

Introduction: Virtue's Reasons

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I. BACKGROUND TO THE VOLUME

Over the past thirty years or so, virtues and reasons have emerged as two of the most fruitful and important concepts in contemporary moral philosophy. Virtue theory and moral psychology, for instance, are currently two burgeoning areas of philosophical investigation that involve different, but clearly related, focuses on individual agents' responsiveness to reasons. The virtues themselves are major components of current ethical theories whose approaches to substantive or normative issues remain remarkably divergent in other respects. The virtues are also increasingly important in a variety of new approaches to epistemology.

Many writers have commented on the close connections between virtues and reasons: for instance between the ethical virtues—justice, courage, temperance, honesty, and so on—and the different ranges of morally relevant reasons that seem to be intimately, or even conceptually, tied to them.¹ Even so, the relationship is complicated, and it seems safe to say that no one has yet done justice to the complexity of the interconnections between virtues and reasons. To compound matters, the more recent growth of virtue epistemology, with its focus on the intellectual virtues, only makes the interconnections between virtues and reasons that much more challenging for anyone attempting to understand their relationship.

¹ Here one might think, especially, of the work of Robert Audi (1995, 2009), Philippa Foot (1978), Rosalind Hursthouse (1995, 1999), John McDowell (1979, 1980), Martha Nussbaum (1988), Bernard Williams (1995).

Virtues and reasons are, of course, by now widely recognized as major concepts that figure in almost any kind of serious moral thinking. They also inform philosophical work in ethics from a variety of theoretical perspectives, whether Aristotelian (or eudaimonist, or more broadly ‘virtue-ethical’), Kantian, consequentialist, or intuitionist. A better appreciation for the interconnections between virtues and reasons still seems to be needed, however, since most contemporary discussions have focused on how the virtues enable their possessors to appreciate and respond to reasons for acting in certain ways, or to the reasons for holding certain attitudes—ethically relevant attitudes, like admiration or regret, but also epistemic attitudes such as belief, which need not be of any particular ethical interest. Virtues and reasons seem to have interconnections that are not limited to the specific reasons made available to the individual practical intelligence of a deliberating (or inquiring) agent, as such contemporary discussions might suggest. Instead, virtues and reasons seem to exist in a network of mutually influential relationships, in which specific assessments of a person’s character, or the specific facts that constitute (possibly unnoticed) normative reasons for her, are impacted by the nature of these relationships. It seems natural to include the wider set of issues that emerges from these relationships under the heading of ‘virtue’s reasons.’

In exploring such reasons, there are many interesting questions to confront. For instance, we might ask whether there actually are adequate reasons—as some recent philosophical situationists seem to suggest—for withholding the attribution of virtuous traits based on what someone would do in remote hypothetical scenarios. Perhaps such scenarios remain, in fact, irrelevant to the proper attribution of the virtues (or other stable traits) to specific individuals. There are, moreover, developmental issues regarding what normative reasons there might be for aiming, in general and in specific cases, to cultivate the virtues of character in the first place. Do

such reasons have a different nature than, say, reasons for action? Are there different sorts of reasons here, not just reasons to *do* certain things, but also reasons to *be* a certain kind of person overall? Addressing such questions could presumably shed light on what it means for someone to be a good ethical role model. Connected with those developmental issues are questions concerning the reasons there might be for cultivating such seemingly admirable traits as practical wisdom, open-mindedness, and modesty—not only as ethical agents, but also as ethical theorists. By addressing a diverse set of questions on the connections between virtues and reasons, the papers here do not offer a sustained treatment of one or two core issues; instead, the papers that we have collected here form, together, a kind of kaleidoscope of issues surrounding the notion of *virtue's* reasons.² By appearing together in this one volume, the essays below will hopefully allow previously unnoticed patterns to come into view, enabling further research on the multiple interconnections between virtues and reasons.

The main aims of this book are therefore to foster a greater appreciation for the multiplicity of reasons surrounding the concept of the virtues and to shed light on what is presumably the paradigm case, of an individual agent responding to an array of potential reasons, often in diverse circumstances and contexts. The book contains substantive contributions to a major topic that still remains underexplored, and it presents novel discussions that should enhance philosophical understanding of reasons and their interconnections with the virtues—especially the virtues of character, but also, in a more modest way, the intellectual virtues as

² Highly focused collections are, of course, valuable for their own and for obvious reasons. Three recent collections along these lines are especially worth mentioning here, Lord and Maguire (2016), Peters (2013), and Snow (2015), since they contain valuable additional discussions of some of the key themes taken up in the essays presented here.

well. Below we outline the structure of the book and preview some of the core issues discussed by the contributors.

II. THE CHAPTERS

The volume is divided into three sections. Part I, “Reasons, Character, and Agency,” contains contributions regarding the paradigm connection between virtues and reasons. The essays in this section analyze how the virtues are tied to, or linked with, normative reasons, in ways that improve our understanding of virtuous character and ethical agency. Garrett Cullity argues, in his chapter “Moral Virtues and Responsiveness for Reasons,” that our rich vocabulary of ‘*aretic*’ terms is used in an evaluative manner to assess the quality of our responsiveness to morally relevant reasons. According to Cullity, to be virtuous is to be well oriented to morally relevant reasons and to respond appropriately *for* those reasons. In other words, what makes a response virtuous is the *nature of the response* to the relevant reasons. Since any such response seems to include three main elements, namely, the reason for the response, the object of the response, and the characteristics of the response itself, Cullity sorts the virtues into a three-tiered taxonomy based on their place in this overall structure.

In “Remote Scenarios and Warranted Virtue Attributions,” Justin Oakley provides an analysis of the extent to which remote hypothetical scenarios should play a role in assessing whether someone possesses a particular virtue. Oakley examines Kant’s restrictive account, according to which remote scenarios are entirely instructive in assessing someone’s virtue, as well as Robert Adams’s looser probabilistic account (Adams 2006). Differentiating his position from both accounts, Oakley argues that in order for remote scenarios to be useful in assessing

someone's virtue, we need to look beyond the actual or dispositional behavior of an agent to the larger set of *reasons* the agent has for acting, or for being disposed to act, in a particular manner in a remote scenario. For Oakley, remote scenarios are diagnostically useful only if we are sensitive to the agent's overall reasons for action.

Damian Cox argues, in his chapter "Vice, Reasons, and Wrongdoing," that aretaic judgments can be helpfully mapped onto deontic judgments in order to formulate a theory of right action that he calls 'vice ethics.' Cox identifies an asymmetry between virtues and vices, insofar as the virtues supply only *prima facie* reasons for action, whereas vices seem to supply *pro tanto* reasons. This distinction implies that if an action is vicious, then we have decisive reason not to engage in that action; but virtuous action seems to be optional, since it represents a type of moral excellence. Cox argues, then, that while reasons of virtue are supererogatory, reasons of vice introduce moral obligations, so that the right action is the "least vicious of available actions." Cox defends this account of 'vice ethics' by arguing that the account possesses distinct advantages over a near competitor: Michael Slote's 'direct virtue ethics' (Slote 2001).

The final chapter in this section is Peter Shiu-Hwa Tsu's essay, "Can Virtue be Codified? An Inquiry on the Basis of Four Conceptions of Virtue." The aim of Tsu's paper is to challenge John McDowell's well-known 'uncodifiability' thesis (McDowell 1979). Tsu identifies four ways to conceptualize virtue, depending on how virtue is thought to interact with moral rules in the reasoning process of a virtuous person. These are (1) the 'absolute' conception, (2) the '*pro tanto*' conception, (3) the '*prima facie*' conception, and (4) the 'particularist' conception. According to Tsu, McDowell's account of virtue is *only* consistent with either the '*prima facie*' conception or the 'particularist' conception. Consequently, because McDowell is not working

with either the ‘absolute’ or ‘*pro tanto*’ conception of virtue, these two conceptions remain unaffected by the uncodifiability thesis. Tsu believes that the ‘absolute’ and ‘*pro tanto*’ conceptions of virtue remain plausible, and that therefore virtue might be achieved through some kind of rule following after all.

Part II, “Reasons and Virtues in Development,” contains essays that explore how the virtues might be developed or cultivated, so that one acts from virtue and in line with good reasons. In his chapter “Virtue, Reason, and Will,” Ramon Das reformulates a dilemma for virtue ethics that he has pressed in previous work. Das argues that someone’s acting *as she should* in a certain situation might require that she “transcend” the fixed aspects of character that are given such importance in virtue ethics. Das contends that theorists such as Audi (1995), McDowell (1979), and Tiberius (2006) tend to run together *motivational* and *normative* reasons, so that acting “from a virtuous motive” and acting “for a good reason” cannot be properly distinguished from one another. Das argues that when the latter two notions are clearly distinguished, we can see how someone might rightly determine, “at will” and out of character, the reasons for which she acts. Given this diagnosis, Das provides a new formulation of the dilemma facing virtue ethicists. He maintains that virtue ethics “remains plausible roughly to the extent that it construes *acting for a good reason* in a way that is not distinctively virtue-ethical.”

In her chapter “Self-Knowledge and the Development of Virtue,” Emer O’Hagan examines what the development of virtue requires and how agents can ensure that they are acting from virtue. This leads her to a critique of Robert Audi’s perspective. O’Hagan is largely in agreement with Audi that virtue requires a relatively stable character and a sensitivity to the right reasons. But she worries about how virtue is developed within Audi’s framework. In particular, she disagrees with Audi’s claim that virtue cannot be attained “at will,” that is, directly through

an act of self-control. O'Hagan argues that there are techniques of self-reflection and self-regulation that agents can use to improve their characters. These techniques may vary, but they aim at achieving, in O'Hagan's words, "a morally refined self-conception," one that enables people to understand themselves better so as to act in a more virtuous manner.

The section concludes with Audi's wide-ranging chapter, "Aretaic Role Modeling, Justificatory Reasons, and the Diversity of the Virtues." Drawing on an analysis of the ways that virtues are modelled and developed, Audi argues for the fundamental importance of responsiveness to appropriate reasons. Audi maintains that reasons are more basic than virtues. However, he rejects the idea that specific rules can serve as guides to virtue, given the diversity of the virtues and the diversity of goods pursued by virtuous action. This view does not imply that the virtues are subjective or somehow reducible to normative reasons, nor that people lack stable dispositions of character. The point is rather that the virtues cannot be understood in isolation from reasons, and that sensitivity to reasons is fundamental to understanding the nature of virtue and how virtue can be modelled and developed.

Part III, "Specific Virtues for Finite Rational Agents," contains essays with a more practical focus. These essays examine how specific virtues interact with reasons. Andrés Luco, in his chapter "Practical Wisdom: A Virtue for Resolving Conflicts among Practical Reasons," develops an account of how an agent endowed with the virtue of practical wisdom can decide between the rationally incomparable reasons that sometimes confront an agent's choice. Luco contends that the virtuous agent should follow what he calls the 'Override Principle.' This principle directs someone to choose the course of action that secures some good corresponding to one type of reason, when doing so does not result in the loss of any goods corresponding to another type of reason. Luco defends the Override Principle against objections and concludes

that it can serve to assist the practically wise agent in deliberating among rationally incomparable normative reasons.

In “The Virtue of Modesty and the Egalitarian Ethos,” S. Stewart Braun develops a novel account of modesty. After analyzing recent approaches to understanding the virtue of modesty, Braun argues that, despite the shortcomings of these approaches, they all show a modest agent to be responsive to egalitarian reasons. According to Braun’s analysis, a modest agent is disposed to act in a manner that attempts to avoid establishing or endorsing distinctions in social status or respect because the agent accepts the value of social equality. This ‘Egalitarian Account’ of modesty explains why modesty manifests itself in people’s characters and dispositions in diverse ways, and why modest agents may act in the ways described by the competing theories. Braun contends that his Egalitarian Account of modesty provides a unified account of the virtue that helps to dissolve the debate about its nature and also to explain why modesty is admirable.

In the final chapter of this volume, “Virtue and Prejudice: Giving and Taking Reasons,” Noell Birondo discusses what he calls the ‘long-standing’ criticism of Aristotelian virtue ethics. The target of the long-standing criticism is a foundational appeal to nature that purports to validate certain traits of character as *virtues* of character. Birondo argues that this criticism only properly targets what he calls an ‘external’ validation of the virtues and that it fails to appreciate the resources available to an ‘internal’ validation of the virtues. An internal validation would require, he says, an open-ended form of reflective scrutiny, a “giving and taking” of reasons with others, even those whose ethical outlooks differ radically from our own. Birondo’s account advocates a widening of cultural perspectives in order to overcome a regrettable form of prejudice: an illiberal form of prejudice that can impede the rational revision of our own evaluative outlook.

Overall, this book collects valuable new essays that we believe will influence the course of further research on virtue ethics and moral psychology. However, we recognize that this collection is far from representative of all the excellent work being done throughout the philosophical community and that the volume is particularly unrepresentative of female philosophers. For several reasons, many female philosophers whose work we strongly admire were unable to contribute. This fact is, of course, unfortunate; and it points to some regrettable structural challenges facing the discipline. Nevertheless, we do not believe that it detracts from the quality, creativity, and insightfulness of the essays collected here.

We would like to acknowledge several people whose collective efforts enabled this book to come into being. We thank the authors for their timely contributions and for working to strengthen the essays into their present form. We thank the anonymous referees whose insightful and conscientious comments led to refinements in the overall structure and presentation of the book and to improvements in the individual essays. We would also like to express our gratitude to Andrew Weckenmann, our editor at Routledge, for his patience, direction, and good will. Most of all, we are grateful to Robert Audi for his generous advice, which was indispensable to the completion of the book, and even to its inception.

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