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INTRODUCTION

It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference.

Aristotle, *NE* II 1, 1103^b24–26



A good case can be made that the most exciting work done in moral philosophy over the last fifty years is that set of inquiries collected under the title of “contemporary virtue ethics.” In its infancy it was not always clear that this would be so, and indeed, it used to be the case that the proponents of contemporary virtue ethics could rightfully complain that they did not receive the respect they deserved. But this has changed. Current handbooks on moral philosophy include significant entries on virtue ethics, there has been a proliferation of articles and books on it, and there are job postings seeking virtue ethicists for hire. Its leading figures are easily recognized by our newest generation of aspiring philosophers, with names like Elizabeth Anscombe (the movement’s grandmother), Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum, and many others making regular appearances on college syllabi. By the accounts of those with

Quotations follow Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *NE*), trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), with a few emendations based on Bywater’s Greek edition in the Oxford Classical Texts.

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a stake in classifying the varieties of ethical theories, virtue ethics is treated as a cohesive movement unified by a common aim and methodology, and it prospers.

There is perhaps no clearer evidence that the contemporary virtue ethics movement has been endorsed as a coherent and significant contributor to debates at the heart of moral philosophy than its recent treatment in Cambridge University Press's companion series.¹ The arrangement and variety of chapters in the companion make evident the appealing features of virtue ethics: it focuses on the fundamental Socratic question of how one ought to live, draws from the wisdom of both ancients and moderns, is theoretically rich, and makes significant contributions to applied ethical questions of great importance.² *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* also reveals some of the ways in which the controversies concerning virtue ethics over the last fifty years have shaped the movement and made it relevant to debates across the field of moral philosophy generally. To be sure, virtue ethics has not achieved universal sanction, but it is widely regarded as a legitimate approach to moral philosophy, indeed one that has a seat beside the two other main approaches most discussed in contemporary moral philosophy, deontology and consequentialism. In short, the movement has grown into a popular way of addressing questions at the fore of contemporary moral debates and cannot be ignored.

A review of the chapters composing *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* reveals, as well, some of the challenges to making sense of contemporary virtue ethics and assessing its value. There

1. Daniel C. Russell, *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), hereafter CCVE.

2. For an analysis of some different ways in which virtue ethics approaches applied ethics see Liezl van Zyl's "Virtue Ethics and Right Action," CCVE, 172–96. The CCVE also contains chapters dealing with bioethical issues (Justin Oakley, "Virtue Ethics and Abortion," 197–220), environmental ethics (Matt Zwolinski and David Schmidtz, "Environmental Virtue Ethics: What It Is and What It Needs to Be," 221–39), and business ethics (Edwin Hartman, "The Virtue Approach to Business Ethics," 240–64).

are included chapters describing the virtue ethics of Aristotle,³ Plato and the Stoics,⁴ Confucius,⁵ various medieval authors,⁶ Hume,⁷ and a number of contemporary authors. There are of course significant differences between these various classical, medieval, modern, and contemporary approaches. How can contemporary virtue ethics draw from each of them and remain unified and distinctive? This is a question at the forefront of adherents to virtue ethics, and both the editor and several other authors address it over the course of the companion volume. But one discovers in the various attempts to answer that question additional difficulties. Daniel C. Russell, the editor of the companion volume, whose *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* provides an impressive defense of the centrality of practical wisdom to each of the virtues and forges on it a relatively narrow definition of what he calls Hard Virtue Ethics,⁸ argues in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* that it is impossible to provide a definition of virtue ethics that is brief, specific, and inclusive.⁹ Nevertheless, he contends that all approaches to virtue ethics include a focus on one's character and whole way of life. Christine Swanton, whose chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* is the

3. Daniel C. Russell, "Virtue Ethics, Happiness, and the Good Life," CCVE, 7–28.

4. Rachana Kamtekar, "Ancient Virtue Ethics: An Overview with an Emphasis on Practical Wisdom," CCVE, 29–48.

5. Philip J. Ivanhoe, "Virtue Ethics and the Chinese Confucian Tradition," CCVE, 49–69.

6. Jean Porter, "Virtue Ethics in the Medieval Period," CCVE, 70–91.

7. Paul Russell, "Hume's Anatomy of Virtue," CCVE, 92–115.

8. Daniel C. Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), hereafter *PIV*. "My view therefore stands in stark contrast to the trend towards increasing indifference to the notion of phronesis in recent thought about the virtues of character. Some virtue theorists argue that phronesis is important for some virtues, but certainly not all (Swanton, 2003); others.... Consequently, I distinguish between two basic varieties of virtue ethics: those on which phronesis is part of every virtue, which I call 'Hard Virtue Ethics', and those on which it is not ('Soft Virtue Ethics')." (*PIV*, xi). Later, he contends that only Hard Virtue Ethics is real virtue ethics (*PIV*, 71).

9. He contends the best one can arrive at is to incorporate two of those three criteria (CCVE, 3). His preferred strategy is to provide a definition that is brief and specific. The exclusivity of Russell's position on virtue ethics is what motivates objections such as Swanton's to it.

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last, explicitly rejects Russell's definition of Hard Virtue Ethics as too narrow, and endorses instead a view that collects all virtue ethical approaches as united by virtue notions.¹⁰ The notional approach to defining virtue ethics has advantages of inclusivity, but, like other notional solutions, is susceptible to claims that it lacks substance. We will have occasion to address this and other matters addressed by the companion volume and other literature in the pages to follow. At this early stage, what is to be noted is that even though virtue ethics is evidently regarded as a coherent and comprehensive approach within moral philosophy, it is not free of internal conflicts. Those internal divisions may indicate vitality within the movement, or may point to serious problems. It is perhaps not surprising, given the nature of most movements in philosophy, that we will discover the contemporary virtue ethics movement to be complex, a mixture of both vitality and, seen from at least some perspectives, decay. It is one of the tasks of the book before you to sort through this mixture in the hope of advancing a virtue-focused approach to moral philosophy that draws from the strengths and not the weaknesses of recent work in virtue ethics in combination with features of classical, and particularly Aristotelian, moral philosophy. For reasons that will become evident, I hesitate to describe my favored approach as a virtue ethics.

A note on terminology is in order before we begin in earnest. One of the claims of many adherents of virtue ethics, and indeed many of the approach's opponents, is that virtue ethics is as old as Plato, or if not Plato, then at least as old as Aristotle. It is indisputable that virtue theory has its origins in classical philosophy. But, as Julia Driver has pointed out,¹¹ a virtue theory does not necessarily imply a virtue ethics. It is one of the claims that I will advance later in this book that what one finds in Aristotle is not what is typically thought of as virtue ethics in its contemporary use. Therefore the expression "contemporary

10. Christine Swanton, "The Definition of Virtue Ethics," in *CCVE*, 332–33.

11. Julia Driver introduces this in her first footnote to "The Virtues and Human Nature," in *How Should One Live?* ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 111–29.

virtue ethics” will generally be used to specify the movement ushered in by Anscombe near the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, and especially when it is necessary to signal discontinuities between the ethics of Aristotle and virtue ethics as it is employed in contemporary moral theorizing. Further distinctions between various strategies within contemporary virtue ethics will be introduced as we progress through an analysis and assessment of this movement.

The Complexity of Contemporary Virtue Ethics

Thinking about virtue ethics seems not unlike Augustine’s description of the challenge of thinking about time: one seems to know what it is until challenged to describe it. Students before they are led through some of the literature on it, interested laypersons, and indeed even philosophers tend to assume virtue ethics to be easily describable. However, the pedestrian descriptions of the movement tend to be rather too general to specify it in such a way as to distinguish it from others, such as virtue ethics being about one’s whole way of life, or about being rather than doing. Often there is more familiarity with some of the key figures usually identified with the movement, such as Aristotle or MacIntyre, than there is with the movement itself. And indeed, if Russell is right that it is impossible to have a definition of the movement that is brief, specific, and unified, then there is good reason why commonplace descriptions of the movement generally do not encapsulate it.

My own initial experiences of thinking about virtue ethics, at least, fall under this description of a commonplace view of the movement. Perhaps they can serve as an instructive point of entry for advancing upon a preliminary description of contemporary virtue ethics, especially for those readers of this book who are interested in the movement but have not been tutored by an adherent of contemporary virtue ethics. When in 2001 I completed my dissertation, which fo-

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cused in large part on the foundations for Aristotle's ethics, I saw my project working in the same direction as the efforts of contemporary virtue ethicists. I had, naturally, worked closely on the ethical and political writings of Aristotle himself, and took in the contemporary, and some of the classical, commentaries on those works. I had also begun a close reading of Alasdair MacIntyre's work, and MacIntyre, I was given to understand, was a virtue ethicist by virtue of being an Aristotelian on the virtues. Many of the other virtue ethicists I had read also looked to Aristotle for some inspiration, and so I concluded that contemporary virtue ethics was a revival of Aristotelian ethics, and a much needed one at that.

A more thorough review of the movement has revealed a much more complicated, and in some respects more sophisticated, approach to moral philosophy than I had anticipated. A closer examination of the movement's literature reveals that there is no common set of principles or strategies for grounding the virtues, but rather a variety of competing eudaimonistic, agent-basing, and agent-centered theories of the virtues. Moreover, it reveals that the movement is not in fact consistently Aristotelian in orientation or methodology since sometimes different virtue ethicists look to competing philosophical systems as foundational, and that even some of those works that have claimed to be Aristotelian (or more often neo-Aristotelian) have departed quite far from Aristotle's approach, sometimes without acknowledging those points of departure.¹² In many ways, at least the mainstream of contemporary virtue ethics seems not to represent a radical departure from what Anscombe characterizes as "modern moral philosophy," and given the origins of the contemporary move-

12. Daniel C. Russell's *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, and Julia Annas's *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), are notable exceptions. Russell and Annas, both classical philosophers, have endorsed versions of virtue ethics that draw more heavily from Aristotle than from features in the mainstream of contemporary virtue ethics. In this work Russell several times mentions his distance from the mainstream of the movement and, as we have seen already, is registered as an outlier by Christine Swanton in her chapter in the Cambridge Companion volume that Russell edits.

ment this is a great irony. Moreover, recent literature on the virtues often employs theories of the virtues that bear little resemblance to the accounts given them by their classical originators. These were, as I have said, surprising discoveries for me. My hunch, based on conversations with and studies of other philosophers with an interest in virtue theory, is that it will also be a matter of surprise for others. Since many readers with an interest in virtue theory tend to think of contemporary virtue ethics as a reintroduction of Aristotelian ethics in a modern context, identify Anscombe, Foot, MacIntyre, or Nussbaum as some its leading lights, and assume a general coherence of doctrine and philosophical direction, it will be useful to them to see why these assumptions do not bear up well under closer scrutiny. For those already informed on this point, there is much this book offers by way of analysis and critique to advance positions within debates surrounding virtue ethics that will be of use. For all readers, both the critical and constructive dimensions of this book offer a perspective on the role of the virtues in moral philosophy that, though certainly indebted to the insights of many past and present philosophers, offers a fresh perspective on the role of virtue within moral theorizing.

Some Preliminary Distinctions

Since contemporary virtue ethics is a complex movement, it is necessary to determine if there are some significant divisions implicit within the whole if we are to analyze it successfully. Movements, unlike arguments, theories and doctrines, do not typically yield distinctions that have hard edges. The historical and situational conditions vary between the many authors of any movement, as do their degrees of responsiveness to the work of other thinkers and their unique formulations of central features of the movement. For these reasons, we should not expect anything more than distinctions with soft boundaries, or trends as we might call them, which compose the broader categorical divisions within the virtue ethics movement.

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David Solomon describes one such set of trends. Some virtue ethicists engage in what he calls “routine” virtue ethics—an approach that emphasizes the importance of the virtues within the typical strictures of the way in which moral philosophy is currently pursued, particularly in the analytic tradition.¹³ It was not and is not always the case, however, that all of those who identify as virtue ethicists adopt the strategies and preoccupations that are more typical of current mainstream moral theorizing. Much of early virtue ethics literature, for instance, was polemical in nature, disparaging Mill and Kant as wrongheadedly rule-based ethicists. In place of the rule-based approaches, those virtue ethicists Solomon calls “radical” proposed various alternatives.¹⁴ For reasons that will become more apparent later in this book, Solomon seems to have described a genuine division. Although many of the radical virtue ethicists’ solutions bear little in common with each other, there is among them a more or less unified turn away from the mainstream of modern moral philosophy. On the other hand, more recent works in virtue ethics have sought to show the pillars of modernity, including Hume, to have a genuine concern with character development, which is taken to imply they are contributors to an ethics of virtue.¹⁵ The distrust early virtue ethical lit-

13. David Solomon, “Virtue Ethics: Radical or Routine?” in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, ed. Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003): 57–80. It is a shame that this insightful chapter has not received more attention. One notable exception is Christine Swanton’s mention of it in “The Definition of Virtue Ethics,” in *CCVE*, 315–38, 318, though she does not engage his main thesis there.

14. Timothy Chappell in “Virtue Ethics in the Twentieth Century,” (*CCVE*, 149–71) emphasizes the revolutionary character of the work of Anscombe and the early Foot. He contends that everything that has followed, including the work of MacIntyre, Bernard Williams, and Charles Taylor, has been a matter of seeking to fill in the details of Anscombe’s and Foot’s research project.

15. For just a few prominent examples of this strategy, see Michael Slote’s efforts at a Humean virtue ethics in *Morals from Motives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Kwame Anthony Appiah’s declaration of J. S. Mill as a great virtue ethicist in *Experiments in Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), and Christine Swanton’s effort at arguing that all major moral theories contribute elements of a virtue ethics in *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

erature directed toward the leading lights of modern philosophy has not simply been softened in the cases of some recent contributors, it seems in some cases to have become admiration. The process of accommodation to the more narrow range of concerns and methodology typical of modern moral philosophy is one that Talbot Brewer helpfully characterizes as the “normalization of virtue ethics.”¹⁶

There are some disadvantages to the terms preferred by Solomon, Brewer, and some other observers of the movement,¹⁷ to describe these trends. The adjective “routine” can be taken pejoratively, and “normalized” admits of several interpretations depending on the norms specified. So, when referring to this trend, I will usually employ the terms “conventional” or “mainstream.” “Conventional” is useful insofar as it points to the ways in which this trend in contemporary virtue ethics has adopted many of the conventions of current moral theorizing, and “mainstream” is useful for pointing out the ways in which this approach has become dominant in more recent virtue ethical literature. The term “radical” is somewhat less clear as a label, if only because of the variety among those thinkers marginal to mainstream virtue ethics. Several of the significant figures whom Solomon counts as radical virtue ethicists do not describe themselves as virtue ethicists at all. These include those philosophers I mentioned in the first paragraph of this introduction as usually associated with the movement. Anscombe never claimed to be one, and judging from the radical departure from modern moral philosophy she advocated, there is little doubt that she would not claim to be one now were she still alive to witness what she is so often credited by mainstream virtue ethicists with starting. MacIntyre never intended his project to be seen as a contribution to contemporary virtue ethics, and has made it clear that he does not in any way wish to be seen

16. Talbot Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

17. Especially notable for drawing out the distinctions between radical and routine varieties of virtue ethics is Christopher Miles Coope’s “Modern Virtue Ethics,” in *Values and Virtues: Aristotelianism in Contemporary Ethics*, ed. Timothy Chappell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 20–52.

as a proponent of the movement.¹⁸ Foot seems to have done much to develop the movement with a series of articles later collected in *Virtues and Vices*, but has gone in a different direction, that of re-grounding ethics in general and not just contributing a third way to engage in the projects of modern moral philosophy, with *Natural Goodness*.¹⁹ Nussbaum, always resistant to categorization, published a paper in 1999 in which she argued that “virtue ethics” is a misleading category and ought to be jettisoned altogether.²⁰ For these reasons, I usually will refer to these thinkers, and others in a similar situation with respect to mainstream virtue ethics, as “unconventional” or “marginal” virtue ethicists.

We find in virtue ethics a multifaceted contemporary moral philosophical movement, some of the parts of which—generally, those represented in more recent literature—accommodate themselves to status quo moral philosophizing; others of which—generally, those produced in the first and second generation of the contemporary movement—depart radically from status quo moral philosophizing. We also find in virtue ethics a movement not always sensitive to its rebellious origins, so that those thinkers credited by many of the movement’s current adherents as being the movement’s founders—Anscombe and MacIntyre most notably—would not or do not wish to see their own work as contributing to the contemporary movement at all. On the contrary, and as I will argue in the second chap-

18. This is clear enough from his writings. This is why nearly all of his post *After Virtue* writings are ignored (with the occasional exception of *Dependent Rational Animals*) by virtue ethicists. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* is, in many respects, a defense of an Aristotelian-Thomist approach to ethics, and is not the work of a virtue ethicist. In addition, MacIntyre graciously answered by email some questions I had about how he sees his relationship to the virtue ethical movement, and he made it abundantly clear in our exchanges that he does not identify with the movement in the least.

19. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Moreover, in his review of her book in *Mind* 112 (2003): 130–39, Michael Slote claims that Foot made clear to him in a personal communication that she does not identify herself as a virtue ethicist.

20. Martha Nussbaum, “Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?” *Journal of Ethics* 3 (1999): 163–201.

ter, there is good reason to characterize conventional virtue ethics as developing in part from the rejection of that influential and rebellious observation submitted by Anscombe that the whole project of modern philosophy has gone off the rails and from Anscombe's advice to cease doing moral philosophy until we have retrieved something like an Aristotelian philosophical psychology. Seen from this historical perspective, the most institutionally successful variety of virtue ethics, mainstream virtue ethics, has achieved its current status only after reversing the course of its initial impetus.

The developmental stages leading to success in the mainstream of contemporary virtue ethics might have been different if those who celebrate the inspiration Anscombe provided to the movement acknowledged the ways in which they disagree with her. We cannot say in retrospect whether a different set of developmental stages might also have met with the sort of success contemporary virtue ethics now enjoys as a major contributor to contemporary moral inquiry. What we can observe is that current encyclopedic, anthological, textbook, and companion entries on virtue ethics tell the story of vibrancy in the movement, and it is this story that has become the defining narrative for the way the next wave of moral philosophers has been taught to consider virtue ethics—as one more alternative for solving the questions that define contemporary moral philosophy. Even though Anscombe is in these entries generally acknowledged as the founder of the movement, the core of her teachings has often been jettisoned without comment. If the core of Anscombe's analyses and recommendations is sound, as I will argue in the second chapter that it is, the fact that it has been set aside is a significant indication that something may be amiss in what otherwise appears to be a healthy and rich movement in ethics.

This is not to suggest that criticisms of contemporary virtue ethics is uncommon. In the critical literature a standard set of objections to the approach of virtue ethics has emerged. The most common of these is that virtue ethics does not provide sufficient guidance for ac-

tion. The second most common is that a concern with the development of one's virtues is self-centered, and renders one unsuitably prepared to come to the aid of others in need. More recently, situationists have challenged the very notion of there being something like stable character traits, and this is often hailed as the situationist challenge. Other, less common but significant, objections include the charge of cultural relativity; the circularity problem of determining grounds by means of which a character trait can be claimed a virtue when virtues are taken as already epistemologically basic; and, the so-called conflict problem, where two or more virtues suggest different courses of action for resolving a moral conundrum. Standard criticisms of contemporary virtue ethics press one or more of these objections.²¹

These objections, and the mainstream virtue ethical responses to them, take for granted a shared set of assumptions about the tasks of moral philosophy: first, that moral philosophy ought to be action guiding; second, that one ought to be altruistic; third, that our actions are not merely the products of our situations; fourth, that there are universal ethical principles; fifth, that there is some way to derive first moral principles from which to build an account of the virtues; and sixth, that there simply are some insoluble moral dilemmas. In standard virtue ethical attempts to respond to these objections, it is the shared set of assumptions between objectors to and adherents of virtue ethics that has served to bring the two parties together, indeed, on many points they are indistinguishable.

This book does not fit neatly into the model represented by this list of standard virtue ethical objections and assumptions, and the reasons for it failing to do so are twofold: on the one hand, my critical appraisal is, unlike standard criticisms and defenses of contemporary virtue ethics, attentive to the basic difficulty in specifying just what contemporary virtue ethics is so that the target, or rather

21. Rosalind Hursthouse discusses the standard criticisms, in different order, in her "Virtue Ethics," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2007 ed., <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2007/entries/ethics-virtue/>.

targets, for criticism are adequately described. Second, I find significant flaws with several of the standard assumptions concerning the basic tasks of moral philosophy subscribed to by most critics and defenders of virtue ethics alike. I am not unique in pointing out these flaws. Some of them have been most ably described by those thinkers Solomon names radical proponents of virtue ethics. In the pages to follow, some of the arguments used to criticize features of the virtue ethics movement will be drawn from the work of thinkers who may or may not, depending on what view of virtue ethics is being taken, be regarded as proponents of the virtue ethics movement. The complexities of the first task, those related to specifying what virtue ethics is, necessarily create complexities for the second task, that of critically evaluating the movement. It certainly does not serve a genuine philosophical purpose to avoid tackling these complexities if we are to gain a more thorough understanding of this important movement. It is hoped that this critical appraisal of the movement will yield some worthwhile conclusions not just about virtue ethics, but also about the basic tasks of moral philosophy itself.

Overview of the Project

This book includes both critical and constructive arguments concerning virtue ethics. Regarding the critical position advanced, I intend to argue that contemporary virtue ethics, considered as a unified movement in ethics, does not present an altogether promising alternative to the strategies and preoccupations characteristic of what Anscombe describes as modern moral philosophy, but is rather, in many respects at least, an extension of them. It is important to highlight the qualification employed in this thesis, that it regards contemporary virtue ethics considered as a whole. There is much variety between the parts of this movement, and especially between those virtue-focused thinkers lying outside the virtue ethical mainstream. Both philosophers in the mainstream of virtue ethicists and

those more marginal to the movement provide help for advancing the constructive thesis that a virtue-focused approach is essential to an adequate moral theory.

The critical thesis should not then be taken to imply that the contemporary virtue ethics movement is a worthless philosophical dead end, for, despite some of what I will describe as failures to advance a genuine alternative to modern moral philosophy, contemporary virtue ethics has successfully reintroduced some of the perennial questions essential to a classical and medieval approach to ethics, questions that are comprehensive in scope, putting a concern with one's overall way of life at the center of focus. Moreover, if contemporary virtue ethics as a whole has failed to be a comprehensive alternative to other popular approaches to philosophical ethics, and one of the reasons for its failure is the inadequate manner in which it has recovered the Aristotelian tradition of moral inquiry, then there are still reasons to think that the survival of some form of an Aristotelian approach to ethics is viable, and, moreover, that a discussion of some of the more significant failures of the contemporary virtue ethics project can advance that Aristotelian project in both negative and positive ways. Negatively, by indicating what to avoid. Positively, by pointing out the directions in which philosophical ethics, I will argue, needs to move. In addition to its polemicizing then, this book seeks to indicate new directions to pursue in philosophical ethics, albeit new directions that take their bearings from ancient maps.

This book includes both a description of the virtue ethics movement and a defense of an Aristotelian strategy for moral philosophizing. The initial articulation of this Aristotelian strategy takes place in chapter 1, wherein I examine the competing claims of modern moral philosophy and the contemporary virtue ethics movement. I then examine the origins of the contemporary virtue ethics movement (chapter 2); consider its many varieties (chapter 3); look to the central claims and promises of especially mainstream virtue ethics to provide an adequate alternative to other leading modern moral

theories and the failure to make good on those promises (chapter 4); and then I turn in chapter 5 to a consideration of the ways in which especially the Aristotelian varieties of contemporary virtue ethics have too aggressively censored the Aristotelian project, and add to that claim the further one that Aristotle's approach ought not to be named a virtue ethics. Then in chapters 6, 7, and 8 I argue that not just deontology, consequentialism, and contractualism, but conventional virtue ethics and many of its unconventional proponents as well, have failed to provide as successful a strategy for answering the basic questions of moral philosophy—the answers to which, though taking many varieties, must nevertheless be given—as that provided by a more thoroughgoing Aristotelian approach. Chapter 9 looks to draw a last conclusion from the inquiry.

For a number of reasons, my claim that the Aristotelian approach to moral philosophy provides a more promising alternative to modern moral philosophy, whether in its rule- or its virtue-based varieties, is far more controversial than pointing out the taxonomical difficulties in describing virtue ethics as well as the shortcomings of the movement. If all I have to offer is a set of observations to the effect that contemporary virtue ethics, like the rest of modern moral philosophy, fails to be Aristotelian in the scope of its inquiry and its methodology, and yet nevertheless use Aristotelianism as a normative standard for judging the adequacy of other moral philosophies, then this work could fairly be criticized as a sustained but unreflective argument from authority—even a misguided effort in circular argumentation. But it is not that, as I hope to make clear in summary fashion now and extended argument later.

Though not every adherent of an ethics of virtue advanced in recent years identifies with the Aristotelian project, it is certainly the case that the greater part of them has done so in one way or another. Most, like Foot, Nussbaum, Gabrielle Taylor, or Hursthouse, prefer to refer to their adoption of Aristotle's approach as selective, and so name their approach neo-Aristotelian. Such selection is normally

characterized as a matter of leaving out the rotten bits—like Aristotle's views about women and slaves—and keeping the rest. Because of the prominence of claims to be philosophizing according to the mind of Aristotle, which implies a deference to essential facets of the Aristotelian project, it is significant to my criticism of especially mainstream virtue ethics to point out that there is far more “neo” than “Aristotelian” in their neo-Aristotelianism.²² More significant, however, is it to point out and argue for the position that many of the facets of the Aristotelian project that are typically left out by virtue ethicists are by no means marginal, but rather are at its heart.²³

It is my contention that there is far more Hume, Mill, and Kant at work in the neo-Aristotelianism of many contemporary virtue ethicists than there is Aristotle, and that at the critical points of disagreement mainstream virtue ethicists reveal themselves to be adherents to the modern moral project rather than the Aristotelian. I further argue that Aristotle's project fails to fit into any of the leading mainstream contenders for what is to count as virtue ethics.²⁴ Moreover, Aristotle's project is non-reductionistic in the way that most contemporary virtue ethical projects are reductionistic, insofar as Aristotle does not seek to derive an ethics meant to answer the main concerns at work in the project of modern moral philosophy of justifying claims to right action from universally acceptable intu-

22. To borrow Peter Simpson's expression in “Contemporary Virtue Ethics and Aristotle,” *Review of Metaphysics* 45 (1992): 503–24.

23. The areas of fundamental discontinuity between Aristotelian ethics and mainstream contemporary virtue ethics, to be discussed in chapter 5, include the special concern with moral motivation, the role of consequentialist reasoning, the significance of contemplative wisdom, the logical relation between the virtues and happiness, the significance of practical wisdom, the unity of the virtues, the supposed significance of altruism and benevolence, the significance of friendship, the significance of justice, and the political nature of the human person.

24. Recent works by Daniel C. Russell and Julia Annas are generally Aristotelian in the more robust sense I am using it here. Moreover, as they themselves note in several places in their respective works, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* and *Intelligent Virtue*, their approaches to eudaimonism and their treatments of *phronesis* and the unity of the virtues put them at odds with the mainstream of contemporary virtue ethics.

itions about either virtue or happiness. Aristotle, instead, assumes what many modern moral philosophers take it as their task to prove: the goodness of certain actions or traits of character. It is the openness of Aristotle's ethical project to the riches of his own tradition that makes such a starting point possible, and it is not the case that such openness to the riches of his cultural tradition makes Aristotle's project a cultural relativistic one. Aristotle's ethical project is multifaceted in its principles, and shows itself to be answering a different set of questions than those occupying the efforts of most contemporary virtue ethicists. To be sure, the virtues play a central role in Aristotle's ethics, but not the role of a set of core principles from which all other principles come to be derived. This is in fact one of the advantages of the Aristotelian project, as well as one of the reasons why it should not be characterized as a virtue ethics.

I contend that the main reason for the superiority of the Aristotelian approach to moral philosophy is its ability to do a better job of answering what I argue to be the fundamental background questions of moral philosophy than do its rivals, virtue ethical or otherwise. These questions are: What is a human being? What is the end of human life? By means of what criteria does one measure successful progress toward the end of human life? I argue in chapter 1 that these questions are explicitly the subject of philosophical anthropology, natural philosophy, and natural theology, and that those disciplines are necessarily foundational to a more adequate moral philosophy. This funneling of other disciplines into ethics is possible only in a moral philosophy that is non-reductionistic with respect to its foundational principles. The lack of an insistence to begin with a "pure" moral philosophy, and openness to including the fruit of intersecting disciplines,²⁵ is just one of the many virtues of the Aristotelian ethical project.

25. Consider the contrast between Michael Slote's efforts to generate a pure ethics in *Morals from Motives* and Kwame Anthony Appiah's celebration of the intersections between moral philosophy and the social sciences, especially psychology, in *Experiments in Ethics*.

It is my contention that the Aristotelian ethical project is superior to others because of its ability to address these questions more adequately than do other ethical approaches. I argue that marginal virtue ethics has already done a sufficient job of showing that the leading approaches of modern moral philosophy have failed to answer these questions adequately. My specific concern in these chapters is to argue that mainstream virtue ethics has also failed to do so. There are several stages to this line of argumentation. First, I argue that these are, indeed, questions the answers to which must be either assumed or argued for by any moral philosophy. Those approaches that have sought to ignore these questions have done so at their own peril, for in ignoring them one is destined to provide unexamined answers to them at critical junctures of moral inquiry.

Second, I argue that Aristotle's project is at least free of this error of willfully ignoring questions that must be answered to proceed with a sufficiently well-examined ethical project. These questions, in fact, become thematic in the Aristotelian project, and Aristotle himself brings his project as a whole to be measured against the success with which it brings greater clarity to these foundational concerns. It is because of the central role that these questions have for ethics, including an ethics of virtue, that I have called this work *Before Virtue*.

Third, it is not just that Aristotle explicitly answers these questions that makes his ethical inquiry superior, but I argue further that Aristotle's answers are correct, at least in their general structure and in a way that is left open for further clarifications by later Aristotelians—most notably in this regard, by Aquinas. Arguing for this claim, that Aristotle's answers to these questions are correct, has proven to be the most challenging aspect of my project, and it is at those points that my argumentation is especially indebted to MacIntyre's works.

In making the case for the verity of the general features of Aristotle's ethical inquiry, I argue that it is impossible adequately to answer questions about what a human being is without some account of what a human being is for—a position in line with the relationship Aris-

tote discovers between formal and final causes. I follow MacIntyre in arguing that absent some version of an Aristotelian sort of answer to what the purpose of human life is, one is left with the Nietzschean alternative that life is mere will to power; and further, that on this central question of moral philosophy, and so with respect to mature and competing moral philosophies, the only real alternative is that between Nietzsche and Aristotle. As valuable as MacIntyre's account in *After Virtue* of a sociological teleology is, this account does not go far enough. First, MacIntyre is wrong to dismiss so hastily what he calls Aristotle's "metaphysical biology." I am not in a position to defend at length in this project, even if I could, the principles (as distinct from the details, many of which are known to be false) of Aristotle's biology, though I do in general think its basic principles not without merit, and I provide some reasons for deploying the full array of Aristotelian causality to make sense of human life and action. Moreover, MacIntyre himself has corrected this dismissal with his often overlooked but significant account of the central role of the virtues of acknowledged dependency in *Dependent Rational Animals*. These arguments will help to show, as well, the superiority of an ethical approach that recognizes that we social animals only can flourish in relation with others.

Finally, I argue that Aristotle himself is at his weakest in answering the third fundamental question articulated above, that concerning the criteria for assessing progress toward one's end. It is from one of the most formidable of Aristotle's heirs, Aquinas, that we find more adequate means to address that question. Aquinas's Aristotelian project enables us to fill in those features of Aristotle's account of practical wisdom that remain opaque in his own writings. It is with a broadly conceived Aristotelian account of the workings of right reason, that is to say his account of the natural law, that we find adequately articulated those criteria needed for sufficient assessment of progress toward the goal of life.

These, then, are the main features of my defense of the Aristotelian ground of my project. It is from this ground that I will, indeed,

be judging the successes and failures of the contemporary virtue ethics movement. Not all of that assessment need rely as explicitly on my claims regarding the superiority of the Aristotelian ethical project as do others. For instance, it will not be necessary always to invoke Aristotle to point out that contemporary virtue ethics has not delivered on its central promises. Those central promises, as I take them, are to provide a comprehensive ethical approach that proves a rival to the other moral philosophies in vogue today, including its ability to settle matters of applied ethics; to provide a single unifying account of what virtue is; and to be able to articulate and use as touchstone a more or less universally acceptable tabulation of which character traits are to count as virtues and which as vices. I will, however, need to invoke the Aristotelian approach to argue at length for why virtue ethics does not present a comprehensive approach to ethics, and that it is because of virtue ethics' failure sufficiently to address the foundational questions of ethics that it fails to deliver on the second two promises mentioned above; a failure that, I will argue, Aristotle's approach does not suffer.

The central claims of this book's argumentation are, then, the following: virtue ethics arises from critiques of the modern moral project; mainstream virtue ethics suffers from the very same defects that unconventional virtue ethics has pointed out in modern moral philosophy; mainstream virtue ethics has failed to achieve what it has promised even when evaluated on its own terms; unconventional virtue ethics has failed to provide a constructive path out of the problems of the modern moral project that it has often so successfully described; sufficient recourse to the Aristotelian approach to ethics has not yet been made by mainstream virtue ethicists, despite some claims to the contrary; the Aristotelian approach to ethics is in fact the superior approach to ethics because it is more successful than all rivals, virtue ethical and otherwise, at addressing the foundational questions for ethics; we ought to make recourse to an Aristotelian approach to ethics.