what accomplishing that goal would actually look like, here and now.[vii] And each requires ordinary executive capacities for achieving that determinate goal through effective means (VI.12, 1144a20-b1). Virtue and skill are both

prescriptive about what to do (VI.4-5), finding the mean while avoiding both "too much" and "too little" (VI.1, 1138b18-34).

For Aristotle, the psychological paths for moral improvement are the very same paths that people exploit in acquiring skills. His approach is path-dependent, beginning with what we observe about "getting better" in general and extending that insight to getting better at living our lives in particular (*NE* II.2, 1103b26-31; VI.5, 1140a24-31). And that suggests a line of research into moral development that explores this apparent isomorphism between virtue and skill.[viii] But the question is, how promising would such a line be?

1.2. Is there such a thing as character?[ix]

Every contention about virtue is empirically risky. Personality comprises psychological attributes that account for how people behave, and when those attributes are excellences we call them virtues. The risk is that our best understanding of human behavior might give us no reason to believe in virtues, character, or even personality in the first place.

In fact, at one point in the past century that risk seemed to be the reality. Whatever personality is, it must be both *stable*, generating similar behaviors in similar situations at different times, and *consistent*, generating similar behaviors across different but relevant situations. However, by the 1970s poor evidence for consistency led psychologists to question the very idea of personality,[x] and in the 2000s several philosophers declared that since personality is at best a hodgepodge and at worst a fiction, no better could be said of character.[xi]

But both reactions were hasty, because even while one conception of consistency was falling away, another was taking its place. The question unexplored in most of 20th century personality psychology was just what makes situations and behaviors "similar" or "different." Suppose Corey sees a coin on a table in an empty room, and leaves it there; Trevor enters the same empty room later, but pockets the coin. Are these opposite behaviors? Are the situations the same? Personality psychologists assumed the answer to both questions was yes: Corey acts honestly in the same situation in which Trevor acts dishonestly. But that assumption ignores how Corey and Trevor classify the situation and their behaviors. Maybe Corey saw pocketing a lost coin as stealing, but Trevor saw it merely as good luck. People *construe* situations and assign meaning to them, and their patterns of construing situations and adjusting their behaviors to them are central to their personalities.[xii] Once psychologists began looking for consistency in those patterns, the evidence for consistency put personality back in the game.[xiii]

What is more, this way of thinking about personality also puts *character* back in the game[xiv]—and character as Aristotle thinks of it, because Aristotle too thinks of stability and consistency not from the observer's perspective but in terms of how subjects construe situations and adjust their actions to them.[xv] First of all, Aristotle believes we must understand a subject's inner states in order to understand his actions in a way that manifests his character, since actions that all look the same to an observer can come from very different sorts of character. There may be few observable differences between two persons who each give open-handedly on many occasions; but which of them counts as generous, rather than profligate, depends on their emotions and on their practical reasoning, whether they give the right amount to the right people, for the right reasons, and at the right time.[xvi] Stereotypically "generous" actions are not *sufficient* evidence of generous character. They're not *necessary* evidence either: the person who gives less or on fewer occasions may nonetheless be the one with the virtue of generosity, if his giving comes from the right emotions and the right practical reasoning about when it is appropriate and effective to give.[xvii] And second, Aristotle also believes that we must understand how a subject construes his

situation in order to understand the inner states from which he acts: his attitudes about other persons, his relation to them, and their intentions, as well as such situational features as the presence of onlookers (see *Rhetoric* II.2-3; cf. *NE* IV.5).

The inner states that differentiate actions with respect to character are those by which persons construe situations and adjust their actions to those situations so construed. So for Aristotle, we must understand how someone construes his situation in order to understand his actions in a way that manifests his character. Aristotle was on the right side of the debate over the basis of consistency, long before there was a debate to be had.

A path-dependent approach to the virtues takes the improvement of character to be an available path for moral development, and the "situationist critique" of the 2000s was as an attempt to show that there is no evidence that such a path is available, contrary to "traditional" views of character. But that critique assumed that consistency across situations would have to be the consistency of behaviors from an observer's point of view—ironically, the very conception of consistency that not just social psychology but even Aristotle had rejected. The critique was wrong about personality, wrong about character, and wrong about the tradition.

1.3. Is character like skill?[xviii]

But although that "situationist" moment has passed, there is no guarantee that the consistency of personality and character will be the *kind* of consistency that *good* character has to have. To act from virtue is to respond to good reasons for acting, and for acting at a certain time, in a certain manner, and so on (*NE* II.4, 6, VI.1). But the experimental evidence suggests that human behavior is surprisingly susceptible to situational variables that have nothing to do with reasons at all, such as being hurried, being alone or among strangers, and even what one happens to hear or smell.[xix] Behavior may have less to do with responding to reasons than we think it does—and perhaps less than the virtues would require.[xx] In that case, trying to improve our character might not be a feasible path to moral improvement *even if* there is such a thing as character.

But the problem is that this line of thought proves too much: if the very idea of responding to reasons undermines the very idea of the virtues, then it must also undermine the very idea of skill. Skill, no less than virtue, involves responding to reasons to do some things and not others (cf. *NE* II.1, VI.1), and yet people do acquire the skills of, say, driving a car, building a wall, playing chess, and diagnosing a patient. When it comes to skill, we know already that developing personal excellence in responsiveness to reasons to act is a path for improvement that human psychology makes available.

What's more, the paths available for acquiring a skill are just the basic mechanisms of personality: mechanisms for construing situations, and mechanisms for adjusting actions to situations so construed. We construe our experiences by attaching meaning to things that happen, things people do, and their intentions in doing them, and by discerning how these situations afford opportunities to advance goals that we care about. And we adjust our behaviors through discerning both what advancing our goals would actually look like in concrete situations and what would be the most effective means for doing so.[xxi] These mechanisms account for the human capacity to be consistent by one's own standard, for better or worse. But to learn a skill is to turn consistency with *some* standard into consistency with an *excellent* standard, the standard of the skill in question. Skill is a matter of intelligently defining a goal, extracting information from one's surroundings that is relevant to that goal, and perceiving opportunities for advancing that goal; that is, skill makes intelligent use of the basic mechanisms for construing experience. Skill is also a matter of making effective use of mechanisms for adjusting one's actions to those opportunities.[xxii]

Skill is how creatures who act by such mechanisms become not just consistent but consistently excellent, getting better at responding to reasons.

The nature of human psychology therefore makes the development of personal excellence our greatest hope of improving when it comes to skill. And I propose that *the same psychological paths that we exploit in order to become more skilled are the same ones we exploit in order to become more virtuous*. As Aristotle saw, this is again a very natural way to think about the virtues. In fact, Aristotle's very first observation in his treatise on the virtues is that we acquire a virtue through focused practice, in just the way that we acquire a skill (*NE* II.1). To have a virtue, like having a skill, is to have a certain standing goal and to be adept at discerning what it would take to realize that goal (VI.1, 12). That discernment involves capacities for interpreting one's situation from multiple perspectives and adjusting one's action so as to realize one's goal in that situation (VI.10-11). Like skill, virtue interprets what is going on around one and intelligently adapts to it, as an archer adjusts his aim at a target (VI.1, 1138b21-34).[xxiii]

Still, that said, if virtue develops along the same paths as skill, then that same fact also reveals how great a challenge, how great an *accomplishment* a virtue really is. In order for the effort to learn a skill to be effective in producing that skill, there must be sufficiently predictable regularities to learn in the first place, and then there must be adequate feedback to learn those regularities through practice.[xxiv] For example, when learning to drive a car, depressing the brake pedal produces highly regular results, with feedback that is both obvious and immediate. But the environment for learning to be more generous isn't "clean" in either of these ways. A cash-strapped friend turns up asking for money; there is no neat if-then regularity as to how it would be generous to respond, since generosity is an excellence and not merely a disposition to do stereotypically open-handed things, which don't always help and can even make things worse. Suppose you give the money and your friend goes away satisfied; but this isn't a clear indication that you really helped your friend, because you may not have made your friend any better off in the greater scheme of things. Even if virtue develops along the same paths as skill, its development can only be described as messy.

However, we have to remember that that messiness is really not a *contrast* between virtue and skill.[xxv] Messiness is normal. Learning to be a good poet, painter, builder, or philosopher involves not just learning how to make a good poem, painting, building, or argument, but also learning at the very same time what it means for a poem, painting, building, or argument to be a good one in the first place. Neat regularities are few and unambiguous feedback rare; in fact, it is that very messiness that makes it an achievement of skill to be able to detect the relevant patterns and overlook the limitless distractions that also lie in the messy environment.

Furthermore, the case of skill *also* reveals psychological paths available for acquiring second-order skills by which to acquire *other, first-order* skills in messy environments: the capacities for taking guidance from other people, for the habit of being critical of one's initial reactions, for learning what to ignore, for practice that allocates the scarce resource of attention where it is needed most.[xxvi] The barriers to acquiring a virtue are not different in kind from the barriers to learning most complex skills, and with repeated and focused practice we do learn to recognize and overcome these barriers.

A path-dependent approach to the virtues sees the limitations of our psychology not as a disheartening obstacle to "getting there from here" but as an illuminating indication of just where we have to start in trying to improve along whatever paths might be available to us (section 1.1). Despite earlier confusions, there is good reason to believe not only that humans are consistent in personality and character (section 1.2), but also that they possess general capacities for converting personal consistency into consistent excellence, as we see in the case of skill (section 1.3). So I

think there is hope that a path-dependent account of the virtues will be a promising approach for research into moral development. But notice that I speak of hope, not conclusive certainty. It's too soon to say.[xxvii]

Part 2. What does it take to get better?

A path-dependent approach to the virtues is aspirational, but genuine aspiration has to be both *realistic* about what's possible and *aspirational* within what's realistically possible. Given the available paths for character development, what might humans who develop along those paths aspire to? What developments would count as real improvements?

2.1. Where "better" lies: what attributes are virtues?[xxviii]

This is to ask what attributes are excellences or virtues in a human being, and Aristotle answers that question first by exploring the connection between excellence and human well-being, or what he calls eudaimonia. Famously, Aristotle says that the virtues are necessary for human well-being; in fact, virtuous activity is the activity that human well-being chiefly consists in (*NE* I.7, 1098a7-20; I.10, 1101a14-21).[xxix] Now, chances are that we immediately think of virtuous activity as a distinct class of activities—"good deeds"—and then Aristotle's view of well-being looks outrageous: if anything, virtuous activity *competes* with the activities that well-being consists in. But this is to get things backwards. For Aristotle, virtuous activity is just activity done in accordance with right reason and sound emotion—that is, in accordance with the virtues (I.13, II.5). Virtues are those attributes of practical reason and emotion, whatever they turn out to be, that humans need for the sake of the well-being that is characteristic of our kind.

So what *do* we need for the sake of human well-being? Aristotle begins by arguing both that there is some one end that we do everything for the sake of (*NE* I.1-2) and that well-being is that one end (I.4-5). To do something for a reason, he observes, is to do it for the sake of some end (e.g. making bridles for the sake of equipping the cavalry), and that end is connected to further ends (equipping a cavalry for the sake of defending the city). When it comes to the ends in which we invest our lives, Aristotle observes that ultimately our end is to live a good life—to live well and fare well—and that is the same thing as eudaimonia (I.4, 1095a14-20). However, that doesn't say very much about *just* what eudaimonia is, precisely because eudaimonia is broad enough to be what everyone agrees is the greatest good in life even though everyone *disagrees* about just what the greatest good is (*NE* I.4, 1095a20-22). So, how might we say what human well-being is, without either being platitudinous (I.7, 1097b22-24) or else just adding yet another dissenting opinion to the fray?

Aristotle's approach is ingenious. Most people identify well-being with some walk of life, such as a life focused on wealth or prestige (see *NE* I.4-5, I.7, 1097b1-5). By contrast, Aristotle has little to say about *what* life one should live, and for good reason: by the time one reflects on one's life it has already taken a lot of shape, through relationships with family, friends, and a broader community (see I.7, 1097b6-13). Instead, he focuses on well-being as *a way of living* a life that fits the one living it. In particular, that way of living is just one that makes us fully human: the characteristic human way of living is a *rational* way (I.7, 1097b13-1098a20), rational in both our *intelligent* capacity to shape our own lives and our *affective* capacity to be shaped by our intelligent capacity (I.13, 1102a26-1103a3; II.5).[xxx] Well-being is any life of one's choosing, *provided* one lives it with practical intelligence and sound emotion.[xxxi] And the personal attributes by which one lives with practical intelligence and sound emotion are what Aristotle means by *virtues*, the excellences of human character.

So, for Aristotle, it is the ideal of living well in a complete human life that casts light on what it would be for an attribute to be one of our excellences—to be a *virtue* in the sort of creature we are (*NE* I.7, 1097b22-1098a18). In order to understand what counts as "getting better" for creatures like us, Aristotle constructs an ideal of human fulfillment in the defining human capacity for practical rationality (I.7, 1097b13-1098a20) in both deliberation and emotion (I.13, II.5). But what we don't find in Aristotle is any suggestion that living well involves aspiring to that ideal. Aristotle's question is not "How do we get there from here?" but "In what direction does 'getting better' lie?" For Aristotle, the ideal of well-being serves to point us in the general direction of excellence in the human capacity for practical rationality.

A second ideal points us in several more particular directions as well, towards the various excellences that humans need to live their lives well. This is the familiar ideal of acting at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right reasons, and in the right way (*NE* II.6, 1106b16-28), as the person of practical intelligence would do it (1106b36-1107a3). The second ideal, then, is an ideal of doing well in choice and emotion (1107a3-6). So, since human life is social, a life of human fulfillment requires such attributes as generosity (IV.1-2), civility (IV.5), friendliness (IV.6), honesty (IV.7), and even good wit (IV.8), as well as fairness (V). A fulfilling human life also requires a realistic appreciation of oneself, both one's achievements (pride, IV.3-4) and one's shortcomings (shame, IV.9). Humans have goals, so a fulfilling life also requires the ability to stand by one's goals despite fear (courage, III.6-9) and temptation (temperance, III.10-12). And of course, in all of these things one needs to deliberate well (VI.1-2, 5, 8-13) about how to be a good friend, how to deal with successes and shortcomings, what fears and desires are worth resisting, what counts as generous.

The virtues are those attributes that make it possible to live a rich and fulfilling life of a characteristically human sort. The ideal of human fulfillment and eudaimonia points us in the general direction of human excellence in reason and emotion, and the ideal of acting as the practically intelligent person acts points us in the direction of the specific attributes that are excellences in us. It is by those ideals that we know what counts as excellence and which attributes are excellences. It is by those ideals that we know in what direction "better" lies.

2.2. Where "better" lies: what changes count as improvements?[xxxii]

Becoming generous counts as improvement, but what counts as becoming generous? "Better" lies in the direction of generosity, but we also need to know the more precise direction in which generosity lies. Here again Aristotle relies on an ideal: to have any virtue is to have every virtue (*NE* VI.12-13), a thesis known as the reciprocity of the virtues.[xxxiii]

That is a startling ideal. However, I think its root idea is fairly simple. I might change so as to be more giving but still not act with excellence: I may be giving freely when it doesn't help, or even hurts, the people I intend to benefit; or I may be giving freely of something that actually belongs to someone else. It's not that I'm becoming more generous but no more helpful, or more generous but less just. It's that *I'm not becoming more generous either*. Of course, we can use the *word* 'generous' to describe someone who acts in stereotypically open-handed ways (cf. *NE* VI.13, 1144b1-9), but the issue is not the word but the *attribute* of generosity. Generosity is an excellence of human practical rationality, so no matter what we call the attribute underlying unwise or unjust forms of open-handedness, that attribute is not an excellence, so it is not the *virtue* of generosity. In order for my change to count as *improvement* in character, my open-handedness must be increasingly intelligent, as well as increasingly sensitive to considerations that bear on other virtues, like fairness, temperance, and being a good friend. The generosity that is an

excellence aims not at giving a lot or on many occasions, but at giving what, when, to whom, and in the way it is excellent to give (II.6, 1106b16-1107a3; IV.1; VI.1, 1138b18-34).

One moral of this story is that every virtue, because it is an excellence, requires practical intelligence (*NE* VI.13, 1144b14-17, 20-8, 30-2), and requires it in two roles. One role for practical intelligence is to determine what would count as realizing the goals of a given virtue. For instance, to have the virtue of generosity is both to have the standing goal of helping others through giving and to be adept at determining how to advance that goal (VI.12), which requires deliberation (III.3, 1112b11-12, 33-4). We deliberate about ways and means (VI.12, 1144a23-6), but before that we have to determine just what would *count* as helping, here and now, because so far that goal is indeterminate. It is because of virtue that one has the right goal, and it is because of practical intelligence that one makes the right choices for the sake of that goal (1144a7-9), guided by an understanding of what really does benefit human beings (VI.5, 1140a24-31). So the first role for practical intelligence is *to make the goals of the virtues determinate*, specifying what would count as realizing a virtuous goal in a way that would genuinely do good. My willingness to help isn't the virtue of generosity unless I grasp what counts as helping.

But, second, my willingness to help also doesn't count as generosity if my open-handedness is also unjust, again because the virtue of generosity is an excellence. So in order for practical intelligence to make the goal of a virtue determinate *in a way that is fully excellent*, it must specify those goals not merely one at a time but in concert with the various goals and constraints of the other virtues too (*NE* VI.12, 1144a29-b1).

From all these considerations, it's clear what follows: if a virtue that is a real excellence requires practical intelligence (*NE* VI.13), and if practical intelligence makes it excellent by connecting it with the other virtues (VI.12), then a virtue that is a real excellence must be packaged with the other virtues (VI.13, 1144b30-1145a2). So, to understand what is involved in getting better in *any* way, Aristotle constructs an ideal of a person who is better in *every* way. That ideal is the reciprocity of the virtues: to have any virtue is to have the other virtues too.

Now, Aristotle's ideal is *not* that in order to count as generous, I would have to be *perfectly* generous. Aristotle appreciates that some things wide of the "mean" might still be the best that imperfect people should ever try to achieve (*NE* II.9).[xxxiv] Virtue, like skill, is needed precisely because doing well is hard (II.6), and learning to do well, like learning a language or a musical instrument (II.4), is lengthy and gradual. Getting better doesn't mean being perfect. The ideal is rather that in order to be generous, I must also be just, temperate, courageous, and so on. But of course, that ideal is astonishing enough! What's the point of it?

I think the point is simple: generosity lies in the direction of increased practical intelligence, both with respect to the goals of generosity itself *and also* in the connections between those goals and the goals of the other virtues. This means that the development of any virtue must involve expanding one's sensitivity to a wide range of practical concerns, and so we should expect to find improvements in any virtue going with improvements in other virtues as well. Improvements anywhere within one's character cannot be understood in isolation from the rest of one's character. The ideal of the reciprocity of the virtues is a *test*, a test of when a change in character counts as an improvement in virtue, because the virtues are interconnected.[xxxv]

2.3. Summary of Parts 1 and 2: A place for ideals

Path-dependence comes at moral development by observing, as Aristotle does, how people ever get better at anything and then extending that insight to how we might get better at living our lives—being better friends, more generous givers, fairer arbiters. Ideal theory imagines a

destination of moral maturity, and the question of moral development is then how to get there from here. Path-dependent aspiration goes in the other direction: knowing where humans have to start, and knowing how they ever manage to progress, we then ask where humans might aspire to go along the paths that are actually available to them.

And yet there *is* a role for ideals, as Aristotle also observes. "Excellence" in the broad sense is an ideal that serves to identify sound cases as apart from defective ones, so ideals help us grasp what counts as real improvement. An ideal of human well-being helps us grasp that improvement lies in the direction of the *virtues*, the attributes we need for human fulfillment. An ideal of the person who hits the mark in living a good human life helps us understand just *which* attributes of choice and emotion are the different virtues. And an ideal of the person who integrates all the virtues helps us perceive that improvements in character are *interconnected*.

But if the role of ideals is very important, it is *also* very modest. Getting better is gradual and piecemeal; it is uneven; it will never be perfect; aspiring to get better often means aspiring to get a *little* better. The point of ideals is to increasingly clarify the direction in which getting better lies, within what's feasible. Ideals do no less. They also do no more—or so I argue now.

Part 3. What does it take to do better?

Here I turn from *getting* better to *doing* better, and thus from constraints of psychological feasibility to those of worldly feasibility. Ideals tell us what we ought to do: to get better, we ought to develop the virtues, and the virtues are interconnected excellences of practical rationality and emotion, like generosity, fairness, and being a good friend. What one ought to do is to be a person with the virtues.[xxxvi] But ideals tell us what we ought to do only in this very general way. What they don't tell us is *just* what we ought to do, here and now. That is what practical intelligence is for: it is a virtue of decision-making concerned with figuring out what really works, in the circumstances in which we actually find ourselves (*NE* VI.10-12). That is to say, *practical intelligence is path-dependent*; it is about what actually works, given the paths for action that are actually feasible.

3.1. Practical intelligence in action[xxxvii]

To appreciate the difference that practical intelligence makes for doing better, think about what it's like to realize that one doesn't have enough of it. Every graduate student can remember going—in the course of one summer!—from being an undergraduate to being a brand new teacher of undergraduates, startled to discover how much one didn't know one didn't know about making a lesson work. The gap in one's ability is not uncertainty about one's goal as an instructor (e.g., explain modus ponens), and it's much deeper than uncertainty about the means of realizing that goal (the chalkboard is over there). The uncertainty is about exactly what would *count* as making modus ponens clear, to these students, in this place, with these resources, given one's unique style and combination of abilities. What would actually *work*?

It is this sort of gap (if not this sort of transition) that I think is usefully revealed in Aristotle's account of two large-scale virtues, and particularly in the difference between them and their small-scale counterparts. The first is "munificence" (*NE* IV.2), which is similar to generosity (IV.1) except that it involves giving on the scale of public benefaction. The second is magnanimity (IV.3), which is similar to proper pride (IV.4) except that it involves handling recognition and honor again on the scale of public prominence. These large-scale virtues concern practical demands of doing well that go beyond what their small-scale counterparts are equipped to handle. Aristotle is alone among ancient philosophers in individuating virtues on the basis of scale and social prominence,

and his choice to do so has always been controversial.[xxxviii] But I think Aristotle is insightful not just for identifying these virtues, but for noticing how they differ from other virtues to which they are superficially similar. Being a public benefactor demands more than being generous but with larger sums of money; being a visible public figure demands more than bearing oneself well but with more eyes watching. Each takes learning what it would be to do well in the face of expectations unique to public life on that scale. Each takes its own mastery of practical intelligence. So each takes its own excellence of character.

The background to Aristotle's discussion of munificence is an Athenian institution whereby wealthy citizens provided certain public services, such as outfitting a navy ship or foreign delegation. The right goal in spending on a great scale is therefore to benefit the public (*NE* IV.2, 1123a4-5), without either flaunting one's wealth or cutting corners (1123a19-31). There is a virtue involved in making these expenditures well, which requires determining what really is beneficial to the public and what be the right impact to make on a public level.

But why isn't that virtue simply the familiar virtue of generosity, but with bigger numbers? The reason is that munificence involves acting for the *public* good, and thus deliberating about what would be in the interests of the public and how to achieve it—and this involves deliberative skills beyond those of generosity. It is a different thing to deliberate about spending for the public interest, requiring skill in identifying what kind of public effect is worthy of the magnitude of the expenditure (*NE* IV.2, 1122a34-35, b3-6, 23-9, 1123a10-18, 28-9). So munificence and generosity are different *as virtues*: the difference is not just in *how* to realize their goals, but a substantive difference in what it *means* to realize their goals in the first place. They are both virtues, but *that difference in deliberative excellence* makes them *different* virtues. And I think that Aristotle's insight about munificence offers a deep insight about the nature of the virtues more generally. As the world presents challenges of profoundly new and different kinds, what the world really demands is nothing less than taking a new step in practical intelligence and character, learning anew what doing better would look like in a world like that.

The same insight also drives Aristotle's treatment of magnanimity, which like proper pride is a realistic outlook about what honors one is worthy of, *except* that the honors are on an extraordinary scale (*NE* IV.3, 1123b1-14). Again, I think that Aristotle is right both that it takes virtue to handle large-scale honors well, *and* that that virtue requires its own skills of deliberation. It takes virtue, and virtue beyond proper pride, to know how to bear oneself in public settings in a way that suits a position of public prominence: knowing *in that context* how to handle events that unsettle others (1124a12-19), how to respond to offenses (1125a3-5), how to receive public honors graciously but not obsequiously (1124a4-9); knowing how to avoid complaining about hardships and boasting about successes (1125a5-10); knowing what distinctions it is appropriate to receive (1124a9-12) and to compete for (1124b17-24). It takes virtue to occupy a publicly visible position well, and that virtue requires its own excellences of practical reasoning for determining just what it means to bear oneself well in that position, which comes with unique demands and challenges.

Practical intelligence is a virtue of practical reasoning and deliberation, by which one skillfully makes determinate what it would mean to do well in here-and-now circumstances. Of course, practical intelligence is also an ideal (*NE* II.6, 1106b36-1107a3; section 2.1), and the ideal helps us understand what would count as getting better at deliberation, choice, and action. But what role is there for ideals *within* practically intelligent deliberation and choice? None, I argue now, because aspiring to do better by idealizing about real-life problems isn't a feasible way to do better. Put another way, ideally a virtuous person would not be an idealist.

3.2. Doing better where we can^{xxxix}

3.2. Doing better where we can[xxxix]

Virtue is about having the right intentions, but it is also about intelligence in turning the right intentions into good outcomes (*NE* VI.12). To have the virtue of generosity is to have the standing goal of helping others through sharing with them—that is, actually *helping*, not just *intending* to help; that is why generous people have to be savvy about effective means to that goal (1144a23-28). But there must be more to thinking about outcomes than that, because the generous goal of "helping others" is an *indeterminate* goal, as we have seen. Practical intelligence is the excellence of making determinate what *genuinely realizing* one's goal, here and now, would look like, a middle step between goals and means (1144a7–9).

Practical intelligence therefore involves deliberation about outcomes, in the two roles we encountered above. First, the virtues each have certain characteristic goals, such as helping others or doing what is fair, and practical intelligence makes those goals determinate by grasping what would actually realize those goals—and there is no knowing what it would be helpful or fair to do without deliberating about outcomes. Second, each virtue also shares the common goal of acting in a way that is intelligent about the goals of the other virtues as well (*NE* VI.12-13). Pursuing one worthwhile goal can cost the opportunity to pursue another worthwhile goal, so virtuous people also have to deliberate about the relative costs and benefits of their choices.

Now, I began this chapter by distinguishing two ways of thinking about moral development: one, ideal theory in which philosophers first identify what we should aspire to and then psychologists try to work out how to get there from here; and two, a non-ideal, path-dependent approach in which psychologists first work out where we can get to from here and then philosophers identify which of those developmental paths would count as real aspiration. A path-dependent approach to the virtues puts psychological feasibility first. And we are now in position to draw a parallel distinction with respect to *worldly feasibility*, as there are two ways to sequence our goals and our deliberation about our goals:

- Choose which goals to pursue, then find the most feasible means; or alternatively,
- Identify the most feasible means, then choose between the goals we can feasibly pursue.

Good coaches know to take the second approach instead of the first. They don't imagine the ideal play and then try to figure out how the team they actually have is going to run it. They look at what their team can actually do, and choose the best play in *that* team's playbook. In other words, good coaches take a path-dependent approach to turning the indeterminate goal of scoring into a determinate set of plays. They put feasibility first. Coaches with ideal theories will have more impressive aspirations but less impressive records.

Unfortunately, putting feasibility second is what comes naturally to us: what could be more natural than setting one's goals and then choosing one's means? But the problem is that that sequence ignores the crucial middle step of determining what it would take to realize that goal within constraints of feasibility. That middle step is the work of practical intelligence, and so *feasibility constrains what shape a virtuous goal can take in the first place*.

At the limit, constraints of worldly feasibility can rule out some goals altogether, even if they're well intended. On this side of the US housing crisis, it is staggering to think that in 2002 President George W. Bush could speak into existence the policy goal of increasing home ownership by the millions and then simply say, "I set an ambitious goal. Achieving our goal is going to require some good policies out of Washington."[xl] Unfortunately, reaching that goal would require lowering the price of credit, for one thing, but by 2002 the Federal Reserve Bank had already been cutting interest rates to historic lows, eventually resulting in skyrocketing house prices and then, when the bubble burst, skyrocketing foreclosures. So the necessary means to Bush's goal could have only

hurt the very people he intended to help, but putting feasibility second is to decide in advance not even to hear that kind of warning, much less heed it.

But even when feasibility constraints don't rule a goal out altogether, they still constrain what can count as realizing that goal. For example, Martha Nussbaum has developed a rich understanding both of well-being as a life of distinctively human flourishing, fulfillment, and meaning, and of the centrality of human well-being to social organization.[xli] I agree with Nussbaum on both counts. But what is far less clear is that *politics* is a form of social organization that is an especially feasible path to greater well-being.[xlii] "The role of political planning," Nussbaum says, "is the distribution to the city's individual people of the conditions in which a good human life can be chosen and lived. This distributive task aims at producing capabilities,"[xliii] including the capability to develop the virtues. Nussbaum is careful to point out that the development of her approach has mainly taken the form of "announcing some ambitious goals for the world," and that

> a great deal more remains to be said about precisely how the approach can be used to generate political principles for today's world. To some extent, this job is a practical job, a job for economists, political scientists, diplomats, and policy-makers. Philosophy is good at normative reasoning and at laying out general structures of thought. In a rapidly changing world, however, any very concrete prescriptions for implementation need to be made in partnership with other disciplines.[xliv]

In a word, philosophers state goals *and then* policy-makers work out means, when we come at last to the "implementation" stage. The rationale for that *division* of labor is clear, but notice the all-crucial *sequencing*: priorities first, feasibility second. By now the problem should sound very familiar: putting feasibility second is to set "ambitious goals" and ask "How can we get there from here?," ignoring the very real possibility that the people whose work comes second might have told us that "We can't," if their work had come first. Of course, Nussbaum insists that her approach would be self-defeating if it made people worse off.[xlv] Precisely—*and that is precisely why constraints of feasibility have to come first*. Only then can ambitious goals have any point. For practical intelligence to be *practical*, it has to be path-dependent.

Conclusion

Virtue is path-dependent, in a couple of ways. One, *getting better* is path-dependent (sections 1-2). In order to improve in character, we must begin with the paths for development that are actually available to us, and then try to understand what sorts of developments that are possible along those paths would count as genuine improvements. That is the work that ideals help us perform, and we cannot do it without them. And two, that is *all* the work that ideals do, because *doing better* is also path-dependent (section 3). Even though the virtue of justice or of generosity gives us the right goal, the goal it gives us is indeterminate, and it takes practical intelligence to appreciate what is feasible in the world as we find it, to determine what it would mean to realize our goal in a way that is genuinely excellent.

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Notes

[i] See Fossheim 2014. I owe this way of putting the point to David Schmidtz.

[ii] My focus is primarily on the constraints on moral development for humans as a kind, and only occasionally on how a given individual might improve given the constraints of his unique circumstances.

[iii] Russell 2015a.

[iv] *Categories* 8, 8b25-36, 9a10-13; *Physics* VII.3, 246a10-b3; *Metaphysics* V.16, 1021b20-23; V.20, 1022b10-12; *NE* II.5. See Hutchinson 1986; Parry 2014.

[v] Against Aristotle, the Stoics maintained that the virtues literally were skills, and they rejected Aristotle's focus on productive skills to the exclusion of skills of excellent performance. I think the Stoics were right about this, but I won't pursue the issue here.

[vi] See Annas 2011, 16-32.

[vii] This, I think, is the best reconstruction of Aristotle's highly compressed remarks at VI.12, 1144a6-9. See McDowell 1998, 110; Russell 2009, 6-11.

[viii] See Lapsley and Narvaez 2004, 2005; Narvaez and Lapsley 2005.

[ix] Russell 2014a.

[x] See Mischel 1968; Ross and Nisbett 1991; Cervone and Shoda 1999, 3-4, 9.

[xi] See esp. Harman 1999 and Doris 2002.

[xii] Mischel 1968, chap. 3; Mischel 1973, 265; Ross and Nisbett 1991, 13.

[xiii] See Ross and Nisbett 1991, 164-7.

[xiv] Sreenivasan 2002; Badhwar 2009; Flanagan 2009; Russell 2009, chaps. 8-10; Snow 2010.

[xv] Cf. Kristjánsson 2008.

[xvi] *NE* II.6, 1106b36-1107a2; IV.1, 1120a23-b11; VI.1, 1138b18-34; VI.12, 1144a6-9.

[xvii] See Russell 2009, 348-55.

[xviii] Russell 2015b.

[xix] Ross and Nisbett 1991, chaps. 1 and 2.

[xx] Alfano 2013; see also Jacobson 2005, 391, 400.

[xxi] See Cantor 1990 for an overview of these basic mechanisms in social-cognitive theory.

[xxii] See esp. Lapsley and Narvaez 2004; Narvaez and Lapsley 2005; Vicente and Wang 1998.

[xxiii] Hursthouse 2006; Russell 2009, 20-5.

[xxiv] Hogarth 2001; Kahneman 2011, chap. 22.

[xxv] Cf. Kahneman 2011, 240-2.

[xxvi] Bargh 1989; Logan 1989, 52-65; Hogarth 2001; Narvaez and Lapsley 2005, 150-1; Annas 2011, 13-18; Bazerman and Tenbrunsel 2011, 78-9, discussing Neisser 1979.

[xxvii] Lapsley and Narvaez (2004, 207) call it "a strategic bet."

[xxviii] Russell 2013; Russell 2012a, chap. 3.

[xxix] As Aristotle rather cryptically puts it, virtuous activity is what "controls" well-being, I.10, 1100b8-11. See Russell 2012a, chap. 5.

[xxx] See esp. Korsgaard 1986 and Hursthouse 1999, 222.

[xxxi] Of course, that proviso does rule out ways of life that are vicious on their face. Cf. II.6, 1107a8-27.

[xxxii] Russell 2014b.

[xxxiii] Distinguish this thesis from the thesis that all the virtues are the same (which Aristotle rejects, *NE* VI.13, 1144b17-30).

[xxxiv] See also Russell 2009, chap. 4.

[xxxv] See also Ackrill 1981, 137; Russell 2009, chap. 11.

[xxxvi] Zwolinski and Schmidtz 2013, 221.

It's unfortunate that characterizations of right action in terms of what a virtuous person would do (Hursthouse 1999, chap. 1) have been interpreted as *formulas* for action guidance and action assessment. Such

accounts better serve the far more modest role of connecting the things people do with the attributes of the people who do them, a connection that matters in our assessment both of people's actions and of their wisdom in choosing those actions.

[xxxvii] Russell 2012b.

[xxxviii] See Crisp 2006 for discussion.

[xxxix] Russell 2014c.

[xl] Bush 2002.

[xli] See esp. Nussbaum 1988.

[xlii] Cf. Nussbaum 2014, 26:16-47:53.

[xliii] Nussbaum 1988, 145.

[xliv] Nussbaum 2005, 211.

[xlv] *Ibid*, 213.