

Virtue and Character

5.1 The question of character

Most of the previous sections have concentrated on questions relating to what it is right to do. We admitted, though, very early on that this has not been the only way in which the task of moral philosophy has been conceived. Philosophy as it is being understood here has its origins in Ancient Greece, and amongst its most significant figures were Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.¹ All were concerned with ethics; but their concern started with the question ‘What is the good life?’, rather than the question ‘What ought I to do?’ It’s important that we see the questions are asked in this order. After all, someone who thought that the most important thing of all was that the right things be done might say ‘The good life is the life which ensures that the right things are done’. There would then be a question of how such a good life could come about. Perhaps some means to this end would be unacceptable.² The point, though, would be that the life which ensures that right things are done is seen as a means to the end which really matters, that right things *be* done. ‘Character’ is the servant of ‘conduct’. (In both utilitarianism and Kantianism this is true. It is quite possible, though, for some forms of utilitarianism, and for Kantianism, to give some room for reflection on the virtues. In this very general sense, whilst Kantianism and utilitarianism are incompatible, virtue ethics and the other theories need not be seen as *alternatives*.)

The conception of ethics which concerns us in this chapter is a form of virtue theory which places conduct in the service of character. The word ‘virtue’ which characterises the life of good character (the virtuous life, a person of virtue) comes from the Latin ‘virtus’ meaning ‘manly’, which has an unhappy sexist ring (and may be further compromised by the negative overtones of ‘macho’ as a common word to caricature a range of supposedly masculine attributes). Perhaps the Greek word ‘areté’, meaning excellence, gives us a better chance of getting an unprejudiced understanding of what is at stake. The core idea is that there is a way of being a thing of a particular kind (in this case, a human being), and being that kind of thing well. We might speak in terms of the fulfilment of potential, marking that because we are interested in human beings quite generally we will not be thinking of “fulfilment” relative to endowments or aptitudes which are not universally shared. If it turned out to be the case that some people were better at mathematics than others due to the structure of their brains, it might also turn out to be the case that those who are good at maths will be most fulfilled in careers where their mathematical abilities are exploited. Those who don’t have such abilities are very unlikely to find fulfilment in such a job. The capacity of these

¹ Surely the most remarkable series of teacher-pupil relationships in the history of philosophy, Socrates lived from 469-399 BC, Plato from 427-347 BC, and Aristotle from 384 to 322 BC. All did their philosophy in Athens, though Aristotle was not a native of that city. For an excellent short introduction to classical ethics, largely in the words of the philosophers themselves, see chapter X of Terence Irwin (editor), *Classical Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)

² What if *every* means to it were unacceptable?

groups to find or to lack fulfilment in such jobs has no relevance for a study of virtue. What does our fulfilment as human beings require? One standard answer from the virtue-ethics tradition is that it requires the possession of a set of characteristics, termed 'virtues', which dispose those who have them towards right action. These virtues actually *constitute* at least part of what it is to live a good life. They are not just means to the end of a good life; they *are* (at least elements of) the good life.

Already from this brief sketch a number of questions arise. First of all, is there a general way of 'being human well' applicable to all human beings? If there is, are we in any position to give an account of it? We might deny that there is any such general account, or we might be skeptical regarding our confidence that we could know what such a life consists in. The latter point might feed in to the question whether there is a way of being human well which is realised by each person in a distinct way. We might then return to our reflections on mathematical ability above, and say: what makes for human wellbeing is fulfilment of our potentialities to the highest degree possible. Because potentialities differ, the recommendations we ought to make to any individual about the content of a good life for him or her as an individual will vary, and it might be at least theoretically possible to imagine two individuals where there was no overlap at all in our recommendations. 'Being human well' will just amount to 'being me well', for each individual.

However, is this plausible? One objection might be that the 'recommendations' we spoke of ('develop your social skills', for example, or 'hone your sense of humour') become means to the end of fulfilment rather than elements of it, but this seems wrong. If fulfilment is radically individual, why should we not say that my own carefully-honed misanthropy is internally related to what it is to be me well? More to the point, we would be asking ourselves to imagine that certain characteristics - courage, say, or justice - would be things which some people could be themselves well without, indeed that they might be things which would count against their living well. Could this be so?

We may well be inclined to think that it would be better if it were not so. This takes us into the important territory of the normativity of the concept of human being. If we have good reason to think that the state which we have so far called 'fulfilment' can be achieved in an individual only by that person cultivating characteristics of injustice, we will accept this cultivation of injustice as a good thing only if we accept that there can be no criticism of the personality of that individual which would make this characteristic fulfilling. It is at least as likely that we would be inclined to think something wrong with a person for whom injustice could be fulfilling. We would be dealing with a poor specimen of humanity, and the departure from the proper (not just 'normal') standards of human well-being represented by this person would constitute something bad - bad, that is, for that person. We might speak of someone being 'alienated from her true nature'. We might, alternatively and perhaps in a more sinister tone, speak of someone being 'sub-human', because incapable of being fulfilled by that which is fulfilling for human beings.

Mention of justice and courage as two of the characteristics central to the good life was far from accidental. These are in fact two of the four virtues which have been classically taken as the core of the good life; the others are often termed 'temperance' and 'practical wisdom'³, and together they are often termed the cardinal virtues (from the Latin 'cardo', literally a

³ The Greek is *phronēsis*, the Latin *prudencia*, from which the word 'prudence' is sometimes used for this virtue. 'Prudence', however, has a rather narrower and perhaps more negative sense in modern English than the Greek ought to convey.

hinge; they are the ‘hinge’ or ‘pivot’ of the good or virtuous life, that around which everything else turns). This list of four virtues, commonly accepted in antiquity and forming much of the structure of subsequent treatments of virtue ethics, offers us an insight into a certain tradition of reflection on what it is to be human well. Do we, though, have any further insights into how we might learn to see which characteristics are virtues? Why these four, and what others might be added to their number?

5.2 How to spot a virtue

The first and most obvious way to recognise a virtue would be by the positive contribution it makes to a virtuous life. That might very well be all we need to be able to pick some characteristic out as a virtue, as long as we have a sufficiently clear idea of what a virtuous or excellent life - a life of ‘*eudaimonia*’, to use Aristotle’s term⁴ - will be like.

There might be something to be said for using a word like ‘blessedness’, if it could be shorn of religious overtones and the sense of one who gives blessing; at least one may be blessed, be fortunate to be blessed, and not feel it. (The Greek word used in the New Testament Beatitudes in Matthew 5, sometimes translated as ‘blessed’ and sometimes as ‘happy’ or ‘fortunate’, is not *eudaimonia* but *makarios*). Having said this, Aristotle introduces a method for reflecting upon the virtues which can be instructive, though it has a number of critics. The method is to perceive each virtue as lying between two ‘vices’ or defects of character - one of these a deficiency and the other an excess. With courage we may contrast the obvious vice of cowardice, a vice of deficiency. It may be less immediately obvious, but it is useful and instructive, to see that there is a vice of excess corresponding to courage; we might label it ‘foolhardiness’ or ‘bravado’.

Translations of Aristotle typically refer to the relation of virtue to vices as one of the finding the ‘mean’, which can appear to be a sort of arithmetical average. Yet Aristotle is at pains to point out that this is precisely not his meaning - some virtues are closer to their vice of deficiency and some the vice of excess. In the case we have just mentioned, Aristotle says that courage is more like, or close to, bravado than to cowardice, which is why when we typically search for a contrasting vice to courage we find cowardice is what we naturally light upon. It is not, though, the only vice with which courage is to be contrasted.

This ‘doctrine of the mean’, as it is often termed, may be instructive in various ways.

For example, it may point towards things which, once noticed, are seen more clearly to be vices (or, indeed, virtues). We may actually lack a word in our language for the trait of character in question, but given (say) two accepted and related vices, we may notice that there is an (unnamed) virtue between them. In spite of this admitted advantage, it is

⁴ There is no really satisfactory English equivalent to this term. JO Urmson remarks that ‘The word *eudaimonia* is used to refer to whatever life is most desirable and satisfying. The word happiness’ has not quite the same force. In particular, *eudaimonia* is not a state of feeling or enjoyment or content’ (Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* translated by David Ross (Oxford: OUP World’s Classics, 1980) pxxvii). In spite of this, ‘happiness’ is often chosen by translators; reading 25 in Sterba is a selection from Aristotle where ‘happiness’ is the preferred translation.

sometimes offered as a criticism that Aristotle's approach tends to favour 'moderate' rather than extreme or heroic candidates for virtue. I suspect that Aristotle would have rebuked this claim - he makes it clear that with respect to the vices virtues are 'moderating', but with respect to their status as contributors to the good life they are absolute and extreme. There is a very important sense in which courage is not at all moderate.

Aristotle's presentation may be defended as instructive, but it is important to press its significance a little further. It is not, after all, generally true that where we have a situation which calls for courage, there are three possible actions (courageous, cowardly, foolhardy) which might be performed. In fact, the courageous person may very well in a given situation do just what the foolhardy person would do (dive in to the river to save the drowning man); in another situation what the coward would do (fail to perform some dangerous task, not out of fear, but because, though brave enough to do it, the courageous person sees that it is not worth undertaking, whatever other people may think of her). It's not that there are 'three types of action', but there are three traits of character which may come to bear on actions, and we may be unable to tell in any one case whether we are observing a courageous person or not. To be told that a person with courage is a person who does what courageous people do, is not to be given a guarantee that there is a distinct class of 'courageous actions' neatly specifiable in advance.

What we might say instead is that, for each set of possible actions which are characterised by a pair of vices, marking out the boundaries of excess and deficiency, there are characteristics labelled by those vices which constitute absences of control on the part of those who possess them. The coward cannot help but be cowardly, and though occasionally he may act in the same way that a courageous person does, that is merely accidental. Similarly, the foolhardy person will act on occasion as the courageous person does. Perhaps he will do so on most occasions. That does not make him courageous, as we may see by asking whether, had courage demanded a different course, he could have taken it. The courageous person has in some sense more available options for action, in that he is not constrained in advance by anything other than a capacity for right action, done from right character. The vicious person may do right action, but only accidentally, and this makes all the difference in the world. Perhaps it will be objected that if the courageous person is constrained to act in accordance with courage, he has no more choice than the coward, and constraint therefore cannot mark out the difference. Yet there is this difference: the virtuous person is constrained to act in accordance with virtue, to act rightly; the vicious person is constrained to act in independence of any conception of right, and is thus not free to live a good life. Imagine that, impossible as it might seem, a person was only ever to find himself in situations where the right action to do was one which would be consistent with the possession of a particular vice and also with a particular virtue, and he always acts viciously (but also 'rightly'). For example, being a coward, he tells the truth, though only out of fear of what his friends will think if he does not, whilst if he had been courageous he would have told the truth whatever his friends might think, and so on through every action in his life to date. In this astonishingly unlikely scenario, we as observers of the man might feel we had no good grounds to know one way or the other whether he was virtuous. Alternatively, he might even generate a reputation for virtue amongst us, albeit quite undeservedly. Such a man has never, from the perspective of external evaluation, done a wrong action, yet he is not a good person, and his life is very far from being a good or happy life.⁵

⁵ The scenario outlined, if practically possible in any sense at all, raises an interesting question for the person who accepts the common and quite natural thought that to obtain virtue, or become a virtuous person, one must habituate oneself to act in accordance with virtue. The problem is that it appears possible for someone to already

We have seen that Aristotle develops a 'method' for the discussion of virtues and vices. We have also seen that virtues and vices cannot be picked out by reference to 'types of action' except when 'type' specifies a type of action in accordance with the virtue in question; 'running into a burning building to save an occupant' is a type of action, but without further qualification we cannot tell whether the action thus characterized is courageous or rash. On the other hand, 'a courageous act' specifies a type of action done in accordance with courage, but is otherwise lacking in content, so cannot guide us to any specific sort of action which is to count as courageous in all circumstances. It will only be by reference to the good life, and to the role of virtues within it, that we can specify what is to count as properly courageous. Once this is admitted, the importance of our conception of the good life becomes obvious. That conception at least includes the capacity to predict that the virtuous person will act in accordance with virtue. And this is something which our hapless person who has hitherto always acted in accordance with virtue (and also with vice) cannot be predicted to do. We cannot know - and probably will very much doubt - that the fortunes of this individual will continue in their old ways. Next time a moment of testing comes, it is likely that courage (which he lacks) and cowardice (which he has in an extreme form) will dictate divergent paths. His true colours will begin to be revealed, and a true choice of good and bad, of virtue and vice, will present itself to him.

5.3 How to be good

How may one become virtuous? A fundamental element of much ancient reflection on moral character, certainly central in Aristotle, is that of our responsibility for our character. One element of the good life is that we be responsible for it in ourselves; to this extent, we are to be 'self-made' men and women. We may ask how this is meant to work; but we may also ask whether it is a belief which we can still hold with any conviction.

In relation to the latter point, we might hold up the great variety of evidence which modern science and social science offers in relation to the determination of our character. Whether through genetics, the influence of home and family, the wider community, schooling - the list might go on and on - we are not entirely in control of who we are, and are not entirely in control of what we may become. There is nothing in virtue ethics which need deny the first of these claims. We do not start with a level playing field; the old adage 'to get a good start in life, choose your parents well' still holds, and genetics merely gives it a more scientifically reductive twist, moving away from 'nurture' to 'nature' in a hard-biological sense. Yet the question of the extent to which we are responsible for what we become remains pressing. In the 1980s there was much debate between those who held that inner-city riots in Britain were

have been habituated to act in the 'right' ways, by possession of the appropriate vice. A further act in accordance with the vice might seem to entrench the vice within one's character; but if the same act would also be in accordance with the virtue, it might entrench the virtue at the same time. This seems odd, and a natural thought might be that as the vice is already entrenched to a high degree, and the virtue not at all, the vice would inevitably win out. An alternative, that virtues are more easily entrenched than vices, is a happy thought but perhaps contrary to experience. The solution to this line of enquiry lies in the role of intellect in commitment to action, as we will see below.

the direct result of urban deprivation, to the extent of mitigating responsibility from the rioters, and those who held that at least the very great majority of those who rioted were indeed responsible for their actions. Similarly, we may ask whether or not backgrounds of family wealth, or social class, and so forth serve to predispose to the possession of virtues (or vices).

One of the reasons why the Ancients were so keen to render character a matter of one's own responsibility lay in their concern to render ethics an arena immune to the vagaries of luck or fortune. The path chosen to avoid luck, which I termed above the 'self-making' of character, has both an attractive and a repulsive dimension. It may attract those who regard the radical individualism and self-sufficiency of much modern culture as a thing to be welcomed. It may repel because of an undeniable potential to collapse into self-satisfaction and smugness. (The 'self-made-man' who worships his creator.)⁶

How do we come to possess the virtues? Let us imagine ourselves born with a range of tendencies towards actions in accordance with (say) generosity or meanness, courage or rashness, and so on. These are not, yet, the vices or virtues which they are associated with. We do not, yet, have properly formed moral characters. If we are by nature foolhardy, and if nothing is done to correct this tendency in us, we are likely to act rashly, and by thus acting, we will find the vice of rashness becomes entrenched in our characters. We become rash; possess the vice of foolhardiness; are, to this extent, vicious.

On the other hand, even possessing a tendency to rash actions, we may steel ourselves against the temptation to be rash. We may ask ourselves what the situation demands; which is to say (the question is all one), we might ask what the courageous person would do. Having determined what the courageous person would do (or what courage demands), we do it. This might well be easier to do for us as rash people than it would be for a coward; Aristotle admits as much. What matters, though, is the intervention of practical reason in assessment and action. Rather than acting on pure instinct, we acted to some extent against instinct. We did this both by producing an action which might have been different from the one we would have instinctually done (this may or may not be the case), and also by submitting our action to the judgement of practical reason.

To act once in accordance with a virtue is not to be virtuous, is not to possess the relevant virtue. To act so a hundred times may not yet be to overturn a predisposition towards a vice. Yet it is held that habituation is eventually possible, and will produce a character disposed to right action. It should be clear that 'responsibility for character' cannot, on this view, imply that a cowardly person can 'choose to be courageous' by a momentary decision and from that

⁶ Those interested in reflecting on the fate of the tradition of virtue in Christian theology might find it worthwhile to see how the themes of luck and responsibility operate in this alternative conception of the good life. Here, any sense of 'self-making' is abandoned in favour of a language of divine activity; the 'fruits of the Spirit', as the facets of character which are brought about in the Christian by the work of the Spirit of God, are emphatically not the work of the believer. Yet where becoming a Christian is held to be a matter of the receiving of God's promises 'by faith', the nature of this 'faith' becomes the focus of much controversy. There are those who hold that this faith, too, is a work of God, and they may speak of 'election' to faith as a divine gift, yet this may appear to press the question of 'luck' upon us again. On the other hand, those who profess that the faith is a human work in response to God allow for a place where God's own action is not sufficient, and where human work is needed in addition, which offers a place for human responsibility for salvation, at the expense of emphasizing the sufficiency of God's work. Thus, the controversy over the nature and extent of God's grace, which recurs in Christian discussions of salvation, has a direct bearing on the theological handling of the topic of virtue.

moment on possess the virtue of courage. Yet it is also clear that a person who has long been content with cowardly or rash actions in her own person is someone whose failure to take available steps towards virtue constitutes a kind of moral failing. The failure is all the worse if vices are traits or dispositions of character in which we may become deeply entrenched. Sometimes it is held that at the furthest extreme vices may become inescapable, and our characters be incapable of moral redemption.⁷

The good life

Much has been made of notions like ‘the good life’, ‘the fulfilled life’, well-being, happiness, blessedness, eudaimonia. Aristotle treats human nature as implying some pretty determinate form of ‘fulfilment’, which he labels eudaimonia; other commentators (for example, Thomas Aquinas, who wrote a commentary on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and produced one of the most important and influential mediaeval discussions of the virtues)⁸ might agree that there is a determinate answer to the question ‘what is the good life for human beings?’ but disagree with Aristotle regarding its content. Without a sense of what such a life looks like, we cannot decide between the Christian elevation of ‘meekness’ as an element of good human living, and Aristotle’s apparent rejection of it in his discussion of proper pride (*Nicomachean Ethics* IV.3).

At this point, though, modern commentators might inject a note of caution. Is there such a thing as ‘human nature’ in the determinate sense required? There certainly are a variety of visions of what good human life is like, and these certainly do play a part in determining what people hold to be virtues and vices, as well as contributing to the sense which people have that possession of those virtues and vices is integral to living a good life. All of that is to be accepted, and yet there still remains the question: how may we decide between rival accounts of what a good life would be? Alasdair MacIntyre has drawn attention to the very different accounts which are offered by Homeric society, where the warrior hero constitutes a model of the admirable and blessed life, and the sort of life which Aristotle, living in Athens some hundreds of years later, regarded as good. Subsequent history gives us many more examples of the ‘ends’ to which people might aspire in their lives. Such ‘ends’ are very far from being mere matters of individual whimsy. They are transmitted from generation to generation through the values implicit in bedtime stories, through the choice of role models and of educational systems, through the relative priority given to news items in papers and on the television; in these and many other ways our conceptions are transmitted (and transmuted) through time. ‘Cultures’ and ‘religions’ are in part defined by their answer to the question of the good life.

⁷ Those who hold to a strong notion of genetic determinism might believe that such apparent vices as lust and greed are genetically determined, and inescapable at least in the absence of engineering changes in the individual’s genetic makeup. Such discoveries are speculative, and available ‘cures’ presumably belong in the realm of science fiction for a while longer at least. They do, however, offer an interesting context for further reflection on these issues of responsibility for character.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Dumb Ox Books, 1993); *Summa Theologica* Prima Secundae (i.e the first part of the second part), Questions 55-70.

Admitting all this, we may still hold that cultures and religions may be right or wrong in their answer to the question. Or, admitting it but denying a standpoint from which we may arbitrate between them, we might hold that what matters is that the question of the good life be asked and answered (for only then can good lives be lived), but that what counts as a good life can be determined only from within a culture. To say this is to relativize the question of the good life, to make it askable and answerable only from 'within'.

Within what? We have been speaking of cultures and religions; we might broaden this to a generic term 'tradition', and say that the bearers of tradition are crucial to the future of the good life. 'The bearers of tradition' are various; stories, customs, manners, rites, structures of our social and political life, and probably countless other things as well. What the tradition constitutes for our purpose is a vision of good human living. We might ask how the relationship of the individual and the collective good is envisioned in any particular society. It might indeed be that one sign of the superiority of one vision of human good over another would be its capacity to envision a good society in which each individual was also capable of personal well-being (and in which, unlike Aristotle's social vision, there would be no need for a slave-class), but the only ground for judging of this superiority would be from within the various alternative traditions. We cannot judge from outside of a tradition what might be made of an alternative. The Christian tradition regards greed as a vice, so will always be in tension with a social vision of economic order which depends upon greed for its furtherance, and which requires people to think of it, admittedly under certain constraints (roughly, the recognition and acceptance of private property as legitimate), as a virtue. There are different visions here of what a good life might look like, competing claims regarding the good life.

It is possible for virtue ethics to give an account of the good life as consisting in the possession of certain dispositions of character called virtues, and for these virtues to be constitutive of the good life for human beings, without necessarily being committed to the existence of any particular form of the good life as an objective truth. The question of objectivity - whether there is such a thing as human nature, and how that might relate to the vision of the good life as the proper end of human existence - might be unanswerable.

5.5 Conclusion

What we have said about virtue and the virtues suggests a shift in the primary focus of moral philosophy away from the questions of what ought to be done, and why it ought to be done, towards the question of how we might live good (satisfying, fulfilling) lives. It is taken for granted that no one will want to live a less than fulfilling life; the question 'given that this is the good life, why should I want it?' does not occur, because anyone who asked it would have failed to understand what 'the good life' meant. Whether there is a single, universal answer to what the good life consists in (what the virtues for human beings are, objectively speaking) remains a matter of controversy.