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# VIRTUES AND OBLIGATIONS

by

Lawrence Blake Sypher

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Philosophy in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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## INTRODUCTION

The current renascence of interest in the virtues has produced a voluminous literature on issues concerning the nature and traits of the good person. Since the publication of Elizabeth Anscombe's influential article four decades ago[1], philosophers have explored anew the fundamental Aristotelian concepts of character and virtue in an attempt to redefine the role of these concepts within moral philosophy. Philosophers have considered in depth particular virtues (and vices), attempting to illuminate the role of those virtues in a good human life.[2] In addition, writers interested in moral psychology have examined questions concerning the nature of human wants, the relation between emotions and ethical decision-making, and the importance of moral sensitivity.[3] Many of these efforts serve to further discussion of the virtues by providing the background necessary for understanding what kinds of traits virtues (and vices) are, as well the roles that virtuous dispositions play in the justification of right action.

Unfortunately, it has been difficult to separate the many distinct strands of argument presented under the rubric of virtue ethics.[4] This is in part due to the fact that the revival of interest in virtue ethics has been sparked by

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Kantian approaches to normative ethics, combined with widespread skepticism concerning the objective validity of ethical claims. Thus, much of the literature on virtue ethics has been polemical in nature.[5] Proponents of virtue ethics have argued that contemporary moral theories, characterized by universalization of judgments, a commitment to impartiality, and clearly articulated rules derived from core principles, are deeply flawed.[6] Also, many philosophers interested in virtue ethics as an alternative to standard forms of consequentialism and deontology do not formulate their views in terms of a systematic theory, because of skepticism about the value of theories per se within moral philosophy.[7]

Nevertheless, the depth and quality of recent work in virtue ethics has made it possible to consider its merits as a genuine alternative to familiar Kantian and utilitarian moral theories, and to assess the cogency of its various claims. Despite the fact that different exponents of virtue ethics make a host of often divergent assertions, all of its advocates agree that assessments about character play a central role in all moral judgments. Specifically, right actions are typically justified by reference to what a virtuous agent would do in the relevant circumstances. A corollary claim is that judgments about character are

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conceptually prior to any rules or principles entailed by those judgments.[8] In addition, most advocates of virtue ethics follow Aristotle in arguing that sound ethical decisions and good actions require perceptive skills and attention to relevant contextual details, in addition to rational analysis. Rules and principles, while helpful as general guides or rules of thumb, are deemed insufficient for determining how to act morally or how to resolve ethical dilemmas in ordinary affairs.

The revival of interest in virtue ethics has naturally incited a variety of criticism. Critics have raised a wide range of objections to arguments that the virtues should play a central role in ethical deliberations. Many of these objections are either directly or indirectly related to the fact that virtue ethics focuses primary attention on good and bad agents rather than right and wrong acts. For example, it has been argued that virtue theories (whatever their other merits) do not appear capable of providing a theory of obligation, which has been thought to be the great achievement of modern theories (whatever their defects).[9] Specifically, it is thought that contemporary virtue theories, because they eschew reductive rules as guides for action in favor of developing behavioral dispositions that generate good patterns of action over a long period of time, cannot support a sufficiently substantive notion of general rights.[10]

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At first glance, this concern is plausible. Indeed, the feature of Kantian theories requiring respect for the deliberative character of persons in large measure accounts for the lasting appeal of the Kantian moral framework. Clearly articulated principles generated logically from primary standards appear well equipped to provide clear, unambiguous answers to questions about the nature of rights and obligations. This applies as well to hybrid theories, such as Rawls's, which include elements of rational choice theory and contract theory. We believe intuitively that an acceptable moral code must include an obligation to respect persons' desires to determine their own choices. Thus, theorists such as Brandt have embraced *rule* utilitarianism, for example, in their effort to develop and defend the utilitarian ideal: *act* utilitarian principles have been criticized because they may sometimes require actions that fail to respect the desires and interests of individual persons.[11]

The fact that virtue ethics focuses attention primarily on character traits rather than discrete acts is thus seen as a drawback for virtue ethics. Critics typically claim that the structure of virtue ethics with respect to act assessment is overly vague and therefore inadequate. The perceived inability of virtue ethics to provide a principled decision-

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procedure for determining how to act in specific circumstances has led some commentators to suggest that while the insights gained by paying more attention to questions of character are valuable, virtue ethics cannot stand alone as an adequate moral theory. Rather, questions of character should be considered as a supplementary or complementary feature of an act-based moral theory.[12]

However, there are sound reasons to resist the temptation to conclude that a hybrid moral theory which includes act-based principles and virtue-theoretic concepts should be adopted, reasons that will become clarified as the argument progresses. One obvious difficulty stems from the existence of fundamental disagreements about the nature of ethical judgments. For example, advocates of virtue ethics typically consider the need for perceptive discretion in distinct contexts to be a crucial feature of ethical judgments. This focus on contextual decision-making does not fit well with act-based theories that rely on a logical application of central ethical principles in order to evaluate particular acts.

In what follows I shall address the relevant concerns of some influential critics of virtue ethics. I shall argue that an adequate account of virtue ethics is capable of providing moral guidance in decision-making contexts, and shall develop a proposal intended to provide the foundational structure for

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a theory of obligation based on the virtues. In order to do so, I shall first develop the framework for these arguments by examining the relation between the virtues and a clearly articulated notion of human flourishing.

I shall argue that the most plausible account of human flourishing is one that is based on the fundamental importance of basic goods in human life. These basic goods include food and shelter, as well as friendship and a social context conducive to flourishing. Our common need for basic goods provides a rational motivation for developing virtuous dispositions, which enable us to attain and maintain those basic goods associated with flourishing. In addition, the social nature of important fundamental goods (e.g. friendship), along with the fact that as social creatures our personal identities are tied in complex ways to an interrelated web of persons, provides a convincing reason to conclude that we must support the flourishing of other persons and our communities if we wish to flourish. I shall show that this important relation between our basic needs and the basic needs of those around us can serve to establish a framework for constructing an account of *prima facie* obligations based on the virtues.

Finally, I shall consider some objections to the proposals that I develop, and I shall attempt to discuss some

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of the implications of my views in the realm of practical ethics. For example, I shall consider a case study in health care ethics, in order to examine the ways in which my account of the virtues might generate *particular* obligations in specific contexts.

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## NOTES

1. G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," Philosophy 33 (1958): 1-19.

2. See, for example, Lawrence Blum, "Compassion," in Explaining Emotion, ed. Amelie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Lawrence Thomas, "Friendship," Synthese 72 (1987): 217-236; and Bernard Williams, "Justice as a Virtue" in Essays on Aristotle's Ethics, ed. Amelie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

3. See Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts," in The Virtues: Contemporary Essays on Moral Character, ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz and Robert C. Roberts (Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth, 1987); John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," The Monist 62 (1979): 331-350; Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," The Journal of Philosophy (1982): 419-439; and Lawrence Blum, "Moral Perception and Particularity," Ethics 101 (July 1991): 701-725.

4. For an excellent attempt to create a "conceptual map" of the various claims made by virtue ethicists, see Justin Oakley, "Varieties of Virtue Ethics," Ratio 9 (September 1996): 128-152. See also Gregory Pence, "Recent Work on the Virtues," American Philosophical Quarterly 21 (October 1984): 281-297; Marcia Baron, "Varieties of Ethics of Virtue," American Philosophical Quarterly 22 (1985): 47-53; and Gregory Trianosky, "What Is Virtue Ethics All About?" American Philosophical Quarterly 27 (1990): 335-344.

5. See Phillipa Foot, Virtues and Vices (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); and Bernard Williams, Moral Luck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). See also Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," Journal of Philosophy 73 (1976): 453-466. For influential attacks on moral objectivity, see Gilbert Harman, The Nature of Morality (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); and J.L. Mackie, Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong (New York: Penguin, 1977).

6. The prototypical polemic is found in MacIntyre, After Virtue. Although considerable attention has been given to MacIntyre's constructive proposals, the majority of commentaries focus on his critique of "the enlightenment project" and its failures.

7. See Bernard Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1985); and Michael Stocker, Plural and Conflicting Values (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). A significant effort to formulate a systematic framework for a virtue ethical theory can be found in Michael Slote, From Morality to Virtue (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

8. Justin Oakley identifies six primary claims as essential features of any virtue ethics, and tries to show how these claims distinguish virtue ethics from character-based forms of Kantian and consequentialist ethics. See Justin Oakley, "Varieties of Virtue Ethics," Ratio 9 (September 1996): 128-152.

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9. See Robert Louden, "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics," American Philosophical Quarterly 21 (July 1984): 227-236; and J.B. Schneewind, "The Misfortunes of Virtue," Ethics 101 (October 1990): 42-63.

10. For my purposes, rights and obligations are relational moral concepts that mirror one another. An obligation is a requirement to act in a particular manner (or to refrain from acting in a particular manner). A right is an entitlement based on the moral force of an obligation. For example, if A is morally obligated not to harm B, then B has a right to not be harmed by A. Rights and obligations can be either actual or prima facie. The additional force typically associated with political rights does not apply to my use of the term, "rights," unless explicitly modified.

11. See R.B. Brandt, A Theory of the Good and the Right (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). I do not wish to imply that act utilitarians cannot respond adequately to such criticisms, nor that rule utilitarianism represents the best possible form of consequentialism. However, by pointing out one of the motivations for embracing indirect (rule) utilitarianism, I intend to emphasize that *any* theory must accommodate in some way the strong intuition that we are obligated to respect the fundamental desires of persons to determine their own courses of action.

12. See Kurt Baier, "Radical Virtue Ethics," in Midwest Studies in Philosophy XIII, ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Euhling, Jr. and Howard K. Wettstein (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 126-135; Robert Louden, "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics," p. 78; and William Frankena, Ethics, Second Edition (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), especially chapter four.

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## I. ARISTOTLE AND EUDAIMONIA

In order to understand the ways in which virtue ethics might ground judgments concerning right action, it will be necessary to consider in some depth the concept of *eudaimonia*.[1] Most virtue ethicists develop the Aristotelian notion that the virtues are necessary constituents of a flourishing life; according to this view virtues are plural, intrinsic goods without which it is not possible to live a satisfying, flourishing life.[2] Nevertheless, there has been little direct discussion in the literature concerning the relation between *eudaimonia* and duties or obligations to others.[3] This may in part explain why critics of virtue ethics are skeptical about the prospects for developing a theory of obligation based on the virtues. Aristotle's functional description of persons, for example, leads to an account of virtuous behavior that does not transparently generate an account of our obligations toward one another. Aristotle's focus on developing traits of character intended to guide ethical judgment in particular circumstances, along with his insistence that such judgments require sensitivity to the details of particular contexts, lead critics to argue that ethical theories based on a clearly articulated set of rules or principles fare better than virtue-based theories in

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providing moral guidance.

For these reasons, it is necessary to examine closely the relation between virtues and obligations. My method will be to show that the concept of *eudaimonia* must play a central role in determining the content of our obligations via the virtues, and that once we develop a clear account of the content of a theory of human flourishing, it will be possible to present a satisfying response to critics' challenges concerning moral guidance and act assessment. In addition, by focusing on human flourishing, I shall be able to raise crucial questions concerning how we conceive ourselves and our relation to others within ordinary contexts. What must I do in order to live a flourishing life? What are my obligations to other persons? How do the answers to these questions differ, and why? A fundamental intuition that shall be a guiding assumption throughout this work is the idea that issues between self and other are the underlying thorns to various ethical problems, and that a close examination of such issues is crucial to fruitfully developing the current dialogue on questions concerning the basis of our ethical obligations, self-other asymmetry, the ethical relevance of personal projects, and other related questions. By focusing on both conflicts and confluences between self and other, I hope to develop a framework that can accommodate a well

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balanced view of personal responsibility within the context of citizenship.

What, then, is *eudaimonia*? What is required to live a humanly flourishing life? In order to approach an answer to this question, we must begin with Aristotle.

**Aristotle**

In Book I of the Nichomachean Ethics, Aristotle identifies three types of ends: those ends that are pursued solely as means to other ends (e.g. placing a key in a lock), those ends that have their own intrinsic value but are also means to more fundamental ends (e.g. lying on the beach on a sunny day), and those ends that are sought solely for their own sake. Now the summum bonum must be associated with the latter type of end, and its presumed existence is justified by reference to two facts about the ends of various arts and sciences. First, activities (e.g. medicine, shipbuilding) are actually of value, and their value is proved by their very existence. Aristotle is unwaveringly keen to explore the practical importance of ethical questions, and considers abstract conceptual arguments to be unhelpful unless clearly tied to their application in human affairs. Different crafts and activities and their associated ends have been pursued by intelligent persons and have earned their place in various

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networks of social activity over time; in this we can see that the specific ends that are somehow related to the summum bonum are called "good" because of their actual value to those individuals who engage in the relevant activities, crafts, etc. Second, if we ask *why* the products of activities such as medicine and shipbuilding are good, the answer cannot rest merely in the intrinsic value of the ends aimed at by those crafts, but must refer to some greater end(s). The greater end that gives meaning to the various activities, each with its distinctive purposes and more narrow ends, is *eudaimonia*.

Aristotle at this stage of his argument leaves open the question of whether or not *eudaimonia* represents a single end or a plurality of ends, and this is important, as we shall see later. He does argue that a distinctive end must exist for the sake of which we pursue all other ends, or our various activities and their purposes would be vain and futile.[4] Nevertheless, it remains possible that the best life is one defined either by the attainment of a single end or by the attainment of a harmonious blend of multiple ends, each of which is pursued solely for its own sake. It might turn out that *eudaimonia* is identified as a whole that consists of valued and integrally related parts (e.g. honor, pleasure, health, friendship). I must return to this question shortly,

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in connection with Aristotle's treatment of the choice between a life of virtuous activity and a life of *theoria*. There can be no doubt, however, that *eudaimonia* (however defined) is the end of the practical agent's activity. As Sarah Broadie notes,

> Aristotle may be overconfident about the uniqueness of the good that makes life happy; but all the same, the arguments . . . do succeed in pointing us toward a unified topic which concerns, it would seem, not merely that good itself, but the nature of the being whose good and happiness it is. This is the practical agent, since happiness is here considered above all as an end of practice.[5]

In order to begin sketching an outline that might help to determine the content of *eudaimonia*, Aristotle claims that the object at which we aim in attempting to live flourishing lives is to be identified with the aims of the statesman, since the ends of all other arts (e.g. strategy, economics) are subordinate to the ends of political science (NE 1094 a 28-29). This move is extremely important, and has ramifications concerning our question about the relation between virtues and obligations. If the best life is to be associated with the aims of the statesman, then how do these aims relate to the

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goals and purposes of individuals? Since Aristotle's primary question is, "what is the best life for human beings?" (and we can only interpret him to mean by this actual, individual human beings), how can the aims of persons be identified with the aims of the statesman, who is primarily concerned with the good of the community?

The apparent difficulty associated with these questions can be partly obviated by recognizing that the aims of the statesman are the aims of the individual in the sense that the flourishing of individuals is directly dependent upon the flourishing of the communities in which they live. This means more than just requiring that the laws of communities allow its citizens freedom to pursue their chosen ends, as the principles of liberal political theory attempt to insure. For Aristotle the function of the state is to provide its citizens with good lives, and the best state is one in which citizens participate actively in governing themselves.[5] Self-government is also an important requirement for liberal political theorists, but in discussing the relationship between the individual and the community Aristotle goes a step further. The flourishing human being for Aristotle is a person who necessarily identifies herself as a member of a particular community; she is actively involved in the lives of those persons who are members of the society of which she is

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a part. For Aristotle the flourishing human being is first and foremost: a citizen.

Aristotle, then, views the person seeking to identify the ends associated with a flourishing life as an individual qua statesman.[7] One of the implications of this conceptualization is that it is not easy to make a sharp distinction between distinct autonomous individuals, because the concerns of citizens are in large measure shared concerns, and it is impossible to achieve our personal aims without participating in the activities of other members of our community with an eye constantly focused on the flourishing of all. Because Aristotle associates *eudaimonia* with a life characterized by social activity, he recognizes that many of our most important activities require an active intercourse between persons whose aims and purposes are inextricably interconnected. Therefore, he views flourishing human beings as persons who naturally identify themselves as parents, brothers, sisters, friends and citizens, as well as autonomous individuals.[8]

This conception contrasts sharply with the more narrow view of persons as primarily autonomous, equal individuals (often in direct conflict with one another) that dominates discussions within the context of most contemporary moral philosophy. The fact that Aristotle's understanding of persons differs in fundamental ways from the model of persons

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operative within Kantian and consequentialist moral theories is one reason why a hybrid moral theory that incorporates act-based principles and virtue-theoretic concepts should be rejected. Differences in basic assumptions about human nature make it impossible to reconcile the claims supported by the frameworks of virtue ethics, Kantian views, and contemporary consequentialist accounts.

This consideration also raises a general concern about the methodology used to establish an ethical theory based on the virtues. It is important to pay attention to the significance of interpersonal relationships in the life of the flourishing person when developing an account of the virtues and the goods that their active expression produces. While most contemporary advocates of virtue ethics criticize Kantians and utilitarians, the complex character of personal identity as it relates to an appropriate description of the virtues is often overlooked. In what follows I shall pay close attention to the ways in which the quality of our social relations is relevant to the project of providing an adequate account of human flourishing.

By embracing an Aristotelian conception of human beings that emphasizes the importance of our various social roles in determining how we should act, I do not intend to imply (nor did Aristotle) that there are not contexts in which the aims

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and actions of particular persons (or groups) might conflict. On the contrary, it is extremely important from an ethical standpoint to be able to find principled ways to resolve conflicts when they occur. It is my position that it is possible to establish means of conflict resolution (and to provide moral guidance generally) using a virtue-theoretic framework. Arguments in support of this claim shall be given in Chapters 4 and 5. At this point it is enough to say that it is important to recognize the many ways in which the interests and concerns of citizens within a community tend to converge, and to emphasize the Aristotelian claim that a genuinely flourishing human life is one in which I actively consider the fundamental aims of others as in important ways my own aims. This is what it means to identify the purposes of the individual with those of the statesman.

This identification, however, can be questioned. The notion that the function of the state is to provide good lives for its citizens is not universally accepted. It is more common now to argue that the function of the state is to insure that the conditions necessary for pursuing good lives are available to citizens. It is also commonly held that a state ought not to go beyond the role of insuring that the conditions for living well exist, for this would inevitably involve an extension of its authority that is inappropriate,

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paternalistic and inherently conservative. Thus, it is mistaken to suggest that the character of persons (since having good characters is essential to having good lives) is an appropriate concern for the statesman's activity. This conclusion does not follow, however; it could be determined (by examining actual governmental and social practices) that while it is the function of the state to provide good lives for its citizens, the best way to do this is to limit the authority of the state with regard to civil liberties and personal autonomy. There is no reason to suppose that (say) a principle of harm (rather than a paternalistic concern with the character of citizens) cannot operate as the most useful liberty-limiting standard for legal and public policy decisions, simply because we choose to formulate an ethical framework based on the virtues. It is important to distinguish between the practical activities of the *politikos* and the notion that the basic aims of the statesman are those that we as persons ought to embrace as moral agents.

What reasons do we have, then, to accept this notion as an operating assumption? For Aristotle, the answer is a practical one: we are by nature social animals, whose flourishing is tied to the robust health of the communities in which we live. How well we act in our various roles within social contexts partly determines whether or not we lead

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genuinely good human lives (partly, because external circumstances can always affect one's happiness; Aristotle is one of the few moral philosophers to appreciate the power of fortune's fickle hand). This seems to me to be a strong argument, and to provide a fruitful framework for examining issues of conflict and cooperation between oneself and others, issues central to ethical inquiry. Why is it virtuous to be just and generous? What is the relation between my friend's happiness and my own happiness?

These questions are naturally prompted by a consideration of our central question, "what is a good (or best) life for a person?" In contrast, contemporary moral discussions focus more commonly on the question, "what are my duties and obligations?" Contemporary ethical theories of both consequentialist and deontological stripes are committed to impartially considering the interests or rights of particular persons, and the rules or outcomes generated by these theories are intended to have general application. The commitments to universality and impartiality explicit within (most) contemporary moral theories naturally rely on the idea of persons as equal and autonomous moral agents.

One problem with this approach (which I shall discuss in more detail later) is that these characteristics of modern theories lead to a level of abstraction that glosses over

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important differences that exist between persons in their relationships with each other in various contexts. For example, differences in social status, in real power, in experience, are relevant to a thorough ethical evaluation of the obligations incumbent upon individuals in different contexts. What a parent ought to do for her child is not what she ought to do for her employer, or for her friend. Such differences are obscured, and the cogency of our evaluations is thwarted, however, when persons are conceived as relatively equal and autonomous (since the relevance of such differences cannot be adequately considered given the assumption that we are all equal and autonomous). More importantly, assumptions of relative equality and autonomy make it impossible to evaluate the way in which the quality of our relationships with each other affects our ethical obligations on various levels, and indeed is relevant to the way in which we identify ourselves as unique individuals.[9] In short, the abstraction of agency required to produce the simplicity sought by rule-based ethical theories generates a conception of individuals that is insufficiently realistic.[10]

In contrast, as we have noted, Aristotle begins by considering the question, "what is the best life for a human being?" Here the focus is clearly on the individual agent, albeit agent qua statesman. Here the flourishing of persons,

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rather than their distinctive obligations, is considered to be central. Why should we be interested in this question today? One important reason already touched upon is that the conceptual framework natural to the concerns of Greek thinkers provides room to consider the complex ways in which the happiness of individual persons is related to the happiness (or sorrow) of other persons who stand in various relations with the agent. A thorough examination of these relationships will help to provide insights into a variety of thorny questions. How can I pursue my personal ends while being just in my actions toward others? Why are so-called other-regarding virtues (e.g. beneficence, magnanimity, kindness) as important as primarily self-regarding virtues (e.g. prudence, temperance, courage)?

We can begin to seek answers to these questions by continuing to consider Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia*. Aristotle emphasizes that we should not demand more clarity than is appropriate to the subject matter:

> We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premisses to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premisses of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better.
>
> (NE 1094 b 19-23)

Thus he is willing, once he has determined that there is indeed a summum bonum, and given an account of its formal

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characteristics, to rely on our actual beliefs about what counts as excellent human activity as a way to begin to flesh out the meaning of *eudaimonia*. The formal definition, which is built on Aristotle's *ergon* argument, is that human flourishing is "activity of soul in accordance with excellence." (NE 1098 a 17) Without much argument, he associates "excellence" with moral and intellectual virtues (e.g. temperance, courage, wisdom, justice), but this association can be justified by the fact that Aristotle is relying on the commonly held beliefs of good persons, along with the knowledge that those characteristics necessary to a successful statesman must be included in the catalog of virtues.

In Nichomachean Ethics, Books II-V, Aristotle presents his account of moral virtue. Virtuous activity is defined as the practical expression of human excellence, yet just how virtuous dispositions relate to particular actions remains unclear. While this is frustrating, it is unavoidable because particular cases "do not fall under any art or precept but the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion." (NE 1104 a 7-9) The issue is further complicated by the famous dictum that in particular cases "the decision rests with perception." (NE 1109 b 23) It seems that if the budding moral agent requires guidance,

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the moral exemplar is her only aid. Aristotle does supply as a palliative the doctrine of the mean, but this medicine is of dubious efficacy, since knowing which action lies appropriately between excess and deficiency requires the experience and perceptive judgment of the discerning agent.

Aristotle, then, does not provide a clear criterion for determining how to act virtuously in particular instances because he does not believe that it is possible to do so. Given this background, it is easy to understand the motivations of philosophers who have doubted this belief and sought to formulate justifiable ethical principles capable of generating rules for right action. It is also easy to understand the critics of contemporary virtue ethics, who claim that its advocates are in the same sorry position as Aristotle in this regard. Is it possible to come to Aristotle's defense by clarifying the way in which human flourishing is related to particular ethical obligations? In order to approach the demands couched in this question carefully, I must first consider two related problems with Aristotle's characterization of eudaimonia: the apparent conflict between what seem to be two distinct accounts of human flourishing in the Nichomachean Ethics, and difficulties associated with Aristotle's reliance on his metaphysical account of natural teleology.

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It is necessary to provide some background to indicate the motivation for considering these problems. It is my purpose to defend a version of Aristotelian eudaimonism that in important ways relies on a picture of the good human life as one in which prudential concern for the agent's interests is essentially connected with ethical concern for the good of others.[11] This view is supported by Aristotle's contention that the good of the community and the good of each individual is closely related, and is challenged by the Kantian claim that individual self-interest and ethical responsibility are inevitably in conflict.

The picture of the good life that emerges from Aristotle's discussion of moral virtue and his discussion of the best friendships (in which we act to benefit our friends for their sake), provides support for the claim that flourishing requires the active expression of virtuous dispositions (including such virtues as beneficence and magnanimity). However, in Nichomachean Ethics X.6-8, a quite different picture of the good life emerges, based on the notion that *eudaimonia* must be most closely associated with the activity of *theoria*. From the point of view presented by Aristotle in his discussion of the contemplative life, the concept of man's essential function takes on new characteristics: since it is our contemplative nature that

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characterizes and distinguishes us as humans, the divine life of *theoria* is the true end of the motion from potential to actual. Indeed, Aristotle in his discussion of the superiority of the contemplative equates reason with the divine:

> If reason is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything.
> (NE 1177 b 30-35)

Although reasoning is a kind of activity for Aristotle, the type of reasoning associated with contemplation is quite distinct from the activity of practical rationality associated with the correct expression of the moral virtues. The contemplative life, which dominates the scene in X.6-8, had been briefly mentioned in I.5 as one of the prominent types of life, along with the life of pleasure and the political life (NE 1095 b 9-11). The life of pleasure is quickly rejected as inadequate, although this does not mean that pleasure is worthless, and it turns out that in the best cases pleasure is an added bonus in the good life. Similarly, Aristotle in the Eudemian Ethics compares the lives of the philosopher, the political man and the voluptuary.[12] His discussion there

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implies that the flourishing life perhaps includes some combination of the three competitors. Pleasure, honor and wisdom: each are goods with their unique characteristic advantages, and each is natural to human endeavors. This suggestion raises an important question. Is it possible that the best life is one in which both virtuous activity and contemplation are component elements? Is the best life one in which the political and philosophical are appropriately balanced elements? Since this seems a natural suggestion, it is important to examine its plausibility.

Aristotle clearly does not jettison courage, temperance and justice when he claims that the life of *theoria* is the best life. Speaking of the value of moral virtue in NE X.8 he states:

> But in a secondary degree the life in accordance with the other kind of virtue is happy; for the activities in accordance with this befit our human estate. Just and brave acts, and other virtuous acts, we do in relation to each other, observing our respective duties with regard to contracts and services and all manner of actions and with regard to passions; and all of these seem to be typically human. (NE 1178 a 8-14)

A plausible inference to draw is that Aristotle intends to make a distinction between a good life and the best life; the moral virtues aid in attaining a good life and the wise man must develop the moral virtues in accordance with practical wisdom (*phronesis*), but for the best life theoretical wisdom

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(*sofia*) is the essential virtue, and its cultivation the primary activity.

However, the demands of the socially active life in accordance with the manifold virtues appear to conflict with the leisure that is necessary for engaging in the contemplative life. A life filled with responsibilities and dominated by relationships with one's fellow citizens contrasts sharply with a life of leisure, in which one might quietly read books and contemplate serious questions concerning the life of the soul. Although Aristotle does not directly address the problem (so glaring from the modern viewpoint) of how to resolve conflicts based on limited time and resources available within a human life, he does not appear to be unaware of the potential for conflict, or he would not present the choice between the political and contemplative lives as distinct alternatives. He asks, "which type of life is best?" and argues that the life of *theoria* must be considered best, because "the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else is man." (NE 1178 a 7-8)[13]

If morally virtuous activity guided by practical wisdom remains a component of a life dominated by contemplative activity, the sense in which morally virtuous activity constitutes (part of) the good life becomes arguably somewhat

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different from that which animates the discussion of moral virtue in NE II-V. Even if Aristotle intended to include both morally virtuous activity and strictly intellectual pursuits as components of the best life, it is difficult to be satisfied by the attempt to accommodate a place for courage and temperance within a life whose guiding principle is the search for intellectual wisdom. In a human life our time and resources are limited; this is why the choice between the political life and the contemplative life is significant. To say that the good for man consists in living both an active life in accordance with moral virtue as well as a life of contemplation and intellectual activity, and to further assert the necessary dominance of the latter, complicates rather than resolves the appearance that the holistic and intellectual models of the good life are incompatible.

Commentators concerned to show that the Ethics presents a coherent, unified theory of the good life attempt to argue against an intellectualist interpretation of Aristotle. It cannot be, they claim, that all morally virtuous actions must be done for the purpose of making possible or maximizing the goods associated with the pursuit of theoretical wisdom. The implication of these arguments is that morally virtuous activity has its own independent value as a component of any

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good life, even though contemplative activity represents the greatest flower of such a life. John Cooper, for example, points out that Aristotle does not advocate an ascetic ideal.[14] On the contrary, he implies in his discussion of the mean in relation to moral virtues that enjoying some bodily pleasures is important for the wise man. Though one must not become a glutton or a sybarite, it is also wrong to abstain from pleasurable meals and good sex. Cooper claims that it would be difficult to characterize these activities as ultimately serving to enhance the quality of the intellectual life, particularly when one considers that it is the pleasure associated with e.g. good sex that justifies indulging in (at least some) sexual activity.

In addition Aristotle emphasizes that the flourishing associated with the good life must be complete; thus both the moral and intellectual virtues are necessary, as well as luck (NE 1098 a 17-19; 1220 a 2-4). It is natural to interpret this requirement by holding that both practical and theoretical wisdom are components of the good life, each with its natural domain of activity. If so, the best life must be a well balanced combination of the political and philosophical life, and the contrast between these lives can be seen as distinct but not incompatible.

Nevertheless, even if we grant that *eudaimonia* must

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include a plurality of excellent activities that include both the moral and intellectual virtues, a nagging discomfort implied by the dominance of the contemplative life as the ultimate end remains. One reason for this discomfort stems from the fact that the requirements of the politically active life are so different from those that inform the life of contemplation. Learning to choose the moderate action appropriately in accordance with the moral virtues by in fact doing right acts habitually and with enjoyment has no apparent connection with the application of reason to theoretical problems. More importantly, the burdens of the contemplative life are very great, since its activity involves engaging in inquiries about the most difficult possible subject matters. The attention and concentration seem hardly consonant with the types of activities associated with a life dedicated to family concerns and affairs of state.

There is in addition a more general consideration that adds to lingering doubts about a harmonious balance between the political and theoretical components of the good life. The character of Aristotle's description of the contemplative life in NE X, with its clearly discernible elements of Platonism, does not share the same motivational assumptions that underlie the arguments of the middle books. The naturalism that inspires a practical, down-to-earth theory of

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the good is absent from the lofty sentiments expressed in the sections on the glories of the contemplative life. The description of the contemplative life characterizes reason as that in us which is divine; perhaps this appeal to divinity can provide a clue to understanding the apparent tension in Aristotle's thought.

In the Metaphysics Aristotle claims that concrete particulars are always composed of both form and matter, substance being the cause or form that puts matter into a determinate state. He argues against the Platonic conception that there are substances which are not sensible and claims that it is not coherent to assert the existence of immaterial substance:

> While the theory presents difficulties in many ways, the most paradoxical thing of all is the statement that there are certain things besides those in the material universe, and that these are the same as sensible things except that they are eternal while the latter are perishable.[15]

He goes on in this passage to present a version of the third man argument, and concludes that the Platonic ontology cannot be correct. Again, "all things produced either by nature or by art have matter; for each of them is capable both of being and of not being, and this capacity is the matter in each" (M 1032 a 20-22). Since all beings, including humans, have both form and matter, it is unreasonable to assert that persons are immortal, for when our bodies perish the form goes

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out from them and cannot exist separately.

On the other hand, there are passages in which Aristotle leaves open the question of whether there is an aspect of the eternal within humans that persists beyond death. In a discussion of natural objects such as Socrates and Callias he states that "we must examine whether any form also survives afterwards. For in some cases there is nothing to prevent this; e.g. the soul may be of this sort - not all soul but the reason; for presumably it is impossible that all soul should survive." (M 1070 a 25-28) The extensive arguments that Aristotle presents in the Metaphysics against the existence of immaterial substances (e.g. mathematical objects and Ideas), though largely motivated by the view that primary substances are essentially material, strangely leave the issue of the status of the soul unanswered.[15]

In his discussion of the relation between soul and body in De Anima, Aristotle similarly wavers between asserting that the body and soul of a person, as form and matter, are inseparable, and suggesting that it is at least possible that (a part of) the soul can in fact exist separately from the body. After considering and dismissing previous accounts of the nature of the soul, he presents an answer to the question, "What is soul?" that is consistent with his metaphysical arguments concerning substance, matter, form and composite

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particulars. The body is said to be a compound substance, and the soul "must be a substance in the sense of the form of a natural body having life potentially within it. But substance is actuality, and thus the soul is the actuality of a body . . ."[17] The preliminary definition of soul is a quite natural one, considering Aristotle's general philosophical commitments, and leads to the conclusion that soul and body are inseparable, yet he soon goes on to express lingering doubts about this point in a particularly enigmatic passage:

> From this it indubitably follows that the soul is inseparable from its body, or at any rate that certain parts of it are (if it has parts) - for the actuality of some of them is nothing but the actualities of their bodily parts. Yet some may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at all. Further, we have no light on the problem whether the soul may not be the actuality of its body in the sense in which the sailor is the actuality of the ship. (DA 413 a 3-8)

It is unclear what could possibly be meant by parts of the soul that "are not the actualities of any body at all," yet there is in the question of whether or not this is possible a clear tension in Aristotle's thought on the nature of the soul that mirrors the apparent difficulties that emerge by trying to combine the two models of the good for man. The belief that a part of the soul is immortal and eternal coincides with the references to the divinity of reason that litter discussion about the superiority of the contemplative life.

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Further evidence that Aristotle held such a belief can be found in De Anima III, where he explicitly states that the disembodied mind is immortal: "Mind is not at one time knowing and at another not. When mind is set free from its present conditions it appears as just what it is and nothing more: this alone is immortal and eternal." (DA 430 a 22-24) By asserting the immortality of the mind, Aristotle appears to answer the lingering question as to whether or not a part of the soul might be able to exist separately from the body, yet one wishes that he had proceeded to advance a stronger and more sustained development of this position.

Throughout the text of De Anima there is a consistent tension between a scientific analysis of soul, one that emphasizes the inextricable connection between soul and body, and a suggestion that there is an element of the soul (reason) that is immortal and eternal. On the one hand Aristotle claims that all thoughts must be thoughts of sensible things and that soul is the actuality of a certain kind of body, while in other passages he divides the soul into different parts: self-nutrition, sensation, motivity and thinking, and gives to thinking a unique status that parallels his remarks about the divine nature of reason in NE X.

This parallel sheds some light on the problem that we have been considering. If there is a part of the soul that is

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immortal and eternal, and this can be identified with reason, and if in addition reason is that which is best in us, then the discussion of the contemplative life which conflicts so sharply with the bulk of the text in the Nichomachean Ethics becomes easier to understand. As J.L. Ackrill notes, "Just as he cannot in the De Anima fit his account of separable reason - which is not the form of a body - into his general theory that the soul is the form of the body, so he cannot make intelligible in the Ethics the nature of a man as a compound of "something divine" and much that is not divine."[18] Unfortunately, by recognizing a deep internal tension in Aristotle's thought we have not resolved the question of whether or not the political and contemplative models of the good life can be made compatible as components within the best life.

Although I am skeptical about attempts to harmonize Aristotle's account of the good life, I must leave the question open, in part because my consideration of the issues involved has been much too brief to produce an unequivocal conclusion. This result is no cause for distress, however, since my purpose in considering the issues has been to critically examine Aristotle's account in order to develop a contemporary version of virtue ethics that includes the best features of Aristotelian ethics while revising certain

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important elements in the light of relevant criticisms. I submit that even if it is possible to harmonize Aristotle's account of the moral virtues with his insistence that a life of contemplative activity represents the highest good, it is not to be recommended. In order to support this claim, it will be necessary to consider briefly the second problem that I mentioned earlier: Aristotle's reliance on a theory of natural teleology that contemporary philosophers are no longer willing to accept.

Once we reject the central idea that all persons have a particular function that is uniquely human, the assumption that there is a sole end that all persons seek for its own sake and not for the sake of any other ends *and which contains all of the same components* becomes highly questionable. Although we might retain the *concept* of *eudaimonia*, the question of its *content* remains problematic. If there is no specific description of the summum bonum that is applicable to all persons qua persons, then it appears as if the contest between the political and philosophical life becomes merely a matter of personal preference; it loses its ethical importance.

However, it would be a mistake to make too hasty a conclusion in this regard. It is important to recognize the subtlety of Aristotle's discussion of *eudaimonia* and the

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virtues, for even though his *ergon* argument fails, it remains plausible to claim that a human life cannot be an excellent life if the values that inform our actions are not ordered and prioritized in a rational plan of some sort. It also remains possible to identify features of any worthwhile life that will be common to all persons, regardless of differences in personality and interests. The task that remains to us, if we wish to continue along Aristotle's well-worn path, is to replace the metaphysical notions of a final end and a natural human function with a theory of human flourishing that retains the insights inherent within Aristotle's discussions of friendship, the virtues and the role of perception in choosing wisely.

**Contemporary Proposals**

It is this project to extend the Aristotelian framework in fruitful ways that has motivated much work in contemporary virtue theory. A prominent example of this project can be seen in the work of MacIntyre. In his now familiar arguments, MacIntyre invokes the concepts of *practices with goods internal to them, the narrative structure of a human life, and coherent moral traditions* as elements of a complex framework within which it is possible to identify the meaning and purpose of the virtues. According to MacIntyre, we need the

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virtues not because we have a specific function as humans, but rather because they are those dispositions that allow us to achieve the goods internal to specific practices, and to sustain our *quest for the human good.* The virtues are "those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter . . ."[19]

By insisting on the historical relevance of particular traditions that form the context for our activities, MacIntyre focuses attention on the need to maintain those features of our traditions that support the ability to pursue practices and goods within the context of a whole life whose meaning is directly related to the particular relationships that occur within the person's cultural milieu. Such focus represents a significant insight, an insight that is often lost in the chasm of debate surrounding MacIntyre's critique of the "Enlightenment project." Despite an industry of criticism that has evolved in relation to MacIntyre's claims, his demand that we consider the particularities of our social context when considering moral questions has provided an important focus for contemporary ethical discussions.

However, there are also common features within any social

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context that influence the goods related to our practices; I shall argue that it is extremely important to consider the ethical relevance of certain trans-historical facts in order to counter the common criticism that accounts such as MacIntyre's are inherently relativistic and conservative. If the justification of moral practices must occur within particular traditions, then there seem to be no objective criteria for evaluating the merits of competing codes or theories, or for criticizing practices within the context of a particular tradition. Yet for all persons in all cultures there are particular goods without which it is not possible to flourish. If we have no friends and no food, we cannot begin to pursue the human quest to live an excellent life. By considering the moral importance of these goods we can begin to construct an account of the virtues that can form the basis for rational criticism of particular cultural practices while acknowledging the relevance of contextual factors.

In what follows I shall develop some of MacIntyre's proposals, by focusing on some of the ways in which relationships function as the basis for particular obligations. Yet in so doing I intend to include as a crucial element of my discussion the notion that there are basic goods necessary for *any person's* pursuit of a good human life. These goods shall form the basis for a conception of

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flourishing that in turn will ground my account of what it is to be a virtue.[20]

However, I would first like to consider briefly another attempt that has been made recently to supplement Aristotle's contention that developing the virtues is the most crucial project for ethical living. In his important work on the virtues, Michael Slote presents a unique form of virtue ethics, and in so doing provides an alternative model for developing Aristotle's claim that the virtues are indispensable features of a good human life.[21] Slote does not attempt to construct an account of flourishing capable of providing a foundation for understanding the purpose and value of the virtues; rather, he relies on intuitive judgments concerning the admirability of various human traits, and argues that such judgments provide the best means for evaluating acts and persons, because of problems that beset Kantian, utilitarian and common-sense accounts of morality. Slote develops a theory of common-sense virtue ethics that recommends developing a balance between concern for oneself and concern for others. The important thing to notice in the present context is that Slote's view does not rely on the Aristotelian notion of flourishing in order to create a means for determining which traits count as virtues and which traits count as vices. Thus, it represents an effort to create a

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foundational theory of ethical life based on the virtues quite distinct from the current effort.[22]

No doubt all promising paths should be followed, for wherever there is promise, we must search. However, I am convinced that there is an important area of inquiry relevant to the current discussion that has not yet received adequate attention. I would like to suggest that we can discover some insightful clues concerning the relation between flourishing and the virtues by considering the importance of those good things, both simple and complex, that all persons value. If we are fortunate we might, as did Socrates in his search for justice, find that the fundamental basis for a plausible account of human flourishing has been "rolling around at our feet from the beginning."[23]

Once we reject Aristotle's argument that there is a unitary human function which determines the nature of the good for man, then it becomes plausible to suggest that there are no sufficient conditions for living an excellent human life. The goods associated with flourishing activity very likely differ to some extent in the case of different individuals, and depend on contingent factors such as personality, cultural background and the unpredictable character of those opportunities and obstacles that naturally occur for each of us. Perhaps for me the opportunity to teach and share ideas

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with thoughtful people contributes something to my life that makes it happier than it would be without these activities. For another person the freedom to play music for others, following the tradition of Orpheus in our own time, would count as a central feature of a good life. The particularity of each individual is relevant to any assessment of flourishing or its lack, and thus cannot be circumscribed in theoretical terms.

However, it remains true that for each of us health and personal freedom are important goods. Enduring friendships add to the flourishing of anybody's life, as does the ability to procure adequate food, clothing and shelter from the elements. Those goods that we can agree are common goods in the sense that they are universally considered valuable constitute necessary conditions for flourishing, and as such provide a universal basis for considering a wide range of ethical considerations.

In what follows I shall consider in some depth the ethical significance of basic goods. I shall try to identify a plausible set of basic goods that together constitute necessary conditions for flourishing, and then discuss the relation between the value of these goods, the necessity of the virtues, and general obligations. I shall pay particular attention to the ways in which prudential considerations

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generate (or fail to generate) a justification for what are considered in modern terms to be broadly ethical considerations: namely, duties or obligations to ourselves and others. By so doing I shall attempt to criticize the thesis that it is a mistake to conflate prudential and ethical norms, each of which has its own independent and distinct justificatory structure.

In order to clear the way for an examination of these issues, I must consider in some detail a cluster of common objections concerning the adequacy of contemporary virtue ethics. Several critics have cast doubt on the adequacy of any ethical framework based on the central importance of virtuous activity to deal with the need to provide principled guidance in making ethical decisions and judgments. To their criticisms I now turn.

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**NOTES**

1. I follow those philosophers who translate "eudaimonia" as "human flourishing," rather than "happiness," because "happiness" seems to me not to capture the full meaning of the Greek term, particularly as it is employed by Aristotle, who is primarily concerned with the evaluation of a life *over a long period of time*. "Well being" has also been used recently as a translation of "eudaimonia." See James Griffin, Well Being (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). Although this translation reflects the importance of judging a life through its many phases, its common usage generally focuses primarily on *physical* conditions. In addition "well being" seems ill suited in various linguistic contexts. For example, its use is awkward in certain verb tenses (e.g. "She went well") and as an adjectival modifier (e.g. "She led a _____ life").

2. See Foot, Virtues and Vices; MacIntyre, After Virtue; and John M. Cooper, Reason and the Human Good in Aristotle, (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1975). Michael Slote develops a version of virtue ethics that is conspicuous because it does *not* rely on the idea that humans need the virtues in order to flourish. Rather, he relies on intuitive ideas about which traits are characteristic of admirable human beings. See Slote, From Morality to Virtue.

3. Aristotelian scholars are the exception here. See, for example, J.L. Ackrill, "Aristotle on Eudaimonia,"; and Thomas Nagel, "Aristotle on Eudaimonia," both in Essays on Aristotle's Ethics. Though penetrating and insightful, these discussions generally focus on *interpreting* Aristotelian texts, rather than examining how Aristotle's views support the claims made by contemporary virtue ethics.

4. Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics, trans. W.D. Ross (New York: Random House, 1941), 1094 a 21-22. References will hereafter be given in the text, identified as "NE."

5. Sarah Broadie, Ethics with Aristotle, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 33.

6. Aristotle, Politics, trans. W.D. Ross, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), especially Book VII.

7. Ibid., 1288 a 39-b 3.

8. This reading of Aristotle can be questioned, particularly in light of his claims about the preeminence of contemplation, and the virtue of wisdom associated with the contemplative life. Some commentators present what might be termed an intellectualist interpretation of the Nichomachean Ethics, which places much less stress on social activities than I do. See, for example, Richard Kraut, Aristotle on the Human Good (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990). I shall argue that regardless of how we interpret Aristotle's intentions in Book X, a balanced account that includes both moral and intellectual virtues is superior to a theory the defines the best life according to a description of the contemplative life, q.v. 20-32.

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9. My focus on the significance of relationships as defining features of personal identity is influenced by Hume, and also by contemporary feminist critiques of traditional ethical theories. See, for example, Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1982); Virginia Held, Rights and Goods (New York: Free Press, 1984); and Alison Jaggar, "Feminist Ethics: Some Issues for the Nineties," Journal of Social Philosophy 20 (1990): 91-107.

10. Recent work by some Kantians and consequentialists attempts to address this charge by allowing character to play an important role in the determination of right action. See Barbara Herman, The Practice of Moral Judgment (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Richard Brandt, "Morality and Its Critics," American Philosophical Quarterly 26 (1989): 89-100.

11. This interpretation of Aristotle, often termed "inclusionist eudaimonism," has been developed and defended by several scholars. See J.L. Ackrill, Aristotle the Philosopher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); and "Aristotle on Eudaimonia," in Essays on Aristotle's Ethics; John Cooper, Reason and the Human Good; and Julia Annas, "The Good Life and the Good Lives of Others," Social Philosophy and Policy 9 (1992): 133-48.

12. Aristotle, Eudemian Ethics, trans. Michael Woods (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 1215 a 35-b 5.

13. See Nicholas White, "Conflicting Parts of Happiness in Aristotle's Ethics," Ethics 105 (January 1995): 269-70; and John Cooper, Reason and the Human Good, 144-180.

14. Cooper, Reason and the Human Good, 107-109.

15. Aristotle, Metaphysics, trans. W.D. Ross (New York: Random House, 1941), 997 b 4-8. References will hereafter be given in the text, identified as "M."

16. Aristotle does admit some substances that are separable from matter (e.g. the unmoved mover). Nevertheless, the tension introduced by the notion that there is a part of the soul which is immortal remains problematic.

17. Aristotle, De Anima, trans. J.A. Smith (New York: Random House, 1941), 412 a 20-22. References will hereafter be given in the text, identified as "DA."

18. Ackrill, "Aristotle on Eudaimonia," 33.

19. MacIntyre, After Virtue, 219.

20. Q.v. Chapter 4, 86-93.

21. Slote, From Morality To Virtue. I will discuss Slote's proposals in more depth in Chapter 3.

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22. I argue against the plausibility of basing a virtue theory on intuitive judgments concerning admirable character traits, q.v. 80-85.

23. Plato, Republic, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 432 d 8-9.

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## II. CHARACTER AND ACTS

Critics of contemporary virtue ethics have argued that virtue theories are inadequate because they are incapable of providing a principled decision procedure for determining how to act in particular circumstances, or how to assess discrete acts. This is considered a problem of objectivity that arises because long-term character traits rather than principles that define parameters for right actions constitute the central focus of virtue ethics. It has also been urged that by focusing on the character of agents rather than acts, virtue theories fail to provide criteria for resolving disputes. It is important to address these claims directly, in order to establish the groundwork from which an account of obligation based on the virtues can be derived.

### Virtues and Moral Quandaries

In his article on the virtues, Robert Louden focuses on generic defects of modern virtue ethics.[1] He states that while teleological and deontological theories differ in well-known ways, both are act-centered approaches to moral questions, while virtue ethics is an agent-centered approach. Louden traces several problems to the fact that agents rather than acts function as the primary objects of moral evaluation

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for virtue ethics. For example, Louden claims that virtue ethics cannot provide much guidance in resolving moral quandaries. Since its rules and principles of action are derivative and the skills of moral perception required to make good decisions in particular cases are not routinizable, "we cannot expect it (virtue ethics) to be of great use in applied ethics and casuistry." (Louden, 230) Although I shall argue that Louden's critique relies on several questionable assumptions, in some ways his indictment of virtue ethics is undoubtedly accurate. As Louden points out, Aristotle maintains that the quality of judgment requires the active use of perceptive imagination and practical wisdom as well as logical assessment. The application of *phronesis* is crucial to ethical decision-making, particularly in the case of moral quandaries. The underlying conviction that supports Aristotle's position is that any set of moral rules, while useful as an instructive device and general guide, will be insufficient for resolving moral dilemmas in ordinary contexts.

This conviction is evident in Aristotle's discussions of the nature of political science and the fact that it is extremely difficult to act according to the mean between excess and deficiency. For example, he states that blameworthiness "is not easy to determine by reasoning, any

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more than anything else that is perceived by the senses; such things depend on particular facts, and the decision rests with perception."[2] It takes experience, attentive perception and even luck to develop the skills necessary for good moral judgment. This is why Aristotle spends so much time discussing the importance of cultivating good habits. When faced with moral quandaries one typically encounters a wide variety of contextual factors relevant to the particular situation. Conflicting moral considerations, each with its own prima facie significance, must somehow be balanced. Because of the diversity
and unpredictable range of such contexts it is unlikely that *any* theoretical principle or set of rules will be able to provide principled guidance, beyond establishing minimal parameters for acceptable/unacceptable choices.

The resolution of controversial issues in applied ethics is thus inherently problematic, regardless of one's avowed theoretical commitments. Louden's criticism of virtue ethics as insufficiently action-guiding is based on the assumption that competing ethical theories fare better because they focus directly on acts rather than long-term character traits. However, it is not at all clear that the moral principles of consequentialist or deontological theories are capable of providing uncontroversial solutions to moral quandaries that

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virtue theories cannot adequately address.[3] For example, Louden claims that virtue ethics will have little to say about whether to abort mentally deficient fetuses (Louden, 230). Clearly, this is a complex issue whose resolution is not readily apparent. What would a utilitarian analysis of the question reveal? A clear and straight-forward decision procedure is ostensibly one of the advantages of utilitarian consequentialism. Consequences of acts (or types of acts) determine the criteria for choosing between alternatives (or determine a decision procedure that is best able to produce optimal consequences), with some interpretation of "the greatest good for the greatest number" providing a measuring rod. Nevertheless, the ambiguous status of fetuses in the moral calculus makes a determination of right acts involving them problematic, whether such fetuses are mentally deficient or not. Are the interests of fetuses to be considered on an equal basis with those of adult humans? Are fetuses persons? If not, what consideration do they deserve as potential persons, if any?

Such commonly asked questions represent one complication among many, yet more perplexing difficulties result from the presupposition that moral questions about particular issues can be treated generally. Louden and others suppose that it is possible to elicit considerations appropriately related to

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a set of principles that will apply to all cases of the class, "mentally deficient fetus." If we simply assume that fetuses are persons, can we answer Louden's question concerning *all* mentally deficient fetuses? That is, can we give a *general* answer to the question? A rule utilitarian might argue that the devaluation of life associated with the general practice of aborting mentally deficient fetuses would have a debilitating affect on attitudes of persons toward one another, and should thus be prohibited. Call this argument RU1. On the other hand, a rule utilitarian might argue that the social cost of allowing mentally deficient fetuses to be born is too high to be borne (RU2). In each case relevant ethical considerations are given greater or lesser emphasis. Does the utilitarian decision procedure provide a way to determine which of these arguments wins the day? In fact, utilitarians are far from unanimous in their views on abortion and infanticide, and it is unlikely that such unanimity will emerge from the fierce debate that surrounds these issues.

A natural response is that at least (rule) utilitarianism provides a clear criterion for making difficult moral decisions about social policy issues, even if the application of its criterion sometimes requires a complex analysis of differently weighted facts and projections. While

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utilitarians disagree, this is primarily due to disagreement about empirical facts rather than disagreement about values. Yet the problems posed by dilemmas go beyond the need to clarify facts and make accurate social predictions. Specific ethical considerations relevant to particular situations as well as background facts must be thoughtfully evaluated and balanced in cases that resist a clear solution; even if the utilitarian criterion is straight-forward, its application in hard cases is not. Although utilitarian theory can provide basic guidelines within which competing ethical considerations can be evaluated, it cannot provide an uncontroversial answer to questions about all mentally deficient fetuses. The lack of agreement among utilitarians on this and other issues emphasizes the limitations of theoretical algorithms in the face of complex moral problems.

Imagine a case in which the woman carrying a mentally deficient fetus has the opportunity to bear a child after suffering through two miscarriages. She and her husband want desperately to nurture and raise their own child, and the child's mental disadvantages do not sway the parents from their loving intentions. Should we use the moral force of a utilitarian argument (RU2) to prevent such a couple from pursuing their personal vision of a good life? On the other hand, consider the case of a woman who has no desire to bring

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a mentally deficient child into the world, someone who has few resources and who will be ostracized by those around her if she becomes the mother of such a child. Let us assume that this woman is in fact a 14-year-old girl. Shall we use moral pressure to change her mind, for the sake of greater social benefits (RU1)?

The committed utilitarian is likely to stress in response to these examples that any good theory will allow for different circumstances to produced different moral judgments. Perhaps a rule utilitarian analysis fine-grained enough to handle difficult cases could be constructed. One wonders, however, if in so doing the advantages of appealing to clearly stated rules as appropriate action guides would not be lost. At any rate, these considerations reveal that Louden's criticism concerning the impotence of virtue ethics in the arena of casuistry relies on the faulty assumption that questions in applied ethics are susceptible to general answers which render differences in particular contexts irrelevant. There may be issues that yield to directives in the scope of universal quantifiers (e.g. "never wantonly kill an innocent child"), but such issues are the exception and not the rule, and tend to be less controversial than questions whose answers are intimately influenced by differences in context that it would be foolish to ignore. Moral quandaries especially are

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partly defined by the fact
that differing moral considerations, each with its own prima facie
significance, are in conflict with one another. The hope that a moral theory can provide the means to resolve the broad range of dilemmas that persons face in daily life is naive.

However, let us continue to examine Louden's example case by considering other treatments of the issue. An act utilitarian is much better situated to consider reflectively contextual differences in individual cases, and it is plausible that an act utilitarian analysis of different situations involving mentally deficient fetuses will in some cases yield definite answers to real moral dilemmas. In the extreme cases presented above, it seems clear that each woman should make the choice that her desires dictate, since those choices will probably produce the greatest overall benefit. Though more problematic examples can be considered, the act utilitarian will at least have the opportunity to consider relevant features of each particular situation, and will stress that reflective consideration of such features is crucial to making good choices. This is an advantage of act utilitarianism, and represents a conviction about the relevance of context that act utilitarians share with advocates of virtue ethics.

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Nevertheless, there is a deep problem with an act utilitarian approach to ethical dilemmas that stems from the utilitarian commitment to impartiality. Let us reconsider the case of the young girl who wants to abort her mentally deficient fetus. However, assume that she will be ostracized not if she bears the
child, but if she chooses to have an abortion. Further, assume that her physician has discovered unique anomalies in the fetus' immune system, anomalies that might provide insights into solutions to immune system diseases such as AIDS and diabetes. One might suggest that the girl allow an organization or individual to adopt the child, but also assume that the nature of the pregnancy yields great risk to the girl's health. The point is that it is easy to construct cases in which the utils supporting the demand that the girl give birth to the fetus outweigh her personal utils, yet it seems intuitive that her personal well-being and her position as the decision-maker should have more weight than benefits to others who might be affected by her choice. Here the contextual details that are ignored are those relating to the particularity of the persons whose choices and values are being evaluated, since utilitarianism necessarily abstracts from the separate and unique standpoint of particular persons. This is a natural result of the fact that each person's

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interests are given equal weight in the utilitarian calculus.

It is absurd to demand that a moral agent ignore the needs of close friends and family, as well as his own needs, in order to act optimifically. While one might admire a person whose altruism motivates her to devote her life to addressing the needs of others, this does not entail that one should expect her to do so. Let us paint a portrait of a mother with three small children who is presented with an opportunity to work for a charitable organization in Bangladesh. Her husband is deceased and her sister, who is childless, would be happy to care for her children. Imagine that the sister is devoted and kind, and has always wanted children of her own to raise. Our mother's training and skills are particularly well suited to the needs of the charitable group soliciting her services, yet she has no desire to leave the life that she has built for herself and her family. Can we reasonably blame such a woman for refusing the offer, or demand that she recognize the greater needs of those that she is being asked to serve?

There are two distinct difficulties with act utilitarian principles and their implications for moral agents which this example is intended to illuminate. First, an adequate moral theory should recognize that greater moral concern is due to

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persons closely related to us.[4] It is natural that mothers are more concerned with the flourishing of their children than they are with the flourishing of strangers in other lands. Although this does not entail that we have no obligations to help strangers who stand in great need of help, it does indicate that there is something missing in the "each to count as one" dictum explicit in (some versions of) utilitarian ethics. Second, it is possible for personal considerations of deep importance to weigh more than (or at least equally with) the demands of impartial morality.[5] The value that I place on choosing for myself a particular kind of life should not be negated by the requirements of impartialist principles. The impartiality demanded by utilitarian (and Kantian) theories carries with it a variety of counterintuitive consequences, only a few of which I have discussed.[6] It is relevant to consider impartiality here because it is symptomatic of a range of problems related to the attempt to reduce diverse moral considerations to a simple, over-arching principle, an attempt whose rejection is partially responsible for the reemergence of virtue ethics as a viable alternative to the dominant moral theories of our era.

However, perhaps the appropriate response to criticisms based on the inappropriateness of impartiality is to develop a form of *indirect* consequentialism based on a distinction

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between decision procedures and criteria for evaluation. Various versions of indirect consequentialism have been developed recently,[7] often with the criticisms that I have raised in mind. It might even be that the best decision procedures require a person to act based on a particular set of dispositions that together function to produce the best consequences. This type of view has some advantages over more primitive forms of utilitarianism; favoring close friends and performing particular acts that fail to maximize utility can clearly be justified, based on the overall benefits associated with acting according to an appropriately ordered set of dispositions (or some other preferred decision procedure). Such a view leaves open the possibility of supererogatory actions, and is not confined by a strict set of rules as the only means for determining how to act.

For example, when adopting a dispositional form of indirect utilitarianism, utility functions as the criterion for determining which traits will produce the best consequences, but in particular situations persons will not appeal directly to principles or rules, but must use discriminative judgment to determine what to do, just as an Aristotelian agent must do. In this respect dispositional forms of indirect utilitarianism are quite similar to virtue ethics, differing primarily in the respective criteria used to

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determine which traits should be developed.

Nevertheless, even for the indirect consequentialist, the problem of dilemmas remains. For example, what does a person with a well balanced set of dispositions do when faced with difficult decisions where opposing values conflict? Is it more compassionate to abort a fetus once genetic screening has determined that the child will be afflicted with a debilitating disorder (e.g. sickle cell anemia, Tay-Sachs disease), or would it be better to have a baby under such circumstances, hoping that aggressive therapies might be developed that will enhance the quality of life available for the child? To what extent should a woman include risks to her own health as a feature of the decision procedure in such a case? Simply stated, it is hard to say.

The point is not that indirect consequentialists are poorly situated to answer problematic ethical questions in particular contexts. The upshot is that it is a mistake to expect *any* ethical theory to be able to provide an algorithmic procedure for determining how to act (or how to assess the acts of others) in the course of ordinary moral experience. The conclusion that we must draw from a reflective consideration of the difficulties that ethical dilemmas present is that theoretical considerations alone will not help us to resolve such difficulties. Furthermore, it is a mistake

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to attempt to formulate theories capable of providing unequivocal means for resolving ethical quandaries, because in so doing we obliterate morally important distinctions based on differences between the status of distinct individuals as well as differences between the various distinct contexts in which ethical problems arise.

These considerations reveal that the criticism of virtue ethics as a view of moral life incapable of providing principled guidance in the face of difficult moral decisions relies on a faulty assumption about the relation between theory and practice and a questionable view about the function of moral theories in general. Moral theories are not simply "applied" in particular situations that are species of a particular genus, and should not be expected to provide reliable answers to moral quandaries, which typically involve conflicts in which various morally relevant factors must be somehow balanced.

This is why Aristotle stressed that good ethical choices require discriminative judgment in different contexts. Perceptive skills, emotional responsiveness and sensitivity to relevant details are all qualities that must be nurtured in order to develop the quality of judgment associated with the good person. Inclusion of a principled discussion of such qualities, and their role in moral judgment, represents an

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important advantage that virtue theories wield in comparison with theories based on impersonally formulated rules or principles.

**The Role of Ethical Theories**

I have responded to claims that virtue ethics is insufficiently action-guiding by arguing that advocates of rule-based ethical theories misconceive the functions that their theories are intended to serve, as well as the appropriate relation between theory and practice. Therefore, it is important to consider reflectively the role of ethical theories in relation to the particular choices and activities that constitute our lives. What are the appropriate functions of an ethical theory, and how should we characterize the relation between theory and practice?

Although these questions go beyond the scope of the present inquiry, it is possible to say that a good ethical theory should at least provide a justifying ground for leading a moral life. I believe that a good theory should also provide a plausible justification for those substantive moral requirements that are considered to be morally binding. In other words, a theory should provide a reasoned argument to support the normative claim that persons are subject to various moral obligations. The demand that an ethical theory

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should provide some guidance in determining how to evaluate acts and agents is reasonable, and I shall argue that virtue ethics is capable of addressing this demand. However, as the arguments presented make clear, it is unreasonable to expect an ethical theory to provide a definitive means for rationally resolving ethical quandaries or disputes. This expectation, generated historically by a legalistic view of morality, must be rejected.

One of the motivations for developing virtuous dispositions relies on the conviction that a decision procedure based on a set of rules derived from a central principle will be of little help in resolving the moral problems that one encounters in daily living. Modern virtue theories acknowledge the relevance of contextual details, perceptual acuity and emotional sensitivity in ethical decision-making: this is a virtue of virtue ethics. While a virtue theory cannot provide an algorithmic decision procedure (such as is generated by the principle of utility) for determining what an agent's particular obligations are, it can provide a more realistic guide for understanding moral experience, and for preparing oneself to face the difficult moral decisions that all of us inevitably confront. In addition, by starting from the point of view of the agent's personal well-being, virtue ethics provides a moral

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perspective that can make sense of the moral relevance of personal projects and personal relationships.

In many contexts ethical decision-making is a very difficult and complex activity, mediated by features of particular situations that cannot be adequately accommodated within a decision procedure driven by a simple, reductive standard of choice. Nevertheless, the desire to develop a rigorous, straight-forward theoretical model that generates distinct rules to govern moral behavior is eminently understandable. The recognition that persons and groups in contemporary societies hold diverse and often conflicting moral beliefs motivates the project of justifying and specifying a moral theory that is neither relativistic nor vaguely formulated. Indeed, it may be that the understandable desire for a clear set of moral rules formulated on the basis of unambiguous principles is responsible for some of the glaring defects of the dominant moral theories.

I have discussed ways in which the impartiality implicit in the central principle of classical utilitarian theory generates counterintuitive results, and undervalues the moral relevance of a person's close relations and individual projects by failing to include thoughtful consideration of these personal features in the structure of the utilitarian

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calculus. This criticism applies to Kantian theories as well, since Kant's principles are formulated in universal terms that fail to distinguish differences between duties to persons who stand in various significantly different relations to the agent. Even in the case of Kantian-inspired theories such as Rawls', which avoid metaphysical problems inherent in Kant's own view, the relevance of personal considerations is obscured by the abstraction from agency implicit in adopting the original position. In addition, the desire to formulate a moral code whose rules are based on a central principle is responsible for another well-known problem with (act) utilitarian theories: the lack of room for supererogation within a maximization of utility calculus. For the act utilitarian there is always an optimific act, and it is this act that must be performed in each case, rather than any alternatives. Many writers have argued that the burden of optimizing is unreasonable. The point to be made in the present context is that this fundamental difficulty with utilitarian consequentialism stems from its attempt to include in its theoretical apparatus a straight-forward decision theory for determining how to act in any context.

We can conclude from these considerations that it is wise to be modest concerning our expectations of what an ethical theory can provide, and thus to reevaluate the function of

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ethical theory, and its relation to practice. Still, it is important to demonstrate that the virtue theorist who attempts to describe systematically relations between a wide range of ethical considerations is not entirely bereft of structural guidance in seeking to provide a means for making good choices and evaluating acts. This can be done if we pay adequate attention to the important role of flourishing within any well articulated theory of the virtues. Louden claims that "the agent who correctly acts from the disposition of charity does so (according to the virtue theorist) not because it maximizes utility or because it is one's duty to do so, but rather out of a commitment to the value of charity for its own sake." (Louden, 229) This statement is only partly correct. While the good man is motivated to act for the sake of the virtues themselves, it must be remembered that the ultimate purpose for cultivating the virtues is the flourishing of the agent and the community.[a]

By failing to include the concept of flourishing within his characterization of the structure of virtue ethics, Louden illicitly deprives the virtues of the teleological framework within which Aristotle develops his view of the virtues and their function in a good human life. It is only within such a framework that the possibility for developing a theory of

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obligation based on the virtues can be effectively realized. In describing Elizabeth Anscombe's position, Louden interprets her as shifting act evaluation from rules to moral exemplars. "Suppose one follows her advice, and replaces "morally wrong" with "untruthful," unchaste," etc. Isn't this merely shorthand for saying that agents *ought* to be truthful and chaste, and that untruthful and unchaste acts are *morally wrong* because good agents don't perform such acts?" (Louden, 228)

The problem with Louden's interpretation is that he falsely implies that there is no further question we can ask. If we cannot intelligently pose the question, "*Why* don't good agents perform untruthful acts?" then we must rely on the idea of what the good person would do in order to determine our obligations. However, we can indeed ask why good persons act as they do. The answer to such a question is, in fact, not abstruse. Good persons don't perform vicious acts because such acts fail to generate a good life for the agent and those persons with whom the agent lives. Thus, the "root conception" of virtue ethics is not, as Louden claims, the morally good person, but rather the morally good life for persons.

Given this focus, the central importance of determining which

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features characterize a good life becomes evident. An objective account of flourishing can provide the necessary link for understanding the way in which evaluations of character and evaluations of acts are related. In order to show that a virtue theory can adequately cope with the need to evaluate acts and provide some guidance in ethical quandaries, I shall characterize the relations between an account of flourishing, the virtues and standards for right action that can form the general basis for decision-making and act assessment. My strategy will be to discuss ways in which necessary (though not sufficient) conditions for flourishing require that we nourish the development of those virtues necessary for a good life, and to argue that such virtues include those other-regarding traits generally associated with particular moral obligations. While an algorithmic decision procedure that can be applied in all contexts is a will-o-the-wisp, a list of prima facie obligations can be derived based on the relation between such obligations and the basic requirements for flourishing that motivate adoption of virtuous habits. For example, I shall argue that persons should respect the needs of others for basic goods, and help others in need (ceteris paribus), because the flourishing of others (and the flourishing of the community in general) intimately affects the flourishing of the individual.

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The admirability of both agents and acts (for some acts can be seen to have or lack virtuous character) can only be properly understood given a clear account of the function of the virtues. The good person develops virtuous dispositions not merely for their own sake, but in order to live a flourishing life. If we ask, "Why be virtuous?" the answer is that the virtues promote flourishing. Thus, in answering the question, "What ought I to do?" it is not necessary to appeal only to our notion of what a hypothetical moral exemplar would do, for we can answer the same question by determining whether or not our alternative choices will promote flourishing. As Aristotle argues, virtuous behavior is the result of developing good habits, patterns of thought and action that form the character of the good person. It is important to bear in mind that such patterns are justified by their relation to the purposes they serve.

In addition, our appreciation of good persons typically flows from us naturally, often without much conscious consideration of the relation between the motivation and justifying ground for living an ethically commendable life and its results. Thus Hume, in discussing sympathy, states that "the minds of all men are similar in their feelings and operations, nor can any one be actuated by any affection, of which all others are not, in some degree, susceptible."[9] Yet

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he also claims "that qualities acquire our approbation, because of their tendency to the good of mankind. This presumption must become a certainty, when we find that most of those qualities, which we naturally approve of, have actually that tendency . . ." (T, 578) In the context of a moral dilemma, the need to be aware of the effects of our actions emerges because of the ambiguity which conflicting moral considerations generate, yet
in all contexts the relevance of beneficial consequences underlies the purpose for living a virtuous life, as it underlies the praise that we offer to good persons. Thus Hume, whose account of the virtues is generally considered to be distinctly non-teleological, argues "that moral distinctions arise, in a great measure, from the tendency of qualities and characters to the interest of society, and that 'tis our concern for that interest, which makes us approve or disapprove of them." (T, 579)

As advocates of a virtue-theoretic approach to ethics, we suggest that persons attempt to become moral exemplars by adopting virtuous habits, partly because it is the best way to prepare oneself to face the difficult moral decisions that one encounters in ordinary life. Rules and principles alone are insufficient, both for acting well and for being a good person. Nevertheless, the virtuous person who understands the

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function of good character will be able to resolve moral dilemmas by assessing the probable consequences of acts (or types of acts), just as a utilitarian might do. Utilitarianism and virtue ethics both share a teleological structure, as opposed to various species of deontology. They differ primarily in their description of the telos of good action, in the utilitarian's adherence to an impartially formulated central principle, and in the fact that virtue theories emphasize the central role of moral character.

Once we pay adequate attention to the role of flourishing within virtue theory, most of the problems cited by Louden become
defanged. While virtue ethics does focus primarily on agents, this does not inhibit it from having substantive things to say about the character of acts and their results. In the case of intolerable actions, for example, we can say that while most situations require a person to consider various contextual features, certain species of action always fail to promote flourishing (and in fact inevitably cause undue harm); thus, they should be generally prohibited.

**Virtues and Moral Laws**

Another important critique of contemporary virtue ethics is provided by J.B. Schneewind.[10] He argues that virtue ethics

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fails because it can supply no principled ground for resolving disputes or providing moral guidance. Schneewind develops a historical discussion in which he claims that virtues became secondary to laws and rules in the minds of moral philosophers, not due to the influence of Kant, Hume and other enlightenment thinkers, but because thinkers in the seventeenth and eighteenth century natural law tradition saw morality as a system of laws and felt the need to provide an account of their structure. Schneewind discusses the views of Grotius, Pufendorf and others, and claims that their work created the context in which Hume and Kant approached the central problems of theoretical ethics. Grotius's distinction between perfect and imperfect duties, for example, is adapted by Hume in his account of natural and artificial virtues, and is developed by Kant as well.

According to Schneewind, Hume's view fails because it does not "convince those who accepted Grotius's assumptions that it was an adequate alternative to an act-centered or juridical approach to morality." (Schneewind, 54) Not only does Hume's moral philosophy fail to convince Grotians who badly want a clear set of moral laws, it fails to provide any principled answer to the question, "What should I do?" Hume "writes as a theorist bent only on explaining the moral life, not as offering direction or even as showing us where to get

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it. He does not claim that his theory gives guidance, still less that it contains a rule book or a single principle which each person could use for decision making." (Schneewind, 57) Finally, Schneewind discusses ways in which Kant's philosophy supplies better answers to the problems inherited from the natural law philosophers who preceded him.

Schneewind provides a valuable addition to the contemporary dialogue about the virtues by placing the contributions of Hume, Kant and others into historical perspective. There is little doubt that the arguments of natural law thinkers influenced the way in which Hume and Kant approached the central problems of moral philosophy, and Schneewind provides ample support for his primary thesis, "that virtue was not neglected during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries." (Schneewind, 63) However, his characterization of Hume's moral thinking is seriously inadequate, and his praise for Kant's "solution" to the problem of devising a system of moral laws to regulate social activity and resolve controversies fails to acknowledge important weaknesses and misrepresentations in Kant's moral philosophy.

In describing Hume's debt to Grotius for supplying the pattern that Hume used to distinguish between natural and artificial virtues, Schneewind writes that "we should see Hume

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as trying to show that a theory making virtue rather than law the central concept of ethics can give a better account of the distinction than that given by the natural lawyers who invented it." (Schneewind, 50) Hume does argue that conventions naturally evolve when people reflectively consider conflicts caused by acquisitive passions, and that these conventions are the source of just practices, rather than a set of laws comprehended by the intellect. Justice and the other "artificial" virtues differ from the natural virtues because the approbation associated with them emerges only after the usefulness of the conventions that establish just practices is recognized.

Hume emphasizes that conventions such as respect for property rights are invented rather than discovered. He also emphasizes that the artifices that we develop must be approved (and perhaps modified) by the activity of the moral sentiment. Clearly Kantians who develop the connection between morality and law that is a central concern in the work of Grotius and Pufendorf accept no role for the passions in determining one's duties and obligations. However, it is important to recognize that the differences between Hume's view of morality and that of the natural lawyers (and Kant) run much deeper. If we pay adequate attention to the way in which Hume develops his distinctive account of the moral sentiments and their relation

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to ethical practices, it becomes clear that Schneewind's dismissal of Hume's view as "one of the misfortunes of virtue" (Schneewind, 54) is itself unfortunate.

Hume is skeptical about the power of moral sanctions to reform persons, and therefore does not expect moral evaluation to serve the purposes that laws are enacted to serve. Nevertheless, he does see moral philosophy as a reflective activity whose purpose is to make possible good, cooperative living in complex social contexts. The objects of moral reflection are the actual passions and practices of persons, and the distinction between natural and artificial virtues is developed in order to provide a systematic account of our passions and practices that makes clear their function in the attempt to live good lives.

There is in Hume's philosophy a relation between his descriptive characterization of our moral sentiments and the goods which virtues produce that Schneewind fails to acknowledge. Both natural and artificial virtues receive approbation because of the ways in which the expression of those virtues improves the quality of human lives, with their myriad interconnections and interdependencies. In discussing the social virtues, Hume states that, "as the public utility of these virtues is the chief circumstance, whence they derive their merit, it follows, that the end, which they have a

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tendency to promote, must be some way agreeable to us, and take hold of some natural affection."[11]

Hume recognizes the deeply social character of human life, and gives due consideration to the need for persons to balance both interpersonal and intrapersonal concerns. He views the development of the virtues as a process by which we learn to balance the often conflicting desires and feelings that arise within the heart of the sympathetic person. Given this understanding of the moral life, an understanding at once richer and more realistic than Kant's description of equal, autonomous persons fighting valiantly against their own inner urges, it is clear that Humean reflective understanding can provide guidance and help us to resolve disputes, by helping to discern which practices and institutions promote cooperation and support common goods.

This type of reflection will not supply any set of perfect and imperfect duties, since Hume's conventionalist account of rules and the duties associated with them requires a thoughtful consideration of the particular needs and conditions of particular communities. I have already argued that such thoughtful consideration is a virtue of a moral theory; Hume's historicist conventionalism is both realistic and practical, without appealing to universal rules. Nevertheless, his conventionalist account does allow for

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critical evaluation, particularly when considering artificial virtues. Dialogue concerning the social benefits associated with practices such as respect for private property is always possible, and changing social conditions might render previously cogent arguments obsolete, or create the possibility for new proposals.

In addition, Hume's description of persons, with their complex webs of sentiments and relationships, stands in stark contrast with that provided by Kant, who simplifies his description of persons by focusing exclusively on the importance of freedom and will. Kant's autonomous moral agents are interchangeable despite differences in context because their relations are viewed as relations between equals who must use rationality to determine what the moral law demands. Thus, it is a simple matter to construct universal prescriptions that apply to all persons in all situations. A crucial problem with Kant's approach is that actual relations between persons are seldom characterized by even rough equality of status.[12] Hume recognized the simple fact that many morally significant relations exist between persons who are not equals because he viewed the paradigm of a morally significant relationship to be that between parents and children.

> Whoever is united to us by any connexion is always sure of a share of our love,

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> proportion'd to the connexion, without enquiring into his other qualities. Thus the relation of blood produces the strongest tie the mind is capable of in the love of parents to their children, and a lesser degree of the same affection, as the relation lessens.
>
> (T 352)

Although blood ties often represent the strongest bonds that exist between persons, relations between parents and children are only one example of connection that is unequal and/or unchosen. Relations between employers and employees, teachers and students, spiritual advisors and their followers, all exhibit varying degrees and modes of inequality. The contractarian character of Kantian morality, which assumes self-chosen relations between equals to be the paradigm of a morally significant relationship, is inadequate to the task of evaluating the duties and obligations that exist between (say) parents and children. Annette Baier makes the point well:

> A more realistic acceptance that we begin as helpless children, that at almost every point of our lives we deal with both the more and the less helpless, that equality of power and interdepency, between two persons or groups, is rare and hard to recognize when it does occur, might lead us to a more direct approach to questions concerning the design of institutions structuring these relationships between unequals . . .[13]

Furthermore, it is not merely Kant's unique form of abstraction that is at fault. Any attempt to codify general obligations that fails to consider reflectively the variety of

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unequal/unchosen relationships that exist between persons will be inadequate because of that failure. Once we begin to pay attention to the variety of differences that exist in various types of morally significant relationships, we encouter yet another reason to be suspicious of attempts to capture all of the obligations that persons fall under in various contexts by subsuming them under a central principle that generates a set of clearly defined rules. While there are certain areas of moral life that perhaps require rigid rules, as Hume recognizes in his discussion of justice, we cannot hope to write rule-books for morality writ large as we do in legal contexts, despite the hopes of Grotius and his followers.

Schneewind's argument that "Kant's reconstruction of virtue seems to be an even more brilliant achievement than Hume's" (Schneewind, 60) is thus unconvincing. Kant's abstract formulation of the categorical imperative leaves no room to consider morally relevant differences between agents interacting in ordinary contexts, and his view of duties as rational imperatives leaves no room for loving feelings to play relevant motivational roles, despite the distinction between duties of law and duties of virtue developed in the Doctrine of Virtue.[14]

In addition, Hume's discussion of the nature of moral judgments can provide a way to determine the appropriate

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resolution of disputes, once the relation between natural approbation of the virtues and the personal and social goods that virtuous actions generate is adequately understood. There is an important intuitive connection that exists between agreeable traits and the goods that such traits generate, a connection that in many passages Hume explicitly recognizes. It is this connection between virtues and good ends that I hope to illuminate by a further inquiry into the relation between virtues and obligations.

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## NOTES

1. Louden, "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics," 227-236.

2. Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics, 1109b 21-23. See also 1094b 12-28, 1104a 1-9.

3. David Solomon raises this point. See "Internal Objections to Virtue Ethics," in Midwest Studies in Philosophy XIII, 428-441.

4. For good discussions of this issue, see e.g. Samuel Scheffler, The Rejection of Consequentialism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); John Cottingham, "Ethics and Impartiality," Philosophical Studies 43 (1983): 83-99; and Martha Nussbaum, Love's Knowledge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

5. See e.g. Bernard Williams, Moral Luck, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), especially chapter 1; Thomas Nagel, The View From Nowhere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Michael Stocker, Plural and Conflicting Values.

6. For other influential criticisms of impartiality as a defining feature of the moral point of view, see e.g. Annette Baier, Moral Prejudices, (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1994); Stocker "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories,"; Lawrence Thomas, "Trust, Affirmation and Moral Character," in Owen Flanagan and Amelie Rorty, eds., Identity, Character and Morality (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1990); and Lawrence Blum, "Moral Perception and Particularity," Ethics 101 (July 1991): 701-725. For defenses of impartiality, see e.g. Stephen Darwall, Impartial Reason (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983); and Barbara Herman, "Integrity and Impartiality," The Monist (April 1983): 233-250.

7. See, for example, Peter Railton's influential article, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality," in Consequentialism and Its Critics, ed. Samuel Scheffler, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 93-133.

8. At this point a significant lacuna occurs, which I shall return to later (chapter 4). The flourishing of the agent and the flourishing of the community are in fact two distinct goals that at times conflict with one another. In my discussion of flourishing to follow, I hope to show that 1) cooperation is essential to the flourishing of both agents and others, and thus conflicts can often be mitigated, and 2) such conflicts that persist can be understood and accommodated by a virtue ethics broadly based on an Aristotelian framework.

9. David Hume, Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, with text revised and notes by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 575-76. References will hereafter be given in the text, identified as "T."

10. J.B. Schneewind, "The Misfortunes of Virtue," Ethics 101 (October 1990): 42-63.

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11. David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, with text revised and notes by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 214. References will hereafter be given in the text, identified as "E."

12. Here I am extending my critique of the Kantian moral framework begun in Chapter 1, q.v. 16-17.

13. Annette Baier, Moral Prejudices, 28.

14. I discuss Kant's views on the importance of virtue more fully in Chapter 3, q.v. 72-78.

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# III. THE RELEVANCE OF FLOURISHING

Before providing arguments intended to show how an account of the virtues can provide substantial guidance in determining our (moral) obligations toward others, I shall evaluate relevant features of an important work that attempts to provide a systematic account of the theoretical structure of virtue ethics. Michael Slote, in From Morality to Virtue[1], provides a foundational account of virtue ethics and defends his view by comparing it with Kantian morality, consequentialism and common-sense morality. He attempts to show that virtue ethics need not be merely a supplementary part of a larger moral theory, and concludes that more studies should be done in order to determine the role of the virtues in moral development and education. Because of the large scope of this important work, I shall restrict myself to questions concerning the way in which Slote believes a virtue theory can guide decision-making and act assessment.

## Asymmetry, Prudence and Morality

A significant assumption underlying Slote's admirable attempt to develop a form of virtue theory that is structurally rich enough to stand as a genuine alternative to Kantian and consequentialist moral theories lies in his

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conviction that it is in fact desirable to have an ethical theory whose resources are capable of helping us to resolve genuine ethical problems in ordinary human affairs. This is one of the reasons that his critique of common-sense moral intuitions is important. While many advocates of developing a general approach to ethics based on a consideration of virtue(s) and character, as well as a rich discussion of issues in moral psychology, reject the desirability of developing ethical theories generally, Slote believes that ethical theorizing is important and should not be jettisoned. He claims that "we need theory in ethics and part of the reason for that need lies in weaknesses and even paradoxes that beset our intuitive moral thinking."[2]

Slote's main reason for rejecting common-sense morality can be traced to his claim that our common-sense moral intuitions devalue the interests of moral agents. His support for this claim relies primarily on now familiar arguments about the self-other asymmetry of common-sense and Kantian moral thinking. The relevant cases involve what Slote terms "agent-sacrificing asymmetries." According to our ordinary moral intuitions, it is permissible to neglect acting in a way that would have benefitted oneself, yet it is not permissible to neglect acting in a way that would have benefitted other(s). "If one could easily prevent someone else's pain,

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it is typically thought wrong not to do so, but not to avoid similar pain in oneself is only lazy, crazy, or senseless, not wrong."[3] Similar considerations affect cases involving comparative moral judgments. It is morally preferable from a common-sense or Kantian perspective to help another person, rather than to help oneself, even when the benefit to oneself is a greater one. Slote questions the adequacy of any moral framework that includes such odd asymmetrical judgments.

Slote develops his argument by contrasting the agent-sacrificing permissions of common-sense and Kantian morality with the impersonal demands of utilitarianism, and argues that both common-sense virtue theory and utilitarianism are self-other symmetric. He claims for theoretical reasons that symmetry is an asset of an ethical theory; moreover, he argues that the oddness of self-other asymmetry becomes logically incoherent when considered in connection with other features of common-sense moral thinking. For example, our common-sense intuitions differ from the demands of utilitarian theories due to the fact that the degree of consideration required for others by common-sense morality grows stronger according to the proximity to oneself. Thus, one has greater obligations to one's parents and siblings than to other members of one's community. However, while I owe more to my sister than to strangers on the other side of the globe, I apparently am not

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morally obligated to myself *at all* (unless my actions indirectly affect my ability to fulfill obligations to others). Slote argues that such considerations, in conjunction with his asymmetry arguments, reveal that common-sense moral intuitions incoherently devalue the interests of agents, and suggests that Kantian theories suffer from similar defects. The force of his argument rests on an intuition that concerns of agents are morally relevant in a way that common-sense and Kantian morality fail to acknowledge, in connection with a charge of logical inconsistency. He concludes that the ways in which common-sense and Kantian moral demands devalue agents and their interests constitute serious problems, problems not faced by consequentialists or common-sense virtue theorists.

Critics have responded to Slote's arguments in various ways. For example, it has been urged that we have no common sense moral obligations to ourselves because the domain of morality (contrast prudence) is relationships with others. Our common sense thinking about morality is based on this relational conceptualization; thus, it is neither odd nor incoherent that obligations grow stronger the closer we get to the agent, while we fail to have obligations to ourselves (except for those that indirectly affect our ability to fulfill obligations to others). The conceptual distinctness

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of prudential and moral norms is implicit in our ordinary discourse about obligations and right acts.[4]

I believe that this argument shows that common sense and Kantian imperatives are not incoherent. There are ample reasons to accept that a distinction between moral and prudential norms has been built into our conceptual and linguistic vocabulary, and the existence of such a distinction helps to explain the seeming oddity that is the focus of Slote's critique. The use of the term "moral" in contemporary society generally denotes value judgments concerning concepts such as "duty," "right," "wrong," and "obligatory." These concepts range over questions that deal primarily with relations between persons (or sentient beings), relations characterized by a set of rights and responsibilities that it is the province of morality to delineate. Though the terms "ethics" and "morality" are ambiguously used, and sometimes are taken to be synonyms, "ethics" is often considered to include both questions of "morality" and "prudence." This usage implies that "morality" is more narrowly defined than "ethics." "What obligations do acts of promising generate?" is clearly a moral question, while "what are the characteristic features of a good life?" is a more broadly ethical question, one that presumably includes both moral and prudential aspects.

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It is plausible to claim, then, that Slote's charge that common-sense moral imperatives are incoherent is too strong. However, this type of response to Slote's asymmetry arguments obfuscates an important question concerning the way in which we distinguish between moral, prudential and aesthetic questions of value, and glosses over an important insight implied by his discussion of differences in beliefs about the moral status of agents and those with whom the agent is related: such differences require (at least) a plausible explanation. While it may be true that common-sense and Kantian moral frameworks map the concepts of "morality" and "prudence" in a way that limits moral questions to relational issues between agents, it must be borne in mind that one of the purposes of Slote's critique is to bring into question the adequacy of these frameworks to cope with ethical issues generally. His thesis that aretaic concepts can better ground an approach to ethics is partially based on the argument that (morally construed) deontic concepts are inadequate in various ways, and his asymmetry arguments serve to raise the issue of whether or not the interests of agents should be considered peripheral to morality per se.

In fact, several considerations serve to raise doubts about the adequacy of any theory that relies on a sharp distinction between moral and prudential norms. The Kantian

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justification for limiting moral duties to the realm of relational obligations is based on the assumption that self-interest naturally insures that persons will attend to their own interests and needs.[5] Indeed, the Kantian moral framework requires persons to overcome self-interested inclinations when they conflict with the demands of the moral law. Morality is characterized as a constraint that we choose to impose on our animalistic desires, a battle whose good outcome requires a positive act of will. We have a (wide) duty to be beneficent (to make the happiness of others our own end), but are under no corresponding obligation to pursue our own happiness.

A variety of critics have argued forcefully that Kantians consistently fail to adequately consider the moral worth of agents' concerns.[6] Slote's asymmetry arguments, for example, focus on distinctions between duties to self and duties to others. Without addressing the adequacy of Kant's views on human nature, I would like to make the related but distinct claim that Kant (and Kantians) overlook the relevant ways in which our obligations to ourselves and our obligations to others are *related*.

An adequate moral theory must be sensitive to the complex ways in which relationships constitute crucial elements of individual identity. Our sense of meaning and value as persons relies on the fact that we are not merely isolated

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individuals with distinctive interests, but are also members of communities whose flourishing is intimately connected to our own. This implies more than the necessity to take into consideration the interests and needs of those around us, because many of our individual goals and projects are in fact shared goals and projects. Moreover, as we pursue shared goals in daily life, we conceive ourselves as persons whose relationships and connections with others constitute indispensable features of our own choices.

Kant acknowledges that we have duties to ourselves, due in part to the fact that we must develop certain abilities to their fullest in order to fulfill our duties to others. Such duties imply an important relationship between oneself and others that Kant poetically describes in depicting the kingdom of ends. This relationship is, however, much deeper and more complex than Kant's discussion implies. Each of our personal activities takes place in a complex social context involving a host of other individuals. Our activities, and the goals associated with them, have little meaning in isolation from the social contexts in which they occur. In addition, our personal success requires the success of those around us, not merely because we need to work cooperatively to attain our goals, but more importantly because the practical and emotional ties that we share with others bind our interests in

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a wide variety of ways.

To illustrate the relevance of this point, consider the variety and complexity of relationships between family members and close friends. Lovers and friends whose intimacy is characterized by mutual trust and respect care about the goals and concerns of one another, and this care involves more than merely recognizing the obligation to be beneficent. The reason for this is that as we become involved deeply with the lives of others, their goals and concerns literally become our own in a vivid and lasting manner. It is not simply that loving emotions are morally relevant (though they are); such emotions bind us to one another in ways that change our conception of who we are as persons. Though we remain distinct individuals, our connections with others become a defining feature of our individuality.

Thus, when I choose to work two jobs for a long period of time so that my partner can pursue educational goals, or when I babysit for my niece while my sister fulfills an important responsibility, I involve myself in a web of activity whose fruits are mutually shared by my partner, my sister, my niece, and myself. Where in this web of activity does prudence end and morality begin? In the context of a healthy family life the notion of a battle between inclination and duty captures little of the morally meaningful character of human action.

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Since my brother's sorrows are my own sorrows, when I help him I help myself. In this context does my assistance to my brother constitute merely a prudential imperative?

Philosophers sympathetic to Kant have attempted to show that his emphasis on duty leaves adequate "room" for the positive influence of love and other sympathetic emotions. For example, it has been urged that duty, though fundamental to morality, does not preclude the importance of sympathy and love, but rather functions as a limiting condition on action.[8] In The Doctrine of Virtue Kant claims that fulfilling one's duty to benefit others actually generates the feeling of love, which Kant describes as a natural feature of the subjective character of humans: "Beneficence is a duty. If someone practices it often and succeeds in realizing his beneficent intention, he eventually comes actually to love the person he has helped."[9]

Now it does not seem initially plausible that acting from duty, which requires us to follow the dictates of reason, can generate the sympathetic emotion to which we refer when we use "love" in ordinary contexts. Perhaps, however, Kant here intends to develop a reified notion of love that can fit the requirements of the categorical imperative. Since we have a duty to develop our innate qualities and a duty to help others it might be argued that we must nourish the virtue associated

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with sympathetic concern for the welfare of others. At any rate, the fact remains that when we genuinely, humanly love another person, his concerns and goals, his sorrows and joys, become our own. It is this fact that adds piquancy to Aristotle's discussion of the value of the best type of friendship, and the power of such friendship to obliterate inequalities:

> Now since friendship depends more on loving, and it is those who love their friends that are praised, loving seems to be the characteristic virtue of friends, so that it is only those in whom this is found in due measure that are lasting friends, and only their friendship that endures.
>
> (NE 1159 a 33-37)

The idea that the lives of friends and family members (and in some cases community members) are inextricably intertwined provides a good reason to be suspicious of a sharp distinction between prudence and morality. Even cases that emphasize differences and conflicts within families reveal that it makes little sense to distinguish between motives to seek one's own happiness and motives to seek the happiness of loved ones. When sons and daughters reach maturity and begin to make their own decisions, conflicts often emerge between parents and young adults. Despite the range of possible parental responses to worrisome choices (grudging acceptance, direct opposition, alternative suggestions), the actions of

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both parents and offspring inevitably involve mixed motives that involve everyone's happiness. This is because each person involved in a caring relationship desires the happiness of all others involved, and thus alters his own conception of what happiness means for him.

These considerations reveal some of the ways in which the deep bonds that tie us to one another in our ordinary affairs are in part constitutive of who we are as persons. The importance of such bonds is central in human lives, and so must be central to any theory or code concerning how human lives ought to be lived. The relevance of meaningful emotional and social bonds between persons cannot be adequately captured by a view of ethical life that sharply distinguishes moral and prudential norms, because such a view cannot incorporate into its structure an account of the rich ways in which our personal interests and plans are interconnected with the interests and plans of others.

If there is any insight that stands out as a result of the debates surrounding impartiality, self-other asymmetry and the relevance of the personal, it is that a thorough examination of the relation between the good for agents and the good for others is essential. The Kantian framework is inadequate for this task because of its assumption that cooperation in a kingdom of ends is largely a matter of

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conflict resolution between self-interested, distinctly autonomous individuals. This assumption does not do justice to the variety of motivations for cooperative activity that exist within a community of individuals whose concerns and interests are necessarily interconnected. What is needed is a theoretical model capable of incorporating a rich account of the ways in which my interests and the interests of others are related. If this argument is sound, then Slote is correct to conclude that common-sense and Kantian moral codes inappropriately devalue agents and their interests; even if common-sense and Kantian imperatives are not incoherent, they fail to accurately capture and incorporate a sufficiently rich account of the relation between obligations to ourselves and obligations to others. Thus the motivation to embrace a reexamination of the role of virtues in human life is well motivated, for virtue ethics is sensitive to the importance of relationships, as even a cursory reading of Aristotle's discussion of friendship makes abundantly clear.

### Aretaic Judgments and Their Application

An important conclusion to Slote's polemical arguments in the first part of his book is the idea that moral theories as such are inadequate for evaluating both character and action. The problems of Kantian and utilitarian views provide a

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motivation for seeking an alternative means for evaluating acts and persons, and Slote argues that the vocabulary of virtue ethics provides the best alternative model.

Slote suggests that aretaic notions (admirable, considerate) should replace moral notions (right, wrong, duty) as primary evaluative concepts, and argues that such aretaic concepts "can accommodate general ethical recommendations of a sort sometimes expressed in the (grammatically) imperative mood."[10] He points out that imperatives often recommend as well as command, and differ in their degrees of forcefulness. "Be a courageous person" can function as a command, but it can also express a person's ideals. In addition, there is no reason to consider deontic/moral prohibitions (x is wrong) to have more prescriptive force than aretaic claims of deplorability (x is bad). Since aretaic recommendations can help us determine what to do and not to do, principles such as "admirable" and "deplorable" can indeed function as foundational ethical concepts, and ersatz deontic notions can be derived from fundamental aretaic principles.[11]

By showing that the principles of virtue ethics can generate recommendations, Slote effectively stifles critics who claim that accounts of ethical life based on the virtues fail as guides to human action. His discussion of imperatives demonstrates that the evaluative terms of virtue ethics are

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capable of grounding judgments concerning ethical obligations. Nevertheless, I am troubled by several features of the particular form of virtue ethics that Slote presents and defends. I shall focus on conclusions drawn from asymmetry arguments concerning an adequate balance between self-regarding and other-regarding virtues, and on the way in which Slote relies on intuitive judgments as guides for understanding and defining the virtues.

Even if arguments focusing on the asymmetry of common-sense and Kantian moral theories, in conjunction with arguments focusing on the distinctive value of agents and their interests, reveal significant difficulties for Kant and moral intuitionists, it remains an open question whether or not self-other asymmetry constitutes a general problem for any moral theory. Slote claims that the virtue theory that he develops is balanced, or symmetrical, with regard to self-regarding and other-regarding character traits. He argues that since his basic evaluative terms don't distinguish between virtues that benefit the agent and those that benefit others, his common-sense virtue ethics recommends balancing concern for oneself with concern for others.[12]

This suggestion is initially plausible, but its motivation is somewhat ad hoc. More importantly, although he advocates a rough balance between concern for oneself and

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concern for others, Slote fails to adequately address questions concerning how concern for oneself and concern for others is related. Perhaps a thorough examination of the "mixed" virtues could reveal important connections, yet what about the relations between virtues that are considered primarily self-regarding or primarily other-regarding? I submit that Slote's account, by maintaining a basic distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding virtues and by advocating a symmetrical balance based on intuitive judgments, obfuscates the importance of crucial questions concerning relations between oneself and others. In quest of theoretical elegance, he has sacrificed depth and clarity.

In this respect Slote's account is subject to the same criticism that I earlier made of Kantian ethics. Relations between ourselves and others, and the significance of the effect that our understanding of these relations has on our ethical judgments, constitute an area of inquiry that is crucial to ethical theory. As Michael Stocker states, "asymmetrical differences and relations between self and other - along with those concerning personal and interpersonal boundaries, connections, and distance - are at the very center of how we understand and evaluate ourselves."[13] If we are to understand and appreciate the differences between the variety of ethically relevant relationships that exist between

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persons, and the relevance of these differences to the character of our ethical judgments, then we cannot fail to recognize and evaluate asymmetries as well as symmetries, when they occur.

It is significant that Aristotle, whose virtue theory is in important ways self-other asymmetric, does provide an account that explains how regard for oneself and regard for others is related. Though I shall argue that Aristotle's ethical theory must be modified and adapted (particularly with respect to his functional account of persons and his view of human flourishing), the basic structure of Aristotelian virtue ethics provides a framework within which it is possible to understand the relevance of both similarities and differences regarding intrapersonal and interpersonal relations and their moral implications. This is due to the fact that Aristotle begins by considering the good of the agent as his initial focal point. In this important respect Aristotle's account of the virtues is far superior to the account offered by Slote.

Slote claims that the self-other symmetry of his account is a virtue, since it avoids the problems of self-other asymmetry that plague both Kantian and common-sense morality. But do we really place equal value on self-regarding and other-regarding character traits? Should we? Is there no

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difference between regard for others whose lives are intimately tied to the life of the agent, and regard for others whose influence is remote? As Slote's discussion of common-sense intuitions implies, it seems rather that we intuitively value those traits that benefit ourselves and those persons closest to us (e.g. family members, close friends) more than those traits that benefit remote others, and that there is probably a rough scale based on proximity of influence (though undoubtedly there is much overlap, since some traits benefit all persons).

Perhaps Slote would agree that close personal relationships can generate ethical asymmetries. He acknowledges that "there is something highly admirable in the capacity for friendship and in the special devotion and interest that friends display toward their friends."[24] Yet if this is so, how can we determine why some moral judgments tend to be sensitive to self-other asymmetries, while others do not? How does our view of the good life affect our account of obligations toward ourselves and others? Despite the rich detail of Slote's account, his virtue-theoretic framework is ill suited to address these important questions. The reason for this stems from the most glaring defect of From Morality to Virtue: the fact that Slote relies on common-sense intuitions as a means for determining the content of his

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theory.

Slote addresses the puzzles surrounding self-other issues by advocating a rough balance between self-regarding and other-regarding virtues. I have argued that even if one views this suggestion as plausible, he lacks the resources to answer questions concerning why such a balance is advisable, or in what way such a balance is to be struck. This problem stems directly from the fact that common-sense intuitions determine the content of Slote's virtue theory. What happens when intuitions differ? Should we embrace Hume's disdain for the "monkish" virtues, or rebuke him? How is it possible to resolve disagreements about intuitions, or recognize when intuitions need to be revised, if intuitions form the fundamental basis for our characterization of the virtues? If different people or groups have intuitive convictions that conflict (as is in fact often the case), there will be no objective criteria for resolving such conflicts. In this respect Slote's account suffers from the same drawbacks that face any intuitionist account.

For example, it is easy to imagine a conflict between an altruist and someone influenced by the writings of Nietzsche. On what grounds could one argue that humility is indeed a virtue, hubris its corresponding vice? Such a claim would inevitably provoke the retort, "Ah! Cannot you see the

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resentful malice that motivates your suggestion? The self-sacrifice that you applaud is the result of the most serious illness, which only strength of spirit and a clear awareness of historical calamity can repair!" The relativism that would result by merely accepting the validity of conflicting versions of what counts as virtuous, or admirable, is not a mild and benign relativism; one quickly begins to wonder why any particular set of intuitions should be trusted as an adequate foundation for making ethical judgments. This doubt becomes more poignant in the context of Slote's critique of common-sense morality. Is it mere luck that our common-sense aretaic intuitions hit the mark, while our common-sense moral intuitions are confused and incoherent?

The principles of moral theories must generate recommendations that somehow fit (and perhaps explain) our ordinary intuitive beliefs. Nevertheless, providing criteria of evaluation that are objective and can therefore serve as a means of settling disputes about basic intuitions must be a desideratum of the type of foundational theory that Slote seeks to defend. Despite his extensive discussion of asymmetry, he says little about how self-regarding and other-regarding traits are related to each other. In contrast, I am able to address the question of how regard for oneself and regard for others is related, because I take an Aristotelian

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perspective that views the good of the agent as central. By so doing I can provide a clear account of the motivational and justificatory basis for adopting virtuous dispositions, and provide a means for examining the particular ways in which the virtues generate moral obligations toward others. An account that relies on intuitions about the virtues has no objective means to address these important issues.

In order to incorporate objective criteria of evaluation into the structure of virtue ethics, I shall argue that it is necessary to develop a plausible and relatively uncontroversial notion of flourishing. This can be done by reflecting on the connection between flourishing and basic goods. Once we begin to think reflectively about the relation between the virtues and the good that their active expression facilitates, it becomes possible to ground our account of the virtues by appealing to the fact that all persons require certain basic goods in order to flourish. The relation between the virtues and an objective characterization of flourishing based on the common need for basic goods provides an objective basis for resolving disputes about the virtues, and makes it possible to critically evaluate dominant conceptions of what counts as a virtue. To a consideration of this relation I now turn.

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**NOTES**

1. Slote, From Morality to Virtue.

2. Slote, "Precis of From Morality to Virtue," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 54 (1994): 683.

3. Slote, "Morality and Self-Other Asymmetry," The Journal of Philosophy 81 (1984): 181.

4. Julia Driver develops this response. See her "Critical Study of Michael Slote's From Morality to Virtue," Nous 28 (1994): 506.

5. Kant's focus on duties to others does not, of course, preclude the notion that we have duties to ourselves. See, e.g., his discussion of duties to self in his Doctrine of Virtue, Part I, Trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Nevertheless, the fact that we are naturally inclined to pursue our own interests places most actions that benefit oneself outside the realm of Kantian obligation.

6. In addition to Slote, see, e.g., Thomas Nagel, The View From Nowhere; Bernard Williams, Moral Luck; and Martha Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

7. See Immanuel Kant, Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, transl. Lewis White Beck (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 48; and The Doctrine of Virtue, 182-197.

8. See, for example, Marcia Baron, "The Alleged Moral Repugnance of Acting from Duty," Journal of Philosophy 81 (1984); and Barbara Herman, "Integrity and Impartiality," The Monist 66 (April 1983): 233-250..

9. Kant, The Doctrine of Virtue, 162.

10. Slote, From Morality to Virtue, 159.

11. Ibid., 159-167.

12. Ibid., 87-101.

13. Slote, "Self-Other Asymmetries and Virtue Theory," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 54 (1994): 690.

14. Slote, "Reply to Commentators," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 54 (1994): 710.

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# IV. BASIC GOODS

I have argued that an ethical framework based on the virtues cannot cope with the need to objectively evaluate acts, or provide adequate moral guidance, unless it is developed in the context of an account of flourishing. Therefore I shall here sketch the outlines of such an account, based on a reflective consideration of the importance of basic goods in human life. I shall present empirical hypotheses based on simple arguments that describe logical relations between a basic list of general facts about persons and a basic list of necessary conditions for flourishing. For example, because persons need food, water and shelter in order to survive, much less flourish, the availability of these commodities is a necessary condition for anyone's flourishing. The empirical hypotheses taken together constitute a partial account of conditions necessary for flourishing, and I shall argue that the virtues are necessarily related to this account in that we must develop dispositions to act in a virtuous manner if we wish to flourish. Virtuous actions make it possible to attain and maintain the basic goods without which a flourishing life is impossible. Finally, I shall examine the ways in which the social nature of many basic goods provides a key to understanding how descriptions of particular

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virtues and their application can yield the framework for an account of general obligations toward others.

Although simple to characterize, the project of actually determining a basic set of general facts about persons directly relevant to anyone's flourishing is daunting. Let me first say a few things about some of the most significant characteristics of such a list. Most important, the facts that I cite are intended to be relatively uncontroversial, and their relation to flourishing easily supported. Because of this it is possible that the set of considerations which I consider central to human flourishing is incomplete. Others may propose arguments in favor of including additional criteria, or interpret the significance of particular criteria differently. While I welcome the discussion that such differences are bound to elicit, my primary purpose here is to establish the crucial importance of human flourishing for any account that attempts to answer fundamental ethical questions. By choosing the most obvious, fundamental characteristics applicable to all persons I hope to develop a framework of plausible assumptions within which a rich account of ethical life can be formulated.

So, the fundamental questions I must address are: 1) What are those features without which a good life is not possible? 2) How do these features relate to particular

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virtues? 3) How do these features support a conception of obligation? There is an intimate relation between 2) and 3) which also must be explicated. For example, if basic facts relevant to a good life support a requirement to consider sensitively the needs of others, the requisite sensitivity will be mediated by the way in which those same facts relate to particular virtues, since it is by cultivating the virtues that persons develop the ability to act habitually in a manner consistent with their obligations.

My approach to the problem of the relation between virtues and obligations is to focus on the way that basic facts about persons play a central role in determining both a justification for developing virtuous dispositions and a robust theory of obligation based on the virtues. A crucial problem will be to show that the obligations generated by my privileged set of basic facts are sufficiently general. A major benefit of my methodology is the ability to maintain within a theory that describes general characteristics of persons (and thus promotes norms applicable to all persons, qua persons) the belief that flourishing in its full description might entail different characteristics for different persons. By providing merely a set of necessary conditions for flourishing I shall avoid begging questions concerning any more complete account of "the good life." By

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its very nature insufficient to a full description of flourishing, the incomplete character of my description of conditions necessary for a good life is ironically one of its most important features. This is crucial, since I believe that any attempt to ascertain all of the components of a flourishing life in general must necessarily travel in myth and speculation; there is no such animal as "the good life," but there are good (and bad) lives.

One way to illuminate the importance of this feature in my account of flourishing is to place it in the context of Aristotle's discussion of *eudaimonia*. One of Aristotle's primary aims is to establish the plausibility of the claim that there does exist an end that is sought for its own sake and not for the sake of any other ends: namely, "activity of the soul in accordance with virtue" (NE 1098 a 16). Aristotle adds, enigmatically, "and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete" (NE 1098 a 17-18). Finally, he pragmatically includes the condition that evaluating the flourishing of a person's life involves evaluating his activities over the long and changing course of a complete life. I want to argue that Aristotle is fundamentally correct when he claims that virtuous dispositions of character are necessary for good living, while emphasizing that there need not be a single functional

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description that captures the meaning of "the good for man." By focusing on the importance of basic goods in any human life, I hope to make Aristotle's characterization of human flourishing less nebulous, while insisting that any more comprehensive characterization is both ill advised and unnecessary.

I also hope that, by focusing on the connection between features necessary for flourishing and particular virtues, I will be able to elucidate the intuitive importance of basic human needs in the realm of moral questions. On my view, particular physical and psychological facts about persons have normative implications: given the plausible assumption that persons desire to lead flourishing lives, such facts directly and necessarily require the development of particular virtues. Thus, the seemingly interminable debate surrounding the relation between facts and values is seen to have a naturalistic solution (without requiring either reductive definitions or implausible claims that moral norms are explanatory [psychological] theories in disguise).[1] The advantage of focusing on the ethical relevance of basic goods must not be misconceived or underestimated; whether or not our basic needs are fulfilled depends in part on the complex ways in which persons conceive their relations to one another, and the ways in which we view our mutual responsibilities.

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Therefore it is useful to examine some of the important ways in which basic goods and ethical norms are related.

So: What are those features without which a good life is not possible? As a beginning let us say that in order to flourish all persons must have:

1) minimal physical sustenance (food, water, shelter)

2) an environment conducive to flourishing (this requirement is purposely vague; just what comprises an environment conducive to flourishing [or at least what comprises some of its central characteristics] will be the burden of my argument to show)

3) friendship and love (although this might be considered an aspect of an environment conducive to flourishing, it deserves separate treatment)

4) the freedom to pursue our ends without external constraints

Although this is intended as a plausible, partial list, it is inevitable that there will be disagreement about some of its elements, particularly once the definition of 2) is developed in some detail. I must address the possibility of counterexamples to 3) (e.g., the friendless but happy librarian/artist). In addition, the relevant sense of "freedom" and "external constraints" in 4) must be clarified,

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in order to avoid ambiguity and misinterpretation. Nevertheless, we can already begin to sketch the way in which my partial characterization of basic facts relevant to human flourishing is related to the need to develop particular ethical dispositions. Rather than discuss a broad range of virtues, I shall at this point merely present a few examples.

However one defines friendship, it must surely be characterized as a relationship that requires, and thrives on, mutual trust.[2] We trust that our friends will act in ways that show consideration for our desires and interests. We learn to rely on our friends to be considerate of our feelings, given that they reliably understand how we feel, and it is important to the quality of our friendships that we not worry whether or not our friends will or will not reliably demonstrate genuinely considerate behavior. We count on them to do so, and their willingness and ability to be considerate of our feelings when they act adds to the value of our interactions with them. True friendships, and the mutual trust that partly defines them, are indispensable to a good life. If an individual wishes to flourish, then she must develop and sustain meaningful friendships. In order to do so, she must develop the dispositions necessary to be a trusted friend; she must be reliably trustworthy, considerate, and kind (and, as Aristotle would add, must enjoy acting in

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ways that bring about the happiness of her friends).

Again, we must be free to pursue our own ends if we are to flourish. There are, of course, well known limitations to the ethically justified expression of individual freedom, but it is crucial to our happiness that we at least be able to (and feel that we are able to) pursue our plans according to our own lights, particularly when our actions do not unduly harm others. Since there are inevitable obstacles to the free pursuit of our interests, we must develop the ability to overcome such obstacles, which requires expressing the courage of our convictions through our actions. Others often attempt to inhibit or thwart our activities. Putting aside the more obvious examples of physical and political constraints, people often attempt to intimidate us, forcing us to abandon our plans because they claim that we are incompetent, or incapable of acting in our own best interest. Unless we develop the disposition to act courageously in situations where others attempt to coerce us, we shall be thwarted in the pursuit of our goals. Thus, there is a direct relation between developing the disposition to act courageously and the need to freely pursue our own ends, given the contingent realities of our world.

It might be objected that the basic facts cited as grounds for developing particular virtues primarily

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necessitate the adoption of a set of social rules, formulated on the basis of a central principle (such as the principle of utility), and that the need to develop virtuous dispositions, while important, must support and mirror the more important task of specifying and justifying a set of basic moral principles. It is the social rules derived from such principles, it will be argued, that are the most effective means for insuring the maintenance of individual freedom, as well as the accessibility of other basic human goods.

Several points are relevant in response to this objection. First, it is the larger project of this essay to establish the viability of grounding an account of obligation on an ethical view that requires us to cultivate particular traits of character; an evaluation of the success or failure of that thesis should await a fuller expression of the argument. It should be noted at this point, however, that I do not advocate a division of labor with respect to the issue of traits vs. principles. As I argued earlier (pp. 40-43), I reject the idea that judgments concerning character should be based on an account of the virtues, while judgments concerning moral obligations should be derived from either deontological or consequentialist principles.[3] Assumptions about the role of rationality in ethical judgment, universalizability as a fundamental feature of ethical decisions, and the requirement

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to make ethical decisions impartially, are implicit in the adoption of the most widely advocated fundamental moral principles. These assumptions are incompatible with the requirements of a theory based on the virtues, which allows room to consider the relevance of emotions and perceptive skills, as well as contextual features such as the importance of particular relationships and personal projects, as significant elements of specific moral decisions.

Also, the political theorist who suggests that the state should be responsible for assuring us of access to basic goods even if we are weak must acknowledge that political rights are often insufficient in various ordinary contexts. While it is undoubtedly wise for us to attempt to establish general political rights, it is also wise for individuals to develop dispositions necessary to cope with less than ideal situations. There are many times when our own personal resolve and courage are the only tools available to avoid harms or promote our interests.

Although the examples of particular virtues cited above are common enough, it is important to emphasize the difference between the functional description of persons defended by Aristotle -- characterized by his definition of persons as essentially rational -- and the limited teleological description in my partial account of flourishing. While both

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descriptions generate the need to develop particular virtues in order to flourish, the teleology implied by my account is defined by the relation between basic needs and the virtues required to fulfill those needs. In both the moral and intellectual models, the good life for Aristotle is defined in terms of his functional description of persons, whereas for me what constitutes the good life for any particular individual is influenced by contingent facts about that individual that are impossible to know.[4] Such facts might differ significantly in the case of different persons; thus it is impossible to generalize about what constitutes all of the features of a flourishing life for any person. Nevertheless there are features of a flourishing life that are common to all persons, expressed in the empirical hypotheses, and it is these features that generate the need to develop the virtues.

This point is significant for several reasons; not only does my account of necessary conditions for flourishing provide a response to complaints that an account based on the virtues necessarily relies on making contentious claims about conceptions of the good life, but it also creates the framework within which a theory of obligation based on the virtues can be developed, a theory that offers a transparent reading of the connection between human needs and ethical

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norms. We all seek the basic goods that I have defined as necessary conditions for flourishing, and we do so in a variety of complex contexts of social interaction. It is within these contexts that we must search in order to understand the relation between virtues and obligations.

How, then, do the virtues needed to sustain the pursuit of a flourishing life generate the substantial obligations that we intuitively consider to be morally required? This question might be termed "the problem of the other," since it is generated in part by the focus on individual flourishing that characterizes (some versions of) virtue ethics. How can virtues whose necessity is directly related to individual flourishing generate anything like a substantial notion of general rights? How do the pursuit of an excellent life and respect for other persons fit together?

These questions define a problem for any account of the relation between virtues and obligations that must be seriously and methodically considered. I intend to show that the basic goods that I have discussed must form the core of any plausible account of flourishing. Such an account will constitute a focal point that reveals the structural relation between those dispositions that support individual flourishing and the ethical imperatives that govern our mutual interactions. I shall illuminate the way in which our mutual

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need for basic goods mediates the relation between virtues and obligations by focusing on the fundamentally social nature of many basic goods. First, I shall consider the question of which primary features characterize a social context conducive to flourishing, and discuss ways in which those features support various prima facie obligations. Then I shall consider the importance of genuine friendship in any flourishing life, with particular emphasis on connections between friendship and justice. By so doing I shall provide support for the claim that the actions of the virtuous person benefit both the agent and those persons who are influenced by her actions.

However, it is important to develop a clear understanding of the gravity of the issue before attempting to show in what way it can be resolved. One way to do so is to focus on the issue of tolerance. One of the most common moral intuitions is the belief that respecting the right of persons to hold and express diverse views is an essential requirement if we are to live in an enlightened moral society. From a Kantian or utilitarian perspective it is obvious why respect for the non-harmful actions of persons is required. From certain descriptions of persons, such as the fact that we are rational and so autonomous, Kant derives his moral law commanding respect for others, the second formulation of the categorical

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imperative. From the requirement to treat all persons as ends-in-themselves and never merely as means Kant derives a variety of more or less clearly defined moral and political rights; the deliberative character of persons, understood generally as an essential property of persons, entails at least a prima facie moral obligation to respect the freely determined choices of persons as long as those choices do not harm others. Similarly, the best utilitarian theories include a principle of respect for persons, and a corresponding obligation to tolerate the free expression of differing views and practices, by claiming that such respect and tolerance in fact serve to maximize utility.

What corresponding story can the virtue theorist tell, with respect to our pluralistic intuitions? While it may be true that the virtues are necessary in order to assure that a good life can be attained, it is not obvious that respect for the deliberative choices of others may be supported by reference to the virtues. How can a general respect for others mesh with ethical norms whose function is to provide principles for action that support the flourishing of the individual? I have called this difficulty the problem of the other, and it can also be characterized as the problem of justice. As Phillipa Foot succinctly puts it, "we will be asked how, on our theory, justice can be a virtue and

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injustice a vice, since it will surely be difficult to show that any man whatsoever must need to be just as he needs the use of his hands and eyes, or needs prudence, courage and temperance?"[5] Under the rubric of justice fall most of the prominent obligations toward others considered to be required by any adequate moral code. Why, then, must the man who seeks a good life be just? Though the question is a thorny one, let us see if our difficulty is not so intractable as it appears.

**Social Context**

I have already argued that the need to freely pursue one's interests and plans is a necessary condition for flourishing. I value my freedom, and will attempt to insure that others do not interfere with my ability to develop and pursue my goals and plans. Why, then, ought I respect the desires of others, and seek to support their flourishing?[6]

A part of the answer to this question lies in the fact that the needs of others are relevantly similar to mine. The property in virtue of which I seek to protect my autonomous actions from interference is a property applicable to all persons: freedom is for all persons a necessary condition for flourishing. All persons act based on their need for those basic goods that we have identified as necessary conditions for flourishing; my recognition that others are similar to me

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in their need for food, friendship and freedom provides a reason to extend to others respect for those actions motivated by the desire for those basic goods that I also desire.

Nevertheless, when my motivation to be just toward others conflicts with strong desires to pursue my personal interests, I will be likely to act in ways that promote those interests. The fact that other humans need the same basic goods that I need provides a reason to respect the interests of others, but it is not an *overriding* reason. Other considerations often appear to be more significant. Thus, it is important to provide further arguments in order to augment the claim that my pursuit of a good life generates genuine, general obligations toward others. In order to do this, I must appeal to a richer description of the conditions necessary for flourishing, because only by examining the ways in which individual goods and community goods are related can we reasonably consider problems of justice.

We can begin by considering crucial features of human social environments. The importance of one's immediate physical living situation, for example, is relevant; if I live in a prison, or in a slum, or in a society in which human life is not highly valued, it will be extremely difficult to lead a happy and fulfilling life. I have suggested that a social environment conducive to flourishing is a necessary condition

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for anyone's living a good life. What, then, are the generic features that any social context must offer if it is to qualify as "conducive to flourishing"?

As a start, we can say that no person can flourish in a social environment that fails to provide sufficient *emotional support*. No person begins life as a hermit, and few of us become hermits; persons are social creatures, and many of our most important developmental needs are tied to the health of the communities in which we live, and to the ability of relevant persons within those communities to support our emotional growth. The need for nurture goes well beyond the basic physical requirements necessary to sustain life; an environment that supports emotional health and growth is crucial to the psychic well-being of any individual. As children we need to feel that we are cared for as persons, and that others are willing to be sensitive to our feelings and desires. Without such care, we are likely to become emotionally crippled, to hide our feelings from others and develop deep resentments toward the world that is our home, along with a pervasive sense of isolation from that world.

However, a skeptic might object to the claim that emotional support is necessary for flourishing. For example, various artistic individuals throughout history have reported that the suffering and anxiety that they experienced during

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emotionally distraught periods of life directly influenced the quality of their work. Perhaps isolation and emotional deprivation can in certain contexts serve to enhance creative flourishing and lead to fruitful internal discoveries. Most of us have experienced the euphoric pride associated with overcoming great obstacles; though lack of emotional support might clearly be considered an obstacle, such difficulties can produce their own rewards.

It must be acknowledged that suffering and tragedies can in some cases contribute to depth of character or create the context in which a significant epiphany might occur. All persons experience emotional suffering and anxiety; our reactions to emotions of grief or anger often reveal insights that are useful or help to strengthen our ability to empathize. Experiences of genuine suffering often mark the boundary between innocence and experience, adolescence and maturity.

These observations, however, do not prove that the emotional support and care of others are not necessary for flourishing. On the contrary, the person who knows that he can rely on the emotional support of friends is best situated to be able to integrate and transform the sorrowful feelings associated with tragic events in a meaningful way. It is

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during periods of emotional distress that one can most clearly recognize the value of genuine love, for it is during such time's that love's power is most keenly felt. In addition, the fact that we are occasionally able to successfully overcome emotional distress *without* relying on the emotional support of caring friends or family members is compatible with the claim that such emotional support is necessary for flourishing. Cases in which persons fail to overcome emotional distress because they have no connections to caring individuals is, sadly, an all too common human experience, and even poets whose creative efforts owe much to emotional suffering could never have persevered without receiving emotional support at crucial times during their lives.

A flourishing life is, among other things, one characterized by a healthy integration with the processes and activities of the societies in which we build our lives, one in which we can feel good about contributing to a complex set of activities whose purposes provide us with a sense of fulfillment. In order to feel the sense of fulfillment associated with active participation in a diverse set of social activities, we must learn to feel good about ourselves as persons, and for this the active and genuine care and support of others is necessary. We do not, as Hume pointed out, spring from some abstract rational soil into the forms of

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fully grown, autonomous individuals, but rely on the nurturing behavior of others in complex ways, both as children and as adults. (T, 347-357) The emotional needs of children are somewhat obvious, yet as adults we continue to require the emotional support of friends, colleagues and neighbors in order to manage successfully the challenges that we encounter. By showing respect and consideration for the fundamental desires and interests of others, individuals increase the quality of social interactions within communities. Even when this does not directly benefit us, by treating others with dignity and respect we increase the likelihood that our community will be a place where our children and friends, as well as ourselves, will receive the support and encouragement crucial to a flourishing human existence.

Again, it might be urged that our emotional needs in social contexts are irrelevant to the question at hand, or that a small minority of concerned persons are sufficient to fulfill the emotional needs of any single individual. It would be dangerous, however, to ignore the relevance of emotional support to questions of social justice, or to ignore the complex ways in which the expectations and support structures within communities influence emotional development. Although insufficient attention has been given to this topic in discussions of theoretical ethics, it is important to make

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clear some of the complex ways in which emotional health is tied to ethical norms.[7]

Our emotional needs are likely to be commonly ignored in a society whose members fail to recognize the personal and social value of mutual respect, generosity and compassion. Though we may personally be lucky in our life's lottery (born into privilege and bearing relations to caring persons willing to support our emotional and intellectual development), our interconnections generally with the host of the world's citizens is great, and the conditions of the societies in which we live (which is directly influenced by whether or not respect for persons is generally present within those societies) are bound to affect our personal destinies in a variety of complex ways. For example, the fear and mistrust that is characteristic of modern life in many large cities reduces our capacity to learn from one another and share uplifting experiences. Although the problems of violence, fear and prejudice in contemporary society cannot be resolved merely through the just actions of considerate individuals, it is to our mutual advantage to be considerate and just in our relations with one another. In order to support the reform of social relations in a peaceful direction and make possible a more humane social environment in which to live our lives, mutual respect and tolerance are badly needed.

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In order to illustrate this point, it is important to consider the ways in which our individual flourishing is tied to the flourishing of a network of others whose interests and projects concern us. Our children, our friends, and those close associates who inform and transform the patterns of our daily lives benefit from the opportunity to participate in activities with individuals who are willing to be sensitive to their emotional needs and considerate in their interactions with one another. It is for this reason that people form communities whose members are capable of providing emotional and practical support to each other, and feel comforted by the knowledge that they can rely on an active network of individuals who care about each other. The knowledge that my neighbor is concerned for the welfare of my children and my friends improves my own capacity for personal satisfaction. A social environment that is in contrast characterized by mutual distrust and competitive hostility cannot provide us with the emotional support, opportunities to participate in activities with others who we respect, and sense of security that are basic characteristics of a social context conducive to flourishing.

In contemporary society many people have become accustomed to patterns of interaction that preserve mutual isolation and force us to rely on our own internal and

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external resources. Although it is reasonable to be proud of the ability to persevere when faced with difficult circumstances (such perseverence perhaps can be considered a virtue), it remains true that interaction with people who are willing and capable of providing caring emotional support improves our capacity to flourish. Therefore it is important to cultivate our own ability to be perceptive about the emotional needs of those around us, and to cultivate communities whose members are equally sensitive.

Our emotional health is intimately tied to the quality of the societies in which we live, and the complex interdependence between persons living in any social context demonstrates why it is important whether or not certain characteristics (such as a general respect for one another) are present or absent within those contexts. These facts contain the seed which, when itself nourished, reveals why it is always desirable to support the flourishing of other persons, and therefore why it is reasonable, and ethically imperative, to extend to others the respect for their need for basic goods that we as individuals require as a necessary condition for our own happiness.

In addition to emotional nurture, individuals require, if they are to flourish in any social environment, the opportunity to encounter influences that can serve to further

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the pursuit of their chosen goals. We need to discover persons whose interests and abilities coincide with our own, to develop relations with those persons that add depth to the possibilities only partially realized in our personal plans. We need to be challenged, intellectually and emotionally, and to find social contexts within which we can pursue our goals and dreams. The best way to insure that there are a rich set of social contexts within which to pursue our individual plans is to build, in cooperation with one another, a society based on principles designed to support the generic needs of its citizens. By respecting the importance of persons' desires for basic goods, we as individuals play a crucial role in this cooperative effort. While there is likely to be disagreement about particular political institutions, laws and public policy, it should be clear that the need to consider the importance of access to basic goods is paramount, since such access has been identified as a necessary condition for the flourishing of any individual and I cannot flourish without the active participation of others.

The upshot is that my flourishing is intimately tied to the flourishing of those around me, since it is within a social context that I seek to pursue my personal goals, and the achievement of those goals (no matter how diverse they are from the goals of other members of society) is contingent on

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an environment that offers persons generally the opportunity to freely pursue their personal visions and projects, as long as the associated activities do not harm their fellow citizens. What is good for my brothers and sisters, is good for me.

**The Value of Mutual Respect**

It will, of course, be suggested that such a view is naive. Why, the cynic or egoist will demand, cannot I simply try to manipulate others to serve my ends, and choose those few friends that I admit that I need for comfort and camaraderie, as persons worthy of respect? It does not follow, she will add, from the premise that one must have active association with other flourishing individuals in order to flourish, that it is in my best interest to respect *all* persons. In order to respond to this objection, we must extend the discussion of environmental features necessary for flourishing to include consideration of those features of an environment conducive to flourishing that are perhaps of greatest importance: love and friendship. Yet before we pursue that inquiry, there are several things that can be said in order to emphasize the value of mutual respect.

It would be a mistake to underestimate the value of insuring that all citizens are able to have access to the

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basic goods without which a flourishing life is not possible. The interdependence that persons share, one with another, in any social environment, is manifold, and a social environment in which the flourishing of all individuals is valued will be more supportive of the needs of each individual than one in which a general respect for the basic needs of persons is lacking. Each of us has unique qualities and abilities that can be harnessed for mutual benefit in an atmosphere of social cooperation, and such an atmosphere cannot be maintained if persons' access to basic goods is not generally supported.

In addition, from an ethical point of view social cooperation that is voluntary and characterized by virtues such as compassion and generosity is much more beneficial than arrangements based on external sanctions (e.g. laws) or tacit contracts based on perceived mutual benefits, because people who consciously work to establish flourishing communities benefit not only from the security that such communities provide, but also from the quality of the relationships that such mutual efforts enhance. When groups of people voluntarily work together to create social structures that provide mutual benefits, they typically must overcome obstacles caused by differences in values, temperament and natural biases. In so doing they demonstrate the wisdom necessary to build strong communities capable of providing

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both security and opportunity to the persons who live in them.

Also, the vast array of social problems that follow inevitably when any large group of persons lack basic goods necessary for flourishing puts a huge strain on the citizens of afflicted communities. Though it is perhaps not an uncommon sentiment, it is unreasonable (and unkind) to rely on one's capacity to remain aloof and unaffected by the distress of others. Historically, tensions caused when individuals and groups are oppressed often lead to social upheavals that negatively affect the quality of life for a vast majority of persons in those societies. This is true in cases as diverse as the English peasant revolt of 1381, the French Revolution and the Watts riots of the late 1960s.

In each of these cases, different groups for different reasons acted in ways that promoted chaos, destruction and death. Yet in all such conflicts there is a common central fact: a particular group (or groups) lacked basic goods that all human beings require in order to live a good life. This situation creates a social framework characterized by mistrust, hatred and envy, a social framework that naturally and inevitably results in conflicts that are harmful to the majority of persons living in those social settings.

As I have stated, it does not follow that it is easy to ease such strains merely by adopting an ethical outlook that

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sees fulfilling the basic needs of citizens as a good. I do not intend here to suggest complete solutions to complex problems of social interaction, which require a deep analysis of particular features within specific contexts of conflict and need. I simply wish to make the basic point that my prospects for leading a flourishing life are intimately bound up with the basic needs of those with whom I share this life; thus, it is reasonable to extend to others generally the respect for personal choices and actions that is essential to the good life that I seek, and to cultivate a social environment in which the basic needs of all persons are valued. A theory based on the virtues, as any good theory, will support an ethical framework in which the flourishing of all persons is considered to be significant. If we appreciate and support our mutual need for basic goods, we will be able to avoid a variety of conflicts that arise when people lack such goods.

Finally, a social context in which individuals respect the importance of persons' basic needs will provide opportunities for more diverse experiences than one in which such respect is lacking. This point can be readily understood merely by examining the character of life in modern liberal states. The irony is that many people view the benefits of contemporary liberal social arrangements (particularly

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diversity and stability) as a compromise carved in order to incorporate an otherwise justified conception of justice, or in order to maximize the probability of achieving self-interested objectives.[8] Legal protections such as those enshrined in the American Constitution do provide benefits by constraining those who do not recognize the value of cultivating the virtues. However, the benefits of just actions are in fact *direct* (both for ourselves and others) and thus self-motivating, despite appearances to the contrary. In order to establish the relevance of this point, let us now turn to a discussion of friendship.

**Friendship**

Among all aspects of social life, the importance of genuine friendship stands out as a feature of a person's life without which the enjoyment of various goods would not be possible. As Aristotle says, "without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods." (NE, 1155a) In evaluating the relationship between the value of friendship and general obligations toward others, it will be helpful to focus on what Aristotle terms the *best kind of friendship, that in which the person views her friend as another self, and desires her flourishing for her own sake.* According to Aristotle, excellent friendships occur among persons who

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naturally express the virtues, and enjoy doing so, since it is characteristics common in good persons -- magnanimity, kindness, courage and trustworthiness -- that provide excellent friendships with their enduring, fulfilling character. It is the virtuous character of our dearest friends which makes their company so pleasant and fulfilling.

Aristotle contrasts excellent friendships with those whose basis is utility or pleasure. (NE 1155 b 17-1156 b 6) Friendships based on mutual advantage easily erode once the benefits that motivated such friendships no longer accrue, and friendships based on pleasure are susceptible to whimsical changes in aesthetic interests. Such friendships cannot tolerate or endure strains easily; we all know people who are witty and entertaining, and perhaps we seek the company of such persons in certain circumstances. Nevertheless, unless we know that we can rely on our friends to value our interests as they value their own, our relationships with friends will lack the intimacy, trust and longevity that characterize excellent friendships.

Now, there are two initial points about developing friendships of the best type that are relevant to the present inquiry. First, we cannot know before we meet them who our best and dearest friends might be, for much in life is left to

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chance (though if we are lucky our familial relationships can become paradigms of good friendships). More important, excellent friendships require for their germination and growth an atmosphere of trust; persons who are wary or afraid do not allow others to observe their best (or worst) qualities, and are not open to the possibility of developing a genuine connection with others, for they are busy protecting themselves from possible harms. Trust is the only soil within which genuine friendships, which take time and loving care to nurture, can successfully grow.

If persons desire the invaluable goods which accrue due to the influence of excellent friendships, then they must make efforts to nourish the larger social environment within which we all live. It is within our communities that we meet and grow to love our friends, and communities in which persons respect one another provide a context that is conducive to the development of excellent friendships. The process that occurs when people become genuine friends requires a measured risk: we allow ourselves to become vulnerable to the power of our friends, and in so doing give each other a valuable gift that is crucial for the development of our friendships. The risk that we take with potential friends is a gift because it makes possible the intimacy that is essential to an excellent friendship. In order to create the context in which this

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delicate process can most joyfully occur, it is important to extend to persons generally respect and appreciation for the fact that they all have the same fundamental needs for those basic goods that are crucial to human flourishing. When we do so we contribute to the real possibility for greater trust to emerge in our general surroundings, *and* we demonstrate to potential friends traits of character that are admirable.

An environment of mutual respect will produce greater opportunities for meeting persons with whom we might develop meaningful friendships, since the general conditions of our social life will be more harmonious in an atmosphere characterized by mutual respect (as opposed to an environment in which personal goods are maintained solely by force or by a set of social rules). The ability to extend to one another the mutual trust necessary for the development of excellent friendships will be greatly affected by the character of our social environments, and will be enhanced only in environments in which the basic needs of persons are generally valued. In addition, negative features of environments lacking mutual respect and tolerance for differing modes of life will minimize the potential for developing friendships with particular persons and groups of persons, especially those persons who are most adversely affected by the inequalities

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generated by a lack of respect for persons and a lack of access to basic goods.

Although I have been discussing some of the beneficial results associated with respectful behavior, I do not wish to argue merely that the probability of developing and sustaining excellent friendships is numerically diminished when we fail to treat all persons with respect, based on a sensitive understanding of the universal need for basic goods (though it is); I want also to emphasize the consonance between the character traits that support friendship and those that generate fair and just judgments and acts. Justice and friendship are typically treated as distinct ethical topics; however, there is an important relation between them that should be carefully examined.

The virtuous traits of those individuals capable of sustaining excellent friendships are the same traits that make the good friend a good citizen; this connection between friendship and justice is extremely important.[9] Excellent friendships will be extremely difficult to build and enjoy for a person who fails to respect others generally, because the traits of character typical of an excellent friend are not likely to be present in the character of an individual who lacks virtues such as justice and generosity. A just person naturally treats others with respect, and his friends

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appreciate this quality in a unique way, for they receive the double benefit of perceiving the honorable way in which their friend conducts himself in public life while simultaneously enjoying directly the active knowledge and practical benefits of his solicitous care toward themselves. Unless we look at others with respectful and loving eyes, we shall have little to give and share with those whom we call "friends."

A person who is capable of being a friend of the best type is someone who naturally expresses all of the virtues well, including justice. It is wise to be wary of individuals who are manipulative and unjust in their relations with most people while maintaining a loyal friendship with a few close associates. Their unjust actions toward others indicates that their motivations for engaging in friendships stems from the utility (or pleasure) that they gain from their friendly relations, rather than from genuine concern for their companions conceived as "other selves." Thus unjust persons are likely to betray their friends whenever situations arise that create serious conflicts of interest; certainly they cannot be relied upon when the chips are down.

In such contexts the relevance of the distinctions that Aristotle makes between the various types of friendships becomes clear. An excellent friend will not fail to act in ways that are considerate of her friend's needs and interests,

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because she desires the flourishing of her friend in the same way that she desires her own flourishing. The same cannot be said for friends whose primary motive for participating in a relationship with one another is based on utility or pleasure.

It might be suggested that there is no *logical* contradiction in the notion of a person who is often unjust in her actions toward others, yet loyal and devoted to her close friends. Even if this is so, such a person is an improbable character, because the experience of genuine friendship teaches us to be sensitive to the vulnerability of human beings, and to appreciate the delicate treatment necessary to establish mutual trust and personal confidence. It is highly unlikely that a person who is crass and insensitive in his relations with most people has the capacity to treat his friends with the love and affection characteristic of a true friend.

In addition, a person who is an excellent friend has learned to be adequately perceptive concerning the emotions and values of her friends. She shows her care and affection by (among other things) paying attention to subtle communicative actions and responding in a sensitive and loving manner. Often the conflicts that arise between friends are based on the belief that one has been treated unjustly or

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inappropriately neglected, and these are the same considerations addressed when examining questions of justice in larger contexts. The person who knows how to recognize the importance of justice in social interactions will naturally be a more sensitive and devoted friend, someone who is capable of honoring and protecting the special vulnerability that goes along with friendship. This is because the person who is naturally just in her interactions with others has established the character traits essential to participation in an excellent friendship.

It might be objected that the harmonious relation between friendship and justice which I describe seems counterintuitive in certain important respects. For example, the loyalty commonly associated with friendship appears to conflict with the requirements of justice in certain circumstances; the committed friend seems likely to be less just in situations where the requirements of justice conflict with her friend's interests. We are, unfortunately, sometimes faced with such conflicts, and I admit that their resolution is problematic for the true friend who is caught in such a bind. The case of the unabomber and his brother perhaps represents a clear example of the conflict faced by a loving friend who also recognizes the demands of social justice.

However, despite the possibility of conflicting ethical

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concerns raised by cases in which friendship and justice clash, it is important to point out that these cases are typically the exception and not the rule. Excellent friends will rarely be faced with dilemmas of this sort, because of the fact that their friendship reflects a mutual appreciation for the virtuous qualities of each individual. The notion that public and private responsibilities commonly clash is based on conceptualizing individuals as persons who are motivated primarily by self-interested motivations whose purposes are not necessarily related to the concerns of social justice. The virtuous agent, in contrast, recognizes the value of participating actively in social activities intended to produce mutual benefits, and so will not be likely to place her friends in the difficult position of having to balance conflicting loyalties. Excellent friends are naturally excellent citizens as well.

The idea that friendship and justice tend to conflict rather than converge is supported by the common usage of "friendship" to refer to all types of relationships in which persons choose to spend time with each other, rather than relationships between virtuous persons who see one another as "other selves" and act in ways that are motivated by genuine concern for the welfare of their friends. It is true that

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even in the case of excellent friendships, persons occasionally make errors in judgment or go through difficult personal trials, during which we may commit unjust acts, treat one another poorly, and even do things that are purposefully imprudent. In such cases, a genuine friend will often be the one to honestly confront his companion or risk his friend's ire by opposing his unjust acts; a friend of the best caliber will do so because he is concerned for his friend's welfare, and recognizes that maintaining personal integrity by facing the consequences of one's actions is crucial if his friend is to flourish. Such conflicts between friends can sometimes create a breach that ends their friendship, and in extremely dire circumstances a normally just person might act in an unjust manner in order to save a friend. Nevertheless, the consonance between friendship and justice in the case of excellent friendships remains strong, and this is a feature of excellent friendships that adds to their quality and depth.

These considerations show that the person who is capable of being an excellent friend, motivated by love and sincere affection for those around him, is the same person who is most able to understand the requirements of justice, and to respond appropriately to the need for perceptive sensitivity and respect in social relations generally. He will show respect for the fact that all persons desire the basic goods that are

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necessary conditions for human flourishing, and will participate in social activities motivated by a desire to improve the quality of life in his immediate community, and in the larger world around him. He will attempt to promote greater understanding and oppose greed, violence and intolerance. He will be, at once, a just man and a thoughtful, considerate friend.

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**NOTES**

1. The thesis that there are moral facts, and that such facts (and the theories which discuss the relevance of such facts) function to explain our moral beliefs, has been defended and attacked by numerous writers under the rubric of "moral realism," sometimes referred to as "confirmation theory." Many authors have argued in response to the relativist views of Gilbert Harman, The Nature of Morality (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); and the subjectivism of J.L. Mackie, Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong (New York: Penguin, 1977). See, for example, Nicholas Sturgeon, "Moral Explanations," in Essays on Moral Realism, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988); and Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," The Philosophical Review XCV (April 1986): 163-207. An incisive critique of confirmation theories is provided by David Copp, "Explanation and Justification in Ethics," Ethics 100 (January 1990): 237-258.

2. An insightful discussion of the relevance of trust in relationships can be found in Lawrence Thomas, "Trust, Affirmation and Moral Character," in Identity, Character and Morality. See also Annette Baier, "Trust and Anti-Trust," in Moral Prejudices.

3. William Frankena attempts to accomodate assessments of character within an account based on logical principles designed to guide action. See Frankena. Ethics, 61-65. Robert Louden also suggests that act-based principles and virtue-theoretic concepts should be coordinated. See Louden, "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics," 235.

4. It might be argued that Aristotle's moral model of the good life, exemplified by his arguments in Books I-IX in Nichomachean Ethics, is flexible enough to allow different descriptions of flourishing for different persons, as in my account. If so, then the distinction to be drawn between Aristotle's ethical views and my own is not so sharp. Nevertheless, my emphasis on the relation between basic facts about persons and the virtues remains distinctive.

5. Foot, "Moral Beliefs," in Theories of Ethics, 97.

6. I have chosen respect for autonomous acts as a paradigm case of a general obligation toward others for two reasons. The role that conceptions of respect and autonomy play in modern moral theories is central, and the issue of respect for autonomous acts represents a deep and difficult challenge for my account. Analogous arguments can be applied in the case of various other obligations (e.g. promising, providing aid).

7. For a discussion of the importance of emotions in moral psychology and development, see Laurence Thomas, "The Reality of the Moral Self," The Monist 1993: 3-21. See also Justin Oakley, Morality and the Emotions (London: Routledge, 1992). On the related issue of the relation between pathos and praxis in Aristotle's ethics, see the illuminating article by L.A. Kosman, "Being Properly Affected: Virtues and Feelings in Aristotle's Ethics," in Essays on Aristotle's Ethics.

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8. See John Rawls, A Theory of Justice, (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1971); and David Gauthier, Morals By Agreement, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

9. For an excellent discussion of the role of justice in friendship, see Neera Badhwar, "Friendship, Justice and Supererogation," American Philosophical Quarterly, April 1985: 123-131. Badhwar argues that the sharp distinction between reason and inclination characteristic of Kantian ethics is responsible for a false separation into distinct normative realms of the concepts of justice and benevolence.

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## V. APPLICATIONS AND OBJECTIONS

I have argued that the person seeking a good life has general obligations toward others, based on the character of the goods associated with a flourishing life. The basic human need for friendship and a social environment conducive to flourishing, coupled with a natural desire to lead a flourishing life, create the framework within which the relation between virtuous dispositions and interactive obligations can be developed. I have shown that the relation between individual flourishing and basic social goods is much more intimate than is readily apparent; the intimacy of this relation reveals how a robust theory of obligation can be firmly based on an account of the virtues.

While no rationalistic decision procedure can be abstractly applied to particular contexts of choice, we can as we strive to develop the virtues in an effort to live a good life attain insight and general guidance both by modeling our choices based on the actions of morally exemplary persons and by recognizing the importance of practices and institutions that promote cooperation and enhance mutual benefits. The reflective search to understand clearly what modes of living can in fact make our communities and individual lives flourish constitutes one of the greatest challenges in our moral

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experience. This effort, fortified by the work of Aristotle and Hume, must be extended to the complex contexts of contemporary moral experience, so that we can determine the implications of our account of the relation between flourishing and basic goods for practical living. This effort is required because ethical inquiry by its very nature is motivated by practical concerns; if human flourishing is to play a central role in ethical deliberations, we cannot confine our exploration to merely theoretical issues, but must also attempt to discern the various ways in which the common need for basic goods supports both general (prima facie) and particular ethical obligations.

While I hope that I have provided sound reasons to pay closer attention to the importance of flourishing when evaluating a variety of ethical questions, the scope of my discussion thus far has been limited to quite basic concerns; several important questions remain to be answered if a fully articulated virtue theory based on the fundamental structure that I have proposed is to be developed. In order to show that a modified Aristotelian ethical theory is capable of providing moral guidance in practical contexts I have focused on tolerance and respect for individual choices and actions[1], and I am confident that analogous treatment can be given to other areas of basic rights and obligations.

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It will be important, for example, to examine the ways in which the need for basic goods that forms the basis for my account of flourishing supports the obligation to provide aid and support to those who lack basic goods. There is a clear need to develop more detailed studies of what features constitute aspects of a social context conducive to flourishing, as well as the relation between such features and particular obligations toward citizens. The role of particular virtues must also be examined, including arguments intended to justify why a particular canon of virtues should be embraced. I have not considered the important issue of how to evaluate the character traits and obligations of entities other than individuals (e.g. corporations, nation-states), nor have I discussed questions related to supererogatory actions and moral sacrifice. To what extent does the virtuous person sacrifice personal goods for the sake of others, and in what contexts?

I cannot here answer all of these questions, because to do so would extend the discussion beyond the intended scope of the current project. My primary aim has been to establish the relevance of a plausible account of human flourishing as a central feature of any adequate ethical theory, and to show that an ethical theory based on the virtues can support a robust account of obligation. However, it will be helpful to

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give some indications concerning the logical implications of the view that I am attempting to develop, and to defend that view against certain criticisms. Therefore, I would like to consider briefly some natural objections to the claims that I have made, and provide a few examples to indicate ways in which the application of my thesis can have practical ethical consequences that are intuitively satisfactory.

**Objections**

One possible objection is that despite the intuitive plausibility of developing an account of obligation based on a notion of flourishing, any such attempt will inevitably fail, either because a well defined conception of flourishing (such as Aristotle's) will necessarily beg too many questions concerning what it means to live a good life, or because a broadly defined conception of flourishing will be too vaguely formulated to serve the crucial purpose of determining which dispositions of character count as virtues, and why. This line of argument is developed forcefully by Sarah Conly.[2] I shall consider her arguments in some detail, because they constitute a direct attack on the type of approach that I have been supporting.

Conly claims that in order to be useful, an ethics of virtue must provide a coherent explanation of our ethical judgments. Since virtue ethics focuses on the fundamental

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role of character in determining such judgments, there must be a criterion for evaluating character. Such a criterion must provide a way for determining which traits are virtues, explain why such traits are admirable, and provide us with a canon of virtues that is intuitively plausible. (Conly, 86) These demands are certainly reasonable, and Conly suggests that the most likely criterion capable of grounding an ethical theory based on the virtues is the notion of flourishing. She discusses Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian conceptions of flourishing, and focuses on Aristotle's *ergon* argument as an example of what she terms a *narrow* conception of flourishing. Aristotle's conception of flourishing is considered narrow because of the claim that a particular activity - contemplation - is considered to be the basis for performing our human function well, and therefore provides a clear basis for determining what counts as virtuous activity and what constitutes a good life.

The problem with such a narrow conception of flourishing is that it excludes too many human activities that seem intuitively to be elements of any good and satisfying life; contemporary thinkers reject Aristotle's narrow focus on contemplative activity and philosophical wisdom because "we recognize too many kinds of traits and activities as intrinsically worthwhile to limit ourselves to any unitary

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account of flourishing." (Conly, 87) It is this discomfort with Aristotle's exclusive focus on contemplative activity that motivated my discussion of differing interpretations of *eudaimonia* in Chapter 1 (pp. 19-30); as I suggested there, an active life that includes expression of the manifold moral virtues as well as the intellectual virtues appears better suited as a model for flourishing than a life dominated by contemplative activity alone. We need courage, temperance and compassion, as well as intellectual wisdom, in order to live well.

If this is the case, then what criteria must be used for determining the range of activities that count as constituents of a flourishing life, and how do these activities collectively support a particular set of virtuous dispositions? Conly criticizes what she terms *collective* notions of flourishing, i.e. those that include an eclectic combination of characteristically human activities each of which supports the flourishing of persons, by claiming that any such notion will be necessarily ad hoc and reflect a circular commitment to particular virtues that we have prior intuitive reasons for endorsing. The difficulty with collective notions of flourishing is that they retain the Aristotelian structure of a characteristic human function while providing no means for choosing a set of activities that

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are necessarily related to that function (or functions) that is not arbitrary. This objection carries some force, and unless advocates of a neo-Aristotelian virtue theory based on a collective notion of flourishing can provide an independent argument for inclusion of a particular set of activities characteristic of human excellence, such accounts will face considerable difficulties.

Conly reserves her most extensive critique for an attack on what she terms *broad* conceptions of flourishing, which describe a varied range of virtuous dispositions and related activities as constituents of a flourishing life while providing a relatively general description of the function that supports those dispositions and activities. Traits of character count as virtues for broad conceptions of flourishing because they contribute to a set of activities that together form the basis for a life whose purposes and projects are coherently organized and satisfying. Since this is the category into which my account of flourishing most closely fits, I shall pay particular attention to her arguments concerning the merits and flaws of broad conceptions of flourishing.

According to Conly the merit of broad conceptions of flourishing is derived primarily from the fact that they provide a general framework for understanding what is required

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to lead a flourishing life without arbitrarily relying on a conception of the good life that is overly exclusive and thus difficult to justify. A broad conception of flourishing "suits our pluralistic notions of human good in a way that no single, exclusive notion can." (Conly, 90) Conly focuses on the work of Williams and MacIntyre as exemplars of virtue theories based on a broad conception of flourishing, and describes the ways in which these accounts rely on the notion of a cohesive personal identity whose purposes and projects are integrally connected to a distinct set of related activities. Although such accounts are intuitively plausible and attractive, Conly claims that they suffer from a fatal flaw directly associated with their advantages: since they are flexible enough to include a variety of differing characteristics and activities as elements of a flourishing life, they are incapable of supporting a principled theory of virtue and vice. "It is difficult to see how, on a plausible account of flourishing, any particular traits are ruled in, or that any particular traits are ruled out." (Conly, 90)

Now it is certainly true that an adequate account of flourishing must be able to support a virtue theory that is not arbitrarily constructed, and so it might appear that my account of flourishing is inadequate on this score, since (like the accounts of flourishing developed by Williams and

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MacIntyre) I see the pluralistic character of my view to be a central advantage. It is for this reason that I discuss necessary conditions for flourishing in some detail while contending that any attempt to establish a set of sufficient conditions will fail, and precisely for the same reasons that Conly discusses. This is why the focus on the importance of a cohesive identity is relevant to ethical judgments; the particular goals and values of distinct persons may plausibly require that slightly different sets of characteristic dispositions be developed (with their associated activities). The question remains, however, whether or not the charge of impotence in relation to a plausible theory of virtue and vice based on a broad conception of flourishing is justified.

I think not, and an examination of the examples that Conly cites will reveal that her critique of broad conceptions of flourishing fails to impugn the account of flourishing that I have developed based on the central importance of basic goods in any flourishing life.

**Courage**

Conly's first example deals with the traditionally cardinal virtue of courage. In the preceding chapter I attempted to sketch the way in which my account of necessary conditions for flourishing supports a need to develop a courageous character: since there are inevitably a variety of

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obstacles capable of preventing persons from enjoying basic goods (e.g. the freedom to choose and act upon one's own set of goals and purposes), and since courage is often necessary to overcome such obstacles in many practical circumstances, courage is a virtue whose active expression is necessary in order to live a flourishing life. Although this argument may seem relatively straightforward and convincing, Conly interjects a counterexample based on a science fiction scenario.[3]

Imagine a future world in which there are a variety of different species with distinct sets of general characteristics. Some species are warlike and aggressive, some are instinctively aggressive but also rationally prudent (perhaps like us), and in addition there is a species of cowards called puppeteers. The puppeteers are completely focused on security, and always attempt to avoid any possible harms, considering physical injury the greatest of evils. Conly argues that there is no reason to claim that puppeteers cannot flourish because they lack the virtue of courage. Since within their own social network all value personal security and safety, cooperation is insured. Furthermore, they are able to avoid the possible violations of other, more aggressive species by prudently developing an advantageous trading position that can be used to deter attacks (through

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the threat of economic boycotts).

The intent of this scenario is to place the virtue theorist who advocates developing a plausible account of the virtues based on a broad conception of flourishing in the horns of a dilemma: I must either claim that the puppeteers are courageous or that they do not flourish. Since neither of these claims is plausible, the possibility of puppeteers represents a counterexample to a virtue theorist like myself. The upshot is that, "given the right means, cowards may flourish." (Conly, 91)

In order to avoid becoming impaled on either of Conly's horns, it is possible to argue that the puppeteers do show courage through their willingness to do what is necessary to achieve their goals while remaining true to their values. Since they abhor violence, the meaning of "courage" for them is less martial than the meaning that the scenario's description implies; indeed, it is implausible to suggest that as adequate characterization of courage cannot include reference to actions whose motivation is to insure that one's primary values are not compromised. However, I think that Conly's counterexample suffers from a more basic flaw, and so I will grant, for the sake of argument, that the puppeteers are indeed cowards.

Any account of ethics worth its salt must rely on

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judgments relevant for creatures that have a distinctive, identifiable set of basic traits and live in social environments with contingent characteristics relevant to ethical evaluations. When we discuss the virtues and their relation to human flourishing, we are attempting to develop an ethical theory *for human beings*. In human societies courage is necessary for flourishing; this is not less true simply because it is a contingent fact about those societies (and the individuals that live in them). Persons in human societies are ashamed of cowardice, and not merely because of the social stigma attached to cowardice. The relation between basic goods and the virtue of courage reveals that our attitudes have a basis in practical reason, even if we as individuals are unaware of the importance of that relation. The problem with the puppeteer scenario is that *we are not puppeteers*; basic truths about human societies and human nature, contingent though they may be, remain truths that are relevant to our categorization of virtues. As Aristotle recognized, a thorough understanding of human psychology and sociology is directly relevant to an adequate assessment of ethical judgments and norms.

Conly states, in a footnote, that there is a third alternative with regard to the puppeteers: namely, that for the puppeteers courage is not a virtue. She rejects this

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possibility based on *our* universal acceptance that courage is indeed a virtue, but given the details of the scenario described, the judgment that the puppeteers do not consider courage to be a virtue seems to be the only plausible alternative (unless, as I suggested earlier, we interpret their actions as courageous rather than cowardly). There is, however, no justification for inferring that because courage is not a virtue for the puppeteers, it is not a virtue for human beings. It is mistake to think that a canon of virtues (or a set of moral rules, for that matter) must be defined *for rational beings as such*. The correct model for determining appropriate ethical norms must rather be *human beings as they in fact are*.

If we accept this model, we can effectively consider questions about how to live well and how to interact together to create a good society without losing any logical force associated with abstracting from the particular features of human psychology. Conly seems to have understood the reasons that virtue theorists present for rejecting such abstraction, only to lose sight of the implications that such a rejection entails.

It must be admitted that Conly's concern about broad conceptions of flourishing must be taken seriously; as I stated earlier it is reasonable to demand an account of the

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way in which a theory of flourishing supports the development of particular dispositions rather than others. Furthermore, it may be fair to assert that many arguments intended to provide a theoretical foundation for virtue ethics fail to respond adequately to this demand. The need to develop an account of the relation between flourishing and the virtues that is structurally Aristotelian while incorporating a serious consideration of the ethical relevance of basic needs has in large measure motivated the current project. The account of flourishing that I am attempting to develop based on basic human needs provides an objective basis for evaluating the question of which dispositions are to count as virtues (or vices) that is crucially important to the project of developing a contemporary virtue theory capable of a wide range of practical applications. The important role that needs play in relation to flourishing and the virtues provides a plausible, principled framework for determining which character traits are virtues, and why.

**Justice**

In discussing the virtue of justice, Conly presents a more formidable objection against the claim that a theory of flourishing can establish the foundation for a robust ethics of virtue. As she mentions, justice has always presented a

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problem for virtue theories based on a notion of flourishing. It seems initially plausible to suggest that being just is not a necessary condition for flourishing; if one is intelligent enough to avoid the harms that might arise as a consequence of one's unjust actions, why should the rights or interests of other persons matter (especially if others happen to be obstacles to the successful attainment of one's ambitions)? Conly focuses on the need to develop a general stability of character as the genuinely important requirement if an individual is to flourish, and claims that this requirement can be fulfilled relatively easily without being just (or courageous, or kind). In addition, she claims that the citizens in an unjust society can flourish, given appropriately auspicious circumstances. Though we might continue to admire just persons and their actions, and thus develop a virtue theory based on such intuitive judgments (pace Slote), an account of the virtues based on a notion of flourishing will fail to support the idea that justice is a virtue and injustice a vice, because a just temperament is simply not needed in order to flourish. "An individual can hone his skills, develop his talents, cultivate his tastes, and be happy without a sense of justice. A society with no concept of justice can succeed, and its citizens flourish, in a sphere where a sense of justice is not expected of them."

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(Conly, 92-93)

This critique is precisely the line of argument that I had in mind when I developed my discussion of the importance of friendship and a social context conducive to flourishing in the previous chapter. Although it is tempting to think that one might be able to avoid suffering from the unjust acts of others, cultivate a few favored friends and treat others with indifference or even disdain, it is important to bear in mind that the value of virtuous traits (including justice) has many overlapping applications, for oneself and for others.

First, virtues like justice are dispositions cultivated over a long period of time; it is not plausible to suggest that persons are capable of being consistently just in some contexts while ruthless and unjust in others. Patterns of injustice that are firm features of a person's character will inevitably influence how that person treats others, including intimates. Second, it is the just person who makes a truly worthy friend; the just actions of virtuous individuals benefit both her friends and the members of society in general, and her friends admire the fact that her actions consistently display a cultivated sensitivity to the importance of justice and honesty in social interactions. Since friendship is a basic good whose fulfillment is necessary for flourishing, we must hesitate to consider the

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savvy tyrant a truly blessed individual, for a tyrant (regardless of his success in arenas of power) will lack the incomparable goods associated with genuine friendships of the best type.

In order to understand the implications of this point let us consider again the relevance of trust as an indispensable feature of an excellent friendship. By trust I mean not merely the ability to predict the behavior of another, but rather the knowledge that I can count on my friend to act in ways that benefit me *because it is her desire to do so.* The joy associated with a secure knowledge that I can trust my friends without fear or calculation based on competing interests is an important feature of my best friendships, and supports my flourishing in ways that no other goods can. It is not plausible to suggest that the savvy tyrant enjoys relationships with others based on the type of simple, genuine trust that supports excellent friendships, since favored persons will have the example of the tyrant's unjust actions to remind them that their position is perilously contingent on maintaining a relationship that continues to benefit the tyrant.

These considerations cast doubt on Conly's claim that Lorenzo the Magnificent and the citizens of Florence flourished under his rule. The reason that it might seem

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correct to say that Lorenzo flourished is because he was not *merely* unjust, but also displayed a variety of characteristics that many consider admirable. Lorenzo is attractive and compelling as a historical figure precisely because he embodied an ambiguous combination of virtuous and vicious traits. In this respect he was probably not unlike most of us, except that he did have abilities that allowed him to dominate the political scene in Renaissance Florence. Lorenzo did contribute to establishing a social context within which artistic achievement reached great heights, and he did achieve most of the goals that he set for himself. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to perceive Lorenzo as a paradigm of flourishing, for his vicious characteristics undoubtedly isolated him from others and prevented him from participating in friendships with those persons in his society most worthy of loving regard and solicitous company. Thus, anyone convinced that Lorenzo and others like him can genuinely flourish must claim that friendship is *not necessary* in order to live a flourishing life.[4] If Aristotle was correct to say that excellent friendships are vital features in any good life, and if as I have urged there is a mutually supportive relation between a just temperament and an excellent friend, then the successful tyrant lacks crucial goods enjoyed by those persons who live virtuously and support the flourishing

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of their neighbors as well as themselves.

Because we as humans are inherently social beings whose identities are partly determined by our relationships with others, and because social cooperation produces a variety of benefits conducive to flourishing, it is possible to argue that virtuous character traits support the flourishing of individuals as well as the communities in which they live. This is true of virtues such as justice and generosity that generally benefit others directly, as well as virtues such as courage and temperance, which are generally considered self-regarding virtues.

Of course, there will be times when it is necessary for individuals to sacrifice personal goods in order to fulfill important obligations, and it is crucially important for social arrangements to be flexible enough to allow individuals the freedom to develop and pursue their personal goals and plans. For example, when natural disasters occur it often becomes necessary for individuals to put their personal concerns aside in order to participate in the effort to rebuild homes or prevent further damage. The virtuous citizen will willingly participate in such efforts because he benefits from the mutual aid of his neighbors when he is in need, because he cares about the friends and neighbors whose lot has been affected, and because his efforts improve and sustain the

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quality of life within his community. Conversely, a strong community will support the need for individuals to pursue their own goals, even when the associated activities do not *directly* contribute to the social welfare of the group, because the respect and love that such support reflects *is* beneficial to both the individuals who are part of the group and to the group as a whole.

Determining the appropriate balance between the values of individual freedom and social solidarity, which is contingent on various circumstances within particular social contexts, represents one of the most significant challenges that persons living in various social settings must face. Communities and social groups that cooperate to achieve mutual goals voluntarily deserve the praise and admiration of all, because it is difficult to work together to build healthy communities (despite the rational impetus to do so). Practical wisdom is, unfortunately, often a rare commodity in human affairs, yet this is not a good reason to abandon the attempt to attain it, or to cynically laugh at the inevitable failures of human endeavors. Rather, one ought to attempt to learn from such failures, in order to establish and maintain communities whose flourishing can be paradigms of social cooperation.

One reason that prevents people from believing that a robust ethical theory can be viably based on an account of

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flourishing and the virtues stems from a tendency to believe that individuals and communities are generally incapable of acting virtuously without being forced to do so. Such skepticism provides one motivation for attempting to develop a clearly defined set of moral rules based on an independently justified central principle. These rules, often conceived as moral laws, can in turn support statutory laws backed by government authority, and thus assure that social institutions will support at least a minimal moral framework that is stable. The contention that individuals will naturally pursue self-interested goals (often to the detriment of others) functions as an underlying assumption in both social contract theory and Kantian moral philosophy.

In addition, an antagonistic relationship between selfishly motivated individuals and the communities in which they live is reflected in the many stories that function as modern versions of the traditional hero myth. Classical heros (e.g. Odysseus) were exemplary citizens in their communities who used natural abilities to overcome a variety of obstacles in order to perform great acts that benefitted both themselves and their societies. As members of their societies they represented paradigms of greatness; each of us might be capable of heroic action, if we apply our natural talents and are lucky. In contrast, the primary characteristic of

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contemporary hero tales relies on a powerful individual intervening in affairs *who is an outsider*. Character types who exemplify the modern hero include the western outlaw and the renegade cop, among others.[5]

The repeated patterns in these stories (or films or music) reveal communities of persons who are impotent to solve their own problems. These communities are saved by heros who are from a different place, have extraordinary powers and typically break many of the laws of the communities where the action takes place. The ends justify the means, however, and we are led to admire such heros who have qualities and abilities beyond our capacity to emulate, even though their success confirms our own impotence.

Perhaps our historical picture of Lorenzo de Medici characterizes the hero in our many outlaw stories, and partly explains our high regard for his actions. We are impressed by his intelligence, wit and daring, even though he is ruthless and unjust. At any rate, I have argued that Lorenzo and others like him are inappropriate paradigms of human flourishing, and what I am suggesting is that we need to develop a deeper appreciation for the truly virtuous individual, one who is a *citizen* of his community and *willingly, enthusiastically* acts in ways that promote the public good. While our citizen may or may not display

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dramatic qualities that stimulate the aesthetic imagination, such a person will recognize that a commitment to justice and moderation is crucial to the flourishing of herself and her community; she will enjoy acting in ways that reflect her just temperament, and will well deserve the high regard and admiration of her peers.

**The Hermit**

The arguments presented cast serious doubt on the common suspicion that justice is not a trait that one needs in order to live a flourishing life. Humans, as social animals, benefit from the just actions of virtuous individuals, and we also benefit when we personally develop an internally coherent disposition to treat persons with respect and compassion. The fact that we are "social animals" in fact plays a large role in explaining why practical rationality supports the requirement to develop a just disposition. As I argue above (pp. 100-115), many of the most important basic goods that function as necessary conditions for flourishing are defined by the quality of our relationships with various other persons, and just persons exemplify the type of individuals who are also reliable, trustworthy friends.

What, then, of the person who spurns social relations in order to live a life apart from others, relying solely on his

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own physical and mental abilities to survive and, if lucky, to flourish. It seems that for the hermit a social context conducive to flourishing, friendship and love are not basic goods, for the hermit by definition lives apart from any social context and chooses isolation as a way of life. As such, the hermit seems to present a counterexample to the notion that friendship and love are *necessary conditions* for human flourishing. If friendship, for example, is not actually a basic good without which persons cannot possibly flourish, then it seems as if my privileged canon of basic goods has been arbitrarily chosen and thus begs the question concerning what is truly required in order to flourish. This charge is particularly relevant, because it is the basic goods associated with social life that have provided the basis for my defense of a virtue theory that is genuinely capable of grounding an account of obligation. Let us, then, consider the hermit.

It is important to bear in mind that (as I pointed out when discussing the puppeteers) a system of ethics based on the virtues is intended to provide insight and guidance about the ethical choices of human beings. The fundamental characteristics of human beings (e.g. that we require food and water to survive, that we as social creatures require friendship and freedom) form the contingent basis that

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justifies claims about the necessity of particular virtues in relation to flourishing. If we did not need physical and emotional nurture both as children and as adults; if we were not the fragile, mortal creatures that we are, then our moral obligations would be other than what they are.

The hermit, however, is a human being who is not a social creature. This does not mean that the hermit is not *inherently* social; rather, for whatever reasons he simply does not participate in the variety of social activities that form the contexts for the lives of most human beings. Though very interesting from an anthropological point of view, the presence of the hermit in the world does not detract from the force of an ethics of virtue based on contingent human characteristics. True: rather than saying that we are developing an ethical theory for human beings *as such*, we must perhaps say that we are developing an ethical theory for human beings *who choose to participate in social life*. I do not see that anything of importance is lost by making such an emendation, because the relevant ethical considerations that I have been evaluating remain crucially important for most persons, and are even important for hermits, to the extent that they participate in social activity.

An ethical theory based on the virtues such as I have proposed, one whose foundation is based on an account of

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flourishing, requires that we appropriately determine the ethical relevance of a set of contingent, practical facts about persons: this is a virtue of virtue ethics, because it allows us to include a thoughtful consideration of the role of basic human goods in our assessment of the genesis of fundamental ethical obligations. Only the presumption that a universalized, abstract formulation of moral principles is a necessary feature of a good ethical theory prevents one from appreciating this advantage.

Given this perspective, the hermit must be seen to operate outside the ordinary framework of ethical obligations; he is in some sense "beyond ethics." I say in some sense because there will likely be norms that would be rational to follow if one were a hermit, and it would be interesting to see what "hermit ethics" might require. In addition, our hermit was not always a hermit, and so at least for a time participated in human social interactions. He might, in fact, to some extent during certain periods of his isolated existence, have further social encounters with human beings. To the extent that the hermit does have contact with others, the ethical considerations relevant to human beings who participate in social life will be relevant to him as well.

It is important to ask, however: *to what extent* will the ethical considerations of cental importance to persons who

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live in social groups apply to our hermit? This question is important because it is not clear that a hermit's basic needs will be quite the same as ours, and thus his needs will not necessarily support the same range of virtuous dispositions with their correlative activities as ours do. I must admit that it appears quite difficult to determine a plausible answer to this question. It may be that it would be unreasonable to apply our ethical standards to persons genuinely living apart from human societies.

Nevertheless, it remains true that for those of us who *are* actively engaged in lives that involve interactions with other human beings, those character traits that support the fulfillment of our basic needs ought to be developed so that we can have the best possible opportunity to lead genuinely flourishing human lives. The presence of the hermit does not cast doubt on the necessity of basic goods such as friendship and love in relation to human flourishing, but merely emphasizes that it is a set of contingent features of human beings that forms the basis for developing our account of human flourishing and the virtues.

The philosophical appeal of the hermit, however, can perhaps be found in the fact that there are many people in contemporary society who see themselves as living lives that are in various ways isolated from one another. Furthermore,

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some are quite satisfied with arrangements that make it easier to accentuate isolation; perhaps they agree with Sartre that "Hell is other people." This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in urban cultures; it is a commonplace to observe that a big city is the easiest place to be alone.

Persons who appreciate the isolation that urban environments afford undoubtedly see themselves as hermits in certain respects. They avoid intimacy, cherish their privacy and seek to support social arrangements that make it possible to maintain an extreme level of independence. A member of this group of urban loners might claim, "I am in fact a true hermit, and want no interference from anyone. I am as you say, "beyond ethics," so do keep your ethical judgments to yourself, and leave me alone."

However, such a claim to hermit status rests on an illusion of independence, and cannot be sustained. The social arrangements that create the context for the highly valued autonomy of modern urban cultures require a degree of interdependence and mutual effort that is crucial if neighborhoods that are pleasant and productive are desired. Without a highly organized degree of social cooperation the variety of benefits (including autonomy and anonymity) that is available to citizens living together in large cities (or elsewhere) would not exist. Even if it is true that economic

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and social institutions which have nothing to do with kindness or generosity are partly responsible for the stability of many cooperative arrangements, it remains the case that the tolerant and respectful attitudes of virtuous citizens are indispensable to the flourishing of cities, and the people who live in them. A city that lacked compassionate, just individuals willing to work together to form communities that are safe and support mutual benefits would be a bleak place indeed. Not even a self-styled urban hermit would choose to live in such a place.

We have good reasons, then, to reject the criticism that goods such as friendship and emotional nurture are not necessary conditions for flourishing. We must in the end agree with Aristotle that friendship is in fact the greatest of goods, without which life would hardly be worth living at all. We must endeavor to cultivate dispositions of character that will support actions and attitudes conducive to flourishing. We must seek to be compassionate, courageous and just. How, then, will these requirements affect the particular choices that we make? What are the practical implications of my argument that basic human needs can support the framework for an account of flourishing which in turn can ground a theory of virtue and vice? To these important questions I now turn.

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**Applications**

When discussing the applications of an ethical theory, it is important to retain a healthy appreciation for the limitations of ethical theorizing in the realm of practical affairs. As I argued in Chapter 2, it is reasonable to expect a good theory to provide insight and guidance in various decision-making contexts. However, it is not reasonable to expect *any* ethical theory to provide cookbook solutions to serious ethical dilemmas, because the complex features of different situations demand not only an understanding of general obligations, but also a perceptive ability to discern which features of a particular situation are salient, an emotionally emphathic ability to recognize important differences in personal responses to particular actions, and a capacity to balance the importance of competing values appropriately. Despite the attempts of modern ethical theories to cope with quandaries in a systematic way, there simply is no adequate formula for determining the solution to controversial ethical dilemmas without incorporating an assessment of contextual details into one's particular judgments.[6]

Nevertheless, there are clearly distinctive ramifications associated with commitment to a particular theoretical view,

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and whether or not those ramifications fit well with our considered intuitive judgments is one mark of the quality of a theory. In this respect the view that I have sketched, although it is incomplete and requires much clarification, is no different. I have argued that because of the way in which the virtues support our ability to enjoy those basic goods that are necessary conditions for flourishing, a virtue theory that takes into account the central importance of basic goods will be able to generate an intuitively acceptable list of prima facie obligations. For example, I have argued that the virtuous person has a prima facie obligation to respect the rights of his fellow citizens to make autonomous choices (as long as those choices do not unjustly harm others), based on the fact that the freedom which such respect acknowledges represents a necessary condition for flourishing, along with the recognition that it is beneficial to support the flourishing of all persons, if possible. By recognizing the ways in which the fundamental needs of persons are related and developing dispositions that insure actions that reflect sensitivity to this knowledge, the virtuous person promotes important goods, both for the agent and her community.

Similar considerations support the claim that the virtuous person has a range of general obligations. These obligations will include (among others) an obligation to

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provide aid, to keep promises, to develop one's capacities (including the capacity to perceive sensitively the relevant ethical features of different human interactions and behaviors), and to refrain from committing harmful acts. Providing an account of the way in which these obligations are tied to the goods associated with human flourishing represents an important continuing project.

In addition to such general obligations, one way in which my account of flourishing entails particular commitments about the nature of one's ethical obligations concerns the importance of proximity to oneself in determining the relative weight of competing obligations. Assuming that we agree that it is virtuous (or morally right) to help others in need, the question arises as to where our efforts should be focused, and why.

Should I do my best to help those persons most in need, no matter where they might be? This is the considered response of many utilitarians, since my efforts if directed to those most in need will produce the greatest overall benefits.[7] I agree that a person who is relatively economically advantaged should have a commitment to provide *some* aid for persons in remote communities whose suffering could be alleviated by such aid, because by so doing she displays generosity toward those who lack basic goods

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necessary for flourishing in a way that is not odious to her own welfare. This is particularly important in the context of a contemporary "global community" that continues to become increasingly interdependent; the welfare of individuals suffering from extreme deprivations of basic goods such as food, medicine and shelter influences the quality of social life in societies around the world, both in subtle and obvious ways. For example, the fact that persons who are suffering under conditions of extreme poverty routinely fail to receive adequate aid from individuals and institutions in wealthy societies capable of providing such aid contributes to an atmosphere of complacent cynicism about the human capacity for compassionate action.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that persons should be obligated to give most of their disposable income to organizations whose efforts focus on providing international aid (e.g. for famine relief). Given the cogency of my arguments about the relevance of friendship and a thriving social context in relation to flourishing, it follows that one's obligations to family members and close intimates are naturally greater than one's obligations to relative strangers within our communities. Similarly, my obligations to members of my immediate community are (somewhat) greater than my obligations to members of more distant communities. Of

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course, "distance" might require a metaphorical interpretation if the events in a geographically remote location directly affected the quality of life in one's community in dramatic fashion, but typically geographical proximity and direct influence on levels of flourishing are closely related.

I believe that agents ought to be active in addressing relevant problems close to home, primarily because of the great effect that such problems have on the quality of life in the social context of the agent and her family, friends and associates. This belief, which follows logically from a commitment to an account of flourishing based on the primary importance of basic goods in human life, fits nicely with intuitions about the nature of our obligations, and provides an explanation for the natural motivational force underlying our intuitive acceptance of certain moral responsibilities in daily life.

My account of flourishing will not tell me that I must volunteer for my local hospice, or that I ought to donate to the local homeless shelter, or that I must become an environmental activist in a grass-roots organization opposed to irresponsible corporate exploitation of local natural resources. It does tell me, however, that a compassionate, generous, just and courageous individual must do *something* to improve the quality of life in her immediate community. It

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tells me (as does my heart) that my deepest and most important commitments are to family members and friends, who most deserve my devotion, love and time. Finally, it tells me that devotion to my own flourishing is neither amoral nor something that will take care of itself, and so I find myself considering thoughtfully which actions and attitudes will promote my flourishing.[8]

Such considerations have led me to adopt a life plan which, while self-centered, is not selfish. This is because I recognize the intimate way in which my life is integrated with the lives of those around me, and recognize that their flourishing augments my own. I take delight when my friends flourish, both because I want them to be satisfied and happy for their own sake, and because their joy in various contexts becomes my own. The fact that we care about one another connects our lives in ways that affect how we identify ourselves as human beings, and creates a framework for our decisions whose ethical features are partly defined by the significance and intimacy of our relationships.

**Virtue in Medical Practice**

Another example of the way in which a virtue theory based on a plausible account of flourishing will generate particular obligations in discrete contexts can be seen by examining the

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ethical responsibilities of physicians, nurses and other health care workers. A topic of major concern among ethicists is the importance of compassion and sensitivity in the context of medical practice. It has been well documented that despite the vast improvements that technological and research advances have made possible, advances that have dramatically augmented the quality of health care services available today, many health care practitioners fail to display sufficient regard for the emotional and psychological needs of patients. In a wide variety of contexts patients and health care workers have reported a noticeable lack of sympathy on the part of health care practitioners, and in some cases physicians have even defended adopting an impersonal, arrogant attitude toward patients (and peers).[9] Perhaps these patterns of behavior explain the ironic fact that many people are unwilling to place trust in a health care system that is in many ways exemplary. Consider, for example, this case study presented by a medical school student[10]:

The student describes one of his first clinical experiences, during which residents and other students had the opportunity to witness an important procedure: the placement of a central line intended as a means to give the patient a large amount of needed fluids and medications. While the excited group of students and residents clustered around the

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female patient, who was described as a somewhat demented alcoholic, one of the interns provided a narrative description. The patient appeared to be in acute distress, moaning steadily and writhing. The agitation of the patient had an acute affect on the sensibilities of the young student, but it was the actions of the physicians in charge that most perplexed him:

> They unfolded her brusquely and efficiently from the fetal curl. Her moans became louder and pierced their moderate, if spirited, professional exchanges: "Mama, Mama, Mama, Mama." Glancing off these was the voice of the cheery young medical student, whose explanatory commentary I found harder and harder to listen to . . . *Why doesn't somebody touch her forehead? Why doesn't somebody take her hand?*[11]

Perhaps the physicians would object, if questioned about their conduct, that their primary responsibility is and must always be the patient's *physical health*, and that in addition it is a good practice to maintain a certain detached reserve in order to remain focused and calm. After all, doctors (unless they are psychiatric specialists) are not counselors! In most standard social settings we are pleased and display admiration when a person shows intense concern for the suffering of others, but we hardly consider it a moral *requirement*.

In some ways it is important to refrain from judging

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apparently insensitive behavior too harshly. Health care professionals are often under a great deal of stress, their time commitments tie them to a strict schedule, and it is certainly true that their primary obligations are met if their patients' immediate clinical needs are adequately addressed. Yet is a sympathetic, kind demeanor merely a supererogatory moral consideration for physicians and nurses? Is it not reasonable to demand that persons responsible for providing medical aid be compassionate as well as efficient?

It is not likely that a generous, compassionate response to the varied mental states of patients could be considered a moral imperative from a Kantian standpoint. The moral law surely demands that physicians be conscientious with respect to their clinical responsibilities, but the obligation to take a patient's hand who is moaning incessantly in order to provide comfort is clearly the type of action that can only be defined as an *imperfect* duty.[12] Perhaps the residents in our case study donate a percentage of their income to cancer research, or volunteer for Special Olympics. When it comes to imperfect duties, the agent has the freedom to decide in what ways he should, for example, help others in need. Compassionate actions are to be commended, but not required.

Similarly, it is unclear whether or not a utilitarian

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analysis of this case would produce a negative judgment concerning the lack of sympathetic concern on the part of the surgical staff. As the student who witnessed the case goes on to report, the patient might not have recognized a comforting gesture had it been offered, and thus would not have benefitted much (if at all) from the effort taken by a rogue surgeon. It might be argued that compassionate behavior in such circumstances generally produces beneficial outcomes, but it is difficult to argue convincingly that *anybody similarly situated* would be obligated to stroke a moaning patient's forehead (or something relevantly similar), solely on the basis of utility. This is true for those who consider immediate results, general benefits or weighted preferences respectively to be the standard for determining the meaning of "the greatest good."

However, it *is* true that the best outcome is assured in the case of the virtuous physician's action, because he enjoys acting in a compassionate manner and thus benefits from the exchange even if the writhing patient does not (and there is at least a chance that she may!) The discomfort that the medical student felt, and the natural tendency to act compassionately to relieve the suffering of others (he eventually attempted to comfort the woman himself) are distinctive features of a virtuous person, whether physician

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or sailor. In the heart and committed thought of such an individual rests concern for the cares and burdens of human beings whose justification and motivating force are supported both by the goodness of her virtuous dispositions themselves and by the underlying truth that those dispositions support the greatest of goods: human flourishing.

In decision-making contexts the established temperament of individuals is of utmost importance, and it is for this reason that Aristotle appeals to habit and the paradigmatically virtuous man as guides to action. Such a person does not need to think much before recognizing what to do in most cases. We can, however, when judging ethically the acts of others (or when we are occasionally befuddled despite our good nature) appeal to the goods that follow from the actions and sentiments of good persons, in order to get our bearings.

Thus we can say unambiguously that our medical student was right to be upset by the unsympathetic, coldly clinical approach of his superiors. We understand that the compassionate agent will recognize and respond to the need to provide comfort and solace to those who are suffering, if possible. We also understand that by so doing we benefit ourselves, those persons to whom we show sympathetic concern, and society as a whole. This latter good can be seen to be a

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result of compassionate action by recognizing the importance of trust as a crucial feature of relations between health care providers and patients. If members of society believe that they can rely on compassionate, sympathetic treatment when faced with the physical problems that we as mortal creatures inevitably encounter, then we will more willingly seek help when the need arises, and will be more confident that we are likely to receive quality care in the moment of our greatest vulnerability.

If we rely on an account of the virtues that is based on a notion of flourishing built around the crucial importance of basic goods, we can state unequivocally that compassionate actions are in various contexts clearly obligatory, because such actions are characteristic of the virtuous agent *and* because compassionate actions such as comforting patients who are clearly in distress benefit both the individuals involved and society in general (by securing public trust and creating a healthy model of quality care). Thus, the need to expand the medical notion of "care" to include the whole person is not merely a supererogatory requirement, and the failure to develop the perceptive abilities necessary to recognize when kind actions are likely to be beneficial deserves our disdain.

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## NOTES

1. Q.v. Chapter 4, 100-115.

2. Sarah Conly, "Flourishing and the Failure of the Ethics of Virtue," in Midwest Studies in Philosophy XIII, 83-96.

3. Larry Niven, Neutron Star (New York, 1968)

4. Of course, one might press the point that having a just character is not necessary in order to have excellent friendships, but I have already indicated reasons to suspect that such a claim is implausible, q.v. Chapter 4, 115-120.

5. I do not discuss here another modern archetype, the anti-hero (e.g. Dostoevsky's Roskolnikov). However, it should be clear that the anti-hero and the modern hero both live in a world that is corrupt and noticeably lacking in virtue. They both find a place within contemporary life precisely because there is no universally accepted moral framework against which their actions may be judged.

6. Edmund Pincoffs contrasts the differing approaches of classical and modern ethical theorists, and terms the modern approach "quandary ethics." See his Quandaries and Virtues (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1986). For a more developed version of my argument against the viability of quandary ethics as a general approach, see Chapter 2, 38-50.

7. See, for example, Peter Singer, Practical Ethics, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Chapter 8.

8. This reflection follows naturally from my critique of the Kantian distinction between prudence and morality. Q.v. 59-66, 72-78.

9. See, for example, "The Surgical Personality," American Journal of Ethics and Medicine (Spring 1997): 21-25; "Medical Education Must Deal With End-of-Life Care," Chronicle of Higher Education (May 1997): 456; and "Medical Students' Attitudes Toward Providing Care for the Underserved," JAMA Vol. 269, No. 19 (May 1993): 2519-2523.

10. Melvin Konner, "Basic Clinical Skills: The First Encounters," in The Social Medicine Reader, ed. Gail E. Henderson, Nancy M.P. King, Ronald P. Strauss, Sue E. Estroff and Larry R. Churchill (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 210-222.

11. Ibid., 212.

12. In The Doctrine of Virtue Kant discusses ends that are also duties, and distinguishes between perfect and imperfect duties. See The Metaphysics of Morals, 150-157.

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## CONCLUSION

As always, much work remains to be done. For example, it will be important to develop detailed arguments intended to show how the need for basic human goods supports a particular canon of virtues. Detailed study of the range of general (prima facie) obligations derived in relation to the virtues must be extended, as well as consideration of ethical problems in more specific contexts (e.g. medical practice). However, the arguments presented make clear that a plausible conception of flourishing based on the importance of basic goods must play a central role in theoretical ethics. It is crucial that we actively consider the relevance of our human efforts to lead flourishing lives when we evaluate various ethical problems and conflicts.

In order to motivate the project of formulating an account of flourishing capable of functioning as the basis for a plausible virtue theory, I first examined Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia*. I argued that the basic structure of Aristotle's ethical theory is sound, despite the fact that the *content* of his theory of flourishing must be rejected because of its reliance on faulty metaphysical assumptions concerning the function of man. I considered the apparent conflict between Aristotle's "holistic" model of flourishing, based on

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the active expression of both moral and intellectual virtues, and the contemplative model, which focuses on wisdom as the only genuinely significant virtue. I argued that the holistic model represents a better attempt to characterize *eudaimonia* than the contemplative model, even if it is possible to argue that the two models can be interpreted to reveal a coherent, unified account of the good life.

Before proceeding to present my own account of flourishing, I considered some standard objections to contemporary virtue ethics, based on the common criticism that virtue theories are incapable of providing adequate guidance in decision-making contexts. I argued that all ethical theories encounter difficulties when faced with genuine moral quandaries, and that it is a mistake to expect theories to provide unambiguous resolutions to moral dilemmas. In addition, I attempted to discuss reasons why the sensitivity to particularities of context and the reliance on perceptive judgments characteristic of virtue ethics should be considered virtues of virtue ethics, rather than problems.

I then evaluated Michael Slote's attempt to develop the theoretical framework for a contemporary virtue theory intended to be rich enough to be considered as a unique alternative to Kantian, utilitarian and common-sense moral theories. I argued that Kantian objections to Slote's

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proposals can be effectively deflected, but I criticized Slote's account as inadequate, primarily because of the fact that he relies on intuitive judgments in order to determine the content of his account of the virtues. I claimed that any attempt to successfully develop a virtue theory must rely on a plausible conception of human flourishing, and proceeded to examine some of the obstacles facing the virtue theorist who attempts to articulate such a conception.

I then presented my account of flourishing, based on the central importance of certain basic goods in any human life. I argued that these goods represent necessary (but not sufficient) conditions for flourishing, and showed how the social nature of certain basic goods (e.g. friendship), combined with an analysis of the relation between the flourishing of the agent and the flourishing of others, can serve to establish the framework for determining a set of general obligations toward others, based on the virtues. In addition, I discussed the thesis that our personal identities are partly defined by the character and quality of our relationships with a variety of other persons, and argued that this fact provides a further reason to respect and value the common need for those basic goods without which a flourishing life would be impossible.

Finally, I considered some objections to my proposals,

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and discussed some logical implications of my view in the realm of practical ethics. I argued that a virtue theory based on an account of flourishing tied to basic goods will yield support for the claim that we owe greater obligations to persons in our local communities than to distant others (although this does not entail that we have *no* obligations to distant others). In addition, I discussed ways in which my account of the virtues might generate particular obligations in certain contexts (e.g. health care delivery). The compassionate agent must in some cases act to alleviate the emotional suffering of patients, rather than merely providing appropriate medical treatment.

These arguments reveal that the conception of flourishing which I have discussed *can* provide a foundation for understanding the relation between virtues and obligations, and thus constitutes an effective rebuttal against the charge that virtue ethics is incapable of providing moral guidance in practical contexts. By connecting my account of the virtues to a partial characterization of flourishing based on the importance of basic goods, and by arguing that the social nature of those basic goods requires us to support the flourishing of others (and the flourishing of the communities in which we live), I have provided a framework for evaluating particular choices that can complement Aristotle's appeal to

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the paradigmatically virtuous individual. Evaluations of character and evaluations of acts are connected by the fact that all ethical choices are related to the conditions necessary for living a good human life.

In order to develop a convincing account of the relation between virtues and obligations, I have relied on the work of Aristotle, whose primary insights I have attempted to retain. Although Aristotle's analogy between persons and artifacts cannot be adequately supported, the basic structure of his ethical theory is capable of providing a sound basis for understanding the relation between basic goods and moral requirements, and for understanding why just acts support the happiness of the wise man.

*

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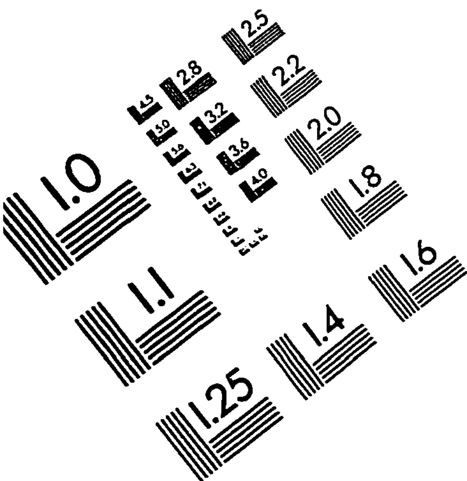
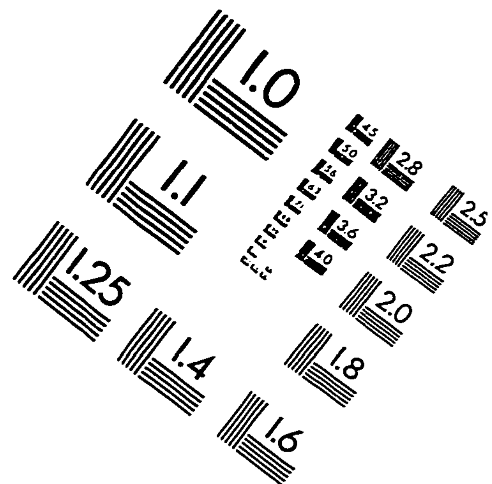
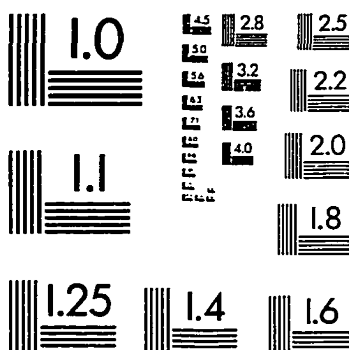
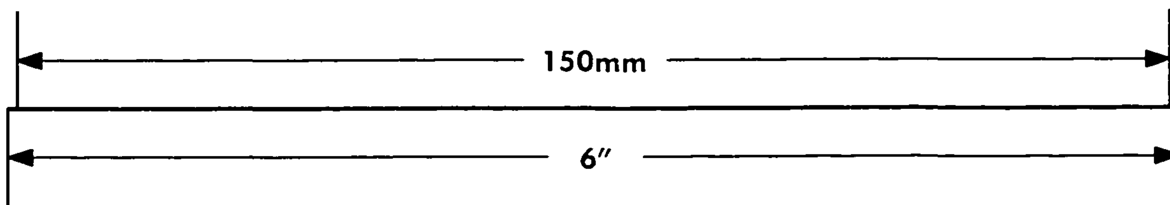

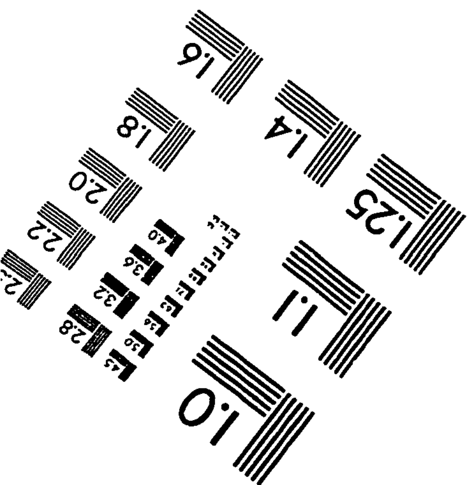

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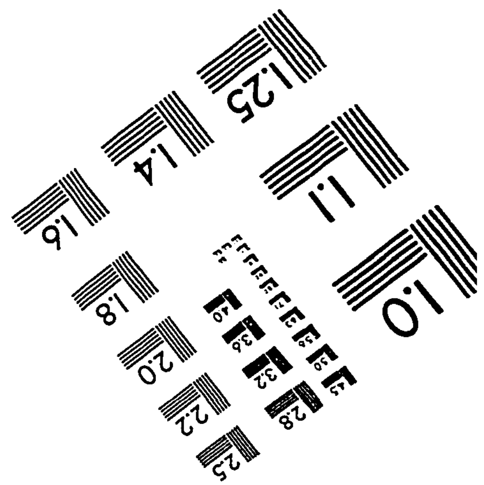

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