

Please cite the published version. Email me for help:

Nomy_Arpaly@Brown.edu

It Ain't Necessarily So

Nomy Arpaly

To get into heaven
Don't snap for a seven
Live clean and don't have no fault!
Oh, I take this gospel
Whenever it's poss'ble
But with a little grain of salt!

Ira Gershwin

There is a view according to which virtue is the royal road to flourishing. Call it *eudaemonism*. Since I share with Anscombe (1958) the suspicion that it is an anachronism to say that Aristotle is concerned with specifically *moral* virtue, I should rather say that there are several different versions of the view; two important ones can be called *Aristotelian eudaemonism* and *neo-Aristotelian eudaemonism*. While one can doubt that Aristotle, whose ideal person has such excellences as wit and the ability to give good parties, is talking exactly about morality, the neo-Aristotelian eudaemonist (the 'NAE', in what follows) writes in the 20th or the 21st century, and is indeed concerned with moral virtue, whether or not she refers to it as such. The NAE sees herself as offering a competing theory to utilitarianism and Kantianism, and so a theory of the same subject matter: morality. Her virtuous person is disposed to do the right thing (though the right thing may also be the fine or noble thing) and usually, if she comes into some money, she spends it on helping the poor or fighting for human rights rather than on building a grand but tasteful house. Still, the NAE holds that the virtues – her kind of virtues, moral virtues – are the character traits jointly needed to live well. Moral virtue is the secret to flourishing. It is either the case that living virtuously constitutes flourishing or that the flourishing person is someone who lives virtuously and who also has a certain minimum of luck on top of that (is not, for

example, the victim of a terrible disaster).¹ Neo-Aristotelian eudaemonism is both a normative ethical view and a metaethical view, as it gives at least a conditional answer to the question of why one should be moral: because being morally virtuous will give you the good life.

Doubts about the connection between virtue and flourishing are, of course ancient as virtue theory itself. Are there not some flourishing bad people and good people who are not flourishing? In response to the more obvious arguments in this vein, Hursthouse (2000) offers an analogy between virtue and flourishing, on the one hand, and health and healthful habits, on the other. Thus, to the observation that some virtuous people do not flourish Hursthouse has a compelling reply:

Suppose my doctor said, “you would benefit from a regimen in which you gave up smoking, took regular exercise and moderated your drinking.” Her grounds are that this is the way to flourish physically, to have a long, healthy life. If, despite following her advice, I develop lung cancer or heart disease or my liver fails (....) this does not impugn the correction of what she said; I can’t go back to her and say “you were wrong to tell me I should quit smoking etc. – look, it hasn’t worked!”. She and I both know that doing as she says does not guarantee perfect health; nevertheless, if perfect health is what I want, the only thing to do is follow her advice and hope that I shall not be unlucky.

Similarly, the claim is not that the possession of the virtues guarantees that one will flourish. The claim is that they are the only reliable bet – even though it is agreed, I might be unlucky and, precisely because of my virtue, wind up dying early or with my life marred or ruined.²

Hursthouse likewise acknowledges that some vicious people flourish, but deploys her analogy again:

Does my doctor’s right answer to my question about how I should live claim that following the regimen she outlines is necessary for a long healthy life? No, because if it did, it would be readily falsified: the newspapers regularly describe the lives of people who achieved remarkable longevity (...) despite

¹ Some current works in what I call neo-Aristotelianism include: Annas (2011), Badhwar (2014), Bloomfield (2014) and LeBar (2013). Not all virtue ethicists who are inspired in some way by Aristotle hold the view I am talking about (for example, Swanton (2003), does not).

² Hursthouse (2000: 172).

flouting at least one of the requirements that she had laid down (as I write, a splendid old lady in France had clocked up 120 years – and gave up smoking at 115). To claim that the virtues, for the most part, benefit their possessor, enabling her to flourish, is not to claim that virtue is necessary for happiness. It is to claim that no “regimen” will serve one better – no other candidate “regimen” is remotely plausible.³

Hursthouse’s analogy to health has a lot to recommend it. Alongside Hursthouse, I would argue that such a theory of the relation of virtue to flourishing is superior to the main alternative theory open to the NAE, a theory that *identifies* the virtuous life with the flourishing life. This view is subject to a number of serious, well-known objections that are worth reviewing, if only to make salient just how difficult it is to link the virtuous life to the good (flourishing, well-lived) life in a credible manner that differs significantly from the manner Hursthouse favors.

Most strikingly, consider the person who acts virtuously, and genuinely is virtuous, but who also suffers from persecution, torture, illness, abject poverty, tragic losses, and any number of other horrible things. If her luck is bad enough, she is not flourishing, even if she is strong enough to keep living virtuously; to insist otherwise is both radically revisionist and insulting to the suffering virtuous individual. Such a person is not a problem for Hursthouse’s view, since her mere existence does not undermine the thesis that there is an appropriately reliable connection between virtue and flourishing, but the existence of even *one* person who lives virtuously but is not flourishing refutes the view that living virtuously is flourishing.

Hursthouse sharply warns the virtue ethicist to avoid denying the harsh reality of non-flourishing virtuous lives by insisting that even the virtuous person who, say, lost all her children is *really* flourishing, though in a special way that only another virtuous person can discern.⁴ A concept of flourishing that has *no affinity whatsoever* with what people seek under such descriptions as “a happy life,” “a good life,” or “wellbeing” loses its philosophical usefulness. Hursthouse mentions a cartoon she has seen in which a woman having cheerful, drunken fun is looked at by some dour, gloomy-looking, pious character who pronounces her an “unhappy woman.” No particular fan of drunken debauchery herself, Hursthouse

³ Ibid., p. 173.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 182-4.

nonetheless takes the cartoon to be an effective criticism of any account of flourishing that has no place for “the smile factor,” that is, the normal signs and symptoms we associate with a person who is fundamentally happy with her life.⁵

A human who has lost her beloved children is deprived of this syndrome of happiness, and so cannot be living the good life. One can suggest otherwise by claiming, like McDowell (1979), that to a sufficiently virtuous person, even losing one’s children does not have the psychological effects that disasters have on ordinary people. This, however, is a thesis Hursthouse rejects in the same commonsensical way Aristotle rejects that idea that a courageous man will altogether fail to find (heroic) death objectionable.⁶ This would not be the inner life of a reasonable human being, much less a virtuous one. And one might add that, in regard to moral virtue, in particular, the impressiveness of virtue in action involves the virtuous person’s willingness to surrender or risk her wellbeing so as to do the right thing.⁷ This is compatible with Hursthouse’s optimism about virtue being the best “regimen”. It is, after all, credible that she who would guard her wellbeing so jealously as to never accept any loss would live a life of lesser wellbeing. However, the commonsensical claim that the virtuous person is a person who sometimes would relinquish her wellbeing is not compatible with the view that one is immune to any loss of wellbeing so long as one lives virtuously.

Other reasons to reject the identification of flourishing and the virtuous life concern the appropriateness of emotions. As Brad Hooker (1998) has pointed out, compassion is an appropriate response to someone whose life is going badly, but compassion is hardly the appropriate response to hearing that someone is deeply dishonest, unkind or otherwise vicious. It would sound strange if I were to respond to the news that a stranger has been cheating or stealing with “oh, the poor thing!” The news that a stranger has cancer often leads to expressions of sympathy, but the news that a stranger is an asshole (if I may be permitted to add that term to the philosophical lexicon) does not. Yet, if the flourishing life is the virtuous life, then the vicious life is a life going badly, and surely compassion would be apt. And then,

⁵ Ibid., p. 185.

⁶ Ibid., p. 183.

⁷ See Seidman (2005) among others.

there is the complementary truth to that discovered by Hooker. Just as compassion is not an apt response to the news that an acquaintance is a thief, moral disapprobation is not, in general an apt response to the news that an acquaintance is utterly miserable. If told about someone's good character and good deeds and then informed that she is utterly miserable, people say that it is very sad that a good person has to suffer. They do not stare confusedly and say, "Just a moment, I thought you said she was a good person!" They implicitly recognize the space that exists between virtue and flourishing, and theory should follow suit. For these sorts of reasons, it seems that the identification of the virtuous life and the flourishing life will not do for the contemporary NAE. Better to work with Hursthouse, and her view that the virtuous life is the best "regimen" for a person who desires to flourish.

Of course, Hursthouse's theory of the relation of virtue to flourishing can be the best available to a NAE and still be untenable. Showing that it is indeed untenable is the work of the rest of this paper. The conclusion I aim to defend is that Hursthouse, too, fails to offer a credible defense of the claim that the good, happy, well, flourishing life either is or is most effectively achieved through the life of virtue.

It should catch the reader's attention that, when Hursthouse describes the way in which the virtuous life conduces to flourishing, she contrasts the virtuous life's effects on flourishing with the effects of the life of wickedness.⁸ She tells the reader of Nazis who ran away to Argentina, for example.⁹ Similarly, throughout the relevant chapter she brings up the failure to flourish that we (but not the "immoralist") expect from people who are utterly dishonest and selfish, living lives of crime, interested in nothing but money and power, and treating other people as mere objects to be controlled and exploited. To have a viable argument against her view, she says, one needs to find a pattern "that we can all see in life" according to which "evil" regularly triumphs over virtue.¹⁰

However, as Copp and Sobel (2004) point out, the virtuous and the wicked are not the only people about. I would not presume to add up just how many genuinely vicious people can be

⁸ Hursthouse (2000: 163-191).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

said to flourish, and, for the sake of the argument, I am willing to assume that flourishing *villains* are as rare as smoking centenarians. I will also happily grant what seems plausible in general: that serial killers have emotionally wretched lives and that the lives of most common criminals are nothing to aspire to if one seeks happiness. I will also grant that the lives of the purely self-centered, even if they are not criminals, are at least likely to be barren. The word from empirical psychologists of happiness appears to be that people who are satisfied with their lives are very likely to have interests beyond money, power, the physical pleasures, and happiness itself, and this is consistent with our ordinary experiences. But the person of interest for this paper is neither the criminal nor the purely selfish agent. It is the *morally mediocre* person, the person who has *some* measure of virtue but not very much.

The morally mediocre person is most of us, for most of us are people who lie somewhere between being a decent person and being a “jerk”: not many of us are saints or heroes, but not many of us are unrepentant assholes either. The flourishing of the morally mediocre person is the topic that Hursthouse and other NAEs should consider more closely. Does the morally mediocre person have strong reason to become more virtuous, insofar as she is pursuing a life of abundant wellbeing? The person who takes mediocre care of her health has strong reason to cut out those cigarettes she only smokes on the weekends while out drinking, to take the stairs more often and the elevator less often, and so on, insofar as she pursues good health. Is the morally mediocre person who wishes to flourish in the same position? In the spirit of Hursthouse’s challenge to those who think vice is a better route to flourishing than virtue, I would like to pose the following challenge to the NAE: there appears to be a straightforward and reliable path to the good life for many people of mediocre morality. Can the NAE theorist show that this is not so, and that virtue is a generally better bet than the mediocre life, for those who would live well?

Talk of mediocrity immediately brings into view questions about the line between being ordinarily virtuous and being extraordinarily virtuous: a saint or a hero of some sort. Am I asking whether the life of the ordinarily virtuous person is more likely to be a flourishing life than the life of the moral hero? Or am I asking whether the life of the ordinarily virtuous person is no more likely to be a flourishing life than the life of the person who falls a bit too far short of

virtue to be counted as “ordinarily virtuous,” without yet being a life of unqualified vice? To keep the discussion interesting, and avoid certain unnecessary controversies, I will soon focus this paper on the second of these two questions. But which question is asked, and so which challenge is raised, does not matter as much as it might seem at first.

If the relation of moral virtue to flourishing is like the relation of healthful habits to health then one cannot, as far as flourishing goes, be *too* morally virtuous. While one can exercise more than is required for one’s health, in fact so much that it is harmful to one’s health, one does not reliably become less healthy because of habits that are *too perfectly healthy*. Any exercise in excess of what is generally good for one’s health is not too perfectly healthy, or even healthy at all: it is unhealthy, at that point. One can overvalue health, but insofar as what one seeks is health, there is no such thing as excessively acting on healthful habits. Likewise, insofar as one seeks to flourish, there is no such thing as being excessively virtuous, on the Hursthouse-style approach to the relation between virtue and flourishing. Thus, one can challenge the Hursthouse-style NAE by arguing that the life of heroic virtue is not reliably happier than the life of ordinary virtue just as much as one can challenge her by arguing that the life of ordinary virtue is not reliably happier than the life of moral mediocrity.

This line of thought can be sharpened a little further by considering the analogy to health in a little more detail. While it might not change our view of smoking substantially if it turned out that smoking a cigarette once a week is not very harmful, it would change it quite a bit to discover that smoking a cigarette once a week is actually *beneficial* for one’s health, that is, to discover that the most reliably healthy course of action is to smoke cigarettes occasionally. For most NAE theorists, conceding that the moral equivalent of one cigarette a week can contribute to one’s flourishing is conceding too much: it is conceding something like the thesis that, as far as flourishing is concerned, there is such a thing as being *too close* to perfect moral virtue. And actually it is worse than that: it is conceding that what looks like moral heroism or moral sainthood, that is, any substantial disposition toward impressive moral supererogation, is in fact a moral vice. After all, the NAE thinks that being virtuous is the best route to flourishing, not that being virtuous-*but-not-too-virtuous* is.

Thus, the NAE does have a problem if moral sainthood and heroism do not have something more to recommend, in terms of flourishing, than ordinary virtue. However, as people of genuinely heroic or saintly virtue are so rare, and since the precise demands of such virtue are so disputed, it is perhaps unwise to rely too heavily on our suspicions about how happy their lives are likely to be when compared to people of more ordinary levels of kindness, equitableness, and so on. So for the remainder of the paper I will set aside the question of the statistically expected flourishing of the person of heroic or saintly virtue, and focus instead on the putative gap in happy living between the person of virtue and the person of ordinary moral mediocrity.

While I will not try to draw precise lines between moral mediocrity and merely imperfect virtue, I take moral mediocrity to involve having a character conducive to reliably taking morally wrong courses of action on some ordinary occasions, but not conducive to committing truly evil actions on any ordinary occasion. The morally mediocre person is more flexible with the truth than the person of ordinary virtue, but would not conspire to send a business rival to prison; she does not qualify for the virtue of generosity, but she is willing enough to buy a box (just one) of fundraiser cookies now and then and is not particularly likely to leave someone to die after a terrible car accident. And so on.

It is clear that in order to make my point, I should do more than point to cases where a morally mediocre person's less-than-fully-virtuous disposition *happens* to do her good. As per Hursthouse, that one centenarian survived a life of smoking cigarettes does not mean that smoking is good for your health. Similarly, if one's tendency to be late for work causes one to meet a person with whom one will later fall in love and have a relationship that will contribute to one's flourishing, this does not suggest that lack of punctuality leads to flourishing as a matter of course.

It is also not enough to point out cases where a generally virtuous person benefits from a bad action that is *out of character*, as the question here is whether a mediocre *character* can be as or more conducive to flourishing than an ordinarily virtuous one. Care should be taken, though, to remember that not every rare or surprising action is out-of-character for the agent. A normally loyal and faithful woman who cheats her romantic partner after she gets drunk with

an old flame to whom she thought she was no longer attracted (and we can add: her getting drunk is an understandable reaction to enduring a frightening and sleep-deprivation-inducing fire in the hotel both were staying in for a work conference, and so on) may well be acting out of character on that occasion. On the other hand, imagine a sober, well-rested agent who had never cheated on her spouse before but who always maintained that if she finds a more “exciting” match she is entitled to cheat, as “you only live once.” Such an agent does not act out of character when, after many years of finding her spouse “exciting” enough, she meets a more thrillingly romantic person and follows her old conviction by having a fling with her.

So a case that is meant to trouble the Hursthouse-style NAE can make use of rare or occasional, but not out-of-character, morally wrong actions performed by the person of mediocre morality, so long as it is convincing that the rare or occasional actions contribute in a statistically reliable manner (and not through lucky accident) to the flourishing, wellbeing, and general happiness of that person.

Before considering the happily mediocre person, though, look first at three things other than moral virtue that seem tightly connected to the ability to live a good life: concern for one’s own wellbeing, caring about and loving other individuals and having good relationships with them, and the passionate pursuit of things (other than relationships with other people) that one values intrinsically but not in a moral way.

First, consider concern for one’s own wellbeing. At first blush, it seems reasonable that concern for one’s own wellbeing would be non-accidentally connected to wellbeing – and having wellbeing, unless viewed simply as feeling pleasure, is tightly connected to living a good life or flourishing, if not identical to it. On second thought, though, reasonable doubts might arise. It is often suspected that the pursuit of wellbeing is paradoxical, as wellbeing tends to be a side effect of caring about other things, such as one’s fellow human beings and “rewarding” projects or passions. People whose sole aim is wellbeing, it is said, or who would never sacrifice wellbeing for anything, or who spend a great deal of their time thinking about their wellbeing, tend not to be satisfied with their lives. There is surely some truth in all of this. Still, being almost single-mindedly concerned with one’s wellbeing is not the same thing as simply making one’s wellbeing a significant priority. That this is conducive to wellbeing can be

hard to see at first, because most people *are* significantly concerned with their wellbeing, and some are all too concerned, but the advantages of concern for one's wellbeing become evident when one encounters people who do *not* seem committed to their wellbeing, or whose concern for their own wellbeing is weakened by depression or by their culture. Such people stay in situations that make them utterly miserable even if a little bit of effort could help them leave these situations. They let themselves be exploited by family and strangers alike for poor reasons. If lucky enough to be able to choose a career, they might still gravitate to the careers their parents tell them to choose even though they know it means emotional death to them. If you find yourself the friend of such a person and wish her to flourish, you *wish* she would care about herself, that she would give more weight to her own wellbeing in her choices.

Second, the observation that non-selfish relationships with specific people – friendships, romances, parenthood, and the like – are part of what makes a person flourish is an old truism that is too wise and too obvious to be bolstered by any philosophical argument I can conjure.

Third, it is only a little less of a truism that a good life involves having some other pursuits, pursuits that might be artistic or athletic, culinary or mechanical, intellectual or sensuous, but which are both valued by their pursuers for themselves (not for how they make one feel, for instance) and that expand one's world beyond morality, the self, and one's loving relationships. One tries to do one's work as well as possible, or is loyal to one's beloved sports team, or one works to save the cheetah: all of these things and thousands like them can contribute to one's wellbeing if one cares about them intrinsically first. Some philosophers, such as Susan Wolf (2010), would add that the things valued intrinsically should be in fact valuable, but even among these it is not generally held that they need to be *morally* valuable. Many of the pursuits one can think of fulfilling this role in a person's life are related to things that "objective list theories" of wellbeing put on their lists of things required for wellbeing, though I suspect that some are not.¹¹ As Wolf would say, even if no such pursuit is a "necessary element of a life well-lived," a life with none of them can be "strangely barren" (Wolf 1982).

¹¹ For example, see Parfit's list (1984), which includes rational activity, awareness of beauty, and the development of abilities.

It is easy to see that concern for any of these three things can potentially conflict with concern for the moral, right, and good. Conflicts between morality and self interest abound, at least *some* levels of partiality toward one's loved ones are morally impermissible (and occasions for such immoral partiality are not exceedingly rare), and Williams's case of Gaugin deserting his dependents in order to realize himself as a painter (Williams 1982) provides a dramatic illustration of the conflict that can exist between morality and a person's morally neutral pursuits (of course the conflict can come up in much less dramatic cases than that of Gaugin). How demanding one thinks morality is will shape one's view as to how common or significant these three kinds of conflicts are, but no one, not even a NAE, should deny that these conflicts are possible. A Hursthouse-style NAE should and will, however, deny that these conflicts are systemic and deep. Since she holds that the (morally) virtuous life is the most reliable path toward happiness, she holds that conflicts between these three non-moral sources of wellbeing and morality are exceptions to a broad pattern (occasionally, but not reliably, it will turn out that immorally favoring a sibling will better promote one's flourishing; and so on) or that the best bet for flourishing is to be the person who, in any such conflict, chooses morality over the non-moral source of wellbeing.

In the case of loving personal relationships the NAE has something stronger to say – namely, that having such relationships *requires* moral virtue (Hursthouse, 168, 185-91). Friendships and rewarding romantic commitments are especially thought to require honesty, as they involve a great deal of trust, and involve such pleasures as self-disclosure and “being yourself” with another. They also, of course, require the ability to be altruistic, which a person who is not virtuous obviously does not have.

Unfortunately for the argument of the NAE, what is clear is that rewarding personal relationships are incompatible with *wholesale* dishonesty and *pure* selfishness. One does not need to be a radical skeptic on the subject of character in order to admit that it is possible for a person with a decisively mediocre record in matters of honesty and altruism to make exceptions for specific individuals and groups. It might be strange, in the same way that it is strange that a person who eats beef and pork can be selflessly devoted to her dog or cat (even dog and cat

welfare generally), and yet the latter sort of strangeness is such a part of normal life that until recently very few people have noticed it at all. Even downright dubious individuals (who are not actual psychopaths) often have one or two people in their lives for whom they will act unselfishly and to whom they are loyal and substantially honest. This is both obvious to anyone who knows such people personally and is obvious through oblique measures, such as the fact that it is possible to blackmail and coerce such individuals by threatening these special relationships. The reader of this article might well have a friend who has such dishonest and selfish habits as stealing music (downloading it for free off of the internet), twisting and stretching the truth on tax returns, or being late submitting documents by firmly promised deadlines, but the fact that some people have *all* of these three habits and little or no remorse about them has never made a dent in my trusting them to be good friends to me. Likewise, many people who think eating meat is wrong do not for a moment doubt the loyalty, selflessness, and interpersonal honesty of their meat-eating friends (even if these friends also steal music, cheat in a small way on their taxes, and so on). Some particular vices might be incompatible with some relationships (as when sexism ruins a man's ability to have rewarding relationships with women), but all in all I suspect that, even though moral perfection need not be as off-putting as Wolf (1982) takes it to be, some of us would find moral perfection (or, for that matter, bad aesthetic taste) a greater barrier to friendship than many types of moral imperfection.

It is possible, then, to have non-selfish, honest, trusting, and otherwise good personal relationships without being even ordinarily virtuous. And, through parallel sorts of observations, it is just as obviously possible to be a morally mediocre person who has a modicum of concern for her own wellbeing and who intrinsically values a range of other pursuits. This profile seems to fit many of the flourishing people I know, and to be validated by many writers of fiction who concur that such people can and often do live well (sometimes to our delight, and sometimes to our dismay).

For the sake of concreteness, imagine a specific character (with the admission that stories of people who seem happy with their lives are usually boring to read and often a touch annoying as well). I will tell his story at length.

Frank has a great job at a high-tech company. He relishes it, partially because he loves the creative work and because he relishes having a much higher income than the very modest one he grew up on. His job involves some drudgery as well, but Frank is great at weaseling out of the drudgery, delegating and avoiding obligations, and making sure he has an interesting and enjoyable time in the office at the expense of his subordinates and other coworkers. He gets away with it because of his creative gifts, which make him hard to replace, and a touch of personal charm that makes people forgive him more often, and also through a bit of sneakiness. It was typical of him that, the last time it seemed he would have to go to a boring meeting, he called in sick, telling a direct lie, because his young daughter seemed unbearably cute that day, the sun was shining and he realized he hadn't managed to spend enough time with her recently. He proceeded to spend the day playing with her instead. Some people would feel very guilty acting as he does. He wishes his good friend Rajiv wasn't spending so much of his time worrying about fairness and obligations, for instance, but Frank, though he knows not to confess it, just does not feel guilty about this kind of thing. "What the heck, we only live once" is something he thinks fairly regularly, along with "what are they going to do, fire me?" He also knows better than to confess that he subtly helped himself get promoted by implicitly taking some of the credit belonging to his subordinates for his successes.

Frank loves his partner, Felicia, his daughter, and his two close friends. He is as loyal to them as anyone can be loyal to friends, lovers and children, and willing to sacrifice for them. They know they can count on him. As he is richer than his friends, he often helps them a little in times of trouble and spoils them in better times, and has no qualms about using his influence to get them better jobs or carefully giving them small but morally questionable investment or tax-

avoidance tips (it is evident to him that many people in his position do “this kind of thing”). He relishes having the ability to make them happy – he didn’t have that sort of ability when young. His personal life has not always been as good as it has been in the last 15 years. His first marriage, which he regards as the outcome of a mistake made when he was young, was deeply unsatisfying. His wife was a good person and accommodated him in many ways, but they did not have a deep communion of the minds, the physical spark did not last, and he came to the conclusion that she was not smart enough and too conventional for him. For a while he stayed, because he was comfortable and because it was clear that his wife, who seemed happy enough, would react very badly if he was to leave. He was not entirely oblivious to her potential pain, as he is only morally *mediocre*, not evil. He also did not want to waste time and energy on disorder, noisy fights and legal struggles. During this time he took a lot of comfort in exciting extramarital affairs and became an accomplished liar for that purpose. Then he met Felicia, with whom he fell in love. Even when he realized Felicia was the partner of his dreams he was in no rush to get a divorce and create a mess, but she told him she could no longer stay with him if they need to live a lie, and he made his choice without hesitation.

In addition to work and to his loved ones, Frank is passionate about jazz music, which he plays and creates with his friends. That, too, is a priority for him, and that is a bit of a challenge given the kind of schedule he has. Because of the scarcity of time, Frank would never dream of stopping to help a person by the side of the road change a tire, for example, or staying late to help a young co-worker. Who has the time for such things? He gives a bit of money to a local society that promotes jazz music – he nearly cried with joy when one of his idols invited him to play onstage with him – but otherwise, he does not give to charities or causes except when there is a tax deduction to be had. He feels entitled to the money he has earned and almost *required* to catch up on the fun he

did not have as a child and to provide it to his own child. Whatever he doesn't spend on himself and loved ones he saves up: after all, he has some (not too bad, but some) anxieties to quiet about the possibility of being poor again.

Frank refuses to worry about whether any ingredient in his food is morally objectionable. He loves food! It is so dreary to have a long list of dietary restrictions to complicate fun social events with. It's almost as dreary as being the one who preaches to others in favor of such restrictions; he never listens. He refuses to worry about whether his clothes come from sweatshops, and if told that some luxury good he has comes from slave labor he inwardly shrugs. Lately, one of Frank's close friends and some people in his wider circle have been worried about current events and have been suggesting to him that he might join them in fighting the rampant injustice they hear about in the news. Frank is not completely immune to being angry about some types of injustice, but this is exactly why he watches the news as little as possible. His friends tell him one must be ever-vigilant against evil, but they themselves admit that their psychiatrists tell them that constant vigilance is bad for you. One is told that the righteous sleep better, but that is patently false these days: those of his friends who care about causes such as combating racism or climate change seem bleary eyed, pale, tense. One is told that they feel satisfaction, but to him they look frustrated. He wants to sleep well. He doesn't want the "negative energies," as he puts it, that being politically conscious would give him. And since his friends have never known him to be a political person, this preference of his puts very little strain on their relationships.

Not afraid to sound sentimental with his partner, he tells her honestly that he would not trade his life for anyone else's.

My challenge question to the NAE is: does Frank have a clear, compelling reason, *in so far as he wants to flourish*, to change over to living virtuously? Of course, he might have reasons to be more moral that have nothing to do with his flourishing, perhaps reasons to be more moral *at the expense* of his flourishing, but would it be better *for him* if he compromised his “we only live once” policy of prioritizing three things – his wellbeing, the wellbeing of the people he loves, and perfection in software and music – and instead made more room in his heart for the suffering and rights of people he does not love?

It is not clear to me that it would benefit him to press a button to become the sort of person who does not deceive anyone (bosses, his first wife, the government) without excellent cause, who is decent and generous with co-workers, underlings, and strangers, and who feels motivating righteous anger and worry in response to national and global injustice. It is even less clear that it would be worth it for him to put on the gargantuan effort typically required to change one’s character.

It is true that Frank’s flourishing depends on some amount of luck. If, for example, his wife were to die or the computer industry were to collapse he would no longer flourish, and if he were born without talent or charm things might have gone differently. However, Hursthouse acknowledges that luck affects us all. Virtuous people need it too, and it is not at all clear that they need it less than Frank does. We see, for example, that Frank’s more virtuous friends are more susceptible to dips in mental health as a result of political upheaval than he is, and he has grasped economic security just ruthlessly enough to protect himself and those he loves from many changes of fortune. Given this world, in which a person’s luck can change every moment, it is still not clear that Frank should press that button for the sake of his own wellbeing.

It is, of course, possible to bring testimonies of people who risked their lives to save Jewish people from the Nazis, or who have dedicated their lives to adopting and taking care of as many children with difficult-to-meet special needs as they could afford, and who have experienced a level of joyous satisfaction with their lives to the extent that they rarely, if ever, envied anyone, except maybe someone who did even more. However, to turn a Hursthousian question on its head, could *these* people not be the equivalents of the “splendid old lady” who was over a hundred years old before she quit smoking?

If Hursthouse's medical analogy turns the question of the relationship between virtue and flourishing into a quasi-empirical one, the quasi-empirical answer seems to be that we do not have clear evidence that the life of a morally mediocre agent who has loving personal relationships, intrinsically valued projects, and an average level of concern for her own interests is less "healthy" than that of a morally better agent, who has a devotion to the right and the good even to the extent that such a devotion leads to a different direction than devotion to self, loved ones, and pursuits. There might be an argument that the NAE can use, but it needs to go beyond tales of the worse-than-mediocre rotting in their personal hells, and beyond rare cases of happy moral saints.

Here is one such argument. We tell our children to be honest, charitable and so on in the same way that we tell them to eat their vegetables, Hursthouse points out, and when we do, we tell them just that: to be charitable, not just mostly charitable, to be honest, not just generally honest, and so on.¹² Hursthouse relies on the assumption that a parent tends to teach her child with an eye not (mainly) to the parent's own benefit nor (mainly) to the benefit of society at large but rather to the child's benefit. If parents tell their children to be virtuous the way they tell them to eat vegetables, that is a sign that virtue is regarded by them as good *for the child*, as eating her vegetables is.

This is a powerful argument, but three things make me doubt that it ultimately works. One is the fact, mentioned by Copp and Sobel (2004), that when children grow up to be teens the advice they receive is often more mixed. A college student who wants to devote her life, or even just the next few years, to the greater good will often hear objections from her parents, who would prefer that she do something more financially prudent. Just recently, I have overheard the parents of a high school student telling him pompously that he should be good but not "too good," because "sometimes you have to be a little selfish. Sad but true." Ask people who say things like "nice guys finish last" where they picked up their sayings and they will most likely attribute them to their parents.

¹² Hursthouse (2000: 175).

Furthermore, even if we only consider children who are not yet teens, it is easy to see that many parents are quite inconsistent in what they say to their children. Parents tell their children, often through stories and poems, to always be faithful and always be true. However, not a long time has to pass before they also tell the (sometimes confused) child such things as “tell them your dad isn’t home,” or “just tell them you weren’t feeling well.” Parents tell their children to be charitable and self-sacrificing, and yet they will also castigate a child who returns from pre-school having given away his coat to a less fortunate peer. In this context I always remember a story from my own childhood. The story, which was popular among Israeli kindergarten teachers, concerned a little girl walking about in her brand new, immaculate white dress. On the way home, the girl meets a poor, elderly neighbor struggling with a heavy bag of coal. She helps him, which results in dark stains on the beautiful dress. When she sees the stains, the girl is terrified that her parents will be furious with her for having made her dress dirty. At that point, an angel from heaven turns the stains of coal into shining gold. It was quite obvious to the children listening to the story that the gold was not simply a reward for the child – chocolate would have served that purpose better – but a way to protect her from her parents, who *of course* would have otherwise screamed their heads off at her for having stained the dress. There is no question that more parents would have penalized the girl for staining the dress than would have praised her for helping the poor man. I suspect that if the child of natural virtue were to say something along the lines of “but you said it’s good to help the poor,” most decent parents would soften up, but would still say something like, “It’s complicated. You’ll understand it when you grow up. Don’t do it again, OK?”

Furthermore, the fact that parents tell their children to always be good (or true, or kind) does not imply that, given a button to press that would make the child a morally perfect (or even clearly above-average) person, they would confidently press it. Ordinary parental lecturing takes place within a context, a context in which everyone knows that children will *not* in fact act as perfectly as their parents tell them to act but, *at the very best*, will act better following the lecturing than they would have acted if it weren’t for it. Children imitate a lot more than they obey, and the average mother or father is a morally average person and thus, of course, does not model perfect virtue. In short, the preaching parent is not really at any risk of

creating a saint, and preaching perfect virtue is done not with the hope that it will make the child perfectly virtuous but rather merely with the hope that it will make her more virtuous than otherwise, or the fear that without it she will become a villain. What parents would do if they were to be given a magic button that they could press to make their child morally perfect is one of these questions too removed from ordinary life to answer with any confidence, but I would doubt that it would be as popular as a button would be who would grant the child lifelong physical health, a stable, happy marriage, and skills that guarantee a good living.

Ethicists and metaethicists have always been fascinated by the figure of the amoralist. I agree the amoralist and the somewhat less frightening “wicked” person are fascinating figures and it is worthwhile to think about them in the various ways philosophers do. However, when people who are not metaethicists, in real life and in fiction, ask why one must be moral, it is only rarely because they are considering becoming serial killers or even conscienceless sharks on Wall Street. More often they wonder why they shouldn’t be doing those less-than-virtuous things that one is sometimes told everyone does.¹³ Whether one is considering the view that moral virtue brings flourishing or another view according to which rationality and morality are tightly related, the morally mediocre can be as interesting and challenging as the amoralist and the wicked person can be.

¹³ The non-virtuous non-amoralist is rarely discussed by ethicists – Svavarsdottir (1999) is an exception. In the context of virtue, Slote (1992) and Vogler (2002) come close to the topic.

References

- Annas, J. 2011. *Intelligent Virtue*. Oxford University Press.
- Anscombe, G. E. M. 1958. Modern Moral Philosophy. *Philosophy* 33(124): 1 - 19.
- Badhwar, N. K. 2014. *Well-Being: Happiness in a Worthwhile Life*. Oxford University Press.
- Bloomfield, P. 2014. *The Virtues of Happiness: A Theory of the Good Life*. Oxford University Press.
- Copp, D. and D. Sobel. 2004. Morality and Virtue: An Assessment of Some Recent Work in Virtue Ethics. *Ethics* 114(3): 514-554.
- Hooker, B. 1998. Does Moral Virtue Constitute a Benefit to the Agent? In R. Crisp, ed. *How Should One Live: Essays on the Virtues*. Oxford University Press.
- Hursthouse, R. 2000. *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford University Press.
- LeBar, M. 2013. *The Value of Living Well*. Oxford University Press.
- McDowell, J. 1979. Virtue and Reason. *The Monist* 62(3): 331-350.
- Parfit, D. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford University Press.
- Seidman, J. 2005. Two Sides of 'Silencing'. *Philosophical Quarterly* 55(218): 68 – 77.
- Slote, M. 1992. *From Morality to Virtue*. Oxford University Press.
- Svavarsdottir, S. 1999. Moral Cognitivism and Motivation. *Philosophical Review* 108(2): 161-219.
- Swanton, C. 2003. *Virtue Ethics: a Pluralistic View*. Oxford University Press.
- Vogler, C. 2002. *Reasonably Vicious*. Harvard University Press.
- Williams, B. 1982. *Moral Luck*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wolf, S. 1982. Moral Saints. *The Journal of Philosophy* 79(8): 419-439.
- Wolf, S. 2010. *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. Princeton University Press.