

Moral Science? Still Metaphysical After All These Years

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VIRTUOUS INTERDEPENDENCY

At the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the most influential secular ethics text in the West (a set of lecture notes dutifully copied by Aristotle's son Nicomachus), Aristotle wrote (or taught) that he would next take up politics, which in any case he ought to have done before the ethics. It would have been equally sensible if Aristotle had written (or taught) the *Politics* first, that he might have had the reverse afterthought – namely, that he should now turn to moral psychology and ethics, to providing a theory of individual flourishing (*eudaimonia*) as well as a theory of human agency, the virtues, moral development, moral education, and weakness of the will (*akrasia*), which in any case he ought to have done first, before providing a theory of social or political good.

So which really comes first – or what is different, should come first – ethics, including what we now call moral psychology – moral development, affective and cognitive components of moral competence, and so on – or politics, including what we now call the theories of justice and social good? The answer to both the descriptive and normative questions is that ethics, moral psychology, and a conception of social and political good typically co-evolve and depend upon each other conceptually. Thus this messy feature of interdependency is as it should be, as it must be. In the domain of morality, as a lived phenomenon and as an area of inquiry, neither philosophy nor psychology nor social and political theory serves as the foundation for any other. There is instead massive, and necessary, interpenetration among psychology, ethics, and politics, between the descriptive and the normative, even, as we shall see, between the psychophysical and the metaphysical.

It follows that the only sensible aim of anyone seriously concerned with the good life, with questions of how we individually and collectively

ought to live, is to maintain reflective equilibrium among our psychological theories of the nature and varieties of moral personality, and among these and our theories about the nature of individual flourishing – what I call *eudaimonics* (Flanagan, 2007): good character, a good society, how to develop and maintain these – as well as among our epistemic and metaphysical theories that can explain whether and how judgments of value can be something respectable, something objective; or if not objective, then at least something more than emotive power plays designed to advance the ways of being and acting that I and the members of my tribe favor.

Here I focus on two areas where the discipline of philosophy, including normative ethics and political philosophy, and the discipline of psychology are especially interactive:

- (1) *The Ontology of Moral Personality*. What basic entities and basic events or processes are theories of moral personality committed to? Persons? Persons with personalities? Personalities constituted by character traits – for example, virtues and vices? Assuming that there are character traits, are these traits causally efficacious and “in” persons, like area V1, which is part of the visual system and is housed in the brain? Or are character traits dispositions, tendencies to express reliably certain patterns of perception, feeling, thinking, and behavior, similar perhaps to my know-how for bike riding, which is not in me as an area of my brain is in me, but is a disposition in me that is activated by bikes; and which is not possessed by my friends who don’t know how to ride bikes? (see Cervone and Tripathi, this volume, and McAdams, this volume, for examples of psychologists who differ about how to conceptualize traits along something like the latter lines). Or, more skeptically, could character trait ascriptions have predictive or some sort of instrumental value, but name nothing real, nothing that ought to be part of a philosophically respectable metaphysic? Consider: One can reliably orchestrate one’s days around sunrises and sunsets, even though, since Copernicus, there are no such things. Or, consider: Is the part of physics committed to studying solids committed to their really being solids, as opposed to providing an analysis for how things that are mostly (80–90%) empty space might seem solid? Along these lines, one might wonder: What do the experts, in this case, psychologists say about the commitments of every moral philosophy ever invented – yes, every single one – to the reality of some such apparatus as reliable traits of persons, commonly designated in the moral

sphere of life as “virtues”? Has psychology revealed that there are no such things? A couple of mischief-makers in philosophy say “yes.” But they are mistaken. I’ll explain.

- (2) *Narrative Metaphysics*. The second zone of interest involves narrative self-construction. Many common modes of moral self-presentation and other-evaluation drip or ooze metaphysics – as William James might have put it – by making a mother lode of philosophically contentious assumptions about free will, causation, personal merit, blame, desert, and the role of luck or fate. I’ll call the sort of narratives that are permitted, indeed favored, in America to ascribe moral decency or indecency to oneself or others, but that arguably rest on philosophical mistakes, *morally harmful master narratives*. I’ll explain by way of a familiar master-narrative that Americans use to speak about themselves, and about what they deserve as reward for conscientiousness and hard work. This *standard narrative of accomplishment and desert* might seem natural from the point of view of social psychology and may well ground feelings of self-esteem and judgments of self-respect. But upon analysis, it appears to rest on problematic philosophical assumptions about desert, luck, and agency. This case raises complex questions about whether there might be non-parochial psychological requirements for self-esteem and self-respect that involve making objective judgments of responsibility, credit, merit, desert, and their opposites when, from the point of view of metaphysics (so I say), it is exceedingly difficult – perhaps impossible – to make sense of these concepts as we intend them. The worry is that the demands of human psychology, and perhaps of sociopolitical-economic life, generally, require good record-keeping about what people have done, are up to, are likely to do next, as well as systems of doling out rewards and punishment, credit and blame, where doing so has an instrumental rationale, but utterly lacks any deep moral or metaphysical rationale. There continues to be – and there is no reason to be optimistic that it can be overcome – genuine conflict between the demands of practical life and what philosophical theory teaches, between the subjective and the objective, between the psychosocial needs of our kind of animal and what metaphysics teaches.

THE NONEXISTENCE OF CHARACTER TRAITS

It may surprise psychologists that this 1970s-early 80s debate (Mischel, 1968; Nisbett and Ross, 1980) inside psychology about the ontology of traits,

despite having reached a resolution in psychology – Mischel, for example, is a defender of a hybrid “social-cognitive” view – and which retains a place for judiciously depicted personality traits, survives nonetheless in philosophy. “The Nonexistence of Character Traits” is the title of a twenty-first century paper by an important philosopher, Gilbert Harman (2000). I take some responsibility for the fact that philosophers are carrying on in this way, since I was the first philosopher to call attention to the debate among psychologists about these matters, and to claim that the debates about persons and situations had important implications for ethics, especially virtue theories (Flanagan, 1991). It did, and it does. But this point – which was intended to be a complex one calling on moral theorists to speak more precisely about the nature and structure of the variety of components that comprise moral competence – opened the door to a playground where a small band of mischievous hyperbolists, really just two, have had their fun for too long making ontological mischief. So I will begin here to make my amends, and to try to quiet the cheerleaders within philosophy (Doris, 1998, 2002; Harman, 1999, 2000), who say that character traits are like phlogiston or unicorns, and thus that moral theories that depend on the positing of traits – virtue theories first and foremost (in fact, the criticism, if it were apt, would apply to all moral theories West and East) – are non-starters.

In a recent encyclopedia piece on “Moral Psychology: Empirical Issues,” Doris and Stich (2008) write: “Initially, philosophers interested in the empirical literature advanced views that were, in varying degrees, *skeptical* of the conceptions of character current in virtue ethics but this skepticism subsequently drew spirited replies from defenders of virtue ethics and character psychology” (Doris and Stich, 2008). In the endnote attached, they write: “The issues were first broached in Flanagan’s (1991) important discussion, but Flanagan did not advance the aggressive skepticism of later writers.” This is true. I “did not advance the aggressive skepticism” that exactly two “initial” writers in the text, now (exactly two) “later” writers in the endnote, namely Doris and Harman, advanced aggressively, incredibly, and with much fanfare. The reason I did not claim there were no character traits is because there are character traits. This was obvious when I wrote *Varieties* in 1991, and it is obvious now almost two decades later. At that time, after examining the trait research as well as the situationist challenge to a trait ontology, I advocated a modest conclusion that both philosophers and psychologists ought to exercise care when speaking of virtues, and more generally when speaking about the nature and structure of the multifarious components of human moral psychology, precisely so that concerns of both ontological legitimacy and psychological realizability can be satisfied.

So when the “aggressively sceptical” conclusion was pressed with no important new psychological research or new philosophical arguments backing it, I expected the noise to abate amidst the variety of wise responses to the hyperbole – which included some “spirited replies from defenders of virtue ethics and character psychology” to the “no character traits” claim (e.g., Annas, forthcoming; Kamtekar, 2004; Merritt, 2000; Miller, 2003; Sabini and Silver, 2005; Vranas, 2005, Sreenivasan, 2002, 2008). But it hasn’t. The claim that there are no character traits, and that psychology has shown this to be so, continues to be made despite my initial arguments (1991), and the latter able responses from defenders of various philosophical virtue theories on behalf of the specific conception of virtue advocated by different virtue theoretical traditions – e.g., Aristotle (Annas, Miller) or Hume (Merritt).

This topic of the ways philosophy and psychology interact makes this a perfect place to do what many have been asking for, namely, to provide my response to the “no character trait” thesis. Since I opened the door to the playground where its defenders play, I’ll cut to the chase and try to make quick work of putting to rest the idea that there are no traits of character. Reference to virtues and vices, and to the aim of trying to equip agents with a good character comprised of virtues is psychologically, sociologically, and politically wise, as well as ontologically respectable.

Several claims must be distinguished: Are there any character traits at all? Are there virtues – “habits of the hearts and mind” that pertain to moral life – among the character traits that there are (like Dewey, I think that using a language of moral habits instead of virtues and vices is best, but I won’t fuss over the linguistic matter here)? Are character trait attributions, specifically virtue-attributions, just instrumental devices that third parties and first persons use to predict or, what is different, sum up, or describe and type, heterogeneous behaviors? So that, for example, saying “she is shy” is a way of telling you that you can expect from her some of the behaviors that we folk around-here call “shy,” but which doesn’t name anything more than that, doesn’t refer to anything psychological – the way, for example, “bad weather” names a practically informative heterogeneous kind, but not a meteorological kind. Or, finally, are virtues psychologically real and thus respectable members of the ontological table of elements? The answers are yes, yes, no, and yes.

The Aim of Varieties of Moral Personality

In philosophy, and in Britain, just as Kohlberg’s program was being launched in Chicago, Elizabeth Anscombe (1958) argued that the enlightenment

ideal of rule-abiding principled reasoners was distant from the way(s) good people, even the principled reasoners, normally operate, and she recommended a revival of ancient virtue theory, which was still, she thought, being deployed by moral teachers, even if not philosophically defended. Murdoch said that normative ethics might as well cease until we philosophers had a better and more credible idea of the equipment real people deploy in moral life. My overall aim in *Varieties* (1991) could be read (it wasn't consciously so) as an attempt to advance Murdoch's program by making the case for ethical theorizing that is *psychologically realistic*. I tried to reveal how much fertile, under-explored common ground there is between philosophers and psychologists, including on such issues as what good character is, what it consists in, and how predictively reliable it is. I was not aggressively skeptical of virtue talk, because whether or not virtue talk was problematic depended on what was being assumed by such talk. What I did say was this: if, or insofar, as virtues or moral character traits are reified as *things inside persons* or, what is different, are conceived to be *situationally insensitive*, there are problems. If you don't commit what Whitehead memorably called "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness" with respect to virtues, and if you don't think virtues make one's character immune to deficiency in the domain that the virtue is set up to cover, then you are off to a good start in proposing a psychologically and philosophically viable normative conception. I argued that philosophers, my main audience, who work in moral psychology ought to speak carefully about the psychological equipment involved in various types of moral competence in accordance with what a judicious interpretation of the psychological evidence requires.

What a Virtue Might Be

Simplistically, we can divide communities who speak about traits, moral habits, and virtues and vices into three: philosophers, psychologists, and ordinary people. I have no firm opinion about what ordinary people think about the metaphysics of traits or how they work psychologically, nor does it matter very much whether and how non-specialists think, so long as they can acquire a morality and teach it to their charges. I understood the question of whether moral character traits exist to be a question about what the experts say are legitimate posits, not, in the first instance, what ordinary people assert or assume or imply by their talk of virtues and vices.

We better hope that morality can be taught without knowing what it is (just as we assume that kids can learn that night follows day and day follows night without knowing what night and day really are, or why they

follow each other), or why exactly one should be moral, and certainly without knowing (because no one knows) how the multifarious components of moral competence are configured in the mind-brain-world. In any case, what ordinary people think or are ontologically committed to is not really any of my business as a philosopher. I only want to know what kinds of ontological commitments talk of traits commits philosophers to, and how such talk fares in terms of what psychologists who pay attention to such matters say traits are or might be. It is these disciplines that have to make the world safe for character traits, and then only if there really are any.

So, what is a moral trait? In particular, what would a virtue (or a vice) be if there were any? First pass, and in the spirit of Aristotle, we can provide this schema:

A virtue is a disposition {to perceive, to feel, to think, to judge, to act} in a way that is appropriate to the situation.

Philosophers who know the history of ethics (not even all ethicists do) know that not all these components are thought necessary for every virtue. How many of these five components are required or thought ideal is variable. It may depend on the particular person, the virtue, and the demands of the social world. On most every view, one at least needs to *perceive* that a situation is of a certain kind, and then to think, although perhaps not declaratively, that something ought to be done (not always by me). But some virtues, especially in an expert, may require little or no thought. So we can imagine the schema written this way, where $\&v$ = and/or:

A virtue is a disposition {to perceive $\&v$ to feel $\&v$ to think $\&v$ to judge $\&v$ to act} in a way that is appropriate to the situation.

A moral habit or virtue so defined or characterized by this schema could be mainly, possibly purely, *behavioral*. A person sees a person in need and reliably helps (traits like being agreeable, or assertive, or being a hard worker might be better examples of traits that in some people are best described behaviorally). She gives helping no thought, nor does she get emotional about the situation. Another individual sees a person in need and reliably helps, but always *feels* for the person-in-need, perhaps before she helps, perhaps as she is helping, possibly after she helps. A third person is (or is thought to be) an extremely sensitive detector of neediness, and *perceives* a larger number of, or different, people as needy than do the first two.

The familiar, but different, ways that various philosophical traditions conceive of virtue tracks alleged differences among persons, and can be

represented by the schema. Socrates and the Stoics did not think “feeling” was desirable in the activation of the virtues, whereas Plato and Aristotle think it is essential. Confucius and Mencius think we just need to grow the good seeds that are already inside us in order to become virtuous, whereas Mozi, who comes between the two, is said to think the mind is a moral *tabula rasa*, and thus that virtues like compassion and honesty will need to be built from scratch in the way my ability to play a musical instrument is (but see Flanagan, 2008). Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains all think that there are poisonous dispositions in our natures that require elimination in order for positive dispositions, the virtues, to take hold. Iris Murdoch, Simone Weil, Lawrence Blum (1994) emphasize acute, particularistic, perceptual sensitivity more than most ancients and, in part, because of the more complex requirements of modern social worlds. The virtues of the Buddhist bodhisattva or the Christian ascetic don’t require much in the action department, but Confucian and Deweyan virtues do. And so on.

All this disagreement is possible and perfectly legitimate because ethical life requires decisions about how best to teach the youth, to maintain virtue and order, and to live satisfying, meaningful lives in different kinds of social worlds (Wong, 2006).

Everyone has a virtue theory. Even philosophers like Kant and Mill, who are thought to have alternatives to virtue theory, have elaborate theories of virtue. But, as expected, these “rule-theorists” think that one crucial virtue will be a cognitive meta-virtue, which (possibly orchestrated by an on-guard attentional mechanism) will kick some moral problem cases upstairs for cognitive testing by the categorical imperative or principle of utility, respectively. People who go to good schools know all this, otherwise not. The main point for now is that there is lots of disagreement among philosophers who advocate the virtues – and everyone does – about which, among the above aspects of virtues – perceiving, feeling, thinking, judging, and acting – and how, these ought normatively to be tuned up or down (Homiak, 1997, 2008; Sherman, 1989; Swanton, 2003). Furthermore, every moral tradition that works with and through virtues thinks that such tuning up or down, even building from scratch if necessary, is possible (you learn bike riding from scratch, why not the same – if necessary – for being honest?), and thus that the virtues are psychologically realizable.

On the schema for virtue provided above, and on the assumption that the perception of the situation as calling for moral attention (component 1) must occur with at least one other ingredient from the list, there are 15 combinations – disposition kinds – for a minimal virtue ascription. If we imagine adding “aptness conditions” on the degree to which other

components can and should be expressed, so that turning off one aspect – feeling, say, for the Stoics – means 0 activation and that we can turn each aspect (of the four remaining) up (by 1's) to a maximum setting of 5 (say, feelings of sympathy or empathy in theories that favor such feelings), then the general ways possible of doing or activating each of the virtues would be on the order of 1,250.

Still, what kind of thing is a virtue? The answer is that virtues are dispositions (if there are any). But they are different kinds of dispositions. Virtues comprise a multiplicity of kinds: A virtue might involve all five of the elements or components in the schema above or it might only involve two – say, perceiving and doing. (In America it is common to emphasize these two elements as the most important).

Much silliness can be avoided if we to remind ourselves of this: if virtues exist at all, they exist as dispositions. Solubility and flammability are dispositions, and dispositions are cashed out in terms of subjunctive conditionals. To say that sugar is soluble means that, if sugar were put in water, it would dissolve. *Where* is the solubility when the sugar is not in the water? It might seem natural to say it is *in* the sugar. But that is not quite the right answer. And the problem is that asking *where* for dispositions is to ask a bad question. Virtues and vices, if they exist, and they do, are instantiated in neural networks. A virtue, if it is accurately ascribed, names a real and reliable pattern among relata (normally comprised of states or processes in things – in a person and the world), but they are not themselves things. They are also not ontologically spooky. Sugar will reliably dissolve in water, and we can explain why in terms of the chemical process that ensues when water and sugar come into contact. Sugar and water causally interact to cause sugary, non-granular, water. Likewise I have the ability to add numbers. If you ask me to add 57 and 34, I can do it. No one knows where and how this ability is housed when it is not being activated by arithmetic questions, but no one would be driven to skepticism about the reality of the ability to do addition and subtraction, and to think that this ability, in virtue of being nowhere, is nothing at all when not active. The ability we are pretty certain is real, and is housed somehow in neural networks.

Now one can start to see how a mistake might be made. We might think that a virtue is a causally efficacious thing inside a person, when it isn't that or not literally that. A virtue does play a causal role, and it is mostly inside the person. But it is not totally inside a person, and it is not a thing. Instead a virtue, like all other character traits (if there any), is a reliable habit of the heart-mind. It has characteristic activating conditions, so that tokens of a situation type activate a neural network, which has been trained-up to be

activated by situations of that kind. In robust cases (according to the schema above), a situation that deserves moral attention activates a {perception – feeling – thought – judgment – action} sequence. The full sequence goes from a situation in the world to an action in the world, and thus there are at least two components that are not literally “in” the person – although both the perceiving and the action are done by the person with the virtue (or vice).

So, the ascription of a virtue or a vice is normally an ascription of a disposition that reliably activates the desired sequence. Although it is not quite right to say that the solubility is in the sugar or the honesty is in the person, it is acceptable to speak this way so long as one is careful. We say that the sugar *is* soluble or the person *is* honest or that the sugar cube or the person has such and such property because the disposition moves with the person (or sugar) across situations of a certain kind, and that is because the disposition is *instantiated* in the sugar chemically, and in the person neurophysiologically: it is activated only when the sugar or person come into contact with the right activating conditions. The activation of the virtue requires that the person with (or, who possesses the disposition to) the virtue be in a token (instance) of the type of situation that the virtue is (was designed to be) responsive to.

So virtue as defined, or better, as characterized, above is a disposition, not a thing. There is no reason for metaphysical anxiety. Reality is filled with many real “things” that are not really things. Days occur. They go by. But the days aren’t things. Perhaps they are events. Love and friendship are among the most important things in life, despite not really being things. Tables and chairs and rocks are things, unless you are Heraclitean, in which case they are just slowly moving unfoldings, processes. In a world conceived along event or process lines, dispositions might seem less queer. But even if you think that most things are real substantial things, you’ll still need to allow dispositions, causes, space, time, and the like to explain what happens among the things, and none of these are themselves things.

Dispositions – like solubility and flammability and honesty – have instantiations all over the place in things and in events in the world, and some things are prone to showing the disposition in active form and others not: gas is flammable, water is not, unless gas gets on top on the water; people but not rocks and turtles can be honest, and so on. A virtue does not *qua* virtue have location, although it, or better, its components are activated in space and time. If the virtue involves activation of a feeling, e.g., an empathic state, then this occurs at a place – in my body/brain – at a particular time. If a virtue involves an action, this requires place and time – but

the action is hardly in me, although my actions are mine; they involve me-doing-things-in-the-world. Finally virtues, according to the schema, are defined in terms of the characteristic situations that activate them, so they cannot be thought of as situationally insensitive. They are defined as dispositions that are active only in certain situations. The essence of a virtue is to be a disposition designed to be situationally sensitive.

The Phenomenology of Virtue (&Vice)

In my work in philosophy of mind (Flanagan, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2002, 2007), I have recommended using what I call “the natural method.” In making decisions about the nature and function of conscious mental states, or states with conscious components, consult the phenomenology as well as the psychological and neuroscientific research. This is helpful in the case of virtues, because one of the many reasons to think that there are character traits and that they are psychological – unlike the disposition of my digestive system to digest food, which is a non-psychological disposition – is because they possess phenomenal aspects. Indeed, the claim that some dispositions are more than behavioral is ancient. Before Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle made arguments for the psychological reality of virtuous dispositions, Confucius and Mencius provided phenomenological evidence for their reality. Mencius claims that everyone (even Hitler, we might say) will feel himself moved (emotionally and physically) to want to rescue a child falling into a well. This is a proto-moral disposition that is recognizable as psychologically real. If we wished, we could measure what is going on in the body and the brain of people who have the Mencian (pre)disposition. To explain how or why this disposition to save-the-child is activated without training (assuming it is), we would need to go to evolutionary biology. In any case, the reason the phenomenology matters is that it adds credence to all the other evidence that character traits are real: it feels like something to have that child-saving urge that may be felt recognizably by simply hearing about it, just as it feels like something to be shy or to experience lust. Jimmy Carter once told a *Playboy* interviewer that he experienced “lust in his heart,” and not just for his wife Rosalyn. Most normal people are familiar with the feel and the activation conditions of sexy thoughts and feelings. It does not require expertise in rocket science to explain why humans are reliably disposed to feel, think, and wish to act on these desires. Whether one’s sexual disposition becomes a virtue or a vice depends on how the person and her moral community manage to (re)structure the natural psychological economy of the underlying disposition. In any case, the possibility

that character trait descriptions are simply descriptively and/or predictively useful summary statements of behavioral tendencies is belied in many cases by the phenomenology. One doesn't just act honestly or compassionately or sexually. Activation of these dispositions normally involves a robust and distinctive phenomenology.

Numbers for Philosophers

So, the character trait skeptics cannot win on the metaphysics or the phenomenology. They sometimes act as if they can win based on the empirical evidence. But this is not so. Walter Mischel (1968) challenged the ability of personality psychology to reliably predict and, what is different, to explain behavior on the basis of trait ascriptions, citing a low *correlation coefficient*. A correlation coefficient is the statistic that describes the degree to which traits and behavior are correlated (and ranges from -1 and $+1$). The correlation coefficient is a measure of actual effect size, which is a different and stronger measure than statistical significance, which is a measure of how unlikely, relative to chance, a result is. Mischel claimed that the average value for the correlation coefficient between traits and behavior, using personality tests, was .30. Nisbett and Ross (1980) put the number at .40. The idea is that both numbers are pathetically low. But they aren't. They are quite high.

Suppose chance would yield 50% accuracy in guessing what person P will do in S, where S is a high stakes situation in which dishonesty will pay. A prediction of what P will do in S based on information about a trait – e.g., honest or dishonest – with a *correlation coefficient* .40 will improve one's accuracy by 20%. That is, using the trait information gathered by valid and reliable testing (not just any old person's opinion) will increase accuracy in prediction to the level of accuracy 70% of the time (Funder, 2001, p. 81; Hemphill, 2003).

A standard move is to say this: "Well, that still leaves 30% of the time that you won't predict correctly using trait ascriptions, and this missing 30% must be explained by the situation." But there is a misstep here. First, one cannot determine the power of situations, or whatever the main cause(s) is or might be, by subtraction. Second, it is incorrect to frame the debate so that it seems to be about the degree to which the situation or the trait (or set of traits) – in our case, a virtue or vice – does more of the explaining. Although it is commonplace to take the lesson of famous social psychological experiments to show that the situation overpowers the person and her traits, it is entirely possible that the so-called "missing

variance” can be equally well explained by adverting to other personality traits, as to features of the situations. Third, no reasonable person would deny that situations might in fact overpower a disposition. There are abundant examples: Sugar is soluble means sugar dissolves in water; but sugar in ice (= water) doesn’t display its solubility very well. Why not? Slow down the motion of the water molecules, and the dissolution doesn’t happen normally. Fourth, when classic experiments (obedience to authority, bystander effects) are reanalyzed algebraically, converting the social psychologist statistics to a correlation coefficient, which measures the relation between features such as degree of isolation in Milgram-type experiments or the number of bystanders in Samaritan-type experiments, these features have a correlation coefficient of .40. So knowing about these aspects of the situations will yield the same sort of increase in predictive power as knowing about traits. That is, the predictive value of these specific features of these unusual situations is about the same as the average predictive value of trait attributions. I have heard no philosopher make these points. They matter, and thus I do so. Both situations and traits are real – they must be to get these real effects. And no one would be led to be a situation skeptic based on the fact that very refined analysis of the kinds of situations, or the aspects of situations (like the water that is ice), that produce unexpected results yields predictive accuracy with 30% misses; that is no one (happily) is led to be a situation skeptic based on a .40 correlation coefficient in cases where our intuitions are strong that the situation must be doing the mother lode of causal work.

The upshot is that debates about the relative causal efficacy of traits versus situations is a discussion about the relative causal power of two kinds of causes, where both exist. There are traits, and there are situations. They interact. End of story. Any questions about the phenomenology, robustness, globality, and causal efficacy of character traits are empirical questions that ought to be discussed and evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Such questions are not questions about which philosophers’ opinions carry any weight. The upshot is this: The argument about the nonexistence of character traits is much ado about nothing. It fills a niche that (still) deserves to remain empty.

In *Varieties* I asked, what lessons should a defender of psychological realism draw from this research? I said this: “Traits are real and predictive, but no credible moral psychology can focus solely on traits, dispositions, and character. Good lives cannot be properly envisaged, nor can they be created and sustained, without paying attention to what goes on outside the agent – to the multifarious interactive relations between individual and

the natural and social environments” (1991, p. 312). I (still) agree with my statement.

THE METAPHYSICS OF NARRATIVE

A second area where several disciplines – psychology and philosophy, but also anthropology, sociology, political theory, comparative literary studies – can engage each other profitably is on the topic of narrative self-presentation and self-comprehension. When I speak about myself (or you), especially if I tell part of my story (or yours), I stand on the shoulders of ancestral storytellers who have supplied what are now – but once were contested – commonsense categories and familiar plot lines in service of the interpretation of persons and their lives. These ancestral storytellers were themselves dependent on communities of predecessors who invented and/or stabilized the language we speak, parsed the universe, and introduced word linkages, word spans, that attempt to capture what we now think of as our kind of beings-in-time doing what our kind of beings-in-time do in time.

Many disciplines have a name for the method of taming unruly phenomena by imposition of master-narrative or mother-theoretical structure. There are scripts, frames, the background, heuristics, ideal types, tropes, themes, ways of world making, *Weltanschauung*, and even meta-narrative, the mother of all narratives, the narrative that ends all narratives by speaking the ultimate truth about us – if there could be such a thing. Each of these grand terms names or gestures at a (possibly, somewhat different) way in which, by way of a general thematic structure, we gain purchase on the patterns that are there, or that we impose on the incredible variety of persons and lives.

Normative Narratives

One important function of self-narration, for both first-personal and third-personal consumption, is to present oneself as morally decent, possibly as morally good, even virtuous (Flanagan, 1991, 1992, 1996, 2002, 2007; Fireman et al., 2003). One feels good about oneself, and social intercourse goes best, when social actors feel morally self-respecting, and are perceived by others as morally decent, or better, as truly good. The complexities of modern life suggest that narratives, as opposed to direct observation, and as told by oneself and others who have heard one’s story(ies), provide much of the material for assessments of decency. The principle of charity in interpretation teaches that we ought assume normally that extreme self-deception

and social manipulation are not in play, and thus that most people speak truthfully when they tell their story (with a hefty dollop of self-serving spin), and thus that our stories are (self-)revealing of our moral personality, our character traits, and their complex situational sensitivities.

Because narratives are designed in part to efficiently play this role of situating us in social space as morally good agents, they incorporate all sorts of assumptions about the nature of persons and goodness, some of which I'll call *foundational* or *metaphysical*. An assumption is foundational or metaphysical if it articulates, without defense, what is taken to be a settled matter of philosophy – e.g., that persons exist; that there are multifarious character traits, many of which subserve moral life and can be used to predict and explain behavior; that some actions are voluntary, some are not; that responsibility tracks voluntariness; and so on. An assumption is foundational or metaphysical in a problematic way if it takes for granted a dubious stance about free will – e.g., that we are totally self-initiating causes; or that will itself has no prior causes; or if it underestimates fate or luck in life's circumstances. A familiar American narrative of accomplishment and desert (Clark 1997) can serve as an example of a type of narrative that, despite being a commonplace and widely accepted as a way of articulating legitimate grounds for self-esteem and self-respect, in fact makes philosophically questionable assumptions about agency, effort, luck, and desert.

The target mother-narrative is familiarly American. It is not itself universal (Gouda, 1995; MacIntyre, 1987), although it may be universal to make some sort of distinction between acts that merit credit and/or blame and those that don't. The narrative is built broadly around themes such as that "hard work and effort pay." It incorporates subsidiary tropes such as these: "People who work hard deserve to enjoy the fruits of their labor." "If one chooses to share these fruits that is nice; but it is entirely above and beyond the call of duty." "Individuals are responsible for their own fates." "Luck can be mitigated by conscientious planning and hard work." "Social safety nets are there for people who *would* work hard if they could but who, due to bad luck, can't."

The "hard work and effort pay" master-narrative typically exists in a web with some or all of these latter themes embedded in a taken-for-granted way. If one is a conscientious and successful worker, then the elements of the web work conceptually together to warrant positive self-assessment. The master narrative that "hard work and effort pay" is of course intended to be both empirical or descriptive (normally hard work pays) and normative (hard work ought to pay), and thus action-guiding (one ought to work hard) (Sunstein, 2005).

The *narrative metaphysics thesis* says that this narrative, as well as many other common narratives (examples follow), incorporates philosophical assumptions. The *narrative metaphysics thesis* is stronger than the claims that narratives are pinned on socially attractive narrative hooks, and that which hooks appeal is culturally variable, both of which are also true (Flanagan, 1991, 1992, 1996, 2002; Fireman et al., 2003). The *narrative metaphysics thesis* says that at least in some important cases our modes of self-depiction incorporate assumptions that can be called normative or metaphysical in a distinctively philosophical sense – they involve assumptions about agency, free will, luck, fate, responsibility, desert, and the like.

The second point is a sequelae of the first. If the socially endorsed storylines about my (or your) self generally, and my (or your) moral self in particular, incorporate a metaphysic of morals, then moral education requires examination, critique, and endorsement or rejection of the metaphysic assumed. Call this the *moral education as metaphysical critique requirement*. Moral education, be it the work of moral self-improvement, moral self-cultivation, or teaching the youth to be better than we elders are, sometimes requires systematic and deliberate attention to our metaphysic of morals (MacIntyre, 1982, 1987; Blum, 2002). One reason is that the acquisition of morality involves education of the sentiments, e.g., building or refining feelings of compassion. But to do this, agents need to be taught who – what creatures even – deserve compassion (or moral consideration) and why they deserve compassion. If one believes, as Cartesians do, that animals do not actually have minds, and thus do not have experiences of pleasure and pain but only simulate them, there will be no reason to extend moral consideration to (other) animals. When there are false assumptions about such matters as sentience, and what oneself or others deserve, the moral educators have an obligation to set things straight. But the moral educators can't do this if they themselves buy into the problematic metaphysic. In this case they will be part of the problem, not the solution (MacIntyre, 1982).

Let us distinguish two kinds of *morally harmful master narratives*. The first kind conceals or allows us to overlook a mistake, which, if we correct it, will lead us to better be able to abide the moral principles we already avow. So the moral educator who engages in critique might convince others that their principle of equal consideration of interests requires that the interests of other races, as well as of non-human animals, ought, by their own standards, to be taken into account. Making this correction might well require narrative adjustments in the way the space of “persons” or of “rights-bearing creatures” is conceptualized and spoken about. But the required correction is possible. The second kind of morally harmful master narrative is weirder

and more puzzling than the first. Here the harm, if there can be said to be harm, comes from the fact that practical life may demand that we apply moral concepts – like responsibility, credit, and blame – when metaphysics can make it seem as if these concepts name nothing real, and thus that it is unfair (in a moral sense) to apply such concepts to ourselves or others. I'll return to this worrisome matter at the end.

For now we can say this much in a clear vein: A major function of master-narrative structures is to situate persons and lives in moral space by depicting types of lives that are deemed decent, good, noble, virtuous, and the like. The patterns of familiar narratives allow us to quickly classify whether individuals are good or not, trustworthy or not, and what sort of karmic outcomes are likely to accrue in their vicinity.

Take the “rags to riches” motif, which is closely related to “the hard work and effort pay” motif. In Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick*, and in most of Alger's other stories, the poor immigrant boy who is morally quite good (but naïve) makes it into the bottom rung of middle class respectability. The character, the shoeshine boy (“blackboot”) in this case, doesn't actually get rich in the story. But we are left to think that he will continue going up the ladder of economic success (if he is good, and he is good). In this way, the “rags to riches” master-narrative allows inferences, which are based upon other common American, Ben Franklin-style, tropes, e.g., “virtue and hard work (for men and boys) can overcome any adversity.” It is an interesting question whether a narrative such as “rags to riches” is taken to describe how things normally work out, as opposed to how they ideally should work (and do sometimes). This matters since we also have tropes that say such things as “virtue is its own reward,” which could be read as a runner-up promise, a sort a consolation prize in case the material success does not occur. If this is right, then the work “rags to riches” does is less predicting (as it might seem) than effort and work pay, as recommending that one ought to think so, which of course might arouse sensible worries about the opiating properties of such narratives.

Another familiar master-narrative trope that is related to the “rags to riches” and “hard work and effort pay” ones, is the “what goes up must go down” trope which tends to come with a karmic justice subtext – on the way up, fat cats especially, have to do bad stuff, and they will pay. The “robber baron” narrative, for example, enacts the way justice works out, and in that way allows the listener to have her vengeful reactive attitudes, some sort of *Schadenfreude*, towards exploiters satisfied. A very different, more recent, and cynical motif is familiar from twentieth century drama, such as Beckett's “Waiting for Godot.” Postmodernism, with help from

existentialism and (scientific) chaos and complexity theory, has given us the “each life is an idiosyncratic absurd performance” storyline, which both permits and endorses stories (as “interesting,” but perhaps only among a certain social and intellectual class) in which the moral, temporal, interpersonal chaos that is any individual person is a different kind of chaos from every other chaotic person-thingamajig. In this way, each person is a possible object of curiosity for the other members of the community of chaotic conscious beings who know about the person’s life or read his story or hear about it. Some absurd beings – Sisyphus, Hamlet perhaps, the compassionate characters in Camus’s *La Peste*, for example – are admirable amidst their absurd, chaotic situation, which doesn’t reduce the absurd and chaotic quality of everything. It just makes it more poignant, and in that way possibly more absurd still. Here there is no pattern (in a life or among lives). But that non-pattern is the pattern. In this case, the narrative structure is overtly philosophical because it is endorsed, as it were, directly by a school of philosophy.

To sum up this section so far: We speak and make sense of ourselves and each other in terms of narratives, which deploy as part of their interpretive arsenal an ontology (there are characters, and they possess traits), as well as metaphysical assumptions about free will, fate, desert, the conditions of self-worth, which are domesticated in familiar storylines, what I am calling mother-theories or master-narrative structures. These are richly normative and give guidance and direction on how things will go from here, and on what is the likely trajectory, both empirically and normatively of this life or these lives. Master-narrative structures provide interpretive shortcuts, heuristics, ways of indicating where in interpretive space, where in the space of possible storylines, I want you to orient your thought about the person, persons, or type of situation being thought about or talked about.

The Target Narrative of Accomplishment and Desert

In light of these points, consider a common, perhaps the dominant, American mother-theory about accomplishment and desert. According to the mother-theory that is my focus here, hard work and conscientious effort are good and ought to be rewarded. If an individual works hard, she deserves (to keep for use) the fruits of her labor. Hard work and conscientious effort are both caused by, and signs of, virtue, wisdom, and free rational choice. Conversely, people who have not suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, and who choose to slack off or worse, are responsible for their situation.

This familiar narrative about individual responsibility and desert ramifies into public policy debates. For example, proposals to uncap payroll taxes for the Social Security fund are politically unpopular, and they are unpopular (John Kerry's team told me this in 2004) because of dominant views among most Americans about their "right" to keep what they earn. The main rationale for changing the cap that might appeal to American voters would not appeal to fairness or social solidarity, but to prudence. For example, taxation for welfare makes the poor (or sick or both) less prone to commit crimes, and thus to endanger public safety. Without some such a purely prudential rationale, taxation for welfare is a form of mandatory charity (which is no charity at all), or even worse, it is state theft.

Regarding desert within a political economy such as ours, a standard view is this:

My pre-tax income and the wealth I already hold are mine. I made what I made, and own what I own, and I deserve to keep it. Any discussion of the right of the state to tax me and/or take some of my stuff starts from my presumptive ownership of my stuff, my money, my property.

Liam Murphy and Thomas Nagel (2002) call this idea "the myth of ownership," the idea that pre-tax income and wealth is mine in some "morally meaningful sense." Why is it a myth? Among other reasons, what I make is made possible by a pre-existing set of political and economic practices, institutions, and principles. I am indebted to these institutions and practices for what I gross. My gross income and the property I have are not the first link in a link of possessions; they are late links. Why's that? Essentially there would be no secure economy in place, no property, no rights, and so on were it not for the existence of a state constituted to allow such things. So both my gross income and my "pre-existing wealth" are outcomes of a complex scheme of distribution and redistribution that antedates my arrival on the planet. It is an utter cosmic coincidence – matter of luck, good or bad – that I have the gifts (or liabilities) I have, and live in a world to which they are suited or not.

The logic of the dominant mother-theory about accomplishment and desert (and its ramifications) can be analyzed in terms of assumptions it makes/assumes/floats on that (we might assume) are so well-grounded that they don't need mentioning, but which are not so well-grounded. Consider these three assumptions that might be taken for granted, but that ought not to be taken for granted because they are philosophically quite implausible.

- (1) *A view of agent causation* or libertarian free will that many philosophers think is the dominant folk view (but see Nahmias et al., 2006), and which Roderick Chisholm (1976) endorsed this way: “each of us when we act, is a prime mover unmoved. In doing what we do, we cause certain things to happen, and nothing – or no one – auses us to cause those events to happen.”
- (2) *A Lockean view of property ownership and desert*: I deserve the in-come from my labor, and I deserve to keep it. In general, combining #2 with #1 we get: How I do my life, whether I choose good or bad, well or badly, is self-originating (in some deep sense) and thus I deserve credit or blame for what I do, how I live, what I make of things.
- (3) *Luck Denial*. A denial of the claim that all my general capacities (including – assuming I possess such things – my intelligence, wit, ingenuity, conscientiousness, desire to work hard, social skills, and so on), and all my specific desires and beliefs, are one hundred percent contingent on causal antecedents over which I had no control, and thus that, from the point of view *sub specie eternitatis*, “luck swallows everything” (Strawson, 1998). Nietzsche said *amor fati* – love fate. Why? Because despite the eternal and heroic – sweet, dear, and laughable – human attempt to actually do something completely self-originating, it has never happened, nor will it ever happen. It takes a “strong poet” to say this, let alone to embrace the idea. The facts are that it may be true.

Luck's Logic

Before proceeding to explain briefly why #1–3 are problematic philosophical assumptions, I'll say a bit more about why it is credible to think that they are commonplace assumptions. Candace Clark (1997) has explored the deep structure of the logic of American attitudes about work, effort, desert, merit, and luck, which show up in our mother-narratives. Here are two key empirical findings:

- *Bimodalism*: Americans tend to have a bimodal rather than a continuum view of desert and luck. “The language Americans use to talk about problems places them *either* in the realm of responsibility or inevitability, chance, fate and luck *or* in the realm of intentionality, responsibility and blame” (p. 100). Outcomes of actions are either

deserved (if they are results of choice) or not (if they are matters of impersonal luck or fate).

- *Self-Caused Bad Luck*: We give ourselves moral permission to ignore feeling compassion/sympathy if the victims of bad luck brought their misfortune on themselves – e.g., drug addiction, alcoholism, criminal behavior. “No matter how bad we consider a plight to be, however, if the sufferer, the social actor, has caused it others may not sympathize. A plight is *unlucky* when it is *not* the result of a person’s willfulness, malfeasance, negligence, risk taking, or in some way “bringing it on him or herself” (p. 84).

These two guiding principles are either equivalent to, or conceptually enabled by, such theses as 1–3 above – to the effect that actions divide between those that are caused by my free agency and those that are not – i.e., tsunamis, neurological seizures, and the like (as in #1). Furthermore, and for similar reasons, *bimodalism* says that some actions are self-initiated and are not caused by features of the world outside an agent’s control (#3), and that it is the products of these agent-initiated or agent-controlled actions for which credit and blame, ownership (I did it; it is mine) make sense (as in #2). When persons choose to do what is wrong or inconsiderate or lazy, they deserve to suffer the consequences. If I wish (because I am kind or generous) to help others who cause themselves grief to get back on track, I do what is optional (not required), albeit good.

Narratives of Free Agency

Since the seventeenth century, metaphysicians in the West (one rarely sees the idea of agent causation in China or India; Flanagan, 2008) have tried to make sense of the idea of agent causation. No one has been able to do so. The scientific image of persons, independently of the red herring of determinism v. indeterminism (as if indeterminacy in elementary particle physics would secure the respectability of agent causation), assumes – because there is great evidence for the view – that *ex nihilo nihil fit*, that everything that happens has a cause, and that the causes have causes. *Huis clos*. Call this the thesis of the *ubiquity of causation* (Flanagan, 2002). The problem this creates for the idea of agent-causation is not quite that there is no such thing as a self-initiated or self-controlling action, but rather that the state of my self, my will, my desires and preferences, themselves are caused. Indeed, the causes of who I am, and what I want, choose, and so on, are (always, they must be) antecedent to whatever choice I make.

The ubiquity of causation, once acknowledged as reasonable, not only calls #1 into question from a metaphysical perspective, but it also is what warrants, if anything does, a challenge to # 3 and its replacement by the idea that *sub specie aeternitatis*, “luck swallows everything,” in Galen Strawson’s memorable phrase (the basic idea is old and has been discussed and sometimes endorsed by Stoics, Epicureans, in a famous Kantian antinomy, by Nietzsche, and many others).

This problem, or these two connected problems of agency, causation, and contingency (#1 & #3) might make it seem as if we are playing with that old disturbing problem of freedom and causation – we are – which one might claim is a notorious philosophical black hole and not, for that reason, worth discussing. True. So let’s move on to #2 – *the Lockean view of property and desert*. But first note that if the problems of agency, causation, and contingency (#1 & #3) take us into the vicinity of a philosophical black hole, it is not as if our standard self-locating moral narratives, including our target narrative of accomplishment and desert, are remotely neutral on its solution. The standard ways we speak morally involve some amount of conviction that the idea of genuinely self-initiated action makes sense, and that there is no need to “love fate” because we are not in its grip, and thus that # 1 & #3 are true even if they cannot be justified.

Narratives of Mixing Labor

A key feature of the dominant narrative of accomplishment and desert assumes that John Locke got things right, more-or-less, when he gave this argument, which I paraphrase:

1. God gave humans dominion over all of nature.
2. Nature is owned initially equally by all humans.
3. The exception to equal ownership is oneself, one’s body, “every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*. Thus no Body has any Right to any but himself” (God’s plan).
4. God must “Of Necessity” have had a plan for how humans would interact with what is naturally possessed by all, so that His gift of earth’s bounty could be enhanced, and so that humans could show themselves worthy of God’s gift. It would be irrational (which is impossible) for God to have given man “The Earth, and all that is therein ... for the Support and Comfort of their being” and not (also and at the same time) to have given humans a way to interact morally (without sinning) with this gift.

5. God's plan must be this: Each person in virtue of his natural right to his own body (#3) is given at the same time a right to the products of "The *Labour* of his Body, and the *Work* of his Hands."
6. Thus, whenever a person mixes his *Labour* with what is initially owned by all (#2), he thereby makes it his *property*. "For this *Labour* being the unquestionable Property of the Labourer, no Man but he can have a right to what is once joyned to, at least where there is enough, and as good left in common for others" (John Locke, *The Second Treatise* "On Property," 26 & 27).

The Lockean story about the move from a state where there is no private ownership to one in which there is a just initial acquisition, and then justice in transfer, is widely accepted in America, despite many problems, some obvious – e.g., acquisition by theft from the original people, the phenomenon of the rich getting richer, etc. Indeed, most of the Lockean story (which is not just a history, it is a justificatory philosophical history) minus much (some or all) of the God talk, is part of common sense, and thus is part of our standard narrative of "just deserts." But it is a problem that we contemporary folk take the Lockean theory of property and desert seriously – indeed, take it for granted – without accepting the God talk that actually warrants, justifies, and rationalizes each premise in the argument.

The reason this is a problem is because the argument is a philosophical disaster unless the God warrants – or reasons that invoke God's plan – are epistemically credible. But they are not. First, the argument has no foundation, if we don't bring in the Biblical story of God giving all of Nature to humans; and second, if we don't accept the principles of philosophical theology to the effect that there is a God and that he is perfect – that is, that God is the familiar all knowing, all loving God of the Abrahamic tradition. Without these assumptions there is no reason to think that there must be "Of Necessity" a divine plan for how we are to make the most of God's gift.

The upshot is that the Lockean view of property and desert may be commonsensical. But this is not because it is based on good arguments.

There are arguments in favor of doling out property rights in a Lockean manner (#2), and there are interesting arguments for why we should act as if agent causation is true (#1), and why we ought to treat ourselves and others *as if* we (not the Big Bang) are ultimately responsible for our actions (#3). But these "good" arguments are all practical, pragmatic, and political, not metaphysical.

This matters because, in my experience, people who morally self-locate inside a standard American narrative of accomplishment and desert, and are

questioned about the legitimacy of the assignments of credit, merit, ownership, and desert that such narratives permit, commonly appeal to such ideas as #1–3 above, in which case they are, or seem to be, claiming metaphysical legitimacy for their practices, when they can't in fact remotely secure the metaphysical grounds that would justify the narratives they speak.

There is an exception: people will sometimes advert to rationales for changing our practices that are straightforwardly moral, not metaphysical: e.g., it would be good, fairer, more compassionate if Ψ . What are moral reasons? If moral reasons are, as Aristotle and many other naturalists have thought, one kind of practical reason, then the task of justification is easier, since we do know how to argue about practical matters. One problem with this view of ethics is that it will seem deflationary relative to expectations that morality is something really deep, and involves more (something transcendental perhaps) than making practical decisions about how to be, and how to conduct our affairs. If, however, moral reasons are truly supposed to be grounded on deep metaphysical truths about agency, merit, and desert, then the problem of justification we have been having repeats. We are left, after all these years, still wondering about what morality is, how it is possible, and why we ought to be moral.

My conclusion for this section on moral mother-narratives is tentative. The self-locating and self-presenting narratives we speak have both descriptive and normative functions. Psychology is able to explain how narrative self-construction is possible in memory and in language, how it works, and how master-narratives serve to mark in a shorthand manner moral merit or demerit, and/or encode moral lessons, and/or instruct on preferred moral trajectories, and/or equip self and other with useful predictive information. Philosophy, along with other critical disciplines, can help us examine what questionable factual, moral, or metaphysical assumptions our narratives make, embed, and enact. It is possible that there just are reasons deep in the biology and psychology of animals like ourselves that require us to live as if certain assumptions such as #1–3 are true, when the weight of the philosophical evidence is that they are false. It is possible that the psychology of self-esteem and self-respect, as well as practices that take advantage of our plasticity and responsiveness to social approval and disapproval, rest most naturally on strong convictions about the nature of the self and agency that are unwarranted. If one is a philosopher who relishes consistency this is a bad outcome. If, however, like Walt Whitman, we can relish contradiction, and the "containment of multitudes," then this tension between the objective and subjective points of view (Nagel, 1979) can be welcomed as a creative one, a source of motivation to keep paying attention, to keeping

our eyes on how our practices, intellectual and social, are hanging together, or not.

CONCLUSION

I've looked at the interaction between psychology and philosophy as it pertains to two questions of ethics, broadly construed: (1) the ontology of moral personality, and (2) the metaphysics and epistemology of narratives of moral (self and other) location. With regard to (1), I provided an analysis of character traits, specifically of virtues, that satisfies three desiderata: they are psychologically realizable; they are psychologically realized; and they are what virtue theories claim must exist if human morality is possible. With regard to (2), I argued that one important function of some master-narratives is to present self and other as morally decent, or better, as virtuous. Narratives do so by providing a sort of shorthand code that marks oneself or others as good, virtuous, deserving, and so on. Some such narratives, specifically a standard American narrative of accomplishment and desert, ride on taken-for-granted philosophical assumptions about agency, merit, and desert that are dubious. I left the reader with a paradox: it may be that the demands of practical life, for example, the conditions of self-esteem and self-respect, as well as smooth coordination of social life, require, or go best, with assumptions about, for example, agent causation and immunity to bad luck, that don't bear up well under close metaphysical scrutiny. But, of course, there was no guarantee that our methods of interacting efficiently, and properly understanding ourselves, would be smoothly co-compatible. Knowing that our ideals and our psychologies are sometimes, possibly often, in tension, is the oldest problem in ethics. Knowing when, where, how, and why this is so might provide us with some methods to reduce the distance between the two, assuming, that is, that knowledge is power.

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