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## Procrastination as Vice

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Philosophers often give procrastination an anemic description—a preference, a conflict, a case of irrationality. Presumably, this is done in order to make it susceptible to analysis. But if one makes use of ethical theory, particularly one with an accompanying account of moral psychology, no arid depiction of procrastination is necessary. An ethical theory that is robust enough—such as traditional virtue ethics—can meet procrastination head on, unhindered by its complex emotionality and opaque intentionality. It can then place it alongside similarly complex behavior, comparing and contrasting until we have some account of the darker alleyways of our nature and the limits of our self-control.

That the term *vice* is out of favor gives us no reason to deny that procrastination is a moral phenomenon. In this chapter, I want to demonstrate that the determinations a completed ethical theory must offer—what humans are capable of, likely to do, and ought to do—are the metrics necessary for any attempt to assess procrastination in a manner that answers the questions we have. Its measure taken, we will see that procrastination can, so to speak, return the favor to ethical theory by drawing out its resources and letting us consider how helpful ethical theory can be if applied.

As normal an event as procrastination is, we do not seem to understand it. Writers on the topic frequently offer earnest and ad hoc accounts of their own, as if there are no resources available but their hunches. For instance, I have read elaborately couched conclusions according to which writer's block is caused by a blank page being terrifying.<sup>1</sup> Ethical theory is

1. As an example of description standing in for explanation, the procrastination researcher Piers Steel describes the intractable procrastination of popular author Douglas Adams, who needed editors to lock him in a room and wait outside in order for him to finish writing. As Steel writes (in "Case Studies"), "The major reason for Adams' chronic delaying appears to be task aversiveness. Though he was an able writer and extremely creative, he found putting pen to paper unpleasant. He put it off as long as possible, and then produced in a frantic rush when eventually necessary. With his wealth from the earlier bestsellers, it became increasingly less necessary and these delays stretched into years."

put in a good light when it helps us to clarify what we find confusing in our very own behavior. And though we hardly ever think we need an ethical theory to tell us that something is wrong, in the case of procrastination, some ethical theories guide us to gentler judgments. Procrastination might not be, technically speaking, a vice, showing that ethical theorizing need not always increase moralism.

After all, ethical theory is not just a list of judgments or merely an additional force with which to condemn behavior. Ethical theories give a means for clarifying our views on behaviors by considering them systematically and in relation to particular takes on our psychology. For example, in this chapter, I consider three different ethical theories on procrastination, each with its own account of what has gone wrong when we find ourselves putting off a task. Each of these theories makes use of *vice* in a theoretical way, and I hope the example of this gives us a new appreciation for the ability of the term *vice* to refer to more than the charmingly roguish habits we associate it with outside of ethical theory (habits that typically fail to optimize decorum or health by the same degree to which they curtail hypocrisy).

But we have two challenges before us: pinning down vice and pinning down procrastination. Although the proper relationship between psychological research and philosophical analysis is a vexed one, and, to my mind, we easily get the priority wrong, in the case of procrastination, it seems to me that the psychologists ought to set the agenda for philosophers to follow.

## WHAT IS PROCRASTINATION? THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DATA

Philosophers inherit established problems—often fascinating ones, such as the nature of rationality or will—and aspects of procrastination can be relevant to these. But emphasizing only an element of procrastination with a squeaky-clean definition (“putting unavoidable things off”) can fail to illuminate the costs and experience of procrastination. It is not always a paper turned in a day late. The rates of medical noncompliance, astonishingly high, have been connected to procrastination.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it is not as if the costs of procrastination are clear in the short term. One study suggests that most damage done by chronic procrastination comes only in midcareer, by which time procrastinators have developed a dispirited detachment to their chosen professions.<sup>3</sup> The impulsivity, mindlessness, and pessimism psychologists find associated with regular procrastinators suggest a relationship between more established and studied behavior disorders

2. Levy, “Failure to Refill Prescriptions.”

3. Dweck, “Motivational Processes.”

(such as impulsive eating). The procrastinator is also in bad company, as narcissists and sociopaths procrastinate frequently.<sup>4</sup> These features of procrastination do not readily occur to us unaided.

Procrastination is a rather opaque phenomenon, and philosophers' intuitions are likely unreliable. Joseph Ferrari has gathered data on how confusing procrastination can be to both the subject and the observer.<sup>5</sup> Procrastinators often report that they do not know what it is they are avoiding. And even longtime researchers such as Ferrari have found their results surprising and have had their studied assumptions upset.<sup>6</sup> It is an incredibly productive time for psychologists investigating procrastination.

I despair of the productivity of empirical researchers working on happiness and ethics when we do not even have agreement on what these phenomena are. But in the case of procrastination, the cart is not before the horse, because there is little dispute over what is under study. Daniel Boice's extensive research into procrastination (making great use of academics as subjects) found that observed subjects readily demonstrate procrastination, and both subject and observer agree that it has happened.<sup>7</sup> Unlike in the study of happiness or ethics, the standards for operationalization can be met, and Gopal Sreenivasan has generated a helpful list of these. According to Sreenivasan, there are three minimum characteristics a behavioral measure would have to include in order to properly operationalize a given trait: "each behavioral measure must specify a response that represents a central or paradigm case of what that trait requires; the concrete situation each specifies must not have any features that defeat the reason on account of which that trait requires the response in question; and the subject and the observer must agree on these characterizations of the specified responses and situations."<sup>8</sup>

Procrastination researchers seem to have some consensus about the paradigm case of the trait. Everyone can be said to procrastinate about some things, but regular procrastinators can be distinguished from the rest of us by displaying the following patterns during everyday work activities:

1. Busyness and impulsive rushing.
2. A product orientation (an articulated focus on the number of papers published or pages done), as opposed to a process orientation.

4. Boice, *Procrastination and Blocking*.

5. Ferrari and Patel, "Social Comparisons."

6. As one example, Ferrari's work (with Johnson and McCowen) in 1995, *Procrastination and Task Avoidance*, was more optimistic about potential benefits of procrastination than his work is now. Root explanations of cause are still at stake. Ferrari used to be sympathetic to the idea that procrastination is exacerbated by modern trends, but his own research contradicts that assumption. In other words, we are in need of data before we can pin down this subject.

7. Boice, *Procrastination and Blocking*.

8. Sreenivasan, "Errors about Errors," 61–62.

3. Discernible anxiety (fidgeting, tense facial expressions, ease of distraction).
4. Unrealistic beliefs stated spontaneously about how high-priority work will get done.
5. Hostile attitudes toward pressures for orderliness and timeliness.
6. Suboptimal outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

Since I have no intention of reducing the phenomenon to something else, any omissions or oversimplifications are not intentional. I am not aiming to tinker with the results of empirical research on procrastination. They ought to come first and then set the philosophers' agenda.

Studies on procrastination at work have led psychologists to conclude that it is a matter of poor work habits exacerbated by underlying, unrealistic attitudes toward work. Misleading self-conceptions are also involved, and these include perfectionistic expectations. These habits and attitudes are not resistant to changes in situations, and there are many external ways to discourage procrastination. On the other hand, the procrastinator can reinforce her own behavior by procrastinating. A cruel cycle exists: procrastinators are inefficient in doing their work, they make unrealistic plans in regard to work, and they are so cowed by perfectionist pressures that they become incapable of incorporating advice or feedback into their future behavior.<sup>10</sup> Procrastinators experience an "aftermath of disappointment, lowered self-confidence, depression and uncertainty about their abilities."<sup>11</sup>

One further interesting finding is that procrastination and "blocking" (as in writer's block) are too intimately connected to clearly distinguish from each other. Blocking is a "nervous slowing of activity, self-conscious narrowing of scope, and even immobilization."<sup>12</sup> This becomes significant because, if we are considering the impact of procrastination on efficiency, it means we have to recognize that it might keep us from accomplishing things altogether. (We may not just write papers in a rush, but neither will we get to rehab.) If "procrastination" can keep us from accomplishing things altogether, we may put less stock in the observation that procrastinators do "suboptimal" work (less work than average, work rendered

9. Boice, *Procrastination and Blocking*, 60. Boice makes it clear that we should not accept the things procrastinators say—the best work coming when under pressure, creative genius coming from frenzy. In a long-term study (six years) of the productivity of 104 new professors, some identified as regular procrastinators (by the measures listed above) and others identified as "efficient" nonprocrastinators, the procrastinators being engaged in what Boice termed "binge writing." They produced less and less successful work (it was not published as often) as "regular writers" (whom he termed "efficient" nonprocrastinators). He concludes that even those who profess to work best under pressure actually do not. The results are marked by the impulsive rushing (resulting in typos) that, along with such rationalization, is part of the phenomenon of procrastination.

10. Dweck, "Motivational Processes."

11. Boice, *Procrastination and Blocking*, 131.

12. Boice, *Procrastination and Blocking*, xii.

sloppy by rushing, and so forth). The determination that some work is “suboptimal” seems dependent on the possibility that better work could have been done. But what about the possibility that it was going to be suboptimal work or nothing at all? We will consider the possibility that procrastination hinders outcomes, but we have further reasons for rejecting the idea that this should be the locus of a moral evaluation.

Finally, though I do not mean to suggest that data I am not mentioning are irrelevant, I would like to highlight that Ferrari has found that there are different types of procrastinators and that they procrastinate for different types of reasons. These include “arousal types,” who experience a “euphoric rush” by putting off their work until it is too late; “avoiders,” who seem to have issues of self-esteem that they are confirming by putting off needed tasks and who also are very concerned with the opinions of others (they promote the idea that they did not have time rather than that they were not up to a task); and “decisional procrastinators,” who procrastinate because they cannot make up their minds. This is said to be related to being kept from responsibility for any outcome.<sup>13</sup>

At this point, what contribution a philosopher can make might be in question. I would like to suggest that the question of whether procrastination is immoral is one that even nontheorists have. Furthermore, addressing this question will situate the phenomenon in ways that psychological research cannot (because ethics is not yet operationalizable), giving us a tentative, revisable, but comprehensive account of the role procrastination plays in our lives. Because of the promise of this, I suggest a two-step approach to a descriptive account of procrastination by first reading off psychological research and then categorizing these findings according to the moral psychology of ethical theory.

## VICE

If you search for “Is procrastination a sin?” online, you find the question asked earnestly on religious discussion boards. One woman carefully describes her habit of leaving packing until the last minute, discusses her husband’s growing disdain for her habit, and asks, “Is what I am doing a sin?” She ends ruefully, “Whether it is or not, it feels terrible.” The question seems very sincere, and one reason for this may be that religious teachings do not send the message we get from our culture about putting things off; as I will explain, there is a clash between Ben Franklin’s aphorisms and biblical parables. Procrastination is also difficult to assess for ourselves, because it involves not meeting our own expectations, so the issue is whether our own standards are the right ones. We are typically not very self-aware of standards we have already internalized.

13. Ferrari and Dovidio, “Examining Behavioral Processes.”

Let us get several ways of determining vice—namely, feeling regret, guilt, or anxiety about behavior—off the table of well-justified approaches. Regret is, of course, the most immediate and most common means of generating the label of vice (or whatever its modern verbal equivalent). Is procrastination something its practitioners find regrettable? Clearly, it is, but to call it vice for this reason is far too costly. If any behavior we regret made it vice, we have failed to distinguish between the behaviors that are actually immoral and those that are not. Regret is not tied to only moral concerns, nor do many of us think our moral compasses are such that they are always true. Listen to friends' confessions of their misdeeds, and you will realize how unduly hard we can be on ourselves. This is why the intense guilt and anxiety involved in procrastination is also not proper evidence for it being a vice.<sup>14</sup> And therein lies the role of ethical theory, which is, ideally, a repository for reflective and consistent assessments of behavior such as procrastination. But ethical theories can be wrong, too—particularly so, I suggest below, if they attempt to tie virtue to worldly achievement. I want to show, rather, that ethical theories that claim that morality is a matter of efficiency or worldly achievement are unsound. Procrastination cannot be a vice merely because it keeps us from getting things done.

### Vice and Outcomes

Let us consider what I will call the Poor Richard theory of virtue, which has been an influential touchstone for our shared ethics, even if—as some recent researchers suggest—Ben Franklin did his moralizing mostly in jest.<sup>15</sup> The Poor Richard account of virtue readily condemns procrastination, perhaps in more straightforward a manner than any other. The aphorisms we have memorized about prioritizing work are likely his. In his *Autobiography*, Franklin lists 13 virtues, and among them is industry, which requires that you “lose no time, be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary action.”<sup>16</sup> He also mentions a prayer he used to recite for inspiration, which includes the line “The precept of Order requiring that *every part of my business should have its allotted time*,” alongside the less specific exhortations to goodness. And, of course, Franklin notoriously reports that as a young man, he devised a scheme by which he would chart his progress toward his virtue “for the twenty-four hours of a natural day.”<sup>17</sup>

14. Even though she emphasizes the crucial role of emotion in moral judgment, Martha Nussbaum, in *Hiding from Humanity*, has careful arguments regarding how emotions must be vetted before constituting the justification of a moral wrong.

15. Weinberger, *Ben Franklin Unmasked*.

16. Franklin, *Autobiography*, 38.

17. Franklin, *Autobiography*, 39.

Max Weber, of course, looked to Franklin's passages when he was writing about the Protestant work ethic, because he could not find a clear commitment to this value system in Presbyterian sermons.<sup>18</sup> Sloth is certainly not promoted, of course. But the significant task you can put off is not a workaday one; procrastination, as discussed by Christian theologians, including Jonathon Edwards in his famous sermon on the topic, concerns putting off redemption. The temptations that must be resisted can be the very duties Franklin's aphorisms take as the most serious. Edwards describes putting too much stock in the importance of "tomorrow" as taking too much pleasure and pride, "boasting" in a worldly existence.<sup>19</sup> The takes are nearly opposite. (Of course, this is why Weber deserves so much credit for engineering his elaborate thesis.<sup>20</sup>)

Poor Richard's virtue ethic assumes that the good guy is the one who succeeds in life, and the bad guy is kept down. It also assumes, without any commitment to doing one's worldly work with a focus on godly duty, that this work is ethically salubrious. Is that where we get the idea that long hours of work will straighten out teenagers? Again, no religious view is this simplistic. Bad people do plenty well in life. You cannot keep the vicious from worldly success. No philosophical theory can take mere worldly accomplishments to be some sort of evidence of virtue or vice.

Maybe a second example will also help. Ayn Rand shares with Franklin's ethic the idea that success in life is tied to moral ability: the more virtuous you are, the wealthier you will become in the market.<sup>21</sup> But she is more consistent than Poor Richard; she writes that hers is a radical dismissal of conventional morality. She does not advocate for kindness or sharing, not even honesty, in the way that Poor Richard does. Of course, even though she acknowledges the costs of tying virtue to worldly success—for one, you have to uproot assumptions about conventional virtue—neither can she maintain the connection she wants. What destroys

18. It cannot be found in the Bible, either—it is almost amusing to note how scant are the passages that pro-industry Christians find to promote their more Franklinesque recommendations. Most of the examples from the Bible decry the person who avoids the "dinner party invitation" in order to do his workaday duties (Luke 14:15–24). Support for the idea that one should be efficient must be found in rather unexciting recommendations such as this one, from Proverbs 10:5: "He that gathereth in the summer is a wise son: but he that sleepeth in harvest, is a son that causeth shame."

19. From Edwards "Procrastination": "So, on the other hand, if we were certain that we should not live another day, some things would be our duty today, which now are not so. As for instance, it would be proper for us to spend our time in giving our dying counsels, and in setting our houses in order. If it were revealed to us, that we should die before tomorrow morning, we ought to look upon it as a call of God to us, to spend the short remainder of our lives in those things which immediately concern our departure, more than otherwise it would be our duty to do."

20. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

21. Rand, "What Is Capitalism?"

her proposal is the fact that dedicated followers of her view do not become wealthy, and those who do become wealthy, in ways she admires, espouse contrary views to her own.

Through this brief discussion, I hope to have demonstrated that standards of worldly success do not coincide with standards of internal or psychological success. There is no regularly occurring, reliable connection between these. For this reason, attributing vice to people because they do not achieve something in the external world is a mistake. We have far more sound accounts of vice and virtue available; they are more unified because they emphasize internal standards.

But is there no way to incorporate a person's inefficiency into a moral evaluation of a person's character in a way that avoids the above mistakes? Surely, there are ways to blame people for being less productive, less practically efficacious, than they themselves might be otherwise. I think there are currently two ways in which this is being done. I want to cast them aside as well and make sure to distinguish them from what traditional virtue ethicists do.

I will be brief, because I simply want to express deep skepticism about the following. One of these is the attempt (usually not intentional) to equate an account of objective rationality with morality. If the reader has even a brief acquaintance with traditional virtue ethics, she will recall the equation of prudence with virtue. But this is a very loaded, fully normative account of prudence—an ethicists' account for ethical purposes—that is offered. It is based on a stated and rejectable standard, which itself depends on the accuracy of an account of moral psychology. Virtue ethicists' accounts of prudence are not, despite all-too-frequent claims to the contrary, what we take rationality to be today. (We should perhaps call it moral prudence to make the distinction clear.) And just because, say, we determine in some case that underproductivity is irrational, this does not translate into a moral judgment about a person. Our moral heroes were, in some arenas, incredibly unproductive. You would have to uproot thousands of years of consistent takes on moral goodness to claim that good people are also successful by worldly standards. I think the many examples of virtuous people who give up their lives or livelihoods for a beloved cause capture my point succinctly and completely.

Yet we slip into equating forms of rational behavior (not overeating) with moral behavior all the time. The first examples given by students in my ethics classes when I ask about bad behavior involve eating junk food, not being physically active, not doing their homework well enough. I do not, of course, mean to limit our evaluations, but I want to make a case for having distinctly moral evaluations available. Virtue is not an all-encompassing standard. It cannot, if it is presented meaningfully, encompass all possibly worthy goals. The traditional accounts of virtue are limited in all sorts of ways—they are not very good at promoting charity, for example. But limits on what the accounts prescribe can be a good thing. We might realize this if we reflect on how wrong it is to assume



that overweight people are immoral. We might recommend both, but everyday prudence and morality do not simply overlap.

A second tactic is engaged in more consciously and can be found in many contemporary attempts to develop a virtue ethic (environmental virtue ethicists can be recognized by this assumption): certain types of behavior bring about less meaning, ergo they are vices. Or, perhaps, meaning comes from value, vice negates value, and virtue promotes it, ergo virtue is justified. This takes a shortcut that a virtue ethic should not take. My inelegant response to this type of move, one that would simply assert that procrastination is unseemly in a life, is to demand proof that procrastination, or any other possible vice, takes the meaning in question away. If you want to tell me that virtue has more value than vice, fine—prove it. We are certainly repulsed by all sorts of behaviors; Susan Wolf includes a list of the ones that repulse her in her work on the meaning of life.<sup>22</sup> Couch potatoes, for example, have less meaningful lives, she says: “for me, the idea of a meaningless life is most clearly and effectively embodied in the image of a person who spends day after day, or night after night, in front of a television set, drinking beer and watching situation comedies.”<sup>23</sup> (In my class, we always respond to this by imagining Wolf trying to get the poor example’s mother to agree that her son’s life was of diminished value.) Meaning is a bizarre and untenable metric; we cannot simply assert, because of our attitudes toward it, that procrastination is immoral.

I hope the accounts of virtue ethics that I am going to present provide a further reason not to take the above approaches and that their explanations of vice seem far more justified. If they do, it will be because each relies on a stated moral psychology. This is not just something they provide in support of their ethical takes; rather, it is the source of their ethical takes. Consider Aristotle on vice: categorizing procrastination according to Aristotelian standards is, in the sense I explained at the start, extremely useful in clarifying Aristotle’s ethical account itself. How many oblique and uselessly general accounts of Aristotelian virtue are available? And what do they help settle? There are fine-grained distinctions available to the virtue ethicist, and classifying modern behavior is the means to getting at these. The ancient categorization is too often taken as proclamation. (Wit comes in a mean!) If virtue ethics is presented as no more than a series of positions Aristotle took, it will never be capable of serving as a viable option among today’s ethical theories.

### Aristotelian Vice and Procrastination

The depiction of procrastination beginning to emerge from empirical studies has these features that traditional virtue ethics is capable of handling:

22. Wolf, “Meanings of Lives,” 62–73.

23. Wolf, “Meanings of Lives,” 65.

- The behavior has costs, perhaps in terms of productivity (though, again, we can quibble with the measures) and anxiety.
- We do not have direct control over our procrastination.
- It involves false beliefs. (In one Boice study<sup>24</sup> false beliefs were discovered regarding work and work habits; when it comes to other areas of life, the false beliefs might be about impacts on our health and the like.)
- These false beliefs are always accompanied by emotion (for example, anger at those thought to be imposing the work being avoided).
- Procrastinators have different reasons for procrastinating (à la Ferrari).

I want to argue that, because of the above features of procrastination, particularly the role of emotion and our lack of direct control, Aristotle would not consider procrastination to be a vice. He would, I suggest, classify procrastination as *akratic*—which can be thought of as weakness of will, but, following Aristotle’s lead, we would do better to leave will out of this. The difference between laziness, an Aristotelian vice, and procrastination is that laziness is not *akratic*. The way to distinguish the two, according to Aristotle, is that the vicious person has committed consciously to holding something like laziness as a goal; a vice is done in accordance with choice. But a procrastinator has not made this type of conscious choice. No one wants to be a procrastinator. It does not matter that we can be said to want to procrastinate; choice requires a process, which we will get to in a moment. Although no one wants to be a procrastinator, people sometimes do attest to the good of being lazy. It is not by accident that a vicious person lazes about; it is not that the person is acting at odds with his stated goals or intentions.<sup>25</sup>

The vicious, according to Aristotle, have consciously adopted the wrong norms. For a person with the vice of laziness, it might be “Why should I have to work? Others should, but I should not have to work.” The vicious pursue bodily pleasure because they have judged it to be more important than other goals (especially altruistic ones). Thus, they choose pleasure as a good; indeed, their own satisfaction might be their most important good. This is not to suggest that they achieve the pleasure they are after, of course. Virtue ethics explains that this is one of the cruel ironies involved in going after pleasure directly. The *akratic* also aim for pleasure, bodily pleasure in particular, but they do so contrary to their conception of the good. To envision the contrast, picture the vice-ridden “procrastinator” consciously scheming to take credit for participating in a work assignment he avoids. The *akratic* procrastinator will feel very bad about having spent three evenings watching television while putting off her assigned share. She will feel very bad about not having done her fair share well (and if she

24. Boice, “Quick Starters.”

25. Rocochnick, “Aristotle’s Account.”

is a typical procrastinator, she might, in fact, feel very bad about not doing more than her fair share very well).

## TRADITIONAL VIRTUE

According to the Aristotelian and Stoic accounts of virtue ethics, our pleasures change as we match norms that we endorse (culled from society or what have you) with sufficient motivation, and this is a good thing, because the pleasures we begin with—those, say, of a seven- or a 17-year-old—eventually result in unhappiness. This process, once I sketch it, will also explain why procrastination cannot be directly controlled, even according to virtue-ethics accounts of moral psychology that are not Aristotelian. At the level of generality with which I am presenting this account (in particular, I am leaving out the various takes on criteria for belief and the process of belief formation), it applies to the Aristotelian, Stoic, and (for the most part) Epicurean accounts of virtue ethics.

Let us begin by depicting someone who has not yet taken on the project of developing virtue. This person might do much to help others while being rather unaware that her behavior falls under this category. And certainly, this person has deep commitments to particular people, as well as to helping these people. This person has also, certainly, heard a host of ideas about helping behavior, such as “good people help others.” But she might notice that people who help a lot get taken advantage of, have ulterior motives, and so on. She might, of course, at the same time have helpful people held up as heroes. Perhaps she has had opportunities to see such heroes in action and has been duly affected by the experience. Our typical situation, says a traditional virtue ethic, is one where we are engaged in projects and have commitments we have not analyzed and where we can also articulate a lot of unsorted, and perhaps even contradictory, norms about behavior. This is the material we work with. It is not a wholesale transformation that we can effect at once. Virtue does not require that we do more than this piecemeal work.

Traditional virtue ethics *recommends*, though, that we do this piecemeal work; we would do well to take the time to analyze both what we are doing and whether what we are doing matches norms to which we ought to be committed. This is a time-consuming project, to say the least. One would have to be acutely conscious of taking it on; think of the effort involved in properly assessing whether one is, in fact, a good friend (let alone a generally helpful person).

Data concerning our psychological tendencies would certainly be useful (such as whether our behavior is surprisingly susceptible to changes in situations). It is also a process we would benefit from conducting along with others, and they would hardly need to be experts in morality. If they merely point out our shortcomings or laugh at our phony self-assertions, this might still prove to be invaluable help. Also, the process depends on

a great deal of trial and error. We might experiment with helping others more or less. We might try to identify with different notions of a helpful person. Norms will be assessed against our behavior (“I tried not helping others, and it didn’t work out”) and our behavior assessed against our norms (“I help my kids with homework on occasion, but I guess I could do more; a good parent would”). The process of attempting to find a match among these will result, says a traditional virtue ethic, in some revision of our behaviors and the norms to which we are consciously committed.

So, this is what happens when we decide to help others by volunteering as a tutor. We have matched the norm “help others in need” with some behavior that fits it. A mismatch would have nagged at us (“I really think people in general should help others, by tutoring children, for example, but I don’t think I should have to do this”). A match, if made, suggests that we are not feeling confused about what we are doing. When there is no match, we feel the pull of contraries. Sometimes, these are two recognized norms that are in conflict (“My mother-in-law is awful! Awful people do not deserve my time!” and “People who cannot get along with their families have the wrong priorities”). And at other times, it is that you are not feeling motivated to do what you think you ought (“I know I should donate more of my time”).

Another way to make this description familiar is to think of times when we do the right thing without a thought. Suppose that you run after a person who has dropped his wallet, and without a thought, you grab it and return it. A traditional virtue ethic predicts that this behavior was supported by norms so well endorsed by you as to be identifiable, easy to speak about, and easy to explain. (“Why did you return my wallet?” “Well, it was yours. You need it.”) And this is everyday evidence for the boldest suggestion in a traditional virtue ethic: doing the right thing can become second nature.

As the story goes, if we analyze and revise our beliefs and behavior, we can have an impact on our psychology. (We can see this on a small scale if, for instance, we shoplifted as teenagers yet could not possibly do so as adults.) To the degree that the result of engaging in this process is a new psychological state, this state—realized or not—is part of the justification and completion of a theory, one that recommends that we go about analyzing our behavior as just described.

## PROCRASTINATION ACCORDING TO VIRTUE ETHICS

### Aristotle and Procrastination

Again, psychologists have determined that we do not have direct control over procrastination and that procrastination involves emotion, aspects that Aristotle’s account can explain. These are the very features of behavior

that, according to Aristotle, cannot be said to be “chosen.” This is also the type of behavior that can never become fully automated. Procrastination will never become a person’s “second nature” (a very apt phrase for describing Aristotle’s view), for it is too upsetting an experience.

What about the idea that procrastinating behavior has costs, perhaps in terms of productivity and anxiety? Can Aristotle account for this? He does explain how an agent comes to accept costs like these; he blames confusion about value. And, as just mentioned, his account also predicts that procrastination will be both opaque and emotional. An advantage to Aristotle’s approach over descriptions of procrastination as preference reversal or some form of discounting is that Aristotle predicts the emotional turmoil and the reinforcing cycle that damage a person’s self-image.

What about the feature of procrastination by which it involves false beliefs? Psychologists have pinpointed the types of beliefs procrastinators have in far more detail than I have suggested here, but this is an element of the psychological account of procrastination that Aristotle has some success in accounting for, as long as the beliefs are those about work habits. For procrastination to remain a less-than-immoral aspect of character, it cannot involve false beliefs about expectations for yourself. Procrastination, less resilient than vice, if it is a case of *akrasia*, has to be a matter of being confused about means, not ends. So, the false beliefs, in his interpretation, are about means. He can account for the beliefs that encourage the “poor work habits,” the “magical thinking” that encourages students to believe they can write a final paper (and do it well) in one night.

Finally, can an Aristotelian account handle Ferrari’s suggestion that procrastinators fall into three different types? It can; Aristotle is particularly clear on how the “arousal” procrastinator would be exempt from moral blame because of the force of pleasurable temptations. But he would have something to say in the other two cases of the “avoiders” and the “decisional procrastinators.” The avoiders are gratifying the part of themselves that enjoys the approval of others, which is bound to mislead a person. And those who cannot make up their minds are tapping into the arational part of themselves to too great a degree. Aristotle, however, might not handle the issue of self-image that arises in the three types of reasons for procrastination as well as the Stoics and the Epicureans would.

### Stoics and Epicureans

The Stoics and the Epicureans give us other examples of a traditional virtue ethic, each of which regards procrastination differently. Together, they give us one further example of how procrastination can be elucidated through its treatment as a moral phenomenon by an ethical theory with an accompanying moral psychology. Procrastination, for the Stoics and the Epicureans, meets the standards of vice. For them, the false beliefs

involved in procrastination are about the relative importance of the ends causing the anxiety. Recall the biblical take: procrastination only counts as such if it is a way of delaying what is of the most value—redemption or putting off God. This, in one sense, is certainly a contrast to eudaemonism, which does not see God’s grace as being delivered in a moment and clarifying the darkness in your soul. The Stoics and the Epicureans, like Aristotle, do not see procrastination as something we have some immediate remedy to, as Edwards thinks. But they do think procrastination is a sign that a person does not have a secure valuation of proper ends at hand. If you are up all night, worried sick once again about a presentation you have not sufficiently rehearsed, the Stoic or Epicurean voice in your head would be the one saying, “The presentation does not matter; the presentation is not worth this.”

The Stoics and the Epicureans abandon the idea that there are parts, or discrete aspects, of a soul or human personality.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, they lose some of the explanations offered by Aristotle—namely, of how the right intentions can be defeated by something, a part of ourselves, that is not under our direct control. Presumably, without divisions in the soul, all of the parts should be under our cognitive control. So, why procrastination is not under our direct control could be harder to explain with the Stoic and Epicurean accounts if we had not explained the process required to determine which beliefs (and ends) are true (consistent) or not. Again, for the Stoics and the Epicureans, the false beliefs involved in procrastination will be about ends (perhaps as well as means, but they are relatively unimportant). But, as we have explained, these ends are the ones we might not recognize that we hold; this is a trope of Stoic and Epicurean thought. The ends we mistakenly take to be justified and final are difficult to access and difficult to change. This lack of consciousness of what we are aiming at is what causes emotional discord.

The perfectionism involved in procrastination is a good example of an end we hold inconsistent with other ends and only semiconsciously. If we know we hold perfectionist aims for ourselves, we might not realize how stultifying they are. And in either case, we are unlikely to realize how much of our perfectionism is a desire to please or impress others. The Stoics and the Epicureans are clear on how a focus on others’ expectations is a disaster for us, morally speaking. Perfectionism in our physical achievements is a mistake to hold up as a value. It is part of an inaccurate self-conception; it is false. Your accomplishments through work are not what define you.

To put this in the form of an example, take someone’s statement, off-handed but revealing nonetheless, that he “lives for his job.” This person might agree with any of these simultaneously: my value is as a good performer at work; I am valuable despite failing at work; devotion to work

26. See Annas, *Morality of Happiness*.

does not completely satisfy me. These are the sorts of norms we have internalized that come into conflict, according to the Stoics and the Epicureans. (I hesitate to call them beliefs, as they might not have been formulated as such yet.) According to each take, the prime source of all of our immorality is to take limited pursuits—success at work, a good reputation—and give them the wrong sort of priority. Put in the right context, these things do not matter compared with virtue, and they are not satisfying without virtue.

The Stoics will argue that some things, the results of a process, are not “up to us.” As Epictetus puts it in the *Enchiridion*, “What upsets people is not things themselves but their judgments about the things.”<sup>27</sup> Events themselves are not under our control, so they are not things for which we should be morally responsible. If we falsely assume that we are, we are being irrational (admittedly, by their lights and given their standard of a good psychological condition). The result of this can amount to vice. The emotionality of procrastination demonstrates that it is intensive enough an irrational mistake to amount to vice. The Stoics want us to value process over outcomes—they call life a stochastic end, a goal that is valuable but not because of its products, a game with no scores or winners. They would not have you give up on the projects that cause you such anxiety, as the Epicureans would. There would be no reason to, as the moral strengthening that comes from performing a duty properly is so valuable to the rest of one’s life. There is no need to switch out the duty. One must just get one’s priorities right.

Although the Epicureans disagree with Aristotle and the Stoics over whether pleasures transform with coming to understand value properly, they do maintain that we are, from childhood on, tempted to distract ourselves from the actual value of things. We attribute false value to all sorts of ambitious endeavors—when these things do not bring us happiness. Stay home and wear a warm hat, they advised. Use “sober reasoning” to “work out” the cause of “every choice and avoidance,” and “drive out the beliefs from which comes the greatest turmoil that grips the soul.”<sup>28</sup>

You see how contrary this is to the Poor Richard view that life is bettered by doing more. The Epicureans used as their standard of virtuous behavior a calm and steady emotional life. They would want you to get rid of the projects that produce anxiety. This is where you have control, in addition to placing less (or the correct, instrumental kind of) value on them. Both approaches would suggest that you are dealing with a vice until you rid yourself of the guilt; it is just that you may not need to conquer procrastination to do this. Rather, you may simply need to apply “sober reasoning” to the cause of your procrastination. Most of the time, you will have false beliefs, particularly about your value and the task’s

27. Epictetus, *Handbook*, 13.

28. Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus, 121–135.”

value. And far more than Aristotle, the Epicureans would often suggest that the task at hand is not worthy of the importance you have associated it with. If you are a writer who never makes a deadline, the Epicureans would certainly not encourage you to strengthen your will; rather, they would question your choice of occupation. What could you do that would not cause this level of anxiety? No matter what you are procrastinating about, beyond the provision of basic needs, the Epicureans could say that the task itself is not necessary to a good life.

The Stoics might not encourage any student who procrastinated before tests to give up on his studies in the breezy way an Epicurean might, but they also would not put the onus on strengthening one's will when faced with issues of time management. They would recommend comfort with the consequences of procrastination instead. Take the bad grade. Lose the account. Be frank with your editor about how late you started your revision. Accept that you procrastinate, do not attempt to lie about or hide this, and move on to focus on what really matters.

The Stoics and the Epicureans give some unusual and perhaps untested advice to procrastinators. Do their accounts help us to understand procrastination as a phenomenon at all? Each of these virtue theories seems to do a fairly good job of predicting the close association between blocking and procrastination in a way Aristotle's does not. The unacknowledged causes of procrastination explain our many omissions of good behavior. For the Stoics and the Epicureans, a procrastinator has blind spots that would impede her ability to recognize all sorts of behavior that the proper valuation of morality would make clear. You are supposed to just identify with striving to be a good person. Anything short of this gets you to aim for nonmoralized ends. For example, suppose that a person has determined that her identity is, in part, as an efficient and responsible worker, one who would never need to request extra time to get something reasonable done. This seems harmless, but the Epicureans and the Stoics would predict trouble. They would envision a project, at some point, overtaxing this person's abilities. What happens then? The stress of having one's self-identity at stake over some worldly objective is what typically causes immoral behavior. For example, they predict that someone under this type of pressure will self-deceive and perhaps lie to others about how difficult it is for her to get the project done. If she had not associated her identity with something like work performance, which is not in all ways under her control, she would have been on safer ground. All vice is, in this way, connected to false appreciation of the independent value of ends. The Stoic and Epicurean accounts would argue that the procrastinator is fundamentally confused about value in a way Aristotle does not recognize as necessary.

Which approach is more practical? Aristotle would recommend the indirect route to curing procrastination: associate tedious work with something you enjoy, and then slowly build on successes. The Stoic and Epicurean approach would, instead, ask a person to directly reevaluate



the tasks affected by procrastination. Research in psychology will have to determine whether changes in self-conception have an impact on procrastination rates. There are studies that look into whether procrastination can be forestalled by the inculcation of good work habits through external prompts.<sup>29</sup> If such measures are successful, Aristotle's account will seem more accurate. It will also then seem as if the cycle that involves the beliefs about one's self begins with poor work habits and attitudes. Self-image will be the chicken, not the egg. Aristotle would also be better situated if people with very clear Stoic or Epicurean self-conceptions still procrastinated.

As promised, it comes down to which account has more accurately described the levers and alleyways of our nature. Is procrastination a fundamental element in our nature, because humans are akratic? Should we normalize procrastination, because, as Aristotle writes of *akrasia*, it is "more pardonable to follow natural desires, since it is also more pardonable to follow those natural appetites that are common to everyone and to the extent they are common"?<sup>30</sup> Or does procrastination signal the need for personal change? The matter is simply unsettled, and we have to await arguments put forward for each side. Research will not settle this issue.

## CONCLUSION

So, why talk about vice? Why classify behavior in this manner? I hope to have shown that the normativity we need in order to make sense of procrastination is part of an account of our nature that a complete ethical theory can offer. The questions about our nature are not futile, as unsettled as the answers may be. And attempting to answer them, as we do when we make use of ethical theory, can elucidate both our behavior and our description of ourselves. The dance between psychology and philosophy, ideally, has the philosophers, when they lead, come up with ideas we would not otherwise test. And when they follow, they do so best by forcing us to put our discoveries about behavior in their fullest context: our description and expectations for human nature get put to the test. When someone asks, "Is procrastination a sin?" what we want in response is some explanation, or set of explanations, for how the behavior befits a human being, given the nature we have. We want to be able to explain what can we expect of ourselves and why.

29. Hall and Hirsch, "Evaluation of the Effects."

30. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1149b5–7.

