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Virtue Ethics

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ABBREVIATIONS, SOURCES AND TRANSLATIONS

Works by Aristotle cited by abbreviation:

DA	*De Anima*, trans. Lawson-Tancred H., (London: Penguin Books, 1986)
DPA	*De Partibus Animalium*, trans. Balme D.N., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)
NE	*Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Thompson J.A.K. (London: Penguin Books, 1976)
R	*Art of Rhetoric*, trans. Freese J.H., (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994)

Citations to Aristotle's works standardly refer to Behher I. (ed.), *Aristotelis Opera* (Berlin, 1831). So that NE 1147a 35, refers to the sentence in the *Nicomachean Ethics* on line 35 of column (a) in page 1147.

Works by Kant cited by abbreviation:

A	*Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* *Anthropology From a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), in trans. Gregor M.J., *Anthropology From a Pragmatic Point of View* (Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974)
G	*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), in trans. Paton H.J., *The Moral Law* (Great Britain: Routledge, 1991)

KpV *Krtitik der praktischen Vernunft*
Critique of Practical Reason (1788), in trans. Gregor J., *Practical Philosophy* (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

KrV *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*
Critique of Pure Reason (1781), in trans. Guyer P. and Wood A.W., *Critique of Pure Reason* (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

MS *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*
The Metaphysics of Morals (1797), in trans. Gregor M.J., *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

Rel *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*
Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason (1793), in trans. Wood A.W. and di Giovanni G. (eds), *Religion and Rational Theology* (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

Citations to Kant's works standardly refer to *Kants gesammelte Schriften, herausgegeben von der Deutschen, Akademie der Wissenscheften*, 29 vols (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902).

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Introduction

The last couple of decades have seen a shift in perceptions regarding the relationship between research and teaching. There has been a strong emphasis on viewing the two activities as separate, led primarily by managerial concerns aimed at increasing academic efficiency. Excellence in research and excellence in teaching are evaluated separately, funding policies attempt to differentiate between the two and now some academic institutions are beginning to characterize their staff as engaged exclusively in one or the other of these two activities. In philosophy, this distinction between research and teaching is artificial and gravely damaging for the discipline (I imagine a similar case could possibly be made for other disciplines as well).

A simple, but persuasive, definition of philosophy is that it concerns itself with good reasoning. The discipline covers a huge number of topics and has links to all sorts of other subjects, from mathematics to English literature, from music to physics, but what unites all these intellectual activities under the banner of 'philosophy' is that they are all concerned with uncovering good arguments. Because of this, philosophical research and philosophical teaching are identical in their approach. Philosophy researchers are concerned with critically assessing the work of their peers, examining available arguments for weaknesses and omissions and making useful and original contributions to the community's search for truth. They achieve all this by engaging with the work of others, trying out their own arguments by publishing and sharing work with other researchers and, in general, developing their reasoning skills. Philosophical research is a community enterprise, one which depends on the contribution of others and thrives on debate and the exchange of ideas.

Philosophy students are engaged in the same enterprise. Students are taught philosophy by being exposed to it. We learn to think well by thinking and practising our reasoning skills. We expose students to both strong and weak philosophical arguments in the hope that they pick up something about how to construct a critical, original argument. There is a reason that there is no unified philosophy curriculum taught across the world (or even within certain countries) and that is because there is no need for one. What unifies philosophers is not our preoccupation with philosopher P or idea X, but rather our interest in reasoning and good reasoning can be displayed by all sorts of thinkers, on all sorts of topics (and of course we learn as much from criticizing poor reasoning as we do from analysing good reasoning). There is no need for specifying a precise content for the philosophy curriculum because the actual content is not crucial – the development of the reasoning skills is.

In this sense then, the researcher in philosophy and the student of philosophy are engaged in exactly the same enterprise and benefit greatly from viewing their efforts as part of a unified whole. If we artificially attempt to disengage research from teaching, we create divisions where there are none and risk harming both activities. A good teacher will have a good command of the materials she wishes to teach, and this involves understanding how different ideas relate to each other, how opposing views take advantage of each others' weaknesses, which questions remain unanswered, etc. Understanding all this is crucial to relating new ideas to students, and doing so in a way that is comprehensible and clear. At the same time, these are the building blocks of good research. By seeing how different ideas relate to each other, our teacher may be inspired to come up with a new alternative, by focusing on the weaknesses of competing views, our teacher may come up with some new replies to familiar objections, by seeing which questions remain unanswered, our teacher may come up with answers. Our teacher then is indistinguishable from a researcher.

At the same time our student also has to engage with the ideas he is presented with. Simple regurgitation of ideas is catastrophic for philosophical education. If philosophy were simply a matter of learning some facts it could be taught via multiple choice questionnaires, but the small group tutorial – and ideally the one-to-one interaction – remains the ideal method of teaching philosophy because it allows students to really engage with the ideas they come

across. Philosophy teachers encourage their students to use the first tense and counsel them to use phrases such as 'I will argue that', 'I will object to', 'I will support claim X', etc. Such phrases illustrate the students' own contribution to the topic, they show that they have not merely encountered the ideas of the course but engaged with them, that is, understood them, criticized them, rejected or approved of them, replaced them or improved on them. Our student is indistinguishable from a researcher in this respect as teaching him philosophy essentially involves developing his philosophical reasoning skills, his research capabilities.

The aim of this volume is to provide a critical introduction to virtue ethics for readers who have some general background knowledge of moral philosophy. An equally important aim of this volume is to reject the research/teaching division and both present materials in a critical manner and expect readers to view them in this manner. This volume is not simply everything one could ever possibly want to know about its subject matter, virtue ethics, but rather represents my own research interests in this area. Ideas are presented through the prism of the author's viewpoint, but they are also presented in a manner which will, hopefully, encourage the readers to develop their own viewpoint. Of course, one practical difference between research and teaching is the level of specialization in one's audience. Students will, on the whole, tend to require materials to be presented at a more introductory level, but this does not preclude a critical approach. A talk aimed at a research audience already intimately familiar with one's topic should be pitched at a different level, for example, assuming background knowledge, but essentially the tasks of the researcher and the teacher are the same: how to critically engage with the ideas and make some, perhaps very modest, contribution to the topic.

In this sense, although the present volume is, in terms of the level it is pitched at, primarily a textbook intended to introduce the student to the main claims of virtue ethics, it also includes elements of a research text, in that it adopts a critical, selective and reflective approach and, hopefully, encourages its readers to do the same. The volume assumes that the reader has an introductory familiarity with normative theories such as deontology and consequentialism (interested readers who lack this degree of familiarity may wish to read up on encyclopaedia articles on normative ethics prior to reading this volume) and proceeds from there to introduce virtue

ethics as an alternative to these theories. In what follows, I offer a brief outline of the main ideas discussed in this book.

Outline

Virtue ethics is an umbrella term, covering a variety of different theories and claims, which have their roots in the works of many different philosophers, from Plato and Aristotle to Hume, to Nietzsche and beyond. It would be impossible to give an exhaustive account of all these diverse theories; readers interested in such an approach might wish to consider a number of survey articles and encyclopaedia entries available on all these topics. By contrast, this volume aspires to offer a critical, challenging and reasoned approach to, by necessity, only *some* aspects of virtue ethics. What is lost in scope by this approach should be gained in depth of argument and in encouraging the readers to engage with the ideas which are discussed in a more reflective manner. The kinds of claims which will be examined here fall broadly under the categorization of Aristotelian virtue ethics, probably the most dominant and influential account of virtue ethics in the research literature at the moment. This reflects both the importance of the position itself and my personal research interests.

The volume is divided into three parts, each one of which has a slightly different focus. The first one assumes that the readers have no prior acquaintance with virtue ethics and is structured around the work of the philosophers who first led the revival of interest in virtue ethics in modern moral philosophy. This period of thinking is characterized by a sense of dissatisfaction with the then available alternative normative theories, that is, deontology and consequentialism, and an awareness that something crucial was missing from the debate. Articulating this sense of what was missing, of a different approach which one should take when considering moral matters, of a change in direction in the debates dominating moral theory, gave rise to the main claims of virtue ethics. Part I follows fairly closely the development of these ideas, by considering the works of major philosophers of the period and introducing the reader to their main arguments.

Part I considers the move from asking 'What is the right thing to do?' to asking 'How should I live my life?' and how answering this question also requires a shift from 'rules' and 'obligations' to 'virtues' and 'character'. Unlike rigid, inflexible rules, appeal to

virtues can capture the contextual sensitivity of moral situations and the diversity of the moral life. Instead of focusing on what we should do in particular, often bizarre and implausible, moral problems, we should concentrate on developing the right moral character that can respond to all sorts of unpredictable moral situations. This part develops an account of the meaningful life for human beings as a life rich in personal relationships that welcomes the importance of friendships and makes room for partial considerations within the moral sphere, something that deontological and consequentialist theories miss out on.

Finally, this part also considers the concept of 'character' which plays such a central role in virtue ethics and its place in gradual, long term and situationally sensitive moral development. We shall see how the virtue ethical conception of the moral life for beings such as our species is a vulnerable and fragile good, achievable only after years of gradual development subject to external factors and the vagaries of luck.

Readers who are already intimately familiar with virtue ethics may wish to skip directly to Part II, although many of the themes elaborated on and defended in this second part have their roots in the discussions developed in Part I.

The second part of the volume presents and defends a particular account of virtue ethics, one which finds its inspiration in Aristotelian ideas and the concept of the *eudaimon* life. This account also relies on a particular understanding of the virtuous agent as a rare ideal. In this sense, this part is rather selective in that it does not offer a comprehensive account of other alternative accounts of virtue ethics; rather, it seeks to defend one particular version of the theory. There are several themes that will be articulated within this broader tradition of Aristotelian, *eudaimonistic* ethics, but the focus is not on an exhaustive description of all the discussions currently in the literature, rather on a more critical defence of a particular position.

The defence of this account of virtue ethics starts off with the recognition of the central role of 'virtue' and 'character' in the theory. Virtue is central in virtue ethics in two ways: first, moral judgements are judgements of the agent's character and second, the account of the virtues is linked to human nature. We will consider how true virtue requires both the right reason and the right desire and must be chosen, chosen knowingly and chosen for its own sake;

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