

## Julia Annas – Virtue Ethics

The excerpt here of Julia Annas's "Virtue Ethics" is taken from *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, edited by David Copp and published in 2007.

*Guiding Questions:*

1. *What is virtue? How is it like a skill?*
2. *What is eudaimonia? How is it different from happiness?*
3. *What is the relationship between virtue and eudaimonia?*
4. *How does virtue ethics differ from moral theories that aim for a "theory of right action"?*
5. *When you make a moral judgment, should you ask "What should I do?" or "What sort of person should I be?"*
6. *What role should rules play in moral reasoning and decision-making?*

In the tradition of Western philosophy since the fifth century B.C., the default form of ethical theory has been some version of what is nowadays called virtue ethics; real theoretical alternatives emerge only with Kant and with consequentialism. This continued dominance is not very surprising, given that concern with virtue is a concern with the kind of person you are, and that this has always been important to real-life ethical matters in Western societies. (And, as is becoming increasingly familiar, this is also true of some non-Western societies and philosophical traditions, particularly Asian ones.)

The tradition has taken several different forms, and sorting these out is useful for finding the underlying structure. I shall also say a little about the way that virtue ethics has been ignored or trivialized by analytical ethical philosophy for about a hundred years, only to reemerge vigorously during the last forty.

Virtue ethics is best approached by looking at the central features of what I shall call the classical version of the tradition. Its theoretical structure is first clearly stated by Aristotle, but it is wrong to think of it as peculiarly Aristotelian, since it underlies all of ancient ethical theory (Annas, 1993, 1999). [...]

### **1. Virtue Ethics: The Whole Picture**

#### **1.1. The Central Role of Practical Reasoning**

A virtue is a state or disposition of a person. This is a reasonable intuitive claim; if someone is generous, say, then she has a character of a certain sort; she is dispositionally, that is, habitually and reliably, generous. A virtue, though, is not a habit in the sense in which habits can be mindless, sources of

action in the agent that bypass her practical reasoning. A virtue is a disposition *to act*, not an entity built up within me and productive of behavior; it is my disposition to act in certain ways and not others. A virtue, unlike a mere habit, is a disposition to act *for reasons*, and so a disposition that is exercised through the agent's practical reasoning; it is built up by making choices and exercised in the making of further choices. When an honest person decides not to take something to which he is not entitled, this is not the upshot of a causal buildup from previous actions but a *decision*, a choice that endorses his disposition to be honest. [...]

What is the role of the agent's practical reasoning? Virtue is the disposition to do the right thing for the right reason, in the appropriate way—honestly, courageously, and so on. This involves two aspects, the affective and the intellectual.

What is the affective aspect of virtue? The agent may do the right thing and have a variety of feelings and reactions to it. She may hate doing the right thing but do it anyway; do the right thing but with conflicted feelings or with difficulty; do the right thing effortlessly and with no internal opposition. One feature of the classical version of virtue ethics is to regard doing the right thing with no contrary inclination as a mark of the virtuous person, as opposed to the merely self-controlled. Mere performance of the right action still leaves open the issue of the agent's overall attitude; virtue requires doing the right thing for the right reason without serious internal opposition, as a matter of character. This is, after all, just one implication of the thought that in an ethics of virtue it matters what kind of person you are. Of course, what it takes to develop your character in such a way that you are wholehearted about being generous, act fairly without regrets, and so on is a large matter. [...]

The virtuous agent, then, does the right thing, undividedly, for the right reason—he understands, that is, that this is the right thing to do. What is this understanding? In classical virtue ethics, we start our moral education by learning from others, both in making particular judgments about right and wrong, and in adopting some people as role models or teachers or following certain rules. At first, as pupils, we adopt these views because we were told to, or they seemed obvious, and we acquire a collection of moral views that are fragmented and accepted on the authority of others. For virtue ethics, the purpose of good moral education is to get the pupil to think for himself about the reasons on which he acts, and so the content of what he has been taught. Ideally, then, the learner will begin to reflect for himself on what he has accepted, will detect and deal with inconsistencies, and will try to make his judgments and practice coherent in terms of a wider understanding which enables him to unify, explain and justify the particular decisions he makes. This is a process that requires the agent at every stage to use his mind, to think about what he is doing and to try to achieve understanding of it (Annas, 2001).

We can see this from an example. In many modern societies, the obvious models for courage are macho ones focusing on sports and war movies. A boy may grow up thinking that these are the paradigmatic contexts for courage, and have various views about courage and cowardice that presuppose this. But if he reflects about the matter, he may come to think that he is also prepared to call people in other, quite different contexts brave—a child struggling with cancer, someone standing up for an unpopular person in high school, and so on. Further reflection will show that the macho grasp of courage was inadequate, and will drive him to ask what links all these very diverse cases of bravery; this will lead him to ask what the reasons are on which brave people act, rather than to

continue uncritically with the views and attitudes he initially found obvious.

The development of ethical understanding, leading the agent to develop a disposition that is a virtue, is in the classical tradition standardly taken to proceed like the acquisition of a practical skill or expertise. As Aristotle says, becoming just is like becoming a builder. With a practical skill, there is something to learn, something conveyable by teaching; the expert is the person who understands through reflection what she has been taught, and thinks for herself about it. We are familiar with the notion of practical expertise in mundane contexts like that of car repair, plumbing, and so on. In the classical tradition of virtue ethics, this is an important analogy, because ethical development displays something that we can see more clearly in these more limited contexts: There is a progress from the mechanical rule- or model-following of the learner to the greater understanding of the expert, whose responses are sensitive to the particularities of situations, as well as expressing learning and general reflection.

The skill analogy brings out two important points about ethical understanding: It requires both that you learn from others and that you come to think and understand for yourself... Ethical reflection begins from what you have learned in your society; but it requires you to progress from that. Virtue begins from following rules or models in your social and cultural context; but it requires that you develop a disposition to decide and act that involves the kind of understanding that only you can achieve in your own case.

Virtue is like a skill in its structure. But the skill analogy, of course, has limits. One is that practical skills are devoted to achieving ends from which we can detach ourselves if we cease to want them, whereas virtue is devoted to

achieving our final end, which, as I will show, is not in this way an end we can just cease to want. Another limit is that the development of practical understanding in a skill can be relatively independent of emotion and feeling, whereas the development of practical understanding goes along with a development in the virtuous person's affect and response. [...]

The classical account has also been criticized because of the notions of disposition and character that are central to it. Some modern theories object to making character basic to ethical discourse, as opposed to single actions; this reflects a difference between types of ethical theory that focus on actions in isolation and types that emphasize the importance of the agent's life as a whole, and, relatedly, the importance of moral education and development. [...]

## 1.2. Virtues and My Flourishing

Virtues, then, are character traits of the kind discussed. There are character traits, however, which are not virtues. To qualify as a virtue, a character trait must embody a commitment to some ethical *value*, such as justice, or benevolence. Moreover, this commitment is not merely a matter of performing actions that happen to be just, benevolent or whatever; a disposition, as already stressed, works through the agent's practical reasoning. The virtues are dispositions *to be* just, benevolent and so on, to give others their fair share, treat others in considerate ways, stand up for others' rights.

So far I have talked of virtue, but of course in everyday life we encounter a number of different virtues—fairness, generosity, courage and so on. The virtues, as we ordinarily think of them, embody commitments to a number of values,

and this comes out in the ways in which different kinds of situation are typically thought of as requiring different virtues.

What makes such diverse virtues as courage and generosity *virtues*, dispositions that it is ethically admirable to have? Any theory of virtue will have something to say about the way the different virtues are valuable. Since the virtues are dispositions of me, they are ways that I am, traits of my character; so they contribute to my living my life as a whole in a certain way. So thinking about the virtues leads to thinking of *my life as a whole*. This notion is crucial, and is prominent in all forms of classical virtue ethics, because the virtues make sense only within a conception of living that takes the life I live to be an overall unity, rather than a succession of more or less unconnected states. And further, cultivating the virtues is worthwhile because living virtuously will constitute my living my life as a whole in a way that lives it *well*, in a way that it is valuable to live.

The final end to which the virtues contribute is often called *eudaimonia*, since this is the term found in ancient Greek theories (that are hence, unsurprisingly, called eudaimonist). The least unsatisfactory modern English equivalent is *flourishing*, which I shall use. *Happiness* would be in many ways better, but unfortunately runs into two problems. One is that the modern philosophical notion of happiness has been influenced by utilitarian ideas, leading easily to the trivializing thought that happiness is pleasure. And while the idea that happiness is flourishing—a well-lived life—does have a place in everyday ideas of happiness, it is often held together with implicitly conflicting ideas, such as that happiness is having a good time, or being prosperous. Modern analogues of ancient eudaimonist theories have, moreover, come to be called virtue ethics, not happiness ethics. Virtue is the concept that has become the central one in recent

philosophy, sometimes obscuring the importance of the idea of the agent's overall flourishing to which the virtues contribute.

Do we have such a final end? It is important to note here that the idea is not a philosophers' demand brought in from outside everyday ethical reasoning. It is just a very ordinary and everyday way of thinking of our lives. We get to it simply by reflecting that our actions can be thought of not just in a linear way, as we perform one action after another: They can also be thought of in a nested way, as happens whenever we ask *why* we are doing something, for the answer will typically make reference to some broader concern, and this in turn to one even broader. Given that I have only one life to lead, I will eventually come up with some very broad conception of my life as a whole, as what makes sense of all my actions at any given point. I cannot escape the fact that at any given point, my actions reflect and express the kind of person I am, and the nature of my ends and priorities. This is a very ordinary way of thinking, one in which everybody engages. (People who are severely conflicted about their aims, or in denial about the way their actions fit into broader patterns in their lives, appear to be exceptions to this; but note that we think of them as having *damaged* lives, not as showing us alternative ways of living *well*.)

Thinking in this way, we come up with the notion of my living my life as a whole, and living it well. This is not yet specific as to its content. (For Aristotle, it is trivial that my final end is *eudaimonia* or happiness, but this link is not obvious for us, and even for Aristotle this was the start, not the finish, of debate as to what living well consists in.) But it is not a trivial result. For one thing, my final end must meet the formal constraint of being *complete*—all my actions are done for its sake, while I do not seek it for the sake of anything further. This at once rules out some instrumental ends, such as

money or fame, which always raise the question of what they are sought *for*, what part they play in the living of a flourishing life. For another thing, my final end, flourishing, cannot consist in things, stuff, or passive states like pleasure. I am aiming at *living* in a certain way, being active where my life is concerned rather than letting it drift along. One major difference from many modern theories is that I am aiming at living my life in a way that only I can do, by developing the way I reason about it; I am not aiming at stuff, or states that other people could just as well provide for me.

How do the virtues contribute to my flourishing? Classical theories of virtue ethics claim that virtue is, more weakly, necessary, or, more strongly, sufficient for flourishing. How is this to be understood? Classical virtue theories reject the idea that flourishing can be specified right at the start, in a way that is both substantive and makes no reference to the virtues. Someone who supposes that flourishing can be defined as feeling good, or getting whatever you want, has given an account of it that is unacceptable to a virtue theory even before we get to the virtues. Rather, virtue ethics tells us that a life lived in accordance with the virtues is the *best specification* of what flourishing is. This claim in turn is not neutral ground between the virtue ethicist and the person who thinks that flourishing is getting whatever you want. Rather, we have already got *rival specifications* of what it is to flourish, to lead a good life. And this is exactly what we would expect, given that the issue of what it is to lead a flourishing life is not one that we could expect to be decided at the *start* of ethical investigation, *before* we try to spell out what is involved in living a life in which you try to live fairly, courageously, and so on, as opposed to living a life in which you aim to get whatever you want. It is a theoretical advantage of classical virtue ethics that it respects a fundamental point about our

ethical discussions. When people disagree as to whether someone did or did not ruin his life by performing an action that is honest but loses him a job he has aimed for, we do not expect them to resolve the dispute by appeal to some neutral list of indicators that a way of life is worth living. We recognize that this kind of dispute is not a simple disagreement about rival means to an agreed-upon end. It is a complex kind of dispute that brings in a wide range of issues, because what is in dispute just is what kind of life constitutes a flourishing one, as opposed to a failure.

Many modern critics have objected to the claim that virtue is even necessary for flourishing, on the grounds that not everybody thinks that it matters to be fair or brave, and that some of these people appear to be flourishing by conventional standards. It is clear, however, that this kind of objection misses the point that virtue ethics does not begin from any specification of flourishing that is substantive and independent of the virtues. Virtue ethicists are often accused of naiveté in thinking that being virtuous is a good bet if you want to flourish, where flourishing is understood independently of the virtues; but virtue ethics rejects this conception of flourishing. Each of us begins with an unspecific notion of living his life well as a whole, and different theories within virtue ethics give us differing answers as to the importance of virtue in giving us a right specification of living well, and so of flourishing. Virtue ethics begins from the point that we do attach value to being virtuous, as well as to having money, a family life, and so on. (It is exceptional, not standard, as some modern critics think, to be cynical about the value of the virtues in life; this is not what we teach our children, or assume in most ethical discourse.) The argument proceeds by getting us to see that virtue is not just one value in life, which could reasonably be outweighed by others, such as money; it has a special status such that, on

the weaker version, those without it do not flourish, whatever else they have, and, on the stronger version, virtue is necessary and sufficient for a flourishing life. Different theories press different points, and no complete range of positive arguments can be given here, but it can be stressed that most classical theories emphasize the point that virtue is like a skill exercised on the materials of your life. Acting virtuously is not an *alternative* to making money, for example. Rather, making money is one of the things you have to do, one of the circumstances of your life, and you can do this either virtuously or not; which of the two it is makes all the difference to the place and significance in your life of making money. [...]

### 1.3. Living Virtuously

How does virtue ethics explicate the notion that I have just made use of so far, of the *right thing to do*? It is clearly important for the theory, since a virtue is a disposition built up by doing the right thing and acquiring increasing understanding of what this is, and why.

Virtue ethics makes the realistic assumption that by the time you come to think about ethics and want to develop or improve your life as a whole, you already *have a life*. You already have a social position, a cultural education, a family, a job, and so on. These are all factors that have contributed to your ethical development, for good or for ill. Because for virtue ethics it matters what kind of person you are, it takes into account the importance of the person you already are when you begin to think about being virtuous. It is unrealistic to think that your ethical views are all completely disposable, and that you can come to be a better person by overnight conversion. By the time you think for yourself about what it is to be brave,

just, and so on, you already have developed views and attitudes.

However, classical virtue ethics always assumes that reflection about our ethical views will reveal them to be inadequate to the way we want to be. As Aristotle says, “In general everyone seeks not the traditional but the good” (*Politics* 1269a3–4). All classical virtue ethics assumes, in a way oddly absent from many modern theories, that ethical thought essentially includes an *aspiration* to be better than we are. Classical virtue theories are marked both by realistic recognition of the socially embedded nature of our ethical life, and by insistence that if we are thinking ethically, we are striving to be better, to reach an ideal that is not already attained. And all classical virtue theories are very demanding in this regard (Annas, 2002). It is therefore irrelevant to point out that the specific classical theories were produced for audiences in societies very different from ours. Virtue ethics gets a grip whenever we realize that the ethical beliefs we live by are inadequate, that, for example, they may imply sexist and racist attitudes, and that we need to become *better people*. Virtue ethics develops from the reasonable thought that *I* have to improve myself; no teacher or book can do the job.

None of this is incompatible with our recognizing that there are some judgments about action that are not only widely shared but not negotiable when we think about virtue and the good life. This is just part of the background from which we all begin. What is important, however, is that this cannot be developed into a theory telling people what it is right and wrong to do in a way that pays no attention to the fact that they are aspiring to ideals from within different contexts and at very different stages of their own ethical development. Some modern theories have thought that there is such a thing as a ‘theory of right action’, which will tell us which actions are

right, or give us an account of what makes an action right, and can be used by anyone, at any stage of moral development, with any level of interest in being a good person. This would make ethical thinking about how to act like using a computer manual. As has been forcefully pointed out (Hursthouse, 1991, 1999), this is a completely unrealistic view of ethical thinking. It is not plausible to suppose that a bright eighteen-year-old could by reading a book become an ethically wise person, an excellent source of ethical advice as to what to do. Nor can we realistically separate the questions of whether we respect someone's advice as to what to do, and our attitude to what they find admirable in life. We cannot take someone's 'theory of right action' seriously if they have appalling priorities in their life—even if they claim, on theoretical grounds, that the two are unrelated.

The answer that virtue ethics offers to the question what is the right thing to do denies that there is any such thing as a 'theory of right action' in this abstract sense. In explaining what is the right thing to do, virtue ethics appeals to the idea of what would be done by the virtuous person. This is not a definition in which the virtuous person is independently defined and right actions derived from this. For virtue ethics appreciates that 'the virtuous person' cannot be defined in a void and then used to derive right actions in a void. Rather, the thought is that what I should do, in my situation, is what I would do if I were brave (generous, fair, etc.), where this is taken to mean: braver than I am, nearer the ideal of the brave person. Working out the answer is complex, because, as we have seen, it requires thinking about both what matters in this situation, and what bravery demands. This in turn requires reflection on what the relevant factors in question are, and whether the conception of bravery I have acquired thus far is adequate; perhaps I need now to think harder about the brave

person's reasoning. Obviously, no simple universally applicable formula will result from this. [...]

At the beginning of its recent revival, virtue ethics was sometimes accused of not being "applicable" to moral problems; telling us what kind of person to be, it was thought, would not help us with problems like the ethical status of abortion and euthanasia and other difficult moral problems that we would expect ethical theory to help us with. At this point, it is clear that all that virtue ethics cannot provide is an all-purpose 'theory of right action' that will mechanically give anybody the answers to these problems in any context. But it is also clear that virtue ethics rejects this view of a 'theory of right action' in favor of an account that does more justice to our moral discourse and moral psychology. [...]

## Conclusion

Why has virtue ethics been so neglected for so much of the last hundred years? One influence has been consequentialism, which has recognized only a reduced notion of virtue as instrumental to the achievement of some independently defined good. There has also been a general focus on actions at the expense of agents; the dominant forms of Kantian ethics have until recently been narrowly obsessed by rules and principles. Indeed, until recently, it was assumed that the only two major forms of ethical theory were consequentialism and deontology—an assumption that clearly takes it for granted that the central concern of ethics is action in isolation from agents. The resurgence of virtue ethics has not merely provided a "third way"; it has challenged this underlying assumption, and thus it not only provides an alternative to the other forms of theory but provides resources from which they have been enriched.