Realistic Virtue Ethics

Dissertation
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

Steven Glen Brown, B.A.
Graduate Program in Philosophy
The Ohio State University
2012

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Justin D’Arms, Advisor
Professor Donald C. Hubin
Professor Sigrún Svavarsdóttir
Abstract

Virtue ethics, to date, has not taken seriously enough the fact that humans are inherently limited creatures. It is all well and good to paint a picture of the ideal human being, filled with virtue and living the good life, but unless we understand how this picture is supposed to apply to those of us who still lack the virtues, it will be of little use to us. If virtue ethics is to succeed, it needs to become more realistic. It needs to recognize that we are epistemically limited beings who are largely incapable of becoming fully virtuous. Several things follow from this basic insight: virtue ethicists should focus on the subjective rather than the objective sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, they should embrace both realistic and ideal conceptions of virtue, and they should transition toward an approval-based theory of right action.

Once all of this is taken into account, the plausibility of virtue ethics is quite striking. There is a clear and important connection between the virtues and actions that are subjectively-right. Since subjective rightness is the kind we care about most, it is natural to try to construct a theory of right action on the basis of the virtues. Once we get clear about what it means to be virtuous, we see that there are two different standards, ideal and realistic virtue, and that each of these standards plays a different role in our moral theorizing. We
ought to strive toward the development of realistic virtues, by performing actions that would be approved of by ideally virtuous observers, for only they have the required insight to see the right way forward in every case. Nevertheless, these virtuous observers needn’t be overly idealized, because they will still need to exercise vigilance in certain circumstances and they don’t require full-information in order to see what the subjectively-right actions are in each situation. For this reason, we can expect realistically virtuous people to closely approximate ideally virtuous ones in most cases and this will not only provide us with a satisfying moral epistemology, it might help virtue ethicists provide an answer to Anscombe’s claim that there can be no moral ‘ought’ without a divine law.
For my parents (in-birth and in-law)
without whom I never could have pursued philosophy at all
Acknowledgments

There are two people who deserve special thanks for all the support they’ve given me throughout this (long) process: my advisor, and my wife.

Justin D’Arms, thank you for the countless hours spent reading and re-reading every draft I gave you. You consistently came back to me with insightful criticism and helpful suggestions. Whatever skill I’ve developed as a philosopher has come about through that process.

Ellie, I know how difficult it has been to endure all these years of writing. Thank you for always encouraging me to keep going, and for bearing the brunt of our family responsibilities whenever I had to hole up and get some work done. I look forward to spending all of my post-educational years by your side.

Thanks are also due to the many others who read and commented on my work over the years, especially Don Hubin, Sigrún Svavarsdóttir, and all of my fellow dissertation seminar participants.

Finally, I must extend my gratitude to all of the blessed souls who kept insisting that I wasn’t allowed to give up, especially Doug and Karen Brown, Jared Boyd, Rob and Ann Dickinson, Ryan and Jacqui Hoke, Kevin Holland, Matthew Jordan, Erik Peterson, Sriram Sridharan, and all my lovely children.
Vita

November 7, 1975  Born – Omaha, Nebraska

1993  Diploma – Georgetown High School

2004  B.A. Philosophy – University of Pittsburgh

2004 – Present  Graduate Teaching Associate – The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field – Philosophy
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................ ii

Dedication ........................................................................................................................ iv

Acknowledgments .......................................................................................................... v

Vita ................................................................................................................................... vi

Chapter 1 - From Virtue to Right ................................................................................ 1
   Anscombe’s ‘Ought’ ....................................................................................................... 3
   Explanation and Guidance .......................................................................................... 9

Chapter 2 - The Meaning of ‘Right’ and ‘Wrong’ in Virtue Ethics ............................... 18
   The Subjective/Objective Distinction ........................................................................ 19
   The Primacy of the Subjective ................................................................................... 26
   Facts, Beliefs, and Evidence ....................................................................................... 30

Chapter 3 - Virtue in Vicious Circumstances .............................................................. 39
   The Imitative View ...................................................................................................... 40
   Which Agents? Whose Circumstances? .................................................................... 45
   Vicious Circumstances ............................................................................................... 50
### Table of Contents

Chapter 4 - Virtue for the Rest of Us
- Ineliminable Desires and Limited Willpower ............................................. 53
- The Skill of Vigilance .............................................................................. 58
- Vigilance for the Virtuous ...................................................................... 62

Chapter 5 - Realistic and Ideal Virtue .......................................................... 76
- Vicious Circumstances Revisited ............................................................... 80

Chapter 6 - Realistic Virtue Ethics ................................................................. 89
- Approval-Based Virtue Ethics ................................................................. 89
- Qualified vs Ideal Observers .................................................................. 96
- Relevance Returns .................................................................................. 106

Chapter 7 - Divine or Virtuous? ................................................................. 113

Conclusion .................................................................................................. 120

Bibliography ............................................................................................ 122
Chapter 1
From Virtue to Right

Virtue ethics, to date, has not taken seriously enough the fact that humans are inherently limited creatures. It is all well and good to paint a picture of the ideal human being, filled with virtue and living the good life, but unless we understand how this picture is supposed to apply to those of us who still lack the virtues, it will be of little use to us. If virtue ethics is going to be a viable moral theory, one that addresses both our practical and our theoretical needs, this must be remedied. Fortunately, I believe that virtue ethics has the resources to answer this demand. It can tell us both what the ideal is, and how that ideal relates to us as imperfect beings, but doing so will require that we come to a much clearer understanding of the nature, purpose, and limitations of virtue ethics itself.

The goal of this dissertation is to argue for a view that I will call realistic virtue ethics. It is, more or less, a view in the Aristotelian tradition which attempts to provide answers to our core ethical questions by appealing to notions of virtue and human flourishing. Ultimately, I will suggest that the best theory of right action is one grounded in the characteristic attitudes of virtuous agents, specifically in their approval and disapproval of agents for the performance of actions. But before we get there, we will first need to get clear about what we
want from a theory of right action, about the meaning of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, and about the standard of virtue.

In my view, a successful virtue ethical theory will not only tell us what makes actions right and wrong, it will also provide us with some degree of practical guidance. However, the guidance it provides should be sensitive to the level of character development present in the agent under consideration. Furthermore, it should take into account each person’s unique epistemic situation, and for this reason I will argue that virtue ethics is best developed as a theory of the subjective sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ rather than the objective sense. I will also argue that the most attractive theory of virtue is one that allows for the presence of problematic desires, and which will therefore require even fully virtuous agents to be cautious about which situations they face. By doing all this, I hope to construct a theory of right action that is simultaneously more theoretically satisfying and more practical than existing virtue ethical accounts.

As it tends to be presented these days, virtue ethics differentiates itself from other ethical theories by defending the idea that claims about what is morally right and wrong are based in claims about virtue. However, some virtue ethicists have suggested that the proper task for virtue ethics is to provide an alternative to theories like this, not virtue-based versions of them. Elizabeth Anscombe, the founder of modern virtue ethics, insists that we should stop doing moral theory altogether unless we are willing to appeal to a divine lawgiver, and Julia Annas contends that virtue ethicists shouldn’t pursue a theory of right action at all because we don’t want a theory to tell us what to do. Before I begin my own attempt to construct a virtue ethical theory of right action, it will be important to address these concerns.
Anscombe's 'Ought'

Modern virtue ethics was first born when G.E.M. Anscombe, in her highly influential essay “Modern Moral Philosophy”, despaired of our ability to say anything sensible about the moral ‘ought’ without appealing to the concept of a divine lawgiver. She believed that the terms ‘should’, ‘ought’, and ‘needs’ ordinarily relate to what is good and bad for a thing. Thus, “machinery needs oil, or should or ought to be oiled, in that running without oil is bad for it, or it runs badly without oil.” This ordinary ‘ought’ (as Anscombe calls it), is essentially a prudential one, as in “you ought to drink water because water is good for you.”

According to Anscombe, the moral ‘ought’ is something rather different: it implies an absolute verdict “like one of guilty/not guilty”, not merely an evaluation of what is good and bad for a thing. She believed that this notion of ‘ought’ entered our vocabulary through the influence of Christianity with its “law conception of ethics.” For Anscombe, this was no mere historical observation, because the psychological force of the moral ‘ought’, which allegedly gives everyone a reason to obey it, only makes sense within the context of divine law. Thus, those who attempt to make sense of the moral ‘ought’ without appealing to divine law are doomed to fail. If one rejects the notion of a divine legislator it would be best to drop the moral ‘ought’ altogether:

It has no reasonable sense outside a law conception of ethics… and you can do ethics without it, as is shown by the example of Aristotle. It would be a

1. Anscombe 1997, 30
2. Ibid.
great improvement if, instead of "morally wrong," one always named a genus such as "untruthful," "unchaste," "unjust." We should no longer ask whether doing something was "wrong," passing directly from some description of an action to this notion; we should ask whether, e.g., it was unjust; and the answer would sometimes be clear at once.3

At this and several other points in “Modern Moral Philosophy”, Anscombe calls for the dismissal of moral theory and then holds up Aristotle’s ethical system as a potential alternative. In Aristotle’s ethics, the virtues are closely connected to human flourishing. In order for humans to truly thrive, they must develop and live in accordance with character traits like courage, honesty, generosity, and the like. He argues that all of these virtues are skills that enable their possessors to recognize and appropriately respond to the salient features of each situation. It takes many years of practice to develop these skills, and the insight they provide cannot be written down completely in an organized and systematic way. Even the best moral generalizations apply only “usually and for the most part.”4 Only those who actually possess the virtues will be able to see how to act well in every set of circumstances. Nevertheless, the rest of us would do well to emulate virtuous agents in our quest to become more virtuous.

Anscombe formulates this view as follows:

Since justice is a virtue, and injustice a vice, and virtues and vices are built up by the performance of the actions in which they are instanced, an act of injustice will tend to make a man bad; and essentially the flourishing of a

3. Ibid., 34
4. Aristotle, 1094b11–22
man qua man consists in his being good (e.g. in virtues); but for any X to
which such terms apply, X needs what makes it flourish, so a man needs, or
ought to perform, only virtuous actions; and even if, as it must be admitted
may happen, he flourishes less, or not at all, in inessentials, by avoiding
injustice, his life is spoiled in essentials by not avoiding injustice—so he still
needs to perform only just actions.\(^5\)

Essentially, the suggestion is that we can derive action guiding insights directly from facts
about human nature. Since humans are the sort of creatures that must be virtuous in order to
flourish, and their actions contribute or detract from their virtue, they must perform only
virtuous actions if they are to avoid spoiling their lives. An interesting issue arises when we
ask what Anscombe means by the idea that virtues and vices are “built up” by virtuous and
vicious acts. One thing she might mean is that virtues and vices are like habits that are
developed by repetition. As an Aristotelian, she is indeed friendly to an idea of this sort, but
it can’t be all she has in mind if she is trying to establish the point that we need to perform
*only* acts of justice and *never* acts of injustice.

One could still object that If developing bad habits is the concern, we should only *rarely*
perform acts of injustice. As long as injustice is not something we go in for regularly, there
should be little reason to think we will develop habits of injustice in our lives. Indeed, there
is some reason to believe that acts of injustice can actually help us develop habits of justice.
The occasional unjust act gone spectacularly wrong might do far more to motivate us toward
justice than a long serious of just acts.

These are empirical claims about the nature of habituation and they may or may not be

---

5. Anscombe 1997, 43
correct. It might be that even occasional acts of injustice will weaken our ability to act justly. However Anscombe's position doesn't depend on this being the case. It would be a mistake to assume that the only way vicious acts detract from the goodness of lives is by making future vicious acts more likely. Just as an Aristotelian will claim that part of what it is to live a flourishing life is to perform acts of virtue, she will claim that part of what is to ruin one's life is to perform acts of vice. Vicious acts negatively impact one's flourishing regardless of their effects, and this is why our lives are spoiled “in essentials” by performing them.

If Anscombe is correct about all this, then even in a world without God, considerations of human flourishing will be capable of grounding an ordinary ‘ought’ that will forbid us from doing non-virtuous things, like acts of injustice. After all, if virtue is necessary for flourishing, then anyone who has an interest in flourishing (which is, presumably, everyone) has a reason to act virtuously, since failing to do so will spoil a person's life. Because she admits an ordinary ‘ought’, she should admit an ordinary ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ as well since even the ordinary ‘ought’ will prescribe and rule out certain courses of action. If one is to flourish, acts of injustice are the wrong acts to perform, acts of justice the right ones. But Anscombe goes to great pains to say that when ‘right’, ‘wrong’ and ‘ought’ are used in this way, they are not moral concepts. What are we to make of this claim? Is she really entitled to that conclusion?

For the past several decades virtue ethicists have been working to account for the whole range of moral terms by appealing to virtue-related concepts. Rosalind Hursthouse, for

---

6. This could especially be the case if an unjust action had pleasant effects for the perpetrator who managed to escape any form of punishment for it.
example, claims that “what is both necessary and sufficient for a virtuous act to be ‘morally motivated’ is that it is done from a state of character that adequately resembles the state of character from which the perfectly virtuous agent acts.” Given how fruitful modern virtue ethics has been in this endeavor, it is probably fair to say that Anscombe gave up too quickly. She began with a fairly specific (and fairly contentious) notion of what the moral ‘ought’ was, and after tying it inextricably to a divine law conception of ethics, she urged those unwilling to embrace the divine to cast out the moral as well. But our understanding of the moral ‘ought’ need not be as rigid as Anscombe makes out. An Aristotelian ethic will no doubt differ in important ways from one rooted in divine law, and it may be that our reasons for living in accordance with the virtues are not quite as strong if God is taken out of the picture. But if virtue ethics really can provide us with compelling reasons for living and acting in ways that are paradigmatically moral, it should at least be considered as an alternative account of the moral ‘ought’.

Furthermore, Anscombe doesn’t go into much detail about how a divine law conception of ethics is supposed to generate the moral ‘ought’ as she conceives it. Without this explanation, she has not given us a substantive reason for accepting her claim that only a divine law conception of ethics will do. This is an issue to which I will return at the end of this dissertation, once I’ve laid out my own preferred theory of right action. At that point, I will draw out several interesting parallels between my account and Anscombe’s (brief) portrayal of divine law ethics which promise to narrow the gap between Anscombe’s moral

7. Hursthouse 2001, p. 159-60
‘ought’ and the ‘ought’ of virtue.

Anscombe’s other main criticism is that before an Aristotelian ethical theory can be made to work, it will “need to be filled in by an account of human nature, human action, the type of character a virtue is, and above all of human ‘flourishing’.”8 In fact, one of her main points is that we should “banish ethics totally from our minds”9 until that work is completed. Although these tasks are no doubt important, and importantly incomplete, a great deal of interesting work has been done on this subject since Anscombe’s times. Modern Aristotelians have come a long way in their attempts to construct suitable accounts of human nature, actions, virtue and flourishing,10 and their efforts have been bolstered by contemporary developments in positive psychology that provide intriguing evidence that humans really do tend to thrive much better when they are virtuous.11 The situationists have claimed that the requisite notion of virtue cannot be found in human psychology, but the value of their claim has been heavily contested by virtue ethicists.12

Obviously, a theory of right action rooted in the virtues will require some sensible account of what the virtues are. Furthermore, that account cannot appeal directly to the notion of right action, lest the resulting theory be guilty of circularity.13 I am convinced that

8. Anscombe 1997, 44
9. Ibid., 40
12. For an excellent discussion of the situationist critique and virtual ethical responses to it, see Adams 2006, 115-58.
such an account can be given and that the best way to do so will be along Aristotelian lines. For this reason, I will assume that virtues are dispositions to act, feel, and deliberate in ways that partially constitute a flourishing life, that they involve a particular type of moral perception that is responsive to the terrain of objective values, and that they are skills we learn by practice. Throughout this dissertation I will occasionally weigh in on the debate over the nature of virtue but it is not my goal to develop my own account of virtue itself. My goal is only to argue for a particular way of grounding the rightness of actions in the virtues, assuming that a compatible theory of virtue can be constructed.

Explanation and Guidance

We’ve seen that perhaps Anscombe was mistaken in thinking that sober reflection on the nature of the moral ‘ought’ should lead us to stop doing moral philosophy altogether. That is certainly a good thing, since moral philosophy seeks to answer questions which are of great practical importance to us. So if we are going to embark on a quest for a theory of right action, what exactly should we be looking for? What do we want such a theory to do? I will consider two possible requirements for a successful moral theory:

---

13. This rules out most accounts of virtue that have been developed by consequentialists and Kantians, since they in one way or another define virtues as dispositions to do what is right. For a consequentialist account of virtue of this kind, see Driver 2001. For a Kantian perspective, see Louden 1986.

Thomas Hurka (in Hurka 2001) has developed a recursive account of virtue that is compatible with his consequentialism. However, since it doesn't directly depend on the consequentialist theory of rightness, portions of his view could be adapted for use within a virtue ethical account. I will return to this point in chapter 4.

14. Especially in chapters 4 and 5.
**Explanation Requirement:** A theory of right action should tell us what it is for actions to be right.

**Guidance Requirement:** A theory of right action should tell us what to do in particular cases.

The explanation requirement is fairly straightforward: a successful theory will be one that helps us understand what a right action is. It will lay out which features set right actions apart from wrong ones, allowing us to see more clearly what that distinction amounts to. And it will tell us, at least in part, what we are doing when we claim that an action is right. It strikes me as obvious that a successful moral theory will need to meet at least this requirement.

One might at first think that any theory which meets the explanation requirement will automatically satisfy the guidance requirement. After all, if we know what makes actions right, why shouldn't we be able to utilize that knowledge to pick out which particular actions are right? Take, for example, the standard virtue ethical theory of right action:

**Imitative Right Action (IRA):** An action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances.

In a nutshell, IRA defines rightness in terms of the characteristic actions of virtuous agents, and it claims that even those who are not yet fully virtuous can do the right thing by imitating those who are. We will discuss and critique the details of this theory in chapter 3. For now, I just want to point out that although IRA satisfies the explanation requirement, it might not thereby satisfy the guidance requirement depending on how that requirement is cached out.

Obviously, at some level of abstraction IRA will provide guidance. If I want to know
which particular actions to perform, I can utilize IRA to derive answers like “be honest” or “be courageous.” Rosalind Hursthouse calls these principles *virtue rules*, or *V-Rules*. V-Rules can provide some form of guidance, but they don’t tell us *exactly* what to do because they don’t tell us which among the actions are honest or courageous. In order to obtain more detailed guidance, we would need to know how to apply the V-rules to individual cases, and as stated IRA doesn’t tell us how to do that. There is a step missing. Should we try to fill in this gap?

Certain members of the virtue ethical community, most notably Julia Annas\(^\text{15}\), have claimed that virtue ethics shouldn’t try to produce a theory of right action at all because we don’t want a theory to tell us what to do. According to Annas, one of the hallmarks of a modern moral theory is that it tries to provide us with a decision procedure. In broad strokes, the idea is that when we approach a complex moral problem, the thing to do is to abstract away from the particular details in search of a general principle that is applicable not only to the issue at hand, but to as many cases as possible: ideally to all of them. Once we have found this principle, we can use it to seek out answers in other cases, cases where the answers are less obvious.

This conception of ethics is a little like science, moving back and forth between experimental observations and the theories that try to explain them. If this is how ethics ought to be conceived, then the ideal condition would be one in which we have identified the perfect principle and it would be capable of giving us the answers we desired in every

\(^{15}\) Annas 2004
case. If, for example, a woman wanted to know whether or not to procure an abortion, all she would have to do is consult the correct principle to find the answer.

It is somewhat curious that Annas discusses this as an accepted constraint on moral theories, since it has now become common to emphasize a strong distinction between a criterion of right action (i.e. an explanation of what makes actions right) and a decision procedure (i.e. a way of deriving detailed practical guidance). In the world of consequentialism, not only modern thinkers like Peter Railton, but even rather old ones like John Stuart Mill have defended the claim that the goodness of consequences is what makes actions right or wrong, while clearly denying that we should base our decisions directly on our attempts to calculate the best consequences.\textsuperscript{16} But what of the virtue ethicists? Some have suggested that one of the main benefits of virtue ethics is that it can generate a theory of right and wrong that is less schizophrenic than consequentialism: enabling us to see a closer connection between what the theory says about the nature of right action and our more practical questions about how we ought to reason through moral problems.\textsuperscript{17}

Virtue ethics has always walked a narrow line regarding the question of practical guidance. Aristotle claimed that there aren’t any simple rules to follow in the domain of ethics: the moral life is complicated, and it takes skill to traverse. We cannot simply sit down with our moral calculators and come to an appropriate conclusion, we must be a certain type of person, think and perceive in a certain kind of way, before we can reliably understand the

\textsuperscript{16} More on this in chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{17} See Stocker 1997
right thing to do. At the same time, virtue ethicists like to emphasize the importance of role models in the ethical life and it is often implied that this importance is reinforced by the role virtuous agents play in directing us toward right action. Although we may not always need to deliberate in terms of what virtuous agents would do, such deliberation is supposed to be fruitful at least from time to time.

Nevertheless, Annas is concerned that whenever virtue ethicists attempt to build a theory of right action, they just end up with a decision procedure of their own, and that is something we should not want. She expresses her concern by drawing an analogy between a decision procedure and a computer manual. Whenever we need an answer to a computer-related question, we can just go to the shelf, pull down the manual, and look it up.\(^{18}\) But in her view, if we try to do this with a moral theory, something important goes missing.

Aren't we losing an important sense in which we should be making our own decisions? Suppose I later come to think that what I did was actually the wrong thing to do. In the computer case I think that either I got the manual wrong, or the manual was wrong. And this is unproblematic; there is no soul-searching to be done as to why I made the wrong decision. But in the moral case there is surely something problematic in the thought that either I got the theory wrong or the theory was wrong, but there is no worry as to my making the wrong decision... My moral decisions are mine in that I am responsible for them, but in a further way as well. They reveal something

---

\(^{18}\) Of course, we can only do this if the computer-related questions are fairly trivial. More complex problems will require a great deal of skill, and will not be solved merely by looking something up in a manual. Presumably, Annas had only the more trivial cases in mind so her analogy is likely to break down more quickly than she would have liked. Still, in a wide variety of cases one can imagine a novice computer user cutting-and-pasting an error message into Google and mechanically following a step-by-step procedure written by somebody else. This is the kind of analogy Annas had in mind for those who follow mechanistic decision procedures without skill.
about me such that I can be praised or blamed for them in a way that cannot be shifted to the theory I was following. This is so even when it is true that the theory was correct, I was following the theory correctly, and the point of my following the theory was to be told what to do.\textsuperscript{19}

As her article progresses, it becomes clear that Annas’ real objection runs even deeper than this. It isn’t just that there’s something bad about submitting yourself to the counsel of a mechanistic decision procedure, it’s that no decision procedure will be able to deliver the right answer in every case. There are two reasons for this:

- **Character Relativity:** The right thing for a person to do varies depending on that person’s level of virtue
- **Variation:** Since those who have truly mastered a skill can exhibit it in many different ways, even virtuous agents will not always do the same thing

Both of these principles are derived from Aristotle’s insight that virtue is a skill, like learning to play a musical instrument. Skills are the kinds of things which must be learned by practice and the right thing for a beginner to do will likely involve rote memorization and copywork, while the accomplished musician will be creative, knowing when and how to transcend the simple rules that guide the beginner. Likewise, the right thing for a moral beginner to do is to seek the advice of more mature people or try to live up to whatever moral principles they have picked up from their surrounding culture. But as people develop over time, they should become less and less dependent on these until, once they are fully mature, they will no longer rely on them at all. Instead, they will possess an astute ability to perceive the right thing to do without appeal to exemplars or principles.

\textsuperscript{19} Annas 2004, 65
Truly virtuous people act on their own. They make their own decisions. Beginners in the life of virtue would be unwise to act in this way. For this reason, the right thing to do is relative to the person’s level of character development. At the very least, experts and beginners will deliberate in different ways, but there is also good reason to believe that the products of their deliberations will be rather different. There are a wide variety of actions moral beginners should undertake that moral experts would have no reason to perform. This is an issue I will discuss at length in chapter 3.

But not only do virtuosos sound nothing like beginners, they also sound little like other virtuosos. Part of what it is to be a great person is to make your own way in the world, to live a life that doesn’t just mimic the successful lives of others, but that is successful in its own distinct way. There is a creative element to the moral life. Annas seems to think that this type of variation and character relativity will be impossible for a theory of right action to capture.

I agree with her suggestion that virtue is a skill and thus that it will be impossible to provide a decision procedure that even moral amateurs could use and that applies to all agents in the same way regardless of their level of moral development. What I don’t agree with is her suggestion that every virtue ethical theory of right action will end up committing these mistakes. We should simply view these as constraints on a successful theory rather than objections to the very idea of making one.

In discussing virtue ethical theories of right action, Annas really only considers the standard view, IRA. Annas might be right when she says that no theory of that form will be capable of meeting these constraints. In chapters 3 and 5, I will argue that she is correct about this, by pointing out that IRA is incapable of meeting the character relativity
requirement. But at least at first glance, the principles of character relativity and variation don't rule out the possibility of a virtue ethical theory of right action, they merely give shape to it.

Annas assumes that whenever a theory of right action tells us what to do, it will deliver only one answer. She rightly finds this problematic because the right thing for the beginner to do is sometimes different than what the fully virtuous person should do. It is also too constraining because it cuts off the possibility of the moral virtuous, the person who moves beyond the basic rules of the morality into new and creative ways of living well as a moral being.

Yet this need not be the case. A theory of right action can, and should, be flexible enough to account for this. If there are many ways of acting well in a particular set of circumstances, then the correct theory of right action will endorse a range of actions, not a single one. As long as that's the kind of theory we have, it might provide us with useful insight without telling us exactly what to do. A successful theory could also tell us what not to do, leaving the rest of the details open to us. It could place constraints on our actions rather than dictating them.

A successful moral theory should tell us what makes actions right and wrong (i.e. it should meet the explanation requirement). It should also provide us with some degree of practical guidance (i.e. it should meet the guidance requirement). But it need not provide us with a mechanism for calculating which actions to perform that can be exercised without skill and that delivers a single answer in every case. Although Annas might be correct in her diagnosis that IRA fails to properly accommodate character relativity and variation, she has
done nothing to convince us that no such theory is possible. In the next chapter, I begin arguing for a view that falls well within all of these constraints.
Chapter 2
The Meaning of ‘Right’ and ‘Wrong’ in Virtue Ethics

The moral evaluation of acts is no simple affair. In order to do it well, we must remember that every act is, in reality, a tiny slice of somebody’s life: a constitutive part of someone’s personal history. Although it can sometimes be useful in moral discourse to isolate actions from the personal histories that contain them, we must be cautious in doing so. If we are not careful, we will forget what we are really talking about. We will fixate on the evaluation of individual disembodied acts (as though acts could exist without the agents who perform them) when what we should be doing is striving to understand how we can learn to live well as moral agents by coming to understand how an action shapes, and is shaped by, the life that contains it.

This shift of emphasis away from the evaluation of individual acts toward the evaluation of acts in the context of people’s lives is characteristic of the virtue ethical approach. Virtue ethicists are well known for calling our attention to issues of character and the overall goodness of people’s lives, and for the attempt to construct theories of act evaluation upon those foundations. Outside the sphere of virtue ethics, it is now common to observe that there are multiple distinct senses of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ at play in our everyday moral
discourse. I believe that virtue ethicists have not yet sufficiently explored the significance of this distinction. This is much more than a matter of terminological curiosity because some senses of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are quite obviously related to character and the goodness of lives, while others have only the most tenuous connections to them. The plausibility of an account of right action will vary widely depending on what sense of ‘right’ is being addressed. If we first clarify which sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ is most relevant to virtue ethics, given its characteristic aims, we will better understand how virtue ethics ought to proceed.

The Subjective/Objective Distinction

Betty, an ambulance driver, is racing to get to the hospital with a patient who is very near the point of death. Along her path are several blind intersections. In order for her to see if any cars are coming the other direction, she would need to pause briefly at each intersection and look both ways. However, her patient is in such bad condition that if she does this, he will die. Only if she speeds through every intersection without pausing at all will the patient survive. As a matter of fact, the traffic at each intersection just happens to be positioned so that if she speeds through every one, she will safely pass through them all. Although several people will need to slam on their brakes and veer out of her way, nobody will actually collide with anything. Sadly, since Betty doesn't know this, she pauses at each intersection and the patient dies.

Did Betty do something wrong by driving cautiously? There is surely something to be said in favor her caution. From her perspective there are several lives at stake: her patient’s, her own, and those of all the motorists she might collide with at each intersection. It would be enormously risky for her to speed through all those intersections without checking. However,
there’s also something to be said in favor of her charging through every intersection, since nobody will actually be harmed if she does, and the patient will die if she doesn’t.

Allan Gibbard, among others, has argued that in cases like these there are at least two fundamentally different senses of ‘wrong’ that can be applied:

An act is **wrong in the objective sense** if it is wrong in light of all the facts, knowable and unknowable, whereas it is **wrong in the subjective sense** if it is wrong in light of what the agent had good reason to believe.\(^{20}\)

Depending on which of these two senses of ‘wrong’ we have in mind, we will say different things about Betty’s action. Betty’s actual behavior, pausing cautiously at each intersection, does appear to be wrong in light of all the facts. If she were somehow granted a God’s-eye perspective of the situation, and understood that she could pass safely through every intersection, then she should certainly do so. But since she lacks that kind of perspective, she has good reason to believe that speeding through those intersections would be much worse than allowing her patient to die by driving cautiously. Thus, Betty’s action is objectively-wrong, but subjectively-right.

A key characteristic of the subjective/objective distinction is that the subjective sense is supposed to align closely with our judgments about praise and blame, while the objective-sense does not. In fact, Gibbard sometimes just defines the subjectively-wrong as that which is *prima facie* blameworthy. This can be seen clearly in the example just given. Betty’s cautious driving was objectively-wrong, but it would be improper for anyone to be angry

\(^{20}\) Gibbard 1990, 42. It is important to note that Gibbard’s distinction between the subjective and objective senses of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ and his claims about the primacy of the subjective sense are completely separable from his norm-expressivist metaethic. Nothing I say here depends on the success or failure of Gibbard’s larger metaethical project.
with Betty for driving as she did, since no other course of action would have been appropriate given her lack of information at the time. Likewise, although Betty should of course be saddened by the death of her patient, she should do her best to combat feelings of guilt by reminding herself that she acted as well as anyone could reasonably expect her to, given the circumstances. Conversely, if Betty had decided to take the risk, and sped through every intersection without checking first, it would certainly have been proper for the other drivers to blame her for this reckless behavior. The mere fact that by dumb luck she had managed to save her patient’s life might do a little to ameliorate this condemnation, but it would not eliminate it entirely. Cases like these are among those we have in mind when we object that the ends do not justify the means.

To understand the importance of the subjective/objective distinction and how it operates in the context of normative ethics, it will be instructive to take a short detour through the world of consequentialism. It has long been realized that consequentialism might be self-effacing: if we always try to bring about the best consequences, we will often, for that very reason, fail to do so. There are at least two reasons for this. For one, we tend not to be especially good predictors of the future. We often do better to follow moral principles without exception, than we would trying to calculate when exactly they should be set aside. For another, the relentless pursuit of the best can require us to set aside many of the things that make our lives satisfying.\textsuperscript{21} Since this can undermine our resolve to do the best, we are most likely to impact the world positively if we hold on to some of our own projects and

\textsuperscript{21} See Wolf 1997
settle for something less than the best.

In response to concerns like these, consequentialists as far back as Mill have recognized that their view will sometimes recommend ways of living that are not solely, or even primarily, consequence-focused.22 One of the best developed versions of this strategy can be found in Peter Railton’s sophisticated act-consequentialism:

A sophisticated act-consequentialist should realize that certain goods are reliably attainable—or attainable at all—only if people have well-developed characters; that the human psyche is capable of only so much self-regulation and refinement; and that human perception and reasoning are liable to a host of biases and errors. Therefore, individuals may be more likely to act rightly if they possess certain enduring motivational patterns, character traits, or prima facie commitments to rules in addition to whatever commitment they have to act for the best. Because such individuals would not consider consequences in all cases, they would miss a number of opportunities to maximize the good; but if they were instead always to attempt to assess outcomes, the overall result would be worse, for they would act correctly less often.23

Essentially, the sophisticated act-consequentialist advocates a stark separation between the evaluation of actions, and the evaluation of agents. An action will be right if it will in fact have the best consequences of the available alternatives. On the other hand, a person will be perfectly virtuous if she possesses the set of character traits which will enable her to bring about the most good she is capable of producing.24 Since the human psyche is not capable of perfectly promoting the good, we must make do with virtues that are somewhat inefficient.

22. I take it that Mill’s famous nautical almanac analogy is intended to suggest something of this nature (Mill, Ch2).

23. Railton 2003, 170
This implies that even a perfectly virtuous human, acting faithfully from her virtue, will often fail to do the right thing. If, as is likely, the human virtues turn out to be pretty shabby substitutes for those of the ideal good-producer, then even our most virtuous actions will nearly always turn out be wrong. The sophisticated consequentialist won't want us to feel bad about these actions, since that could undermine the development of the character that morality tells us to have. And the societies that we live in would be well-advised not to punish us in any way lest that discourage the development of the virtues in ourselves and others. Nevertheless, what makes an action right in sophisticated consequentialism is the goodness of its consequences, so despite the fact that an action proceeds from the best kind of character and has little or no connection to guilt, anger, and blame, it will still usually turn out to be wrong.

One of the most central features of virtue ethics is that it resists this maneuver, preferring instead to maintain close connections between the act and the agent, the right and the praiseworthy, the wrong and the blameworthy. Although virtue ethics has become an increasingly variegated collection of views over the past several decades (ranging from straightforward neo-Aristotelianism\(^{25}\) to virtue-based ideal observer theories\(^{26}\) and Humean-inspired sentimentalist accounts\(^{27}\)), what all the views hold in common is the claim that

\(^{24}\) Julia Driver, inspired by Railton, has defended a related account of the virtues: "A virtue is a character trait that produces more good (in the actual world) than not systematically." (Driver 2001, 82)

\(^{25}\) Hursthouse 2001

\(^{26}\) Kawall 2002

\(^{27}\) Slote 1995
issues of character lie at the heart of ethics. Every action is the action of some agent. Every action plays a part (sometimes small, sometimes large) in the continuously unfolding story of that agent’s life. For this reason, we must situate actions in their proper contexts if we are to evaluate them well. Virtue ethics calls our attention to this simple fact and insists that we make a fundamental mistake whenever we attempt moral evaluation of an action without first considering the moral evaluation of agents.

As we’ve seen above, there are at least two different ways of evaluating acts: one in light of all the facts, and one in light of the facts the agent has good reason to believe. This is not only a feature of objective consequentialism, since the facts outside of the agent’s reach need not only be facts about the goodness or badness of consequences. The relevant facts could just as well be facts about rights or duties. For example, if someone picked a piece of fruit from a tree mistakenly believed to be on public property, that action could be construed as objectively wrong due only to ignorance of the relevant property rights, regardless of the consequences.

If we focus only on the objective sense, it doesn’t matter why people do what they do, why they believe that is the thing to do, how difficult it is for them to do it, etc. Nearly all of the things that matter from the perspective of the agent’s life, the motives, the beliefs, the

28. I suppose it is conceptually possible for agents to exist only for very short periods of time. If that time period were short enough, then the evaluation of the agent would not be significantly different from the evaluation of the individual act. Even in unusual cases like these, the nature of the surrounding life would inform the evaluation of the action. After all, in these truncated lives, every act would be hugely significant since the person’s entire history would be determined by only a handful of actions. It would therefore be immensely important to make every action count. When considering agents more like us, the context of the overall life is much larger. My claim is that this fact ought to affect the way we evaluate each individual action.
history that lies behind the action, are ignored. The subjective sense, on the other hand, takes all of this information into account, allowing us to view the action as part of a person’s life. Only the subjective sense takes into account the agent’s epistemic relationship to the morally relevant facts, and this relationship must be understood in order to evaluate actions as slices of lives. It is possible to draw conclusions about people’s character traits by observing their actions; after all a character trait is some kind of a disposition to act. However, in order to draw the correct conclusions we must understand not only what was done, but why. This crucially involves the beliefs which produced the actions, and why the agent holds those beliefs, regardless of whether those beliefs were true or false. Character exhibits itself in how people obtain their information and what they do with the information they have.

It should now be obvious that in my view the fundamental difference between sophisticated-consequentialism and virtue ethics is that the former focuses primarily on accounting for the objective sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, while the latter focuses primarily on the subjective sense. Railton invites us to take a step back from the agent and evaluate the action in light of objective facts about the universe, regardless of whether or not the agent has, or even could have, any access to these facts. The virtue ethicists insist that whenever we do this we risk missing out on the whole point of ethical inquiry, an inquiry that exists to help us live as well as we can within the realm of distinctively human capacities.29

This insight, I believe, shows us two important things about virtue ethical approaches to our understanding of right action. First of all, it shows us that those who are already committed to the virtue ethical project ought to maintain a clear focus on the subjective sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ rather than the objective sense. Secondly, it could be that virtue
ethics, given its characteristic aims, is uniquely well positioned to provide an account of the subjective sense. If it also turns out that the subjective sense is the most important of the two, then we will all have reason to hope that the virtue ethical project succeeds.

The Primacy of the Subjective

After introducing the subjective/objective distinction, Gibbard argues that moral theorists ought to be most concerned with the subjective sense:

It is clear enough why we would want a theory of what kinds of acts are right in the subjective sense. Such a theory offers moral guidance: even when we know we are ignorant of the relevant facts, we can use the theory, together with what we think we do know, to decide what acts to avoid on moral grounds. Why, though, should we want a theory of what kinds of acts are right in the objective sense? Such a theory offers no guidance when we know we are ignorant of relevant facts… It might seem that a theory for the objective sense would at least be useful in those rare cases when I take myself to know all the relevant facts. Even then, however, the theory is superfluous if we have criteria for rightness in the subjective sense, for in the case of full knowledge, the subjective and objective sense of ‘wrong’ coincide.30

29. It is worth noting that Kantians and virtue ethicists agree on many of the points I’ve just made since the Kantian perspective also maintains a close connection between actions and agents. But the Kantian conceptions of virtue and the good will are both rooted in respect for the moral law as defined by the categorical imperative. Assuming that the categorical imperative is primarily a method for evaluating the rightness of actions, it does seem that Kantianism must also place the evaluation of actions prior to the evaluation of agents. However, this is a subject of debate among Kantians. There are some who argue that Kant really does place agents prior to actions and is therefore best interpreted as a kind of virtue ethicist (See O’Neill 1983). Others deny this claim while maintaining that virtue plays a larger part in Kant’s thought than virtue ethicists have typically allowed (See Louden 1986 and Baron et al. 1997).

30. Gibbard 1990, 42

26
This passage suggests two possible arguments for the primacy of the subjective sense: one from usefulness, and another from theoretical parsimony. Essentially, the argument from usefulness is rooted in the idea that there is a practical constraint on moral theorizing. Any moral theory that is incapable of providing guidance over wide swaths of human experience will therefore be defective. As we've already begun to see, a theory that could account only for the objective and not the subjective sense would be defective in exactly this way.

Humans constantly find themselves in situations where they have severely limited access to the relevant body of facts. One of the hallmarks of the human condition is that we must learn to make do with severely limited epistemological resources even when the stakes are very high. Unfortunately, the kind of situation faced by the ambulance driver discussed above is not at all uncommon. Doctors must decide which treatment to pursue without knowing for sure what the source of the problem really is. Politicians must decide how to shape our society even when they are rather unsure about the long term impact of their actions. Even parents must make life-shaping decisions about the operation of their families without being certain about the effects they will have on those they love most.

The objectively-right answers in these cases are, in a way, too easy to provide. Doctors should prescribe the treatments that will cure their patients, politicians should enact the policies that will promote justice and the common good, parents should help their loved ones to live happy and meaningful lives. If we knew all of the relevant facts, much of the difficulty in carrying out these prescriptions would vanish.31 As it is, they sound rather trite. That's because a great deal of the complexity of the moral life is tied up in understanding and dealing appropriately with the particular shape that risk takes in each situation, in knowing
what to do when we don’t have access to all of the information we’d like to have. If we had access to all of the morally relevant facts, all traces of risk would disappear. For this reason, those of us who possess only limited knowledge of the world can never be satisfied with a merely objective system of ethics.32

As discussed in the previous chapter, I am sympathetic to the Aristotelian claim that virtue is a skill which can only be acquired through practice, making it impossible to reduce virtuous action to a simple set of rules in a way that would be informative to those who aren’t already skilled enough to act without them. Does this point undermine the practical constraint on moral theorizing? I don’t think it does. The practical constraint needn’t require that the theory be so simple that everyone, regardless of their level of moral development, will be able to work out the right thing to do. What it should require is that the theory account for the kind of rightness we are looking for when we seek moral guidance.

When we consider a person’s situation and we want to know what would be morally right to do, whatever actions the theory picks out should count as answers to that question. If we ask how the ambulance driver should proceed given that she doesn’t know if the cross-streets are clear the answer delivered by the theory had better not be “She should run the lights,

31. Complete knowledge of the non-moral facts could still leave some questions unanswered. Some questions about the nature of justice, the common good, as well as the happiness and meaningfulness of lives might not be answerable by an appeal to the non-moral facts. Nevertheless, the complexity of the moral life does at least involve our ignorance of relevant non-moral facts and this is something that should not be ignored.

32. In principle, it is possible to transform an objective view into a subjective one by claiming that the subjectively right thing to do is just whatever one believes to be the objectively right thing to do. However, as we’ve already seen, this maneuver can be problematic. For example, the concern that consequentialism is self-effacing makes it implausible to claim that we should always do whatever we think will bring about the best consequences.
because the streets are all clear.” That’s not an answer to the question we’re asking. The lack of information is a critical part of the ambulance driver’s situation. Any answer that imported previously inaccessible information about the non-moral facts, would fail to provide insight about how she should act in her situation. Instead, it would drastically change the situation, and thus, change the subject. The kind of guidance we expect from a moral theory doesn’t provide us with new information about the non-moral facts. Moral guidance isn’t like that. Moral guidance tells us how we can be praiseworthy or avoid being blameworthy by choosing actions that reflect well or poorly on us given the information we have available at the time. If a moral theory is going to be capable of answering these kinds of practical questions, it must take account of the agent’s epistemic limitations.

The other key insight that Gibbard provides is that the objective sense is just a special case of the subjective one: the case in which all of the morally relevant facts are known. Because of this, any system of ethics capable of providing a satisfactory account of the subjective sense, gets an account of the objective sense for free. As we saw just a moment ago, the converse is not the case. It’s not possible to read an account of the subjective sense directly off an account of the objective. At the very least, something must be added to the objective account in order to deal with the moral significance of risk.

Consider Betty’s situation once again. I’m assuming that the subjectively-right thing for her to do is to proceed with caution. However, if we want to know the objectively-right thing for her to do we just need to consider the nearest possible world in which Betty knows all of the morally relevant facts. If we had a theory of subjective-wrongness, Gibbard’s suggestion is that it would provide us with an answer in this case, and the answer it gave would be the
answer to the question of objective-rightness.

For instance, say that the correct theory of subjective-wrongness entails a principle like this one: don't put several people's lives at risk in an attempt to save one person.\(^3^3\) If we apply this to Betty's actual situation, it will turn out that running the lights would be wrong because running through blind intersections is terribly risky. However, if we consider the nearest possible world in which Betty knows the position of all the cars, running the lights would not be wrong because in that case running the lights would not be putting several people's lives at risk. If she knew that she could pass safely through every intersection, she would be taking no risks in doing so.

Facts, Beliefs, and Evidence

If we are to embrace an ethical system that focuses primarily on the subjective sense, we will do well to get clearer about what it means to do what is right “in light of what the agent had good reason to believe.”\(^3^4\) One might have expected Gibbard to define the subjective sense in light of what the agent did believe, rather than what the agent had good reason to believe. After all, an agent's actual beliefs are the ones that are most clearly relevant to the action under consideration. I suspect that Gibbard defines things as he does in order to account for the fact that sometimes we do wrong by acting on beliefs we shouldn't have. For

\(^3^3\) Like most people in the virtue ethical tradition, I am skeptical about our ability to successfully codify moral principles. Although the principle I utilize here seems to be a good one, it certainly has exceptions. If that person you are trying to save is of tremendous importance, perhaps because he is an important dignitary, it might be worth risking several people's lives to save him. But by and large it is not wise to risk many to save one.

\(^3^4\) Ibid.
this very reason, Derek Parfit argues that we need not two, but three different senses of right and wrong.

Parfit begins by assuming that in cases where people know all of the morally relevant facts, everyone uses ‘wrong’ in the same sense, which he calls the ordinary sense. In cases where people don’t know all of the morally relevant facts, he says that ‘wrong’ is sometimes used in each of the following senses:\(^{35}\)

An act is \textit{wrong in the fact-relative sense} just when it would be wrong in the ordinary sense if the agent knew all the morally relevant facts.

An act is \textit{wrong in the belief-relative sense} just when it would be wrong in the ordinary sense if the agent’s beliefs about these facts were true.

An act is \textit{wrong in the evidence-relative sense} just when it would be wrong in the ordinary sense if the agent believed what the available evidence gives him decisive reasons to believe, and these beliefs were true.

To illustrate, consider the following case:\(^{36}\):

Mr. Body is checked into a hospital with a potentially terminal illness. Although Mr. Body is certainly no saint, he has never said or done anything that would justify either killing him or letting him die without treatment. Nevertheless, Dr. Scarlet, one of three doctors called in to consult on his case, wants him dead. Each of the consulting doctors offers Mr. Body a different prescription. Dr. Scarlet, in her murderous rage, misdiagnoses his condition

\(^{35}\) Parfit’s exact wording is an act is “wrong in the fact-relative sense just when this act would be wrong in the ordinary sense if we knew all the morally relevant facts.” (Parfit 2009, 150) Unfortunately, Parfit’s “we” is ambiguous. Does it refer to the people performing the actions, the people evaluating them, or both? I’m assuming that Parfit intends the “we” to refer to the people performing the actions, and so, in the interest of clarity, I have modified the wording of his definitions accordingly.

\(^{36}\) This case is my own, not Parfit’s. However, it combines features from a handful of separate examples in Parfit. For his original examples, see Ibid., Ch 7.
and prescribes the Red pill because she believes it will kill him. In fact, the Red pill will save his life, and the best medical evidence predicts this. Dr. Mustard helped to create the Yellow pill and this subconsciously affects his judgement regarding its effectiveness. He prescribes the Yellow pill because he believes it will save the patient’s life, but the best medical evidence indicates that the Yellow pill will kill the patient. In fact, due to a very rare and subtle biochemical phenomenon that nobody will understand for decades, the Yellow pill will save him. Dr. Peacock, following perfect textbook protocol, prescribes the Blue pill, which she believes will save the patient. This belief is also supported by the best medical evidence, but in fact, the Blue pill will kill him.

If we apply Parfit’s threefold distinction to this case we see that, depending on what sense of ‘wrong’ we have in mind, each of the doctors did something wrong. Dr. Scarlet did what was wrong in the belief-relative sense, because she prescribed a pill believing it would kill the patient. Since the best evidence indicated that Dr. Mustard’s prescription was supposed to be deadly, his action was wrong in the evidence-relative sense. And Dr. Peacock's action was wrong in the fact relative sense because it will, if administered, kill the patient.

There is obviously a close relationship between Gibbard’s objective sense and Parfit’s fact-relative sense. Essentially, Parfit’s account just clarifies what it means to evaluate an action “in light of all the facts” by imagining a possible world where the agent knows all of the relevant facts and still performs the same action. For example, if Dr. Peacock had known that the Blue pill would kill the patient when she prescribed it, then her action would have been wrong in the ordinary sense.

But what shall we say about the subjective sense, the one that is most relevant to agent-
evaluation? Obviously, Dr. Scarlet should be criticized for her action: she’s effectively attempted murder. It seems that Dr. Mustard should be as well, since, despite his lack of murderous intent, he’s allowed his medical judgement to be clouded by his own pride. Both of them have failed to act well, but for importantly different reasons. Dr. Scarlet’s failure is clearly a moral one. Dr. Mustard’s failure might be largely epistemic, depending on how culpable he is for holding his unjustified beliefs.

So we can see that Parfit’s definitions of the belief-relative and fact-relative senses of ‘wrong’ are clear enough, but his definition of the evidence-relative sense is in need of further elucidation. The set of beliefs an agent holds and the set of facts that are morally relevant to an act are both (reasonably) well-defined. However, we can conceivably appeal to many different standards of evidence in evaluating whether some action is wrong in the evidence-relative sense. In a footnote, Parfit admits that the evidence-relative sense could have two different versions, “one referring to the evidence of which we are actually aware, the other to the evidence that is available in the sense that we could have made ourselves aware of it.” 37

But there are many different bodies of evidence we could have become aware of depending on how much effort we put into it. In the present case, there’s the evidence Dr. Mustard could have obtained by reading all of the journals he hasn’t read, the evidence he could have obtained by performing all of the experiments that could be performed with current technology, the evidence he could have obtained by developing better technology and then performing better experiments, and so on. In fact, there are probably any number of

37. Ibid. p. 461, note 151
distinct bodies of evidence that lie between the evidence he is actually aware of and the
evidence he would have access to with perfect medical knowledge. For this reason, whenever
we discuss the evidence-relative sense of wrong, we must first specify a standard of evidence.

Given that we are interested primarily in subjective notions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, what
should this standard of evidence be? Consider another case:

Shortly before their final vote, a group of jurors are considering the case
against a murder suspect. The best evidence indicates that the suspect is
innocent, and any juror who had been diligent in considering all the evidence
and impartial throughout the trial should be convinced of the suspect’s
innocence. The evidence presented early in the trial strongly indicated that
the suspect was guilty. At that point, Mr. Green became convinced of the
suspect’s guilt and staked his reputation on it. Information presented later on
revealed how that early evidence was misleading, but Mr. Green’s pride
prevents him from seeing his mistake. Ms. White was distracted throughout
the trial and didn’t pay much attention to the evidence as it was being
presented. She now realizes the seriousness of her negligence and tries her best
to make up for it by poring over the stenographer’s notes. Mr. Plum is what
most of us would consider a good juror. He paid close attention throughout
the trial, and he’s free from excessive pride. However, at one key point,
through a piece of fallacious reasoning, he drew the wrong conclusion about
an important piece of evidence. When all is said and done, each of the three
jurors vote “guilty.”

All three of these jurors fail to believe what they ought in this case, but have they thereby
done what is wrong in the subjective sense, i.e. that which is prima facie blameworthy? Mr.
Green presents us with a classic case of culpable ignorance: the activity of a moral vice
directly obstructs his willingness to approach the case responsibly. It’s only because he is
unwilling to admit his mistake that he continues to believe something unsupported by the evidence. We should feel much the same way about him as we would about a juror too lazy to think through all the evidence before voting, or one blinded by considerations of personal gain. It seems clear that he could reasonably be blamed for his unjustified beliefs, and thus that his actions based on those beliefs are subjectively-wrong despite the fact that they are right in the belief-relative sense.

Ms. White is slightly different, since her failure lies primarily in the past. She was irresponsible early in the trial, but is now doing her best with the mess she created. It seems to me that the best thing to say here is that her previous neglect was subjectively-wrong, but that her current attempt to do the best with what she has is not. However, if we ask whether the voting itself is subjectively-wrong, we run into a problem, since that act is a direct result both of her earlier neglect and her more recent diligence. It seems strange to say that her vote would be subjectively-right just because she’s trying to act well at the last minute. Her irresponsible behavior throughout the trial would seem to pollute her vote much more than that. But if we allow past negligence to pollute present actions, there’s a concern that nearly all of our actions will turn out to be subjectively wrong, given that at some point in the past we’ve made a mistake that continues to affect how we act now. We don’t want it to turn out that those who failed to develop their talents early on due to laziness are then doomed to a life filled with nothing but subjectively-wrong actions. There is certainly a difficult puzzle, one to which I will return in chapter 5. For now, I will just point out that if there is a case to be made for the subjective-wrongness of Ms. White’s vote, it would be derived primarily from the fact that she was negligent in her early consideration of the evidence.
Mr. Plum fails to draw the proper conclusion due to a merely intellectual mistake. He appears to be beyond reproach, morally speaking, in failing to believe what, epistemically speaking, he ought. It is possible that somewhere in his past he was especially lazy and if he had worked as hard as he should have then, he would be in a very different situation now. If so, then his case will be much like that of Ms. White. But if we set that possibility aside for the moment, and assume that he is not at all morally culpable for his flawed interpretation of the evidence, how should we evaluate his action? It seems to me that it would be inappropriate for anyone to assign moral blame in this case, or in any other where the failure to do what the evidence recommends can be traced to a purely epistemic mistake. When this happens, there is a failure involved, but it is not a moral one.

What conclusions should we draw then about subjective wrongness? As Gibbard defined it, an act is wrong in the subjective sense if it is wrong “in light of what the agent had good reason to believe.” Using Parfit’s distinctions we can now clarify this claim by stating that an action is wrong in the subjective sense if it is either wrong in the fact-relative sense or wrong in the evidence-relative sense. But as we saw in the case of Mr. Plum, an agent can have good reason to believe a thing without thereby being morally criticizable for disbelief.

Since subjective wrongness is intended to capture a specific type of moral wrongness, the kind of wrongness that relates to the appropriateness of praise and blame, it should not apply to acts that involve purely epistemic failures. Nevertheless, there are two ways in which an agent might be morally criticizable for failing to believe in accordance with a body of evidence. The first way is to misconstrue the evidence due to the activity of a moral vice, as in the case of Mr. Green. The second is to misconstrue the evidence due to a past moral failing,
as in the case of Ms. White.

Thus, I adopt the following set of definitions:

An act is **wrong in the objective sense** iff it is wrong in the fact-relative sense.

An act is **wrong in the subjective sense** iff it is either wrong in the belief-relative sense or wrong in the evidence-relative sense based on evidence the agent is morally criticizable for failing to believe.  

How does all of this relate to virtue ethics? Given certain plausible assumptions about the virtues, fully virtuous people will always do what is subjectively-right (i.e. not subjectively-wrong) as I have just defined it. Virtuous people always act well given their beliefs, and they always have the beliefs they are morally responsible for having. As long as we restrict ourselves to talking about the subjective sense, then perfectly virtuous people do no wrong. So we come, in a roundabout way, to a claim that sounds remarkably like a piece of virtue ethics:

**Proto Virtue Ethics (PVE):** A perfectly virtuous agent’s characteristic actions are necessarily right in the subjective sense.

This is no mere coincidence. The subjective notions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are inextricably tied up with the evaluation of agents. When we do what is subjectively wrong, we show ourselves to be people who are not yet fully virtuous, and when we do what is subjectively right we walk along the path of virtue. Assuming that it’s possible to provide an account of virtue that doesn’t depend on the concept of rightness, this insight will provide a promising starting point for the virtue ethical project.

38. For the time being, when I say “morally criticizable for failing to believe” I simply mean to indicate the kinds of failure present in the cases of Mr. Green and Ms. White. What this moral criticism amounts to will be made clearer in chapter 6.
Of course, if the objective sense were more important than the subjective, then PVE would provide little encouragement to virtue ethicists. After all, PVE is fully compatible with the claim that nearly everything virtuous agents do is wrong in the objective sense. But as we’ve seen, there are good reasons to think that the subjective sense is the more important of the two. If right and wrong diverge too far from issues of praise and blame they will lose their grip on us, becoming little more than starry-eyed observations about the way we wish the world could be. By remaining distinctly agent-centered, virtue ethics promises to deliver accounts of right and wrong that are capable of actively engaging us on a day-to-day basis.

39. As discussed in footnote 29 (on p. 26), this is plausibly the main difference between the virtue ethicists and the Kantians. Like most virtue ethicists, my primary reason for rejecting Kantianism is that I am skeptical of the possibility that a principle like the categorical imperative will be capable of capturing all the subtleties of the moral life. I am inclined to agree with those who think that ethics is fundamentally uncodifiable (see McDowell 1998) but this is not a claim that I defend here.
In the previous chapter, I argued that virtue ethics is best thought of as theory of the subjective sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ and I noted that the characteristic actions of fully virtuous people will always be right in the subjective sense. This tight conceptual connection between virtue and right provides us with a natural starting point for constructing a virtue ethical theory of right action. But the view that I’ve called Proto Virtue Ethics so far only establishes a sufficient condition for right action. In order for a theory to meet the explanation requirement, it will need to supply both necessary and sufficient conditions:

Proto Virtue Ethics 2 (PVE2): An action is right in the subjective sense if and only if it is the characteristic action of a perfectly virtuous agent.

There is something intriguing about this view. After all, if we are to evaluate an action in light of the life which contains it, perhaps only perfect lives can contain perfect actions. But this would imply that nothing you and I do is ever subjectively right since we are not perfectly virtuous agents. For this reason it cannot be an acceptable account of the concepts of right and wrong that we deploy on a day-to-day basis. It is an assumption of everyday morality that we have it within our power to perform at least some right actions, even
though, due to our moral limitations, we may not be capable of acting rightly all the time. Herein lies one of the fundamental challenges of virtue ethics. How can we build a theory of right action that applies well to us on the basis of virtues that none of us fully possess?

The Imitative View

Throughout the history of virtue ethics, the standard way of answering this challenge has been to focus on individual actions and then determine if they are actions that virtuous people would undertake. Thus, an act is just if a just person would characteristically perform it, and unjust if she wouldn't. This idea was articulated by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and is the basis of Rosalind Hursthouse's theory of right action, which has proven to be the most influential modern incarnation of the view. Since this view tells us that we act properly insomuch as we imitate the actions of virtuous agents, I will label it Imitative Right Action:

**Imitative Right Action (IRA):** An action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances.

Unfortunately, Hursthouse and the other most prominent virtue ethicists do not explicitly state what sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ they are trying to account for. For the purposes of this chapter, I will assume that she intends to account for the subjective sense. Thus, whenever I consider a claim about the rightness of an action, the reader may safely assume that I mean subjective rightness, unless stated otherwise.

---

40. Aristotle, 1105b5, “So things done are called just and moderate whenever they are such that the just person or the moderate person would do them.”
It is important to remember that IRA is not intended to provide us with a decision procedure, a rubric for how we should deliberate in the heat of the moment, but a criterion of right action, an explanation of what it is for an action to be right. As Hurthouse says:

Trying to decide what to do within the framework of virtue theory is not, as some people seem to imagine, necessarily a matter of taking one’s favored candidate for a virtuous person and asking oneself, ‘What would they do in the circumstances?’ (as if the raped 15-year-old girl might be supposed to say to herself, ‘Now would Socrates have an abortion if he were in my circumstances?’ and as if someone who had never known or heard of anyone very virtuous were going to be left, according to the theory, with no way to decide what to do at all).\(^41\)

The correct way to deliberate in a particular set of circumstances might be by seeking out the advice of those more virtuous than ourselves, by appealing directly to our virtue concepts,\(^42\) or by some other means. However we determine the right thing to do, IRA claims that the action we should end up doing is the one the virtuous person would characteristically do. In what follows, I will occasionally speak about applying IRA to particular cases. When I do this I mean to be looking for the implications of the theory in those cases, not for the means by which a person ought to deliberate in them.

We should also note that defenders of IRA typically draw a distinction between doing the right thing and doing the right thing in the right way. A virtuous person who is confronted with an opportunity to act well will do so by acting from his virtuous character which

\(^{41}\) Hurthouse 1997, 221

includes the way he deliberates and the way he feels. If a virtuous person encounters someone in need and is in a position to help with relatively little effort, he will help, and because of this, IRA will tell us we ought to do likewise in similar circumstances. But the virtuous person will help those in need cheerfully and because he wants to. Virtuous people don’t just act benevolently, they love benevolence. Non-virtuous people might only be able to help somewhat reluctantly: they must recognize that they should help, and act on that recognition even though they have little direct desire to do so. In cases like these, virtuous people do the right thing in the right way, non-virtuous people do the right thing, but in a way that leaves much to be desired.

IRA has many merits, and has consequently become the dominant theory of right action in the world of virtue ethics. To begin with, IRA allows us to sum up all of the insights gained from the various virtues. If I know that an act is just, courageous, moderate, etc. I still need some way of combining these insights into a overall judgment about whether or not it is something I ought to do. This is especially important if it is possible for the virtues to come into conflict with each other. If justice recommends one course of action while benevolence recommends another, then I need some way of knowing which virtue is more important in the situation at hand. There are two ways out of this problem: you can deny that conflicts between the virtues are possible (an ancient and venerable doctrine known as the unity of the virtues), or you can provide a mechanism for dealing with that conflict.  

Fortunately, by focusing on the actions of virtuous agents, IRA enables us to combine the

---

43. Alternatively, one could accept the existence of true moral dilemmas. I discuss this possibility in chapters 5 and 6.
demands of all the virtues while remaining neutral on their unity. If the virtues are unified, then the conflict problem vanishes. If the virtues are not unified, then one of two things will happen. Either every virtuous agent will prioritize one virtue over the other, or there will be different kinds of virtuous agents, e.g. some that lean toward justice, and others that lean toward benevolence (neither of them leaning too far either way).44

If it turns out that there are different kinds of virtuous agents, when justice and benevolence conflict these agents will do different things, but they will each do so in a way that is sensitive to the nature of the situation.45 The justice-prioritizing virtuous agent will do justice, incurring a cost in benevolence, but she will recognize and respond to the demands of benevolence as best she can. For example, she will incarcerate a criminal she has the power to release, in spite of the fact that he has repented and wants nothing more than to provide for his poverty-stricken family, but she will employ him within the prison and pay him enough to buy his loved ones what they need to survive. Likewise, the benevolence-prioritizing virtuous agent might release him, incurring a cost in justice, but demand that some lesser portion of his time and labor be dedicated to serving his community in symbolic payment for his crime. Thus, even if the unity of the virtues is false, and even if there is no universal agreement among virtuous agents for prioritizing one virtue over another when virtues conflict, the actions of virtuous agents can provide us with examples worth following.

44. I am assuming here that a virtuous agent will need to instantiate all of the virtues to some degree or another. It isn’t sufficient to be completely just and not benevolent at all. This might be considered a weak form of the unity of the virtues.

45. This could be exactly the sort of variation that Annas had in mind when she claimed that moral virtuosos will not always look alike. See my discussion of this suggestion on page 15.
Given the way IRA is formulated, as long as there is a virtuous agent who would characteristically perform an action in the circumstances, that action is right. If different virtuous agents would do different things, IRA implies that more than one action will be right. Because of this IRA should be read as a theory of permissibility, not obligation. However, IRA can still act as a theory of obligation in cases where every virtuous agent would perform the same action, since there would only be one permissible course of action.

Another strength of IRA is that it can accommodate uncodifiability, the idea that it is impossible to write down a system of rules for ethics which can be followed in every situation. Aristotle famously remarked that ethical principles only hold “for the most part.” 46 He suggested that virtue was a skill that required practice to master and not simply the application of a series of rules, much like the ability to play a musical instrument. 47 Many people are drawn to virtue ethics because they are dissatisfied with attempts to codify ethical principles in other moral theories like consequentialism and deontology. If virtue lies at the heart of ethics, and virtue is a skill that can’t be reduced to a system of rules, then not only can we explain why ethics is uncodifiable, we will have something to say about how to proceed when the rules fail.

Finally, IRA provides a natural connection between right action and moral development. Imitating virtuous agents is something we can actually do. 48 Furthermore, although none of us are perfectly virtuous, whatever virtue we have we likely obtained by following in the

46. Aristotle, 1094b11-22
47. See page 14.
48. Assuming we have access to virtuous agents. This is a problem to which I will return in chapter 6.
footsteps of our role models. As children we learn how to act by imitating the actions of our parents, teachers, and other leaders. Aristotle aptly noted that a person without a proper upbringing is unlikely to achieve success in virtue, just because they will not have had role models worth imitating. IRA nicely explains the importance of role models in the ethical life.

But in spite of its many strengths, IRA has a fatal flaw. In the remainder of this chapter, I will argue that any virtue ethical theory of right action based on the imitation of virtuous agents will fail. They will fail because there are circumstances in which those of us who are less than perfectly virtuous (i.e. all of us) need to take our character flaws into account when we act. If there are right actions to perform in such circumstances, and I will suggest that there are, what explains their rightness cannot be the characteristic actions of virtuous agents.

Which Agents? Whose Circumstances?

In everyday life, it is quite common for us to ask what we would do if we found ourselves in somebody else’s shoes. Because we are so familiar with talk of this sort, IRA strikes most people as perfectly intelligible: it just asks us to consider what virtuous agents would do in our shoes. But once we look closely at a few cases, we will see that the whole idea of substituting one agent for another within a particular set of circumstances is fraught with difficulty, and that these difficulties are only compounded when we try to substitute virtuous agents for non-virtuous ones.

In order to apply IRA to a particular case, the first thing we must do is identify the relevant virtuous agents and the relevant set of circumstances. But is it even possible to identify the relevant agents and circumstances in a way that allows IRA to render the proper
verdict in every case? I will call this two-part challenge the relevance problem. To see why it is a problem, it will be instructive to begin with an extremely naive reading of IRA: to determine the rightness of an action, take any virtuous agent, put him in your current spatio-temporal location, and follow his example. In other words, this naive version puts no restrictions on the relevant virtuous agents (any virtuous agent will do) and defines circumstances in terms of spatio-temporal location.

In very simple cases, even this naive version looks like it will work: if a baby boy is drowning in a river and you are the only person around and you are a capable swimmer, you should jump in and save him because that is what a virtuous agent would do if she were standing there. Now it is certainly true that many, perhaps even most virtuous agents would jump in if they were standing beside the river at that moment, but would all of them? Of course not. If the virtuous agent in question were unable to swim, jumping in would only endanger two lives and running for help would probably be the thing to do.

As discussed above, if different virtuous agents would do different things, then IRA would dictate that more than one action would be right. This, in and of itself, is not a problem. It is quite natural to think that ethical considerations do not always pick out a single course of action. Although this is certainly the right thing to say in many cases, it is obviously the wrong thing to say in the case of the drowning baby. Although some virtuous agents would jump in and others would run for help, these options are not both available to me if I am trying to do the right thing. If I am able to swim well enough to help the child, I ought to jump in. If I am not able to do so, I ought to run for help.

In order for IRA to properly judge our actions, the relevant virtuous agents must be only...
those who are similar to us in the relevant ways. Any version of IRA that wants to be taken seriously will need to flesh out the required similarity between an ordinary agent and the virtuous agents whose examples are relevant to the evaluation of his actions. Since there is no obvious way to determine ahead of time which traits are going to be relevant, this promises to be a very difficult task indeed. But this is only half of the relevance problem; IRA must also provide an account of relevant circumstances.

In our naive interpretation of IRA, we took the circumstances to be nothing more than the spatio-temporal location of the agent. But a number of other factors will need to be taken into account as well. Since many of our privileges and responsibilities are derived from our relationships, those facts will be especially relevant. If the question is how I ought to treat my wife at some particular moment, it will not do to ask how Socrates would treat her if he were standing in my current location (no matter how similar I am to Socrates) because Socrates is not married to my wife. Maybe I could ask what Socrates would do if he were married to my wife. But, since it is quite likely that a marriage between Socrates and my wife would be rather different than my marriage with her, that could also be misleading. As with the similarity of traits, there is no obvious way of determining ahead of time which aspects of a virtuous person’s relationships should be similar to mine and how similar they have to be. Given how complicated interpersonal relationships are, the required similarity could at times be quite significant. Any plausible version of IRA will need a way of identifying which features of an agent’s relationships are relevant and a way of saying how similar each of those features must be. The challenge of identifying all this constitutes the other half of the
In a nutshell, the relevance problem is the challenge of identifying the nature and degree of similarity required between the traits and circumstances of normal agents and those of the virtuous agents whose actions are relevant to the evaluation of their actions. In order to determine whether or not IRA is capable of addressing the relevance problem, let us construct a version of IRA that makes the virtuous agent and the agent under consideration as similar as possible:

**Virtuous Counterpart Imitative Right Action (VC-IRA):** An action is right for some agent in some set of circumstances if and only if that agent would characteristically do it after being instantaneously rendered virtuous.

Consider some agent, Ralph, whose actions we want to evaluate, and some set of circumstances in which Ralph has the opportunity to act. According to VC-IRA, the relevant virtuous agent is virtuous Ralph, an agent who is exactly like Ralph in every way except with regard to his virtue; i.e. whatever needs to be changed about Ralph in order for him to be virtuous will change, but everything else should be held constant. If there is only one way for Ralph to be virtuous, there will only be one virtuous version of Ralph, and whatever actions he would perform will count as right for real Ralph. If there are many ways that Ralph could be virtuous, then there will be many virtuous versions of Ralph, and, if each of them acts differently, still more right actions available to real Ralph.

---

49. It might be possible to recast the relevance problem entirely in terms of similarity of circumstances, including things like the ability to swim as features of circumstances rather than features of agents. However, the circumstance of being able to swim is different in important ways from the circumstance of standing by a river in which a baby is drowning. The first is more dispositional while the second is more situational. I have chosen to maintain the distinction between relevant agents and relevant circumstances for this reason.
The relevant circumstances are just Ralph’s actual circumstances, including his whole history of past action up to that moment. It is for this reason that VC-IRA requires the instantaneous transformation of Ralph’s character. We cannot simply say that Ralph should do what Ralph would do if he were virtuous, because such a formulation implies that we should consider the closest possible world in which Ralph is virtuous and do what he does there. But the closest possible world in which Ralph is virtuous is one in which Ralph has become virtuous through ordinary processes of character development, not through unrealistically instantaneous change, and thus one in which Ralph’s past is significantly different than it is in the actual world. In the closest possible world where Ralph is virtuous, Ralph would have a different history resulting in different relationships, beliefs, commitments, etc. Since any part of Ralph’s history could play a role in what he ought to do, and we have no obvious way of determining ahead of time which parts might be relevant, VC-IRA is constructed so that every part of Ralph’s past is held constant. The closest possible world in which Ralph is virtuous and every aspect of his past is identical to his past in the actual world is the one in which he is instantaneously rendered virtuous at the moment under consideration.

A side benefit of VC-IRA is that it needn’t draw a clear line between agents and their circumstances. Since both must be maximally similar, everything that could possibly be considered relevant (except for virtue-related differences) will be included either as a feature of the agent or of the circumstances. Thus, every feature of Ralph and his relationships will be included in one way or another.

VC-IRA works well in both the drowning baby case and the case involving my wife. If I
were standing on the shore of a river watching a baby drown, whether out of fear, malice, or lack of concern, I would see the error of my ways and dive in the moment I was rendered fully virtuous. Likewise, if I were struggling in my marriage and instantaneously became virtuous, I would be endowed with complete practical wisdom and would see the best way forward given the information available to me at the time. Although instantaneous character change like this is certainly unrealistic, there should be no conceptual difficulties involved. If we adopt a roughly Aristotelian account of virtue, the virtues are complex dispositions to act and react in particular ways. Even if there are people whose character is so corrupt they could never be made virtuous via the processes of normal psychological development, we could imagine an all-powerful being miraclously altering their psychology so that the relevant dispositions, no matter how complex, were the same as those of people who developed virtue over long periods of time.

If any version of IRA can solve the relevance problem, the virtuous counterpart version should be able to do so. It would be awfully hard to grant that the actions of an agent’s identical-except-for-virtue counterpart are not relevant while trying to argue that the actions of some other virtuous agent are. So, if VC-IRA fails to address the relevance problem, then those who seek a virtue-based theory of right action will need to begin looking for alternative theories rooted in something other than the imitation of virtuous agents.

Vicious Circumstances

Now that we have a grasp on one method we could use to establish the relevance of virtuous agents and their circumstances, we must confront a far more significant challenge to
IRA. Consider the possible courses of action available to a non-virtuous agent. Among those courses of action are some that relate directly to that agent’s lack of virtue. Imagine someone who is a coward. One course of action open to that person is the elimination of his cowardice. In fact, that course of action is one that he must take at some point in his life if he is to live virtuously and flourish. But as soon as we make appeal to the example of virtuous agents, as we must to apply IRA, that course of action disappears. We cannot put virtuous agents into circumstances in which the elimination of their own cowardice is a possible course of action, because virtuous agents have no cowardice to eliminate. By appealing to the example of virtuous agents, a crucial course of action that the non-virtuous agent ought to be considering goes missing.\textsuperscript{50}

To illustrate the problem, let us try out the method I suggested for applying IRA in the previous section. Ralph is married with a couple of kids. Unfortunately, he is also an alcoholic who tends to mistreat his family when he is drunk. One night he is invited to his brother’s bachelor party, a tempting opportunity to drink excessively. In order to find out what actions it would be right for Ralph to perform, we must ask what Ralph would do if he were instantaneously to become fully virtuous. Now being an alcoholic involves at least one deep-seated character flaw: a strong disposition to drink only excessively. But since deep-seated character flaws must be overcome on the road to virtue, every virtuous version of Ralph will have already overcome them. So, it is natural to presume that every virtuous version of Ralph will be disposed to drink only moderately at parties, if at all. In all

\textsuperscript{50} This style of criticism has been put forth in Williams 1995 and Johnson 2003.
likelihood, Virtuous Ralph would go to the party; after all it is a part of his brother’s wedding celebration.

If this is correct, then Real Ralph needs to take his tendency to drink excessively into consideration in order to make the right decision, but Virtuous Ralph does not. Some things it might be right for Real Ralph to do include staying home and spending a sober night with his family, going to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, or calling his brother, confessing his alcoholism, and requesting that the bachelor party be a dry one. But it seems that none of these things would be characteristically done by Virtuous Ralph. Thus, however wise these actions appear to be, VC-IRA must say that none of them are right. By applying IRA as I have suggested above, we have identified a virtuous agent, Virtuous Ralph, who is as close as possible to Real Ralph while still remaining virtuous. Unfortunately, the very fact that Virtuous Ralph is virtuous renders his example irrelevant. In cases like these, the vice of the agent seems to be an integral part of the relevant circumstances. I will call circumstances of this sort *vicious circumstances*.

The concern is that whenever we face vicious circumstances, IRA will fail to recommend the right actions. It will fail because in those circumstances we must take into consideration the presence of our own vices, something a virtuous agent can never do. But maybe we have been assuming too much about the nature of virtuous agents. Perhaps we ought to embrace an account of virtue that is more realistic, one in which virtuous agents will still have some weaknesses. According to an account like this, part of what it is to be virtuous involves knowing your own limitations and striving to avoid circumstances that would tempt you to act poorly. In the next chapter, I begin to develop such an account.
Chapter 4
Virtue for the Rest of Us

Often, when we are faced with temptations, the best thing for us to do is to flee rather than attempt resistance. For the most part, we ought to do this because we are people with flawed character. In order to work around our lack of virtue, we must come to understand how situations are likely to affect us and become skilled at managing them accordingly. However, I propose that this skill, which I will call vigilance, is not only something humans need to develop in response to flawed character, but as a necessary part of full human virtue. Virtue is not just about reacting appropriately to whatever situation we encounter, it also involves our efforts to control which situations we will face.

Ineliminable Desires and Limited Willpower

All of us have passions we must learn to control if we are to live well. Although the details can vary widely from person to person, we each find ourselves attracted to things we ought to reject and repelled by things we ought to embrace. I will call these problematic attractions and problematic repulsions, respectively. The appetites for food and sex are two of our most common problematic attractions, and our desire to avoid necessary pains is the
main problematic repulsion. For the sake of brevity, I will be discussing only these highly troublesome desires, but what I say should apply to other desires as well.\footnote{51. For example, the desires for power, fame, and honor are also very strong and have often been discussed alongside the desires I address here.}

Given that we find ourselves with these desires, what should we do about them? How do we master these passions that so often and so easily lead us astray? Perhaps the most straightforward way to master our unruly passions would be to alter them so that we desire all and only those things that are conducive to our flourishing. One of the main problems with this suggestion is that it is probably unattainable by actual humans. This isn’t to say that there are no desires for which this strategy can prove effective. For instance, it might be possible when a desire is for objects that nearly always threaten our flourishing. Thus, if a person finds himself with a longing to insult people, he can strive to remove this desire, perhaps by training himself to make compliments whenever possible. He might expect to have some measure of success in this because rarely, if ever, are humans required to be insulting in order to flourish. Once he learns to compliment rather than insult, this person would likely discover rather quickly that nearly all of his social interactions are more pleasant, rewarding, and productive than before, and this feedback could dramatically alter his desires.

But our paradigm cases of problematic attractions, the desires for food and sex, are far more complicated. Nourishment and sexuality both play important positive roles in our flourishing. Because of this, none of us should simply eliminate the desire for food, and most of us (at the very least, those involved in enriching sexual relationships) should similarly avoid the elimination of sexual desire. Both are great sources of fulfillment to us. We must
somehow try to eliminate the desires when they are bad for us, but hold on to them when
they are not. This turns out to be very difficult indeed because our desires tend not to be
fine-grained enough to pull it off. If we find ourselves with a desire for fattening food in
circumstances where it would be good for us to eat them, we will also tend to find that desire
in circumstances where it would not be good. If we find the body of our lover enticing, we
tend to find the bodies of others enticing as well. We often find that we cannot maintain the
healthy desires without also fostering their destructive cousins. Because of this, there appear
to be times when it is better to retain a problematic desire than to eliminate it because
eliminating it would require cutting ourselves off from legitimate sources of happiness.

Furthermore, some of our desires seem nearly impossible to eliminate, even if we wanted
to. Although the desire for food plays a key role in an individual person’s survival, the same
cannot be said about the desire for sex. Given how disruptive this desire can be, many people
throughout the course of history have attempted to eliminate it in order to pursue other
goods, most commonly religious and artistic ones. How do those who achieve lifelong
celibacy manage it? They do not usually do it by eliminating their sexual desires, they do it by
avoiding the situations that elicit them. Consider the following passages from two 16th
century manuals for the development of virtue, both written by monastic celibates:

(1) Be very guarded in your intercourse with women, and beware of
continuing alone with one for any length of time... Do not trust to your own
strength; and let not a habit of virtue inspire you with presumptuous
confidence. Let there be no improper interchange of presents, visits, or
letters, for these are so many snares which entangle us and reawaken
dangerous affections. If you experience any friendship for a virtuous woman
let your intercourse be marked by grave respect, and avoid seeing her too
often or conversing too familiarly with her.\footnote{52}

(2) Before the time of temptation we must avoid all persons and occasions that would expose us to sin. If it is necessary that we speak to such people, do it as speedily as possible; speak only on serious subjects with corresponding modesty and gravity. We must not permit the conversation to become familiar or frivolous. Do not presume on your own strength despite the fact that after many years spent in the world you have remained firm against the force of concupiscence. For lust often achieves in one instant what whole years could not effect.\footnote{53}

Those who have fought valiantly against sexual desire for their entire adult lives find that sexuality is, in the end, an essentially ineliminable opponent. At best, they strive to work around their desire, but they never entirely cast off the influence it has over them. Of course, to claim that the attainment of fine-grained control over our desires is exceedingly difficult is not to claim that it is truly impossible. It could be that those who have tried and failed simply haven't tried hard enough, or have been missing out on some technique that would bring success if only they knew how to utilize it. But the overwhelming testimony of history is that those who struggle to eliminate their problematic passions discover that those passions are far more deeply ingrained than they had ever imagined. It seems unlikely to me that perfect control over all of our desires is even psychologically possible for humans, but even if it is possible, it will almost certainly turn out to be extraordinarily rare and difficult. Because of this, I assume that fine-grained control over all our desires is, for all practical purposes,

\footnotetext{52}{Grenada 1844, Ch. 32} \footnotetext{53}{Scupoli 1817, Ch. 19}
unattainable.

Once we accept that some of our problematic desires are practically ineliminable, the obvious thing to try next is to overcome them. When a problematic attraction draws us forward, we must pull back; when a problematic repulsion pulls us back, we must push on. Thus, we might say that agents should eliminate all the problematic desires that can be eliminated, and develop the strength of will to overcome those that cannot. But recall the quotations I discussed above regarding monastic celibacy. Not only were the authors aware of the resilience of their problematic attractions, they were aware of their strength, and as a remedy to these desires they recommended not resistance, but avoidance.

It is almost certainly true that whatever success people have had in either monogamy or celibacy has come about in large part through the avoidance of circumstances where sexual temptations would be particularly strong rather than through successful resistance in deeply tempting situations. If most of those who have had success in these areas have achieved it by avoiding temptation rather than overcoming it, then we don’t have particularly good reasons for believing that the ability to resist very strong temptations is realistically achievable. The kind of character that people can realistically develop will enable them to resist temptations, perhaps even rather strong ones, but it will almost certainly not enable them to resist temptations of any strength whatsoever.

If we cannot realistically expect to eliminate all of our problematic desires, and we cannot realistically expect to develop the willpower to resist every temptation, is there any hope left for us at all? Indeed there is. We have already seen that simply avoiding temptation can be an effective means of dealing with it. If we are vigilant about which situations we allow ourselves
to face, even those of us who are straddled with rather crippling character defects can learn to live quite well.

The Skill of Vigilance

In order to better understand the nature of vigilance, let us return to the case of Ralph the alcoholic from the previous chapter. It is well known among those who treat alcoholics and other addicts that the real problem is not stopping, it is staying clean after you’ve stopped. In fact, most people who theorize about addiction like to distinguish between two types of addicts: wet addicts and dry ones. A wet addict is one whose current level of use makes it the case that if they were to stop using, they would experience withdrawal symptoms. A dry addict is one who has already passed through withdrawal, but because of the long term effects of their past use are likely to relapse unless they maintain constant vigilance. Many people have suggested that the long term effects of addiction are so profound that dry addiction should be considered a permanent state, one that can never be fully escaped.

Although relapse can occur for several reasons certainly one of the most common is known as cue-elicited craving. If a dry addict is confronted with sensory stimuli they have come to associate with drug use, they will often experience an intense desire to use, one that

54. Cocaine addiction poses a problem for this distinction because it apparently does not cause significant withdrawal symptoms. Assuming this is the case, withdrawal can play no serious role in a cocaine addict’s motivation to use, and thus they can effectively always be treated as dry addicts.

55. Lowenstein 1999 constructs an entire theory of addiction based on the phenomena of "cue-conditioned craving". Although I am not convinced that his theory proves successful, his discussion of craving and the role of cues is very helpful.
is, naturally, very hard to resist. Furthermore, if a dry addict consumes even a small amount of a formerly-abused drug they are very likely to rapidly resume problematic levels of use. Even those who successfully manage to avoid relapse for several years can be sorely tempted when they find themselves surrounded by old friends at the bar where they once drank the night away, and revert to their former ways very soon after their first drink.

It is this danger of relapse in the presence of the proper stimuli that lies behind many of the major strategies for overcoming drug addiction. Most people who have been diagnosed as severe addicts are encouraged to pursue lifestyles of total abstinence. In fact, due to what is sometimes called the cross-priming effect of certain drugs, some people who are addicted to one drug, say nicotine, will be encouraged to abstain from others as well, such as alcohol.\textsuperscript{56} Additionally (whenever possible) addicts are encouraged to sever relationships with old drinking buddies, avoid street corners where they purchased drugs, and seek counseling for any personal issues that may have been associated with their drug abuse. In place of these, addicts are encouraged to develop relationships with those who support their new lifestyle, especially with loved ones and fellow recovering addicts. Furthermore, lest they become overconfident in their abilities after prolonged success, addicts are encouraged to develop a follow-up system to check on their progress, and (when moderate use rather than total abstinence is an appropriate goal) to closely monitor their own consumption.

Of course, we needn't be alcoholics to see the need for vigilance. Consider the following passage from the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}:

\textit{\footnotesize 56. See Gardner and David 1999, 119 for a brief discussion of this phenomenon.}
We should consider the things that we ourselves are more readily drawn towards, for different people have different natural inclinations; and this is something we shall be able to recognize from the pleasure and the pain that things bring about in us. We should drag ourselves away in the contrary direction; for by pulling far away from error we shall arrive at the intermediate point, in the way people do when they are straightening out warped pieces of wood. In everything we must guard most against the pleasant, and pleasure itself, because we are not impartial judges in its case. We ourselves should feel towards pleasure as the elders of the people felt towards Helen, and repeat on every occasion what they uttered; by proposing to send pleasure packing like this we shall get things less wrong. In short, by doing these things we shall be best able to hit upon the intermediate.\textsuperscript{57}

Here we see Aristotle at his most practical. He recognizes that we are all untrustworthy when it comes to pleasure. We are all, in one area of our lives or another, a lot like alcoholics. We each have our own secret (or perhaps not so secret) weaknesses: temptations we know we are very unlikely to withstand. We must guard ourselves against them if we expect to live well, sometimes pulling far away from things that are pleasurable to avoid falling into error.

But as useful as avoidance strategies can be in working around our problematic desires, they will not always provide us with an acceptable solution to temptation. Sometimes when we find ourselves with a problematic desire that we can neither eliminate nor overcome, avoidance is ruled out. The most obvious cases of this kind occur when our temptation comes from a problematic repulsion rather than an attraction. If I am called upon to stand before an invading horde, it is quite likely that I will have some desire to flee. If that horde is

\textsuperscript{57} Aristotle, 1109b2
known for capturing their opponents and slowly, gruesomely torturing them to death, that desire might become nearly overwhelming. How should I respond to this challenge? When faced with a problematic attraction, quite often I do well to flee temptation, but when I am tempted to flee, fleeing is not an option.

Fortunately, there are other ways of being vigilant. Although I will not attempt to construct an exhaustive list, at least one more method seems worth mentioning: we can set our desires against themselves by constructing artificial connections between them. For example, a clever friend of mine once made a deal with himself in order to aid in his quest to stop smoking. He kept track of how much money he would have spent on cigarettes and used that money to save toward a big-screen television. In doing so, he pitted his desire for tantalizing new technology against his desire to smoke.

There are countless ways of applying this general strategy. If you are trying to quit drinking, you can join AA so that you must confess your failures to people whose good opinion you value, thereby setting your desire for the approval of your peers against your desire to drink. If you are afraid that you will flee an important battle, you can ask to be positioned at a point from which it would be difficult to flee safely, thereby setting your self-preservation instinct against itself. Seeking out friends of upright character, making yourself accountable to mentors, even just making promises to do things you would rather avoid can have the desired effect. Just as we can work around problematic desires by avoiding certain circumstances, we can learn to cope with them by creating systems of checks and balances within our desire structure.

This much seems clear: in order for those of us who are less than fully virtuous to live
well, we must learn to be vigilant. We must become skilled at managing the situations that face us before we actually face them so that we can best compensate for our lack of virtue. But what about those who are fully virtuous? Is there any reason to think that they will have a need for the skill of vigilance?

Vigilance for the Virtuous

I want to claim that the skill of vigilance is in fact a necessary part of full human virtue. Whether or not this claim is correct depends in part on what we mean by a virtue. Clearly vigilance is a skill that you and I ought to develop if we are to live as well as we can. Even those of us who do not struggle with alcoholism are well aware of the difficulty of resisting temptations of one kind or another, and we all know of situations we ought to avoid. But one might reasonably reserve the term ‘virtue’ only for character traits that would be possessed by the very best kind of person. Is vigilance a skill we would expect to find even among those who are ideally virtuous?

There are at least two reasons for thinking that vigilance is not such a skill. First, one might think that truly virtuous people are incapable of being tempted because their desires are perfectly attuned to the demands of each situation. Those who achieved this kind of virtue, which I will call detached virtue, would neither find themselves attracted by things they ought to reject nor repelled by things they ought to embrace. They would always act single-mindedly, without internal conflict, because they would lack any desire that ran

58. This appears to be the view defended in McDowell 1998.
contrary to the best course of action. On the other hand, even if it were granted that fully virtuous people had some problematic desires, one might still insist that they have the strength of will to resist those desires no matter how strong they might be. Those who possessed this kind of virtue, which I will call *heroic virtue*, would occasionally experience internal conflict (i.e. they would sometimes desire to do things they shouldn’t and not to do things they should), but they would never need to worry about giving in to those temptations because of their invincible willpower. If we adopted either of these two conceptions of virtue, it would be natural to assume that fully virtuous people would have no need to avoid temptations, either because they would never experience them or never give into them. And if this is correct, those who are fully virtuous would appear to have no need for the skill of vigilance.

I think there is good reason to believe that detached virtue is not actually a good state of being. When confronted with delicious food he cannot virtuously consume, beautiful things he cannot virtuously enjoy, distasteful things he cannot virtuously avoid; the detached agent’s problematic desires immediately vanish. However, this absence of internal conflict might be thought to reflect a defect in the detached person, rather than a virtue. Recognition of desirability usually comes, and generally seems like it ought to come, with at least a modicum of desire.

Imagine a virtuous person who is invited to a banquet where many rich and marvelous dishes are served. Moreover, assume that the virtuous thing to do is to partake of these dishes in moderation, savoring every bite, but never sliding into gluttony, and this places constraints on the amount of food the virtuous person will consume. The concept of detached virtue
would seem to imply that the virtuous person, after finishing the last bite of his moderately-sized serving, will have no desire whatsoever for anything else remaining on the table. If he had such a desire he would have to resist it in order to act moderately, and that kind of internal conflict is supposed to be absent in those who attain detached virtue.

If a person too easily resists the delicious food he cannot virtuously consume, it would seem to indicate that he doesn’t correctly appreciate the deliciousness of the food. Of course, lack of a felt desire doesn’t always imply lack of appreciation. Because we are constantly surrounded by things of value, it is simply impossible for us to fully attend to all of them all the time. Like the constant stream of stimulation our skin receives from our clothing, we must learn to ignore most of the values around us and attend only to a select few. Furthermore, when we are especially tired or depressed, we tend not to feel the pull of any desires at all, even if we ordinarily find them very desirable. Our felt desires do generally reflect our value judgments, but it can be a somewhat imperfect reflection. Although there are times when the absence of felt desire is compatible with a proper appreciation of value, the default position toward an object of value does seem like it ought to be one of attraction.

Thomas Hurka’s recursive account of virtue is built around this basic idea.\textsuperscript{59} Hurka begins by assuming that there are base-level goods and evils:

**Base clause about goods (BG):** Pleasure, knowledge, and achievement are intrinsically good.

**Base clause about evils (BE):** Pain, false belief, and failure in pursuit of achievement are intrinsically evil.

---

\textsuperscript{59} The following definitions are taken from Hurka 2001, 15-20
He then defines four recursion clauses:

**Loving for itself what is good (LG):** If \( x \) is intrinsically good, loving \( x \) (desiring, pursuing, or taking pleasure in \( x \)) for itself is also intrinsically good.

**Loving for itself what is evil (LE):** If \( x \) is intrinsically evil, loving \( x \) in itself is also intrinsically evil.

**Hating for itself what is good (HG):** If \( x \) is intrinsically evil, hating \( x \) (desiring or pursuing \( x \)'s not obtaining or being pained by \( x \)'s obtaining) for itself is intrinsically evil.

**Hating for itself what is evil (HE):** If \( x \) is intrinsically evil, hating \( x \) for itself is intrinsically good.

Hurka uses this account to construct notions of virtue and vice that have intrinsic value and disvalue within a broadly consequentialist framework:

**Definition of virtue and vice:** The moral virtues are those attitudes to goods and evils that are intrinsically good, and the moral vices are those attitudes to goods and evils that are intrinsically evil.

Although there are several aspects of Hurka's overall view that I take issue with, these core ideas strike me as basically correct. This is not surprising since Aristotle endorses

60. Three things in particular deserve brief comment. First, Hurka's notion of virtue is a very thin one. As an Aristotelian, I am inclined to think that virtue requires much more than simply loving the good and hating the evil. It requires the skill of knowing how to act as well. Since Hurka is content with a consequentialist theory of right and wrong, he excludes this skill from the theory of virtue.

Second, Hurka argues in chapter 5 that virtues are always less valuable than their objects. Although I cannot provide an argument here, I side with those who think that the goodness of virtue is of a different (and higher) kind than pleasure, knowledge, and the like. I find Hurka's principle that vices are always less bad than their objects similarly implausible. It seems to me that the pleasure of the sadist can be more evil, indeed much more evil, than the pain of the victim considered by itself.

Finally, in chapter 8, Hurka undertakes an extended criticism of virtue ethics. Many of his criticisms turn on the fact that he treats virtue ethics as a theory of objective rightness. If, as I have suggested, virtue ethics is better developed as a theory of subjective rightness, these criticisms miss their mark.
something rather similar:

The pleasure proper to a worthy activity is good and that proper to an
unworthy activity bad; just as the appetites for noble objects are laudable, those
for base objects culpable.\(^61\)

Essentially, Hurka and Aristotle are claiming that certain activities and objects have
objective intrinsic value (and disvalue), and that virtue involves being attracted to those
things that are valuable (and repelled by those things that are disvaluable). Virtue thus
includes a proper responsiveness to the terrain of objective values, and this responsiveness
involves more than simply our external actions, it involves our internal affective responses as
well.

Emotional engagement with the valuable things in life is a crucial part of well-being. We
cannot be expected to attend to every source of value, but when we are attending to one, we
ought to feel the pull of it. At the very least, the presence of attraction toward an object that
is truly valuable should not be considered a defect. Sometimes things can be very desirable
despite the fact that they cannot virtuously be pursued. In fact, this happens whenever a
lesser good comes into conflict with a greater one. It is tempting to think that in cases where
this occurs it is appropriate to have a certain amount of desire for the lesser good, but to
resist it in favor of pursuing the greater one. This is most clearly the case when the lesser good
is nevertheless a very important one.

Phillipa Foot describes a case involving a young pastor in Nazi Germany who was taken
away from his family, put in prison, and later executed because he refused to stop preaching

\(^61\) Aristotle, 1175b24-30 (emphasis mine)
against the ill-treatment of the Jews. Imagine that while he was in prison he was given the opportunity to renounce his anti-Nazi allegiance in exchange for his freedom and return to family. Here he would be faced with two competing goods: the good of family and the good of standing up for the defenseless. He must choose one. Assuming that the right thing to do is to stand up for the defenseless, what should he desire with regard to his family?

It seems to me that the only proper thing to say here is he should still strongly desire to be with them. There are two reasons for this. First of all, he should hold on to that desire because desires are motivationally significant. If he maintains a strong desire to be with his family then he will be motivated to escape if possible, to negotiate some other means of obtaining his release, etc. and these are things he ought to try. Moreover, it might motivate him to weep from time to time, which would seem to be an appropriate response, given the situation. But secondly, and I think more importantly, to stop desiring his family would be inappropriate because of his love for them. Part of what it is to love somebody is to desire their company even when circumstances make it impossible to be with them without violating the demands of virtue. The right thing for the pastor to do is to strongly desire that he be with his family, and yet resist that desire for the sake of a higher good.

So we have seen that there is something bizarre about detached virtue, something which makes us hesitant to view it as a good ideal. In fact, a human who achieved this kind of detachment would appear to be defective rather than virtuous. There will be times when it is appropriate even for fully virtuous people to feel a measure of desire for objects they cannot

62. Foot 2001, 94-96
virtuously enjoy, and thus our ideal of virtue should be compatible with the presence of certain conflicting desires. Naturally, if this is to be the case, our account of virtue ought to prescribe that we have the willpower to resist those desires lest those who are fully virtuous be led astray by them. Should we then be content with heroic virtue as our ideal?

It is clear that the ability to resist every temptation, no matter how strong, would be a very good thing to have. Even so, I do not think we should treat heroic virtue, all by itself, as our ideal. The problem with heroic virtue is that there is more than one way for our desires to be problematic. One worry about problematic desires is that they will lead us to act badly. Since those who possess perfect heroic virtue will have invincible willpower, there need be no concern about that.

But as Hurka and Aristotle have shown us, there is another worry: sometimes merely feeling a desire can detract from the overall goodness of one's life. This is most clearly the case whenever the desire is for something evil. Thus, a person fails to live well just by desiring to see an innocent creature writhe in agony, even if he never acts upon that desire. The presence of that desire, all by itself, can disqualify someone as virtuous.

Naturally, this claim has been contested. It is wholeheartedly rejected by Abelard, who sees the presence of contrary desire as essential to the exercise of distinctively human virtue, which is essentially just the willpower to overcome our evil desires:

In order that there be a fight, it is evident that there must be an enemy who resists, not one who actually gives up. This surely is our bad will, over which we triumph when we subdue it to the divine will, but we do not really extinguish it, so that we always have to fight against it. 63

There is certainly something to be said for finding merit in the struggles of those whose
desires are disordered, as Abelard does. Indeed, I argue below that we need a realistic standard of virtue which will be similar in many ways to the one Abelard adopts.\textsuperscript{64} But not even Abelard would suggest that this standard of virtue is truly ideal. We need to embrace it because the complete annihilation of our evil desires is “not possible for our weakness.”\textsuperscript{65}

Kant is often portrayed as embracing a similar view. At least at first glance, he seems to suggest that the best actions are the ones done from the motive of duty alone, without any supporting desires. So when Kant considers two philanthropists, one who does what is right because he finds “an inner satisfaction in spreading joy and rejoices in the contentment which he has made possible,”\textsuperscript{66} and the other who “does the action without any inclination, for the sake of duty alone,”\textsuperscript{67} it is the reluctant philanthropist who displays moral worth, not the willing one. One might conclude from this picture that Kant, like Abelard, believes that when our desires pull us toward the good and away from the bad this actually detracts from our ability to act with a good will.

Modern Kantians, like Barbara Herman, have argued that this interpretation of Kant is mistaken. If we interpret these passages against the broader backdrop of Kant’s work, she suggests that Kant believed those who find satisfaction in doing the right thing can still exhibit moral worth, “so long as the moral motive has priority over the satisfaction of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{63} Abelard 1995
\item \textsuperscript{64} In chapter 5.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Kant 1964a, 398
\item \textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
inclination.” But even if this interpretation of Kant is correct, it amounts to little more than permission for agents to have supporting desires. Kant still doesn't require the full alignment of desires in order to count as virtuous.

However, just as in Abelard, it looks as though this might be an accommodation based on our weaknesses, rather than an ideal. Kant holds that “human morality in it's highest stage can still be nothing more than virtue,” where ‘virtue’ is defined as “fortitude in relation to the forces opposing a moral attitude of will in us.” But he still claims that a “holy will” will have no desires that run counter to reason.

On the Aristotelian picture that I accept, the best type of person, the ideal, is one whose desires completely correspond with the terrain of objective values. I have argued above that this picture is compatible with the presence of some conflicting desires, but it needn't be compatible with all of them. In the case of the anti-Nazi pastor discussed above, the desire that needed to be resisted was a very good one: the desire to be with family. Those who might want to defend heroic virtue from an Aristotelian perspective could certainly restrict the set of conflicting desires that are compatible with virtue in a way that rules out the desire for the agony of others and other similarly repugnant desires. What I want to suggest here is that even desires for perfectly good objects can, in certain circumstances, be detrimental to a person's wellbeing despite their never being acted upon and should thus be avoided even by

68. Herman 1981, 382
69. Kant 1964b, 41
70. Ibid., 38
71. Baxley 2010, 55
heroically virtuous agents.

Say that some woman, Guinevere, is involved in a mutually enriching marriage with her husband, Arthur, and that one of the goals of their marriage is to maintain a level of intimacy with each other that is unique among their other relationships. Furthermore, theirs is the kind of marriage that Guinevere has good reason to preserve not only because she vowed to do so, but because the relationship is a good one. Through circumstances outside of her control, Guinevere comes into contact with another man, Lancelot. Lancelot is the sort of person with whom Guinevere could rightly have had a remarkable romance if only she were not already in a committed relationship with Arthur. It is, I suggest, fitting for Guinevere to feel some romantic desire for Lancelot, because he is a very desirable man whose company she truly enjoys. The simple fact that Guinevere finds herself with this desire is not, in and of itself, a failure of her commitment to love Arthur exclusively. Nevertheless, her commitment to Arthur generates strong reasons to avoid association with Lancelot in order to prevent the growth of that desire.

Assuming that Guinevere is an ordinary person, she must recognize that her attraction to Lancelot is likely to lead her to act in ways she should not. But assume for the moment that Guinevere is heroically virtuous, and thus that she is capable of resisting her problematic desires no matter how strong they become. One might still think that Guinevere should avoid Lancelot whenever possible because merely to desire another man too much will detract from the goodness of her relationship with Arthur, even if she never acts upon that desire. It would be appropriate for Guinevere to feel some desire for Lancelot whenever she does see him, but it would not be appropriate for her to seek out, or even fail to avoid,
situations in which she would desire him when she could just as easily do something else.

We see in this case a conflict between two competing goods, much as we saw in the case of the anti-Nazi pastor above. However, in the pastor’s case I suggested that the appropriate response was to feel the pull of family considerations and resist them to act in favor of a higher good. Why should we treat Guinevere’s case any differently? Why should we think that she has reason not only to resist feelings of attraction, but to prevent their very occurrence? What the pastor had to do in order to act well was stand up for the plight of the Jews. He had to be outraged and grieved by the way the Jews were being treated by the Nazis, and deeply motivated to stand up for them even at great personal cost. But those feelings were perfectly compatible with a deep love for his own family and a desire to be in their presence. The pastor didn’t need to cease caring about his family in order to care about the plight of the Jews. The marriage bond, on the other hand, is different. Marital fidelity does sometimes demand that we care for our spouses in an exclusive manner. What is at issue in marriage is a deep emotional commitment. In order to attain the highest kind of monogamous love, Guinevere must be in a particular emotional state, one that places unique value on Arthur, and there is nothing comparable to this in the case of the anti-Nazi pastor.

Marriage is not the only relationship that demands exclusivity of this sort. Friendships and other family relationships do as well, although certainly to a lesser degree. It is simply in the nature of certain relationships that they call us to place value on things in a way that is not completely objective, but informed by our loyalties. When this happens, conflict can arise between loyalty-influenced and loyalty-independent assignments of value. These conflicts can in turn generate reasons not to desire certain objects even when, objectively
speaking, those objects are quite desirable.

When I am searching for love, I ought to obtain as much information as possible about the desirability of the relevant candidates so that I can make the best-informed decision possible. But once a commitment has been made, I should do my best to be satisfied with what I have and this requires a certain deliberate neglect of other possible sources of value. Most of the time this neglect can be accomplished just by ceasing to pursue other alternatives, but occasionally it will require actively avoiding them. How deliberate I should be in the neglect of alternatives depends on how important my commitment is to what I already have. If the commitment is one as important as marriage, then I will have very strong reasons indeed not only to stop pursuing other potential lovers, but to avoid them whenever possible.

What if situations are such that I cannot avoid a desirable alternative? In such circumstances, since the absence of certain desires is what matters, it seems I really must work to prevent those problematic desires from arising. But notice that this comes with a cost: I must train myself to be insensitive to values that really are there. In general, this is something to be avoided whenever possible since part of what it is to live well is to be properly responsive to the value of things around us. Since it is likely that many if not most of these situations can be avoided, vigilance will minimize the negative impact of situations like these.

For example, say that Guinevere thoroughly enjoys the pleasures of poetry and that Arthur, for all of his leadership ability, integrity, and charisma, is not much of a poet at heart. Although Arthur occasionally enjoys reading poetry with Guinevere, he does not delight in it as she does and this is somewhat of a disappointment to her. Minor incompatibilities of this
sort are present in every marriage and learning to deal with these slight disappointments is part of what it takes to make a marriage work. Lancelot on the other hand really is a poet, and a good one at that. He can offer Guinevere something deeply fulfilling that her husband cannot. This isn’t to say that a marriage to Lancelot would be overall better than the one she has with Arthur, since of course Lancelot has his foibles too.

My suggestion has been that Guinevere should avoid spending too much time with Lancelot so that her appreciation of him doesn’t grow in a way that would be bad for her relationship with Arthur. But what if through some unpredictable chain of events they become trapped together on a desert island? In that case, assuming that it is good for Guinevere to maintain her exclusive emotional commitment to Arthur, she should try to prevent her attraction to Lancelot from growing. One way she could do this would be to focus on his aforementioned foibles and downplay the beauty of his poetry. In the circumstances, that might be the best thing she could do. But humans are malleable creatures and by doing this she would run the risk of developing in herself an excessive sensitivity to Lancelot-like foibles and a diminished sensitivity to the beauty of poetry. If Guinevere could avoid Lancelot altogether, then she could maintain a more fitting response to Lancelot-like strengths and weaknesses without threatening her affection for Arthur.

If I am correct in all this, then even heroically virtuous agents (who desire only good things and possess invincible willpower) have reason to develop a skill not often discussed in the literature on virtue. They will need to be attentive to the tendency of circumstances to induce desires in them that are problematic not because those desires might lead them to act badly, but because the very presence of the desires is detrimental to their flourishing.
Vigilance will enable them to avoid or otherwise manage circumstances that would generate these desires. Thus, like the rest of us, even those who are heroically virtuous must be vigilant.
Chapter 5
Realistic and Ideal Virtue

Toward the beginning of the previous chapter, I suggested two possible standards for defining a virtue: as a character trait that is necessary for us to live as well as we can, and as a character trait that would be possessed by ideal human beings. So far, I have been focusing primarily on the second standard, but I would now like to return to the first one. For Aristotle, the fully virtuous person was one whose desires perfectly matched his reason. Nevertheless, he understood that it was impractical to think that any of us could realistically get to the point where we had complete rational control over our passions. As a remedy he advocated the development of pseudo-virtues. With regard to what I have called problematic attractions, he prescribed the pseudo-virtue of continence for those who have not mastered the full virtue of temperance:

Both the continent man and the temperate man are such as to do nothing contrary to reason for the sake of the bodily pleasures, but the former has and the latter has not bad appetites, and latter is such as not to feel pleasure contrary to reason, while the former is such as to feel pleasure but not to be led by it.

Later on, Aquinas takes this account of continence and expands upon it, developing a
similar account of perseverance, a pseudo-virtue designed to address problematic repulsions:

Continence and perseverance are not perfections of the sensitive appetite. This is clear from the fact that unruly passions abound in the continent and persevering man, which would not be the case were his sensitive appetite perfected by a habit conforming it to reason. Yet continence, along with perseverance, is a perfection of the rational part, which withstands the passions lest reason be led astray.72

At times, Aquinas seems to agree completely with Aristotle that continence and perseverance are not truly virtues because the person who has mastered these pseudo-virtues can only do the rational thing without the full alignment of his desires. But in other passages, Aquinas does treat them as virtues, just virtues of a different kind. For example:

Continence has something of the nature of a virtue, in so far, to wit, as the reason stands firm in opposition to the passions, lest it be led astray by them: yet it does not attain to the perfect nature of a moral virtue by which even the sensitive appetite is subject to reason so that vehement passions contrary to reason do not arise in the sensitive appetite. Hence the Philosopher says (Ethics iv. 9) that continence is not a virtue but a mixture, inasmuch as it has something of a virtue, and somewhat falls short of virtue. If, however, we take virtue in a broad sense, for any principle of commendable actions, we may say that continence is a virtue.73

This broad sense of virtue is what I propose to examine here. Essentially Aquinas proposes that we adopt two standards for virtue: one that serves as our ideal, and one that is much more realistic. The ideal standard requires perfect alignment of reason and desire, but

72. Aquinas, 1a2ae 58.3
73. Ibid., 2a2ae 155,1. A similar point is made about perseverance in Ibid., 2a2ae 137,1.
the realistic standard only requires commendable action. This distinction is crucial for our purposes here. Recall that we embarked on this inquiry into the nature of virtue in order to understand how we should evaluate the actions of people like Ralph the alcoholic, people whose desires do not align perfectly with their reason. Despite this misalignment, alcoholics and others who face similar challenges can respond to them commendably. The alcoholic who comes to understand his condition can work hard to act well despite the presence of these unruly desires and this is exactly what we think he ought to do. And those who succeed at this difficult task are worthy of our admiration, for they have developed a kind of virtue.74

Contrary to Aristotle and Aquinas, I have argued above that even ideal humans are likely to experience some problematic passions. Whenever values come into conflict, it is appropriate for the fully virtuous person to experience conflicting emotions which must be either resisted or managed using vigilance. Nevertheless, I do believe there are important differences between ideal and realistic virtues. Based on what I’ve said earlier in this chapter, I propose that we slightly redraw the distinction as follows:

**Ideal Virtues** require the possessor to have the best set of desires.

**Realistic Virtues** are compatible with the presence of flawed desires.

In the previous chapter, I argued that the best set of desires is one that sometimes contains internal conflict because sometimes valuable things really do come into conflict. I also argued that those who are prone to feel this conflict will sometimes have reasons to avoid circumstances in which the conflicting desires are likely to arise. Thus, the ideally virtuous person is one who is both heroically virtuous and vigilant.

74. Philippa Foot labels this type of virtue “corrective.” (Foot 1997, 169)
This ideal is one we can wholeheartedly endorse as good. It would be wonderful if we could order our desires so that they were always appropriate to the value of their objects, even if those desires must sometimes be resisted, avoided, or altered. But in reality, our desires tend to be quite deeply disordered. Not only do we experience conflicts between appropriate desires, we experience rather inappropriate ones. It would also be wonderful if we could resist every temptation that we might face, but realistically we cannot. Yet despite the fact that we are so drastically different from ideally virtuous agents, we can correctly follow the same schema that they do: eliminate as many problematic desires as possible, resist those that influence us to act poorly, and exercise vigilance to manage circumstances where problematic desires might arise.

If we don’t accept this view, then there is a significant discontinuity between how the ideally virtuous people should go about living their lives and how the rest of us should. If they have no need to be concerned about what circumstances they face, then their example will not often be of much use to us. They will be able to walk boldly into any situation, confident in their ability to handle whatever challenges they encounter there. They will have no need for deep introspection about how circumstances will affect them, because circumstances won’t be able to affect them badly at all.

If we do accept the view I’ve been proposing, then even the lives of ideally virtuous people will be importantly similar to our own. Their concerns will obviously be different than ours: they will have fewer problematic desires to manage, and they needn’t worry about giving in to temptation. But they will still need to be mindful of the ways that situations affect them, they will still need to be cautious about which situations they face, and this helps
make the concept of virtue a little less alien than it would otherwise be.

**Vicious Circumstances Revisited**

In chapter 3, we were investigating the virtuous counterpart version of the imitative theory of right action:

**Virtuous Counterpart Imitative Right Action (VC-IRA):** An action is right for some agent in some set of circumstances if and only if that agent would characteristically do it after being instantaneously rendered fully virtuous.

We had been concerned to understand the implications of this view in vicious circumstances (i.e. those in which the presence of our vices plays an important part in our deliberations on how to act). In considering the case of Ralph, the alcoholic who had been invited to his brother's bachelor party, we had assumed that no version of Virtuous Ralph could be an alcoholic, and thus that no virtuous person would avoid the bachelor party as Real Ralph should. But, in light of our recent considerations about the nature of virtue, this might have been a mistake.

People are ideally virtuous only if their desires are perfectly harmonized with the demands of virtue. Since drinking to excess is contrary to the virtue of temperance and part of what it is to be an alcoholic is to have a strong desire to drink to excess, no alcoholic can be ideally virtuous. On the other hand, people can be realistically virtuous as long as they can resist or work around the pull of their flawed desires. So, as long as the alcoholic is able to resist his desire to drink excessively, or work around it by exercising vigilance, he might qualify as realistically virtuous.

If we adopt a realistic account of virtue, one that allows virtuous agents to keep some of
their problematic inclinations in check rather than completely eliminating them (perhaps because they are ineliminable), we can see how IRA might try to address some of the concerns mentioned above. If Virtuous Ralph knows that he is not capable of resisting his desires in certain circumstances, then he can exercise vigilance to avoid those circumstances. In other words, he will act exactly as Real Ralph ought to act. So can we repair VC-IRA just by appealing to the actions of realistically virtuous agents?

Realistically Virtuous Counterpart Imitative Right Action (RVC-IRA): An action is right for some agent in some set of circumstances if and only if that agent would characteristically do it after being instantaneously rendered realistically virtuous.

Unfortunately, as attracted as I am to a realistic account of virtue, I don't think this will solve the relevance problem. The problem lies in establishing exactly how virtuous the Realistically Virtuous counterpart must be. As we defined it in the last chapter, realistic virtue enables a person to act well, only without the full alignment of his desires. But what exactly does this person look like?

The Aristotelian picture is that the continent person acts just like the temperate one, only without the alignment of desires. In the case of the alcoholic, this would be a person who has an extremely strong desire to drink excessively, but who manages to drink in moderation nevertheless. But if this is the standard of realistic virtue, then it isn't actually all that realistic. Not only are we generally unable to fine tune our desires, we cannot expect to resist our most problematic desires once they've become fully engaged.

If Virtuous Ralph were perfectly continent then he really ought to go to the bachelor party. What inclined us to think that Real Ralph ought to avoid the party was not the
intrinsic disvalue of feeling the desire to drink excessively, it was the threat of his bad behavior. So, if perfect continence is the standard of realistic virtue, the relevance problem remains unsolved. What we really need in order to solve the relevance problem is somebody who not only feels contra-rational desires, but has a genuine concern that he will give in to them, for only that person will act as Real Ralph should act. Can we really afford to lower the standard of realistic virtue this far?

Perhaps we can. Maybe the most that humans can hope for is to develop enough self-knowledge to understand our own weaknesses and do our best to work around them. When we look at the world around us, it looks like even the most virtuous people are still susceptible to at least a few temptations. They usually manage to act well not by resisting those temptations, but by exercising vigilance.\textsuperscript{75} Realistically speaking, we might just be unable to grow into the kinds of beings that Aristotle and Aquinas think we can be. It might be impossible for us to achieve complete continence, let alone temperance, in the most tempting of circumstances. If so, then the only realistic standard for human virtue will be one that is always essentially incomplete, one that requires the exercise of vigilance in a much wider variety of circumstances.\textsuperscript{76} Based on these insights, we could redefine the standard of realistic virtue to make it even more realistic:

\textbf{Realistic Virtues} are the dispositions required to live well\textsuperscript{77} in most cases despite the presence of flawed desires and a tendency to give in to very strong

\textsuperscript{75} See my earlier discussion of this point on page 53.

\textsuperscript{76} My claim here is that for each of us there will be times to flee temptation, not that we should always flee. Sometimes we ought to face temptation head on because doing we will help us to grow in virtue.
temptations.

This standard does appear to be the best we can realistically hope to achieve. This is, admittedly, not a very clearly defined standard due to the vagueness of “most cases” and “very strong temptations.” This kind of virtue will come in degrees depending on how many cases there are in which the agent acts well, and how strong the temptations can be before the agent will give in to them. The upper bound will be a person with perfect continence who acts well in every case and doesn’t give in to any temptations. Could this kind of standard resolve the relevance problem for IRA?

Fred struggles with anger, but the struggle is confined to one specific area: he has a very hard time speaking kindly to people who disagree with his political views. In Fred’s case this anger problem doesn’t have deep roots, it’s one that could easily be overcome by a few weeks of diligent effort. Fred’s brother, Barney, is extremely vocal about his own political views, which are in direct opposition to Fred’s. Barney’s birthday is coming up and he invites Fred to come, but since it is an election year, Fred knows that if he goes, he is quite likely to get pulled into a political conversation in which he will lose his temper and start screaming at people.

Structurally, Fred’s case is essentially the same as that of Ralph, the alcoholic. He has a known character flaw which provides him with a reason to avoid a situation in which he is likely to act very badly. However, unlike Ralph’s alcoholism, Fred’s anger problems are relatively easy to overcome. 78 If he tries to be nice to people with relatively minor political

77. I use “live well” as a placeholder term. If one were to build a theory of right action on the notion of realistic virtue, then this would need to be fleshed out in a way that did not appeal to rightness, perhaps by an appeal to the concept of flourishing. Since the theory of right action that I will develop in the next chapter does not depend on realistic virtues, I will be able define realistic virtues as dispositions to do the right thing in most circumstances.
disagreements, he will succeed. And if he continues to stretch himself gradually by spending time with people of increasingly divergent views, he will be able to handle some time with Barney in short order.

What should Fred do about the birthday party invitation? Let’s say that all things considered, the right thing for Fred to do in this case is to stay home. The party isn’t all that important to Barney, and their relationship will go much better in the long run if Fred waits until he has better control over his anger problem. Can RVC-IRA recommend this action? It could only do so by lowering the standard of realistic virtue to the point where a person who has learned how to be vigilant about relatively trivial anger problems will count as virtuous. But surely this is going too far.

If we are going to build an account of right action on the emulation of other agents, those agents need to possess some features that make them worthy of emulation. Ideally virtuous agents do possess features of that kind. They have perfect perception of the relevant values and their desires are perfectly aligned with those perceptions. Realistically virtuous agents also possess features of that kind as long as we don’t set the standard too low. Although they can have some disordered desires, they cannot have too many of them and they cannot be overly susceptible even to the ones they have. If realistically virtuous people are to serve as role models, they need to stand out as people of highly developed character, people worthy of our admiration for their success in the struggle against temptation. A person who has not yet

78. I am simply stipulating that Fred’s anger problem is a trivial one for the purposes of this example. I don’t mean to imply that all anger problems are trivial. I accept that some people’s anger issues are more analogous to Ralph’s alcoholism.
overcome a fairly trivial character problem will not qualify.

But the only people who would do what Fred ought to do are people with easily overcomable character defects. They might be vigilant enough to work around these defects, but that all by itself is hardly enough to view them as overall good role models. In fact, the only reason Fred has for trying to emulate them in this case is that they happen to do the right thing, which is just to put the virtue ethical cart before the horse. Since we are trying to generate a theory of right action based on an independently specifiable notion of virtue we can't simply define virtue as a tendency to do what is right. Yet it seems as though that's exactly what we must do in order to pick out a realistically virtuous agent who does what Fred should do. What IRA set out to do was identify virtuous agents independently of the rightness of their actions, and then account for ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in terms of those agent’s characteristic actions. If we lower the standard of realistic virtue too far, this becomes grossly implausible.

It is still open to the defender of RVC-IRA to deny that Fred’s staying home is truly right. After all, it’s only because of his juvenile character that he must skip out on his brother’s birthday party. If he were only a little bit more virtuous, he really ought to go. Maybe whenever it is inadvisable for us to do what a realistically virtuous person would do in our circumstances due to the presence of a character weakness, whatever we do will be wrong in the subjective sense.

To make this suggestion work, it would be necessary to draw a distinction between action guidance and action assessment.79 In ordinary cases, when we say that something is subjectively wrong, that implies two things: that it reflects badly on the agent, and that it
should not be done. However, there might be cases in which all of the options facing an agent will reflect badly on her (‘wrong’ in the action assessing sense), yet there is still some action which ought to be taken (‘right’ in the action guiding sense).

Returning to the case of Fred, a defender of RVC-IRA could claim that due to Fred’s weak character, every option available to him regarding his brother’s birthday party is wrong in the action assessing sense, but staying at home is right in the action guiding sense. That is, staying home is the thing to do, but it still reflects poorly on Fred. There are two things to say here. First of all, this evaluation of Fred’s action strikes me as incorrect. The decision to stay home does reveal that Fred has a character flaw, but his decision also reflects a sober understanding of his own limitations and an intention to improve himself and his relationship with others. I’m inclined to say that this action actually reflects rather well on Fred, despite (or maybe even because of) his background character weaknesses. I will return to this type of case below. For now it will suffice to say that it seems unnecessarily demanding to claim that his action is subjectively wrong just because a more virtuous person would be able to do something better.

More importantly, this move betrays the overall insufficiency of RVC-IRA. There is an action that Fred ought to take, but no virtuous agent (realistic or otherwise) would perform it. Defenders of RVC-IRA can distinguish action guidance from action assessment, but in doing so they take on the burden of providing a satisfactory account of action guidance.

79. This is a strategy that Rosalind Hursthouse embraced in her attempt to handle moral dilemmas(Hursthouse 2001, 71-79). I will touch on Hursthouse’s view of dilemmas in the next chapter when I discuss choiceworthiness.
What is it that makes Fred's decision to stay home the thing he ought to do? The answer to that question can't have anything to do with the characteristic actions of virtuous people, we've already exhausted all of those resources. At best, RVC-IRA will be able to provide a partial appraisal of Fred's actions, and it will need to be supplemented by an independent account of action guidance.80

So it seems that RVC-IRA must fail as an overall theory of right action, and IRA along with it. The agents who are most worthy of our admiration are those who are ideally virtuous, but they are clearly too virtuous for us to imitate. IRA does better when it appeals to realistically virtuous agents because they are much more like us with regard to the susceptibility to failure. But they can also be too virtuous for us to imitate and the only way to make them similar enough to us for imitation to be appropriate in every case is to rob them of their overall admirability. IRA can claim that actions we should perform in vicious circumstances are wrong in the action assessing sense despite being right in the action guiding sense, but this renders the view both overly demanding and incomplete.

We should not conclude from this that the concept of realistic virtue is useless to us. Virtue ethics is about much more than telling us the right thing to do. It is primarily about telling us what kinds of lives to live, what kinds of people to be. The realistic standard is the one that we should be trying to live up to. We must recognize that we are not anywhere near

80. van Zyl 2011 has claimed that we could derive action guidance from the fact that we ought not do what wicked people characteristically do. This is an odd suggestion because it requires an independent account of wickedness, creating a two-pole aretic system. Furthermore, this type of account will also fall prey to its own version of the relevance problem, requiring us to identify the relevant wicked agents in order to derive negative action guidance from their characteristic actions. I can see no reason to believe that this view will be any more fruitful than ordinary IRA.
the ideal, and probably never will be, so we need to put checks and balances in place accordingly. We start out with a bundle of passions that are more-or-less attuned to the demands of virtue, we strive to eliminate the problematic desires that we can, resist the others, and avoid situations that stimulate the others. By following this general prescription, we will walk the path of virtue, becoming as virtuous as we can, but there doesn't appear to be any way of stretching this insight into a satisfactory theory of right action for virtue ethics.
Chapter 6
Realistic Virtue Ethics

We first came to the imitative view because of Proto Virtue Ethics (PVE), the claim that virtuous people always do what is subjectively right. Of course, this is only true of ideally virtuous or perfectly continent people. We now understand that we cannot imitate these people in vicious circumstances, but we might still try to make use of them in some other way. If, as has been suggested above, what we are most interested in is a theory of subjective wrongness, a theory which is closely related to standards for guilt and anger, a plausible alternative might best be found by appealing to the characteristic attitudes of virtuous agents.

Approval-Based Virtue Ethics

Recall the case of the doctors that I used to illustrate Parfit’s three different senses of ‘right’. In that case, an ideally virtuous observer who understood the situation well enough would disapprove of Dr. Scarlet for her murderous intent, and would disapprove of Dr. Mustard for acting on irresponsibly ill-informed beliefs about the safety of the medicines he prescribes. We would also not expect such a virtuous person to disapprove of Dr. Peacock, since her motives were good and her beliefs were well justified even though her action was
the only one that would result in the death of the patient. Thus, only Dr. Scarlet's and Dr. Mustard's actions will be subjectively wrong, just as they should be. Likewise if we consider the case of Ralph, the alcoholic, or of Fred struggling to control his anger, it seems reasonable to expect that these observers would not disapprove of their efforts to overcome or work around their characteristic weaknesses in vicious circumstances.

So we can define subjective wrongness as follows:

An act is **subjectively wrong** iff a qualified observer would characteristically disapprove of the agent for performing it.

A **qualified observer** is an ideally virtuous person who knows both what the agent believes and should believe in the circumstances and who is fully attentive to this knowledge.

There are two aspects of this view that will require further explication: the nature of the observer, and the nature of the disapproval. In order to count as a qualified observer, a person must be ideally virtuous. Ideally virtuous people have fully developed their acute moral perception and the associated dispositions to act in accordance with them. Because of this they can be relied on to do what is subjectively right in every situation, and I will argue below that they can also be relied on to see what is worthy of approval and disapproval in the actions of others given sufficient information about their beliefs.

Although realistically virtuous people are admirable and we should seek to emulate them in many cases, we cannot safely ground an approval-based view on them alone. Recall that the difference between ideally virtuous and realistically virtuous agents is that ideally virtuous agents always have attitudes that properly reflect the value of their objects. On the other hand, realistically virtuous agents can have disordered desires, ones that do not properly
reflect the value of their objects. I take it that the kind of moral perception that is relevant to Aristotelian views about virtue is a perception that is rooted, at least in part, in our affective states. Part of how virtuous people perceive what to do is by attending to their affective responses. If this is right, then the realistically virtuous person won't be able to perceive situations in the same way that ideally virtuous agents can, even if they somehow manage to act in the same way. As a matter of fact, this insight might rule out the possibility of perfectly well-behaved continent people. Perfect continence allows people to act well without the full alignment of their desires, but in order to act well in every situation, they would still need to know what to do. If disordered desires disrupt moral perceptions, then even fully continent people will not always know what to do. If we are looking for a standard of virtue that we have some hope of actually achieving, realistic virtue is the way to go. But if we are seeking a sound theoretical footing for an approval-based theory of right action, we cannot utilize realistically virtuous agents.

Obviously, in order for this account to succeed there need to be real attitudes of moral approval and disapproval that play the appropriate roles and those attitudes need to be present in ideally virtuous agents. They need to be attitudes that don't depend on prior judgments of right and wrong, since that would render my account circular. They need to be attitudes toward agents for the actions they perform and not merely attitudes toward actions or states of affairs. And they will need to be distinct from other non-moral forms of approval and disapproval, like purely intellectual or aesthetic ones. I think there is good reason to believe that there are such attitudes, and I will strive to motivate this claim a little more below, but a complete account of moral approval and disapproval will fall outside the scope
of my work here.

Given the above definition of wrongness, it is relatively straightforward to define the other core deontic concepts in the standard way:\textsuperscript{81}

An act is \textit{permissible} iff it is not wrong.
An act is \textit{obligatory} iff it is wrong not to do.
An act is \textit{right} iff it is either permissible or obligatory.\textsuperscript{82}

Furthermore, since this account is approval-based, it comes with a desirable feature that many other virtue ethical theories lack: a comparison principle. Assuming that approval and disapproval come in various strengths (as is plausible), not only can this theory determine which actions are right, wrong, obligatory, and permissible, it can (at least sometimes) tell us that one action is better than another:

An act is \textit{better than another} iff a qualified observer would more strongly approve of (or less strongly disapprove of) the agent for performing it rather than the alternative.

This comparison principle is important because it enables us to define some other, more sophisticated moral concepts:

An act is \textit{supererogatory} iff it is permissible and better than at least one permissible alternative.
An act is \textit{merely permissible} iff it is permissible but not supererogatory.

Some philosophers have objected to views like mine on the grounds that they cannot

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{81} In the interest of tidiness, I have dropped the word ‘subjective’ from the remaining definitions. At this point, it should be clear enough to the reader that there are both subjective and objective versions of each of these concepts. I am only trying to account for the subjective versions.
\item \textsuperscript{82} Since every obligatory action will be permissible, the set of all right actions will be coextensive with the set of all permissible actions. The term ‘right’ is ambiguous, meaning either permissible or obligatory. My definition intentionally reflects that ambiguity.
\end{itemize}
produce an adequate account of the supererogatory. For instance, Frans Svensson has argued that virtuous observers will “characteristically disapprove of anything but the best action in the circumstances.”83 Since nothing but the best will be approved of, Svensson claims that the resulting theory will leave no room for merely permissible actions, and thus no room for the supererogatory. Perhaps we simply have different intuitions here, but I can see no particular reason why we ought to think that virtuous people will disapprove of anything but the best action in a set of circumstances. In paradigm cases of supererogation, it is generally quite plausible to think that even fully virtuous people might approve of something less than the very best. It should be clear by now that I am sympathetic to standards of virtue that are much less demanding than Svensson’s, and it seems to me that the burden of proof is on someone who seeks to defend the more burdensome view.84

Mine is admittedly a somewhat thin notion of supererogation. Supererogation is typically defined as an action above and beyond the call of duty. It is built into my definitions that whenever you do something permissible you have already met the call of duty. If there were an unsatisfied duty in the neighborhood, the action under consideration wouldn’t be permissible. Whenever there is more than one permissible action, both of them satisfy the call of duty. So, if one of them is better than the other, that one is (in some sense) beyond the call of duty. Whatever it is that makes the better action better isn’t morally required, it is optional. This optional better-ness is what my notion of supererogation captures.

83. Svensson 2010, 266
84. A related discussion of virtue ethics and the supererogatory can be found in Kawall 2009
One might object that paradigm cases of supererogation involve more than this thin notion. For instance, they usually involve great personal cost to the agent: like a soldier jumping on a grenade to save his friends rather than seeking cover. My notion of supererogation will apply to much more mundane cases. Say that someone is at a grocery store trying to make a decision between two types of breakfast cereal. If it's permissible to buy either one, but better to buy one rather the other, then buying the preferred cereal will count as an instance of supererogation, despite the fact that it doesn't involve any serious personal cost to the agent.

There are two things I can say to this line of objection. I am inclined to say that buying the better cereal really is supererogatory, just minimally so. We don't usually pay attention to minor cases of supererogation like this, but in a very real sense these actions are above and beyond the call of duty. Remember that the type of approval involved in these comparative evaluations is distinctively moral. The cereal purchase can't be preferred just because a qualified observer likes the way that cereal tastes, it must be because an observer morally approves of the agent more strongly for purchasing it rather than the alternative. In the case of breakfast cereal choices, this might have something to do with the agent’s attentiveness to the working conditions of those who made the cereal, the long-term environmental impact of the ingredients, or things of that nature. So even when there is no serious personal cost to the agent, there is still something morally significant in play.

Moreover, those who continue to find my definition unsatisfactory can easily build a more robust notion on top of mine. Every paradigm example of supererogation will satisfy my definition. The concern is only that it is not demanding enough. All the objector need do
is add further conditions to the definition as needed. For example:

An act is **robustly supererogatory** iff it is supererogatory and involves a serious personal cost to the agent performing it.

In chapter 4, I briefly entertained the idea that defenders of RVC-IRA could draw a distinction between action guidance and action assessment in order to handle cases involving people like Fred who struggle with easily overcomable character defects. I suggested that this was the wrong way to handle Fred’s case, but there could still be other cases which are best handled in this way. If so, then we would need a way of identifying which actions are right in the action guiding sense. I will reserve the term ‘right’ for actions that are right in both the action guiding and action assessing sense, and I will introduce a new term, ‘choiceworthy’, for actions that are right in the action guiding sense.

An act is **choiceworthy** iff it is either right or the best of the agent’s effective choices.85

Rosalind Hurthouse believes this is the best way to handle cases in which a person, through their own fault, ends up in a situation that no virtuous person would ever face:

The man who has induced two women to bear a child of his by promising marriage, can only marry one, but he may not be in an irresolvable dilemma; it may be worse to abandon A than B, and let us suppose he makes ‘the morally right decision’ and marries A, perforce breaking his promise to B and condemning her child to illegitimacy. He merits not praise, but blame, for having created the circumstances that made it necessary for him to abandon B; he should be feeling ashamed of himself, not proud, and so on.86

85. I have defined choiceworthy as a binary notion. If a degree notion were desirable, it could be constructed using the comparison principle.

86. Hurthouse 2001, 47

95
The virtue ethics account refuses to assure him that in marrying A he would be doing 'a morally right act - a good deed'. He will not, in marrying A, be 'doing what a virtuous agent would, characteristically, do in the circumstances', because no virtuous agent would have got himself into these circumstances in the first place.\(^{87}\)

I take it that Hursthouse's 'morally right decision' is her version of my 'choiceworthy' and 'morally right act - a good deed' is her version of my 'right'. In terms of the approval-based view, this would be to say that a qualified virtuous observer would disapprove of the doubly-engaged man for marrying A, but since he would be disapproved of even more for marrying B, he ought nevertheless marry A.

As in the case of Fred, I am skeptical that this is the best way to handle cases like these, and in a moment I will suggest what I take to be a better way. In fact, I am inclined to think that there is no such thing as a case in which all of an agent's options are wrong in the subjective sense. If I am right, then virtue ethics will have no need to appeal to the notion of choiceworthiness. However, since the approval-based view can handle those cases if they really do exist, those who disagree with me on this point can still embrace the view as I've laid it out so far.

**Qualified vs Ideal Observers**

The account of wrongness I've just proposed is similar to an ideal observer form of virtue ethics that has recently been defended by Jason Kawall:

An action is wrong for an agent in a given set of circumstances iff an

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 50-51
unimpaired, fully-informed virtuous observer would disapprove of the action.\textsuperscript{88}

There are two notable differences between Kawall’s view and my own. In his view, the virtuous observers need to be fully-informed, and their disapproval is of the action. In my view, the virtuous observers need only understand what the agent believes and should believe, and their disapproval is of the agent.\textsuperscript{89} Both of these differences are derived from the fact that my account is specifically aimed only at defining the subjective sense of ‘wrong’. Kawall is clearly trying to account for something more like the objective sense. One of the main reasons Kawall thinks he must do this is to provide an adequate response to an objection posed by Robert Louden:

There are cases in which a man’s choice is grounded in the best possible information, his motives honourable and his action not at all out of character. And yet his best laid plans may go sour… My point is that virtue ethics is in danger of blinding itself to the wrongful conduct in Oedipal acts [i.e. wrong acts performed by good agents], simply because it views the Oedipuses of the world as honourable persons and because its focus is on long term character manifestations rather than discrete acts.\textsuperscript{90}

Kawall’s analysis of Louden’s point is crucial:

Oedipus is presumably a virtuous agent, and thus on the standard virtue theorist’s account of right action, his actions (such as sleeping with his mother) are morally right. He does what a virtuous agent (Oedipus himself!)

\textsuperscript{88} This is not a direct quote from Kawall, but the material from which I’ve derived this formulation can be found in Kawall 2002, 208.

\textsuperscript{89} To be exact, the disapproval is of the agent for the action, but this is still disapproval of the agent.

\textsuperscript{90} Louden 1986, 71-72
would do in those circumstances. Intuitively, however, this seems quite wrong. Oedipus severely regrets his actions, which suggests that, at the very least, a virtuous agent would not consider all of Oedipus’ actions right.  

I believe that both Louden and Kawall are being led astray by the Oedipus-style cases because they’ve failed to draw the distinctions that Parfit and Gibbard have drawn our attention to. Just as Parfit predicted, here is a situation where “we and others may needlessly disagree.” Virtue ethicists are interested in a certain kind of reasoning: a way of taking beliefs about the world around us and moving from those beliefs to actions in an excellent way. Did Dr. Peacock (the counterpart to Oedipus in my own case) act excellently in offering the prescription she did? Yes. Did it turn out badly? Yes. Does that imply that in the future she ought to prescribe something different than what she reasonably believes is best supported by the medical evidence? Of course not. A good doctor gives the treatments she believes will help her patients based on her mastery of medical knowledge. Dr. Peacock was a good doctor, and what she did was the right thing to do, in the subjective sense of ‘right’. Certainly, what she did was wrong in the objective sense, but that is no criticism of her, and it doesn’t count against any theory that claims she acted well given the information she had.

The fact that Oedipus and Dr. Peacock regret their actions should not affect our judgement of how well they acted. Sometimes we ought to have regrets about our own subjectively right actions. What we properly regret when that happens is not the fact that we exercised our practical reason as we did, but that we did not have access to information that

91. Kawall 2002, 199
92. Parfit 2009, 151
would have changed the way we acted. This kind of regret will properly motivate certain kinds of actions. If after discovering the facts, Oedipus felt just fine about his marriage to his mother, that *would* be a kind of moral failure. He ought to tear his clothes and weep in sorrow (though he should probably refrain from hastily gouging out his eyes). Upon discovering that her prescription killed the patient, Dr. Peacock should apologize to Mr. Body’s family and loved ones.93 Neither of them should conclude that they acted poorly, because they did not. When future challenges face them, they should exercise the same virtues that failed to pay off before. Since they can’t escape the fact that they have limited access to information, they have no other choice.

If virtue ethics is not intended to provide a theory of the objective sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, then the virtuous observers appealed to in approval-based variants of virtue ethics don’t typically need to have full-information. Essentially, what a virtuous observer is evaluating is whether or not the agent under consideration is responding well to his apparent situation. In order to evaluate this, the virtuous observer need only understand how the situation appears to the agent, and how the situation ought to appear to the agent.94 Once this information is understood, the virtuous observer will be in a position to see the morally salient features of the agent’s apparent situation and determine which actions would

93. Of course, apologies come in many forms. What I have in mind here is something like, “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to save your husband.” This kind of apology expresses sympathy and regret, but not an admission of wrongdoing. I take it that a much stronger apology would not be appropriate: “Please forgive me for the death of your husband.”

94. Because my account of subjective wrongness is disjunctive, both of these pieces of knowledge are necessary. An action that is wrong in the belief-relative sense might not be wrong in the evidence-relative sense and vice versa.
constitute responding well to them and which actions would not.

Because of this, the amount of information a virtuous observer needs in order to count as a qualified observer varies according to the epistemic situation of the agent under evaluation. Only if that agent has access to full-information, will the virtuous observer need access to it. Since humans never have access to that kind of information, my theory will not require qualified observers to be fully-informed in order to evaluate human actions.\(^5\) This is a significant benefit of my view, since there are many well-known difficulties with full-information theories.\(^6\)

Despite the fact that my theory does not require virtuous observers to have full-information, one might still object that it requires too much of them. Is there any particular reason to expect that virtue will grant its possessor the ability to correctly perceive the morally salient features of somebody else’s situation?\(^7\) Robert Johnson has suggested that we should not expect this, especially when taking into account the situations of those who are morally immature:

> It is one thing to construe the completely virtuous person as responding appropriately to her circumstances. It is quite another to construe her as responsive to features of someone else’s circumstance relevant to that other

\(^5\) The only time a virtuous observer could be required to have such information would be if she were evaluating the actions of an omniscient being. My theory does imply that only those who are omniscient are truly qualified to evaluate the actions of those who are omniscient. This may have implications for topics in the philosophy of religion, but I will not explore those implications here.

\(^6\) See Sobel 1994 and Rosati 1995

\(^7\) Naturally, our expectations of the abilities of virtuous agents will depend on the account of virtue under consideration. Throughout this dissertation I have been assuming a notion of virtue that is roughly Aristotelian. Since I am not here defending such a view, everything I say in response to Johnson should be viewed as somewhat provisional.
person's shortcomings. . . Since what a novice ought to do is not always what a virtuous person would characteristically perceive as the thing to do for herself, we would need to stipulate that a completely virtuous person has powers of perception that go way beyond determining what she is to do to what variously hampered agents are to do. Such a stipulation, if not wildly implausible, would be utterly ad hoc. For why should such a capacity be attributed to virtue simply in virtue of its being virtue? There is just no reason at all to suppose that the virtuous would have anything helpful to say about how to deal with one's failings, other than useless general platitudes. Good people need not be therapists or rabbis.  

One concern here is that virtuous people aren't required to possess the kind of specialized information required to give good advice to morally immature human beings. Here, once again, we see the importance of the subjective/objective distinction. If what we are trying to do is determine which actions would be subjectively-right for some particular alcoholic, the only information the qualified observer needs to know is what the alcoholic believes about his options and what he has good reason to believe about them.

Ralph finally comes to accept that he is an alcoholic, and wants to do something about it, but doesn't know exactly what to do. He was inspired to pursue sobriety by Bob, who was once the most serious drinker Ralph knew, until one night he stopped coming to the bar and people started saying that he had sobered up. Ralph doesn't know exactly how Bob pulled it off, but it occurs to him that he might just try restricting himself to one beer during happy hour, rather than half a dozen. In fact, this strategy will not work. Once he is at the bar with his buddies and the first beer soaks in, his inhibitions will go down and he will drink excessively. As it turns out, the

98. Johnson 2003, 827
most effective treatment for Ralph’s alcoholism is a pill that has secretly been developed by a pharmaceutical company in his town. Through an improbable chain of events, one of those pills got lost while being transported between labs and rolled onto the sidewalk in front of Ralph’s house.

What’s the right thing for Ralph to do? Objectively-speaking, he should go home, take the pill that’s sitting on his sidewalk, and be freed from his alcoholism forever. Of course, it would be incredibly foolish for him to ingest some mysterious pill he found on the ground, so subjectively speaking, this couldn’t possibly be the right thing to do. What course of action would be subjectively-right? That depends on the details. If Ralph is a relatively tame drunk who really doesn’t know much about alcoholism, then some casual experimentation with various methods of controlling the problem on his own would probably be a fine place to start. But say that Ralph’s drunkenness regularly causes him to harm the people around him. In that case, he should really take his problem more seriously. He should know better than to experiment on his own. The wisest thing for him to do then would be to pursue the aid and advice of those who have more experience with the treatment of alcoholism than he does. In Ralph’s case, he should probably call Bob.

Notice that the pertinent question in this case is not, “What is the most effective way for Ralph to deal with his alcoholism?” The answer to that question does require specialized knowledge. The pertinent question is, “What should Ralph do now that he recognizes he is an alcoholic?” and the answer to that question is “Get help.” That is the kind of question we can expect virtuous people to have some insight into once they are properly informed about Ralph’s epistemic situation. It doesn’t require any specialized knowledge about alcoholism, only the very general principle that serious problems should be handled by those who have
the greatest expertise. If Ralph is to act well, he must undertake a course of action that fits
with a rational assessment of his situation. If Ralph takes his problem too lightly and fails to
seek out those who have the expertise to help him, then he does something wrong. Virtuous
people should be able to discern this even if they don't themselves have the relevant expertise.
You don't need to be a therapist to know when to refer someone to a therapist.

But Johnson's concern runs deeper than this. His concern is that even once the virtuous
observer understands all of the information that Ralph knows, the observer won't know what
to do with it. After all, the moral terrain of the alcoholic's life looks pretty different from the
moral terrain of the non-alcoholic's life. Essentially, the concern is that the virtuous person
won't know whether to approve or disapprove of Ralph's various options. A related concern is
that it would somehow be defective for virtuous people to engage in the kind of disapproving
that is required by my view. There is a lot to be said for the old maxim, “love the sinner, hate
the sin.” Yet my account apparently requires not only that the qualified observers disapprove
of the sin, but that they disapprove of the sinner, since an action is wrong whenever a
qualified observer would disapprove of the agent for performing it. Is this really what we
would want from our ideal of human virtue? Wouldn't we want an ideally virtuous person to
be much less judgmental than my theory requires?

We should expect qualified observers to be well equipped to make accurate, but
sympathetic assessments of other people. These judgments play a critical role in human
flourishing. Since humans are such highly social creatures, it is absolutely necessary that we
have the ability to determine which people we ought associate with and to what degree.
Some people bring great joy and fulfillment to us because they are so mature and pleasant.
Others are more difficult to be with but still worthy of our kindness and investment. But there are some who are simply not worth our time. Unfortunately, there really are people who are psychologically or physically harmful to spend time with. They ought to be avoided and kept away from other vulnerable people. Although qualified observers should still be able to recognize whatever good is left in those people, an overall negative assessment will sometimes be required.

I think the most illuminating case to discuss at this point will be that of Fred, who struggles to control his anger in political discussions. In order to count as qualified, observers of Fred’s actions must be ideally virtuous (to have the right degree of moral perception), informed of all Fred’s relevant beliefs and their moral status (to have a well-developed picture of the agent’s background and apparent situation at the moment), and fully attentive to this information about Fred (to be affectively engaged with the case at hand). What will these observers think of Fred for his decision to stay home?

They will certainly disapprove of Fred’s general disposition to be overly angry about political beliefs. But this, all by itself, doesn’t imply that they will have an overall negative assessment of Fred. He is a generally decent person with a few troublesome weaknesses. As long as you can keep him off the topic of politics, he is generally a good guy, contributing positively to the lives of the people around him.

In that case, we would expect qualified observers to take an overall positive stance toward Fred, but with a few reservations. Just as a qualified observer should be capable of drawing a distinction between Fred’s overall decent character and the more specific evaluation of this one character flaw, a virtuous person should also be capable of drawing a distinction between
the existence of Fred’s character flaw and his current attempts to overcome it. A full analysis of Fred’s decision to stay home will take all of this into account: Fred’s a decent guy with a bit of an anger problem, but at the moment he is handling that anger problem pretty well.

When we ask whether or not the qualified observer approves or disapproves of the agent for *this particular action* I contend that the narrower, more focused assessment is the relevant one. What we are asking is how does *this* action, the one that is going on right now, reflect on Fred. Well, this action is a pretty good one. It’s one of Fred’s attempts to overcome his background weaknesses, and it’s a fairly solid attempt at that. It will sometimes be tempting to pull a background issue into the foreground and allow it to affect our assessment of current actions. But whenever we do this, I think that we are making a mistake.

Recall the case of Ms. White in chapter 2. She came to the wrong verdict because she failed to pay attention to the evidence as she should have early in the trial, but later came to regret this and did her best to learn as much as she could from the notes. Should a qualified observer approve or disapprove of her guilty vote? We are somewhat hesitant to judge White’s vote as subjectively right, but I think we should get over this hesitance. What is making us hesitant is the continued presence of disapproval for her previous neglect. That act, although now long past, continues to have a significant effect on her available choices, and this serves to keep that past failure in the forefront of our minds when considering her actions. There is a very real sense in which the wrongness of her past action continues to reflect badly on her now. But what she is doing at the moment, the focus of her current intentional energies, is doing her best to overcome the bad situation that she’s created. And, of course, that’s exactly what she ought to be doing.
Hursthouse’s case of the doubly-engaged man can be handled in essentially the same way. No virtuous agent would have gotten into this mess, but there is still a right way to get out of it. The right thing to do will be unpleasant for everyone involved, and it will not erase the wrongdoing that came before. But it won’t invite any additional disapproval, and it will do a little something to improve the overall assessment of him as a person.

Relevance Returns

By focusing on the subjective sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, it might be possible to construct a theory of right action based on the characteristic attitudes of virtuous observers that is interestingly distinct from existing ideal-observer theories. But if a view like this is going to succeed, it will need to solve its own version of the relevance problem. When considering IRA, it was necessary to identify both the relevant virtuous agents and the relevant circumstances in order to determine which action to perform. Similarly, an approval-based view will need to identify which qualified agents are relevant and what information they need to have. Since I’ve suggested that the only specialized information qualified observers will need to have is information about what the agent under consideration believes and should believe, that aspect of the problem has already been addressed, but it remains to be seen which qualified observers should count as relevant.

If we thought that every virtuous agent would respond in exactly the same way to every action then it wouldn’t matter which one we selected. But based on what we’ve seen in previous chapters we ought to allow for profound differences between virtuous agents. If there are a wide variety of ways to live well as a human, those who do well in one way cannot
be expected to have the same evaluative responses as those who do well in another. Might not a virtuous soldier disapprove of somebody’s decision to surrender when a virtuous pacifist would approve?

The best way for an approval-based view to accommodate this kind of variety among virtuous agents is to adopt a unanimity requirement for wrongness.

An act is wrong in the subjective sense iff every qualified observer would characteristically disapprove of the agent for performing it.

Given this definition, an action will be deemed permissible as long as there is at least one virtuous observer who accepts the action (i.e. the observer either approves or doesn’t disapprove of the agent for performing it). This raises a concern that perhaps the standard will be too lenient. Part of the reason we allow for variation among the attitudes of the virtuous is because there’s something attractive about the idea that different ways of life require different kinds of attitudes. The soldier’s lifestyle requires one set of dispositions, the pacifist’s another. But what if someone vacillated: sometimes doing what the soldier would approve of, and other times what the pacifist would approve of? Is there any guarantee that the resulting life would be an overall good one?

Perhaps not. It could be that at least some forms of life come with their own characteristic strengths and limitations, and those limitations might only be good when combined with those strengths. For instance, the characteristic dispositions of a virtuous soldier might be focused on the prevention of evildoing more than benevolence toward one’s enemies, sometimes passing over an opportunity for benevolence in order to stop an evildoer.

---

99. When discussing Annas’ virtuoso pianists (p. 14) and the unity of the virtues (p. 42).
On the other hand, the characteristic dispositions of a virtuous pacifist might focus more on benevolence than the prevention of evil-doing, sometimes allowing a preventable evil in order to act benevolently. If this is right, we might worry that a person who sometimes overlooks benevolence like the soldier and sometimes allows a preventable evil like the pacifist will get off the hook, obtaining the approval of the soldier on one occasion, and the approval of the pacifist on the other.

At this point, we can see why it is important that the approval involved in my account of right action be approval of the agent and not merely of the act. In order for the virtuous observer to correctly evaluate a particular action, she will need to be familiar with more than just the action at hand. She will also need to understand how that act fits into the life of the agent under consideration. This feature of the view allows for a response to the problem of the person who vacillates between the characteristic weaknesses of dissimilar virtuous people.

If the overall trend of a person's life is to align himself with the kind of virtue exhibited by the virtuous soldier, we might expect the virtuous soldier to be sympathetic even with his faltering attempts at courage. But if he has a long track record of fighting only when the battles are easy, and at other times standing idly by while preventable injustice occurs, the virtuous soldier will take all of this into account. Likewise if he is known for being peaceful only when peace is easy, and violent whenever peace would be hard, the virtuous pacifist will take all of that into account. By failing to identify with either archetype, the vacillating agent might assure that both parties will register their disapproval.

This implies that in cases where qualified observers disagree, we may choose from among any of the permissible options, but in doing so we align ourselves to a particular type of
virtue. This alignment generates at least a weak commitment to continue pursuing that type of virtue if we are to avoid vacillation. But this is just what we should expect. I’ve consistently argued that our actions play a part in the overall shape of our lives. Once our lives begin to take shape, that will naturally affect the kinds of actions we are permitted to take in the future.

Of course, everything I’ve just suggested depends on other facts in the agent’s life as well: facts about age, mental health, family background, etc. If the person under consideration is a child, then a lot of vacillation is to be expected; if the person is an adult, much less. An action performed by one person will reflect quite differently upon him than it would upon someone else because of the overall significance it has in his life. A formerly-abused father faced with a situation where his daughter is badly misbehaving might be exhibiting astounding self-control when he scolds her harshly: hard earned self-control that he’s fought to develop because of his deep love for her. On the other hand, another father giving a very similar scolding might be nurturing a growing resentment that is slowly deteriorating what few positive feelings he has left for his child. My account requires that virtuous observers consider all of this information in order to properly evaluate an action, and when all of these factors are taken into account, the evaluative responses of qualified observers will be neither too easy nor too difficult to satisfy.

So the unanimity requirement does appear to resolve the relevance problem for an approval-based theory of wrongness despite the complexities introduced by variations among virtuous agents. With wrongness under our belt, we can define right, obligatory, and permissible in the same way that we did above. Things get more complicated when we
consider the comparison principle. As stated above, the principle is based on the evaluative responses of “a qualified observer”, but since we are now allowing these observers to have different responses, different observers will generate different rankings. This will sometimes imply that the same act is both better than and worse than another.

We can try to repair this problem by imposing a unanimity requirement on the comparison principle as well:

An act is *universally-better than another* iff every qualified observer would more strongly approve of (or less strongly disapprove of) the agent for performing it rather than the alternative.

This will imply that a lot of actions will be on a par with each other. If the virtuous soldier ranks an honest fight over a timely flight to safety, while the virtuous pacifist ranks the flight over the fight, then (assuming that vacillation isn't a significant factor in this case) neither act will be universally preferable. If both of these actions really are live options for the agent under consideration, this equivalence might not be a problem, but other cases are more problematic.

Say that the agent under consideration has not two, but four options available: two fights (A and B), and two flights (C and D). The virtuous soldier ranks these options \( A > B > C > D \) because he approves of A more strongly than B and disapproves of C less strongly than D, and the virtuous pacifist ranks them \( D > C > B > A \) for exactly the opposite reasons. If the agent aligns himself with the virtues of the soldier, he ought to prefer A to B. If instead he

100. For convenience, I use “approves of A” as shorthand for “approves of the agent for performing A”. However, it should be remembered that the kind of approval I have in mind is approval of agents for actions, not simply approval of actions.
sides with the virtuous pacifist, he ought to prefer C to D. In cases like this, there is no agreed upon universal ranking, but within the scope of a particular virtuous perspective the individual rankings do matter:

An act is particularly-better than another iff at least one qualified observer would more strongly approve of (or less strongly disapprove of) the agent for performing it rather than the alternative.

How then should we handle the other comparative concepts? In order to respect the differences between virtuous agents, I claimed that an action will be wrong only if every qualified observer considers it wrong. As long as at least one qualified observer considers it right, it is right. In the same spirit, since supererogation and choiceworthiness are forms of rightness, I suggest that an action should be considered supererogatory or choiceworthy whenever at least one qualified observer deems it so:

An act is supererogatory iff at least one qualified observer considers it permissible and better than at least one permissible alternative.

An act is merely permissible iff it is permissible but not supererogatory.

An act is choiceworthy iff it is either right or at least one qualified observer considers it to be the best of the agent’s effective choices.

In the case considered above, every option (A, B, C, and D) is right, but not every option is completely on a par. This can be seen more clearly if we look at the options pairwise. B & C are both merely permissible. They satisfy the relevant moral requirements, each in their own way, but they are nothing special. However, a choice between B & C is a choice to align oneself with the soldier or the pacifist.

A & D on the other hand, are both supererogatory. They each involve a little something extra, morally speaking. Once again, the choice between A & D is a choice to align oneself
with the soldier or the pacifist, but it is a more significant choice. The soldier will more strongly approve of A and the pacifist will more strongly disapprove.

I have already discussed the choices between A & B and between C & D above. We can now see that each of those is a choice between an act that is supererogatory and one that is merely permissible. In each of those cases, we have a moral reason to prefer the supererogatory act, but not an overriding reason, since it permissible to choose the lesser act.

But probably the most interesting choices are the ones between A & C and between D & B, because they involve both types of decision. For instance, choosing A instead of C is choosing to act excellently as a soldier rather than passably as a pacifist. Sometimes life faces us with choices like this: choices between living excellently in one way or passably in another. These choices are so interesting because there is a kind of moral pressure to choose supererogation over mere permissibility, but no direct pressure to choose one type of virtue over another. Whenever we are faced with choices like these, we have an indirect moral reason to align ourselves with one particular type of virtue rather than another, but not one that is overriding.

Although much more work will need to be done in order to fully develop the approval-based theory of right action that I’ve proposed here, it does look promising. It handles a wide variety of difficult cases which other views struggle to accommodate, it has the resources to resolve its own version of the relevance problem, and it does all of this by appealing to the attitudes of idealized, but still distinctively human, virtuous observers who require nothing that even approaches full-information.
Chapter 7
Divine or Virtuous?

With my own view now in hand, I would like to revisit Anscombe’s original criticism of modern moral philosophy. Recall that Anscombe was of the view that only a divine law conception of ethics would be capable of grounding the moral ‘ought’ because the moral ‘ought’ suggests “a verdict on my action”. 101 She goes on to argue that in order for there to be a verdict there must be not only a law, but a lawgiver, and that without such a lawgiver, the moral ‘ought’ will become a word of “mere mesmeric force”. 102 Outside of its proper context the moral ‘ought’ will contain “no intelligible thought: a word retaining the suggestion of force, and apt to have a strong psychological effect, but which no longer signifies a real concept at all.” 103

All of this assumes that if there is a divine lawgiver the moral ‘ought’ really will be a verdict, and that the psychological force of the ‘ought’ will be derived from that fact. Unfortunately, Anscombe doesn’t devote much effort to developing the theistic view which

101. Anscombe 1997, 33
102. Ibid.
103. Ibid.
she argues is the only one capable of grounding a full-blown moral ‘ought’. It isn’t obvious what role the divine law is supposed to play: how it generates the psychological force which Anscombe takes to be characteristic of the moral ‘ought’. The nearest thing she gives us to an explanation can be found in the following passage:

Now let us remember that "morally wrong" is the term which is the heir of the notion "illicit," or "what there is an obligation not to do"; which belongs in a divine law theory of ethics. Here it really does add something to the description "unjust" to say there is an obligation not to do it; for what obliges is the divine law - as rules oblige in a game. So if the divine law obliges not to commit injustice by forbidding injustice, it really does add something to the description "unjust" to say there is an obligation not to do it.\(^{104}\)

The suggestion that the divine law generates moral obligations “as rules oblige in a game” is intriguing but opaque. Remember that the rules are supposed to hold a significant amount of psychological force over us. Do the rules in a game generate this kind of force? If so, how?

There are certainly obligations in play during the course of a game: I must follow the rules or be guilty of cheating. But why do I care about cheating? There are several reasons. First of all, the rules are largely constitutive of what the game is. At a certain point if I’m not following the rules, I’m not actually playing the game. But much of the psychological force behind the prohibition against cheating is derived from the nature of my relationships with my fellow players. If I am caught breaking the rules, they will be displeased with me: they will disapprove. If this is right, then an analogous psychological force in the case of divine law could be derived from the nature of my relationship to God.\(^{105}\) The moral ‘ought’ will

\(^{104}\) Ibid., 43

\(^{105}\)
compel me to keep the divine law in order to avoid divine disapproval.

Interestingly, contemporary versions of theistic metaethics, like those developed by Robert Adams, have made exactly this claim. Adams argues that the concept of obligation is essentially social, that, “having an obligation to do something consists in being required (in a certain way, under certain circumstances), by another person or a group of persons, to do it.” Although he believes that some measure of success can be had in fleshing out moral obligation in terms of merely human social requirements, he argues that there are limitations to this approach which make it preferable to embrace a theory of moral obligation based on the requirements of a loving divine lawgiver.

Adams discusses four features of our relationship to God that could motivate us to act morally:

**Feature 1:** We are motivated to act morally because of how God is related to us. We have reason to value our relationship with God rather than being alienated from it because God is our creator, he loves us, there is a history of relationship between him and the religious community, and so on.

**Feature 2:** We are motivated to act morally because of God’s attributes. It matters to us that moral commands come from a being that is supremely knowledgeable and therefore completely understands us and our situation in life. It also matters to us that he is just and that he is in some significant way

105. It will be tedious to insert disclaimers about God’s possible non-existence throughout the following discussion. I will speak as though God actually does exist, but these are all intended to be hypothetical statements.

106. Adams 1998, 49
beautiful or wonderful.

**Feature 3:** We are motivated to act morally because God’s commands are consistent with our other values. For instance, God does not command cruelty for its own sake. His commands are also consistent with the obligations generated by our human social institutions.

**Feature 4:** We are motivated to act morally because the requirements are actually imposed by God. It matters that moral commands are actually given, not merely that they would be given by a loving God. One reason for this is that although the hypothetical commands of a loving God might have some motivational power, their power is surely far weaker than it could be if a real relationship with God was actually at stake.

Although it may not be quite fair to attribute this exact view to Anscombe, it does seem like these are the resources one would naturally appeal to when trying to account for the force of the moral ‘ought’ by appealing to divine law. In the divine law view we are required by God to act in certain way and if we do not act in those ways, God will disapprove of us. Because our relationship to God has these four features we have good reasons to avoid that disapproval.

Assuming this is how we should interpret Anscombe’s suggestion, an approval-based, virtuous observer view might be able to provide a similar account of the psychological force behind the moral ‘ought’. If we substitute virtuous observers for God, couldn’t we generate similar reasons to act so as to avoid their disapproval? Probably the biggest challenge for this view is the fact that there aren’t any ideally virtuous humans. I take it that the psychological
force generated by the divine law view depends on the actual existence of God. If there is no God, then there is no relationship with God to be concerned about. Likewise, if there are no virtuous agents.

Although it’s true that ideally virtuous humans probably don’t exist, there are some realistically virtuous ones. In the previous chapter, we saw that realistic virtue comes in degrees and I suggested that only people with a relatively high degree of it should be viewed as worthy role models. These role models will be people who have eliminated all but the most stubborn character flaws and who do well resisting or working around those that remain. Let us refer to these people as 'saints'.

The qualified observers I’ve appealed to are heavily idealized, to the point where no actual human is ever going to qualify, but they are still recognizably human. They have some problematic desires which need to be managed, and they will occasionally need to exercise vigilance. Because of this, we can expect the saints to approximate them fairly well in most circumstances. By and large, the things that saints approve and disapprove of will be the same things that qualified observers would.

This brings out another benefit of my view, namely that it can explain not only what makes an action right or wrong, but also how we have access to moral knowledge. We have it by means of the saints, the people among us who most closely approximate qualified virtuous observers. Since each saint has her own characteristic weaknesses, she will be unable to perceive the right action in every case. However, the same might not be true of the overall community of saints. Since different saints have different weaknesses, there might not be many weaknesses that are universal, and the collective insight of the whole community of
saints could be rather acute. This is especially true if saints know what their weaknesses are and defer to others in the relevant cases.

If saints serve as reasonable approximations of ideally virtuous observers, we will have access to people with the relevant perceptual capacities to provide insight into the handling of real-world cases. Saints will still need to know all of the relevant information about the agents under consideration, but this information is also not too hard to approximate. Given a few hours of discussion, it's generally possible to get a pretty good picture of the considerations which bear on the evaluation of a particular action as subjectively wrong or subjectively right. It won't be a perfect picture, but assuming that enough of the relevant facts are communicated, and are properly perceived, then saints will not only be able to detect the right actions, they will be able to detect them for all the right reasons, in essentially the same way that ideally virtuous agents would.

Can our relationship to the community of saints generate the same kinds of reasons that our relationship to God does? There are some clear disanalogies between God and the saints, but many aspects of Adams’ account will translate over fairly well. Regarding feature 1, we were obviously not created by the saints in the same sense that God is our creator, but we do owe much of our way of life to the saints who came before us. Features 2 & 3 will translate rather nicely because the saints have similarly admirable attributes and their views are consistent with (identical with?) our accepted social values. Finally, assuming that the community of saints is fairly large, and fairly active, feature 4 will also have a robust saintly counterpart.

Admittedly, unless there is an afterlife, most of these saints will no longer be around to
actually approve or disapprove of our actions, but hypothetical post-mortem disapproval can still be reason giving. My love for my deceased grandfathers still provides me with reasons to act in ways they would be proud of. Insomuch as my grandfathers were saintly and the relevant approvals and disapprovals would have been generated by their virtue, we might properly consider these moral reasons.

Much more work would need to be done before this suggestion could be developed into a full-blown account of the moral ‘ought’. I bring it up merely to point out that the differences between a divine-law view and my own appear to be differences in degree, not differences in kind. An approval-based virtue ethic can generate an ‘ought’ that bears a striking resemblance to the ‘ought’ that Anscombe probably had in mind.
Conclusion

If virtue ethics is to succeed, it needs to become more realistic. It needs to recognize that we are epistemically limited beings who are largely incapable of becoming fully virtuous. Several things follow from this basic insight: virtue ethicists should focus on the subjective rather than the objective sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, they should embrace both realistic and ideal conceptions of virtue, and they should transition toward an approval-based theory of right action.

Once all of this is taken into account, the plausibility of virtue ethics is quite striking. There is a clear and important connection between the virtues and actions that are subjectively-right. Since subjective rightness is the kind we care about most, it is natural to try to construct a theory of right action on the basis of the virtues. Once we get clear about what it means to be virtuous, we see that there are two different standards, ideal and realistic virtue, and that each of these standards plays a different role in our moral theorizing. We ought to strive toward the development of realistic virtues, by performing actions that would be approved of by ideally virtuous observers, for only they have the required insight to see the right way forward in every case. Nevertheless, these virtuous observers needn’t be overly idealized, because they will still need to exercise vigilance in certain circumstances and they
don’t require full-information in order to see what the subjectively-right actions are in each situation. For this reason, we can expect realistically virtuous people to closely approximate ideally virtuous ones in most cases and this will not only provide us with a satisfying moral epistemology, it might help virtue ethicists provide an answer to Anscombe’s claim that there can be no moral ‘ought’ without a divine law.


Kant, Immanuel. 1964b. The Doctrine of Virtue.


