

Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing

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# BEING VIRTUOUS AND DOING THE RIGHT THING

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One common objection to virtue ethics is that it is “not applicable”; it is, allegedly, a theory which is too vague for us to apply it to the actual world. There is a quick response to this: we do apply it all the time, for we take people to be brave or cowardly, generous or mean. This is, of course, not what the objectors have in mind: they mean that it is not applicable in the special sense, familiar to moral philosophers, of being too vague to be capable of *telling us what to do*. But here again there is a quick response: someone whose ethical thinking is in terms of the virtues can tell people (perhaps his children) what to do: they should do what’s kind, avoid mean actions, and not be dishonest.<sup>1</sup>

This is unlikely to satisfy the objectors. Among the objections brought at this point, two have been prominent: since we pick up our understanding of virtue terms from our family and social contexts, and our culture in general, virtue ethics will tend to be parochial in a way unsuitable for ethical thinking. Further, the recommendations of virtue ethics will be too vague to resolve ethical disagreement, which, again, ethical thinking ought to be able to do.

Before meeting these points on the level of theory, I think it is interesting to point out that, if you get on the Web and go to [www.virtuesproject.com](http://www.virtuesproject.com), you will find the Virtues Project, an organization which specializes in moral education and conflict resolution, which has been particularly successful in the First Nations areas of western Canada and in Maori areas of New Zealand. It does this by using the language of the virtues, which they have found to be the most effective inter-cultural ethical language. The website features a list of fifty-two virtues which the project has found to be character traits respected in seven world spiritual traditions. The Virtues Project is unaffected by ethical philosophy; it uses the language of educational psychology. It is also not hard to find many respects in which it is strikingly under-theorized; it treats the virtues on a very elementary level. Despite all this, it strikes me as worthy of reflection that the Virtues Project has for some years and in many countries actually been successfully using the virtues to resolve conflicts in schools and intercultural situations, while some philosophers have been deeming from their armchairs that thinking in terms of the virtues is ethnocentric and can’t resolve disagreements. It also strikes me as worthy of reflection that, for all that

on the theoretical level consequentialism is often praised as a practical, problem-solving theory, it has, as far as I know, no similar facts on the ground; no teachers (again, as far as I know) are successfully teaching children and actually resolving conflicts in intercultural situations using the language of consequences.

Still, doubt remains at the level of theory. We do learn to apply virtue terms in our own social and cultural contexts. And recommendations to be honest, or brave, are on the face of them somewhat unspecific. Ethical theories, in the tradition in which they have developed in the twentieth century, have raised a certain expectation about ethical theory: that it will apply to everyone in the same way, and that it will do so by telling people what to do in a fairly specific manner. This expectation cannot, I think, just be rejected; it has to be met on its own terms before we are entitled to proceed without it.

When we ask, before getting to theory, what we or other people should do, it is unlikely that we will appeal to principles or methods of deciding which are pulled out of thin air. We are most likely to appeal to the rules, conventions, and ideals of our social and cultural context. For what other source has given us directives as to what to do, and how to live, which are likely to have any authority with us? One way of putting this point is that by the time we get to reflecting about ethical matters at all, we are not blank slates; we already have firm views about right and wrong ways to act, worthy and unworthy ways to be.

As we get to reflecting about the principles and ideals we have acquired, we come to see that there is much in them that is due merely to convention. Worse, some aspects of our moral outlook, when we think about them, appear to be due merely to prejudice. Few of us grow up thinking that our moral education has been entirely adequate; we need to think how to do better.<sup>2</sup> How do we do this?

Ethical theories that have been orthodox among philosophers in the twentieth century have typically thought that what we do is to take the directives that we find in our unreflective ethical thought, and refine them so that they do one thing clearly and specifically, namely direct us. We look at the rules in everyday ethical discourse, notice that they are vague and may conflict, and try to refine them so that conflict is ruled out. Or we follow Sidgwick in looking for principles behind everyday ethical rules—principles which do not suffer from the flexibility of those everyday rules. This general direction of thought can be reasonably summed up in the claim that as we move to the level of explicit ethical theory we search for a *decision procedure* which will tell us what to do.

The term “decision procedure” has had a bad press in some quarters, so it is worth stressing that it does not itself import the idea of a mechanical, algorithmic procedure. The idea is simply that as we get to the level of moral theory, we discover a better moral methodology than the one we have been using, a methodology which will deliver an organized and systematic way of telling us what is the right thing to do.

(It is sometimes suggested that there is a parallel here to the development of a more sophisticated scientific methodology from everyday naïve views of the world. But this is surely a mistake, on two grounds. Firstly, the idea of “scientific method” is scarcely a help here. There are far more divergences between the ways different sciences develop than between different moral theories. And secondly, the purpose of science, insofar as it can be said to have a purpose, is theoretical understanding, which is precisely the wrong analogue for ethical theory insofar as that is taken to be practical, and hence focused on particular people and actions.)

If we need a decision procedure, a systematic and theorizable way of telling us what to do, then it will seem reasonable to think of the major aim of moral theory as being that of producing a *theory of right action*. This will be a theory which will produce, and defend theoretically, some decision procedure for telling us what to do, where “telling us what to do” means: giving specific instructions for how to act which are applicable to everyone in the same way. Consequentialism is standardly the clearest example of this kind of theory. It isolates one simple principle behind the directives of our everyday ethical discourse, and then tells us how to formulate this principle and apply it to tell us, systematically and specifically, what to do. This task is simple in principle, although difficult and technical in practice.<sup>3</sup>

This is very like the kind of help we seek in areas of our lives where we have theoretically simple but practically complex decisions to make. This model of a theory of right action, on this way of looking at ethics, is rather like the model often provided in these technical areas, for example by a technical manual. For example, a computer manual does the technical work for us and makes clear to us the theoretically simple grounds of the decisions we need to make when we use the computer. The common model of a theory of right action, as we meet it explicitly in many introductions to moral theory, and implicitly in the work of many moral theorists, can be called the *technical manual model*.

I have found that some people think that comparison to a technical manual is in some way a dismissive or reductive way of thinking of a theory of right action. I am not sure why this should be so, especially since the model embodies an important, and in many ways attractive, feature of this way of thinking of a theory of right action. It is *egalitarian*—it is, in principle, equally available to anyone. It is not, of course, available to everyone equally just as they are, any more than a technical manual is. However, this difference is standardly taken, surely correctly, as a difference merely in education, where this is training in technical matters which are, we suppose, equally accessible to all who have the opportunity. Similarly, applying the theory will on this account be available equally to all who take the trouble to master the decision procedure. Thus, what a theory of this type offers is something which is in principle available to anyone; inequities in its possession will be due to social contingencies rather than to the characters of the people concerned. It is this egalitarianism, I think, which helps to give this model continued appeal in the face of difficulties.

There are some obvious problems with this model. Two of them have been stressed by Rosalind Hursthouse.<sup>4</sup> Firstly, given the point that the understanding required is technical, and that mastering this kind of information is notoriously something which some people can do at a very young age, it would follow that there could (and predictably would) be clever teenagers who had mastered the relevant theory of right action, and thus would be, since the technical manual model is a model of moral theory, reliable and sound sources of moral advice and direction. But of course as soon as we pose this suggestion we can see how absurd it is. We do not go to clever teenagers for advice on what to do or how to live, because we realize that the technical cleverness they often do have may, because of their comparative lack of experience, be accompanied by naïvete and credulity, rendering their advice shaky at best. We could call this the objection from the idiot savant: the young person with technically brilliant understanding may be a moral idiot.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, if the theory of right action is to have this kind of form, then it would be possible in principle for someone to be brilliant at it, and to offer outstanding moral advice, while having a character and values that were morally detestable. After all, it is a supposed advantage of this model that the moral understanding it offers is available to all regardless of their moral character. So, I could in principle go to someone for moral advice, and take it, regardless of the fact that her character was marked by, for example, great cruelty and sadism. As long as this was unconnected to her theory of right action, there would be no reason for this to bother me. Indeed, I might be intrigued by the interesting complexity of her character. “I hate the way you torture kittens,” I might say, “but I appreciate the excellence of your theory of right action. What a good job it is unconnected to your character and values—for I will do what your theory of right action tells me to do, though of course I would be horrified at the thought of my being in the least like you.” I take it that this is deeply absurd, and indicates that divorcing right action from character is problematic. We could call this the objection from the loathsome advisor.

Some may object that this example is a travesty, but if so the reasons are going to be interesting. The objection has to be some variant on the thought that people with horrible characters are just not going to come up with excellent theories of right action; so we will not be faced by the loathsome advisor. But is this just a massive and fortunate accident? That is not very plausible. And if not, it will suggest the idea that such a theory is not in fact accessible to anyone with the required technical ability, but might involve character and its development. But one of the advantages of this kind of theory of right action was that it was supposed to be available to anyone, regardless of character, who could be taught the necessary technical skills.

However, strong as these two objections are, I think that there is a more important one. It emerges from the discomfort that I, at any rate, feel when faced by the common idea that what we need from a moral theory is to be “told what to do.” Do I really want to be told what to do? I have a moral problem: Should I do this action? I get the answer, Yes

(or alternatively the answer, No). Or I recount my problem and get told to do, or not do, action A. I have been told what to do, but is this what I want from a moral theory? It is certainly the kind of answer I want when I have a technical problem; I consult the manual, and get a specific and decisive answer, Yes, do that, or No, don't do it; or I recount my problem and get told the steps to follow to put it right. But in the moral case this gives us what the theory was supposed to be so good at, and yet clearly something is missing.

Perhaps this is so far an insufficiently charitable interpretation of what a theory of right action is supposed to do. Perhaps so far I am leaving out something else the theory gives us, namely, the justification for doing (or not doing) the action it tells us to do. So a theory of right action won't just tell us what to do; it will tell us what to do and give reasons why this is the right answer. After all, it's a *theory*: it will show us why the answer is correct, in terms of the way that the considerations relevant in this situation are processed by the theory (which will differ, of course, as the theories differ).

This does not remove the discomfort, however. Theories of right action are supposed to be practical, to give us specific directions. Since it is taken to be a fault in such a theory to be vague or unspecific, the desired result has to be, precisely, my being told what to do here and now, Yes or No. Reasons to back this up and enlarge my understanding of why the answer is Yes, on this occasion, rather than No, do not remove this feature. So the original discomfort remains: Do we really want a moral theory to tell us what to do? Aren't we losing an important sense in which we should be making our *own* decisions? Suppose I later come to think that what I did was actually the wrong thing to do. In a technical case I think that either I got the manual wrong, or the manual was wrong. And this is unproblematic; there is no soul-searching to be done as to why I made the wrong decision. But in the moral case there is surely something problematic in the thought that either I got the theory wrong or the theory was wrong, but there is no worry as to *my* making the wrong decision.

The idea that we want a theory of right action which tells anybody (with the right technical skills) what to do seems so far to leave out something important about the making of moral decisions. My moral decisions are *mine* in that I am responsible for them, but in a further way as well. They reveal something about me such that I can be praised or blamed for them in a way that cannot be shifted to the theory I was following. This is so even when it is true that the theory was correct, I was following the theory correctly, and the point of my following the theory was to be told what to do.

This point can be put vividly. Suppose (unrealistically!) someone always does what his mother tells him to do. He always follows her orders; if he fails to do so he feels guilt, regret, and so on. We take this to be immature, a case of arrested development; at his age, we say, he should be making his own decisions. Now, why should this picture become all right when we replace Mom by a decision procedure? Presumably, a decision procedure, supported by a theory of right action,



can be expected to be correct more often, and more reliably, than Mom can; but how could this remove the worry?

Once again we may be told that this is an uncharitable way to be interpreting a theory of right action and people who think we need one. The idea, it will be claimed, is not that I ask the theory to tell me what to do in the way I consult the technical manual. Rather, the theory is supposed to be something I internalize, a way of thinking which, when I adopt it, enables me to have the correct criteria for moral decisions. So the theory does not strictly tell me what to do; it gives me the criteria for doing it myself. The theory of right action is supposed to be like a technical manual in specificity, and in being accessible to all with the technical skills, but unlike it in that I am supposed to internalize it to come to my own decisions.

But again this does not meet the fundamental point. Granted that the theory does not literally tell me what to do, it still gives me the criteria for coming to the right decision. But if the theory is practical and specific, in the way stressed so far, what it is doing, in doing this, is enabling me to tell myself what to do. And furthermore, my acceptance that this is, in fact, the right thing to do comes entirely from my acceptance of, and internalization of, the theory of right action. So whether the theory is pictured as outside me, like a manual, or inside me, like a set of directions as to how to think, it is still telling me what to do. The point remains: what I should be doing is interpreting the theory correctly. If we bothered to internalize technical manuals, like car or computer manuals, it would be somewhat similar.

So we can see that the idea of a decision procedure backed by a theory of right action, as that has been assumed in much moral philosophy, runs into serious problems. And apart from these we can feel the force of a more general dissatisfaction. Informally, this can be put as the query whether we do in fact think of the moral life this way, as our going round all the time telling one another what to do. Is the moral life really this endless busyboding? Further, what on this model do we make of our concern for our own moral lives? It looks as though it has to come from the thought that amidst all this telling other people what to do, we from time to time, if only out of fairness, tell ourselves what to do too. And this definitely gets the concern wrong.

Virtue ethics has, for much of the period of its recent revival, been taken to offer an appealing alternative to this anxious and obsessive picture of the moral life. It is an alternative in which issues of the best life to live, a good person to be and a good character to have are important along with doing the right thing. It is by now clear that the nature of this shift from focus on right action to concern with being a good person is complex, and diverse accounts of it have been given. I will first give a common account of what virtue ethics is alleged to hold about right action and the virtuous person. Bringing out what is wrong with this account will point us in the direction of a better alternative.

A common view is that, by way of an alternative to the egalitarian, technical manual model of a theory of right action, virtue ethics offers a theory of right action that starts from some version of the following:

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An action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous person would do, adding “*reliably* (or *characteristically*)” or the like since virtue is a matter of character. There are many ways of interpreting this schema.<sup>6</sup> I am concerned only with people who take it to provide a criterion of right action. What I take to be the common view holds that the virtuous person must be identified independently of their performance of right actions. Otherwise, we would not have an account of right action which was *explanatory*. If we define right action as what the virtuous person would do, but it turns out that the virtuous person is even in part defined in turn by the doing of right action, the claim goes, we have a circle, and so no explanation.

So construed, the account has been attacked by well-known objections. Firstly, how are we to identify the virtuous person? We can, of course, point to actual examples of alleged virtuous people. “Fred and Jane are the virtuous people around here,” we are supposed to say, “so do what they do.” But there is an obvious response to this: our account will be parochial, for people in other places or cultures might not think Fred and Jane virtuous.

Secondly, we can avoid this objection by saying that unfortunately there are no virtuous people, at least not around here; virtue is an ideal, so that we cannot point to any *actual* virtuous people (though figures like Socrates and Gandhi may give us some inkling). This might be all right from some points of view, but is unfortunate if we want to give an account of right action in terms of the virtuous person, since the account will now be vague, and it will not be obvious how it is supposed to apply to particular circumstances.

Thirdly, we are taken to recognize clear cases where there would be agreement on what was the right thing to do, but this is patently not what the virtuous person would (reliably or characteristically) do. A familiar example is this: I have behaved badly: What would be the right thing to do in the circumstances? It is no good appealing to what the virtuous person would do, since the virtuous person wouldn't have behaved badly in the first place.<sup>7</sup> Recently, Robert Johnson has added to the list.<sup>8</sup> The right thing to do, he claims, might be for me to improve my character (by controlling myself more); or to organize my life so that I am forced to do the right thing when my own motivation is insufficient; or to ask for guidance in an area where I know I am faulty. But none of these actions can be plausibly taken to be what the virtuous person does, reliably or as a matter of character. For the virtuous person does not need to improve; does not need to strategize to make up for absent motivation; does not need to ask for guidance where she is faulty.

We can't, I think, see how these objections can be met until we look at a more adequate alternative account of virtue and right action. And before doing this I shall raise what I take to be a further, more fundamental objection to this standard view. Suppose that we *can* define the virtuous person in a way satisfactorily independent from performance of right action. We then define right action in terms of what the virtuous person, so understood, would (reliably, or whatever)



do. Whatever we have or haven't done, we haven't produced an *alternative* to the kind of theory of right action that has been so problematic all along. At most we have put a loop in it. Instead of trying to produce a theory of right action with the form of a technical manual, we have called up the figure of the technical expert—as when one has a computer problem and calls in tech support. The expert might use a manual herself, in which case we have merely postponed the application of the manual to tell us what to do. But even if the expert is supposed not to use a manual herself, but to have an understanding of right and wrong action which cannot be codified in a manual, we are still, on this model, *using* the expert to tell us what to do, in exactly the way we used the manual, namely, to tell us what to do.

We find, then, that bringing in the virtuous person in this way does not help with the deepest problem we found with theories of right action. Appeal to the virtuous person certainly helps with some of the problems, for at least we will not be getting our theory of right action from a precocious teenager, or somebody with loathsome values. But the deepest problem remains intact, indeed is worse if anything. We still have a theory of right action which tells us what to do. All that has changed is the criterion for locating the right thing to do. It is still the case that what we have to do is to get the theory right; our decisions are the decisions that come from applying the theory correctly, as anybody could in principle do. Hence, this kind of appeal to the virtuous person still doesn't let the character of the person deciding make any difference; for, whether we appeal to Fred and Jane or to the ideal virtuous person, we are still applying the theory in a way that anybody might have done, regardless of character.

So far, then, we have not found a real alternative to the problematic role of a theory of right action, understood as importing a decision procedure. If we assume that the virtuous person must be defined independently of right action, then importing the virtuous person into our theory of right action does no good at all.

A lot of people see this as an impasse. What, after all, is the alternative supposed to be? If we bring the virtuous person into our definition of right action, haven't we just given up on the prospect of a noncircular account of right action?

Obviously, we do not want an account in which being virtuous and doing the right thing are trivially defined in terms of each other. But we might, I suggest, try an alternative: producing a developmental account, in which we give an account of being virtuous and doing the right thing in a way which involves a developmental process. If so, we would have a theory involving not two items but three: the virtuous person, right action, and the relevant developmental process.

This prospect becomes more attractive if we can find an analogous example which is convincing in its own right and also indicates that we can think of virtue in this way. And this is what we find if we look at the classical tradition of virtue ethics, which points us to a model which was fundamental in thinking of virtue for many centuries. It emerges most dramatically when we notice that Aristotle urges us to think of

becoming virtuous on the lines of learning to be a builder.<sup>9</sup> This passage is well-known and we have to remind ourselves that, in terms of what modern theories require, it is outrageous in its mundanity. Learning to be moral is like acquiring a *practical skill*? But yes, this is the point of the analogy. A practical skill is a useful model for the intellectual structure of a virtue in several ways: it is, of course, practical, it is undergirded by general understanding of the relevant field, and, most important, it is an area where there is a process of *learning*, of passage from the state of being a learner to the state of being an expert.

This is a large topic, on which a lot has been written, and here I am just bringing out points relevant to our understanding of virtue and action. The beginning builder has to learn by picking a role model and copying what she does, repeating her actions. Gradually, he learns to build better, that is, to engage in the practical activity in a way which is less dependent on the examples of others and expresses more understanding of his own. He progresses from piecemeal and derivative understanding of building to a more unified and explanatory understanding of his own. His actions may at this point differ from those of his role model precisely because he is a better builder. This is because he is learning, and learning contains the notion of aspiration to improve.

We can see how this leads to an improvement in both activity and understanding if we take an example from the performance arts. Suppose I aim to be an expert piano player, and take Alfred Brendel as my role model. Clearly I am making a mistake if I think that I will learn to “play like Alfred Brendel” if I listen obsessively to his recordings, copy his mannerisms, play only pieces he performs. The development from learner to expert essentially involves acquiring *your own* understanding of the field you are learning. The learner depends on the expert to learn in the first place, but the goal of learning is to have your own understanding of what you have learned from the expert. The expert in a practical field aims not to produce clone-like disciples who will mimic what she does, but pupils who will go on to become experts themselves, which they can do only if they acquire their own understanding of the subject. The person who succeeds in playing like Alfred Brendel ends up performing in a way which sounds rather different.

It is these points about practical skill which make it a good model for thinking of virtue. This in no way implies, it should be stressed, that virtue is going to be in all ways like a skill—clearly, in some ways it is quite different. Nor does it imply that this story is all there is to an account of the development of virtue. I have just emphasized the initial point, that we start as learners dependent on models and progress to acquire our own understanding. There remains much further story to tell.<sup>10</sup> However, the importance of the movement from learner to expert in a practical skill is important for understanding the initial development of virtue. Let us recall the story at the start of this Address: we grow up in a particular social and cultural context and acquire corresponding beliefs, principles, and ideals, along with conceptions of the virtues as those are practised and thought of in our society. We then reach a

point where we realize that our moral upbringing has left us with much that is merely conventional, or wrong. Many moral theories react at this point, as was noted, by trying to systematize the rules and principles of everyday thought, with the aim of producing a decision procedure to be used by anyone.

Here is the point of decisive difference with virtue ethics—at least virtue ethics as I take it to be defensible. For instead of trying to force our everyday moral thoughts into a system of a one-size-fits-all kind, virtue ethics tells us to look elsewhere—at what happens when we try to become a builder or a pianist. The moral beliefs we have taken over from others are just the beginning stage. It is up to us to put in the work needed to develop into someone who has more understanding. Virtue ethics assumes that this is something that we will all tend to do. Other factors may prevent this becoming effective, but it is a rare person who if unaffected by other factors grows up morally in a purely passive and dependent way, never reflecting on the moral beliefs they have grown up with or wondering whether what they were told to do was a complete guide to right action.

What should we do, then, at the stage when we realize the merely conventional status of many of our moral beliefs? In the spirit of other theories, but in a different way, virtue ethics tries to improve our understanding in a way which will lead to our acting in better ways. But virtue ethics regards it as misguided to try to produce a theory-based decision procedure for anyone at any stage to use. This would be like trying to improve building by insisting that all builders learn from the same books. These might be helpful, but they don't produce expert builders; it is people who have to make themselves into expert builders. Similarly, each of us has to do the work in our own case, aiming to become a virtuous person with understanding and not just derivative copying of others. No manual will do it for us.

If we take this developmental model seriously, we can see that it is important to differentiate the initial, uncritical grasp of virtue from the kind of understanding that the developed virtuous person has. We all start with some conventional grasp of virtue that we pick up as we grow up from parents, teachers, and so on. It is up to us to recognize at this point that we are *learners*, and so to aspire to improve. To the extent that we do, we are on the way to becoming more fully virtuous. What form will this improvement take? A number of accounts have been defended here. The fully virtuous person, analogous to the practical expert, may have developed an uncodifiable ability to discern morally relevant features of situations. Or he may have developed practical wisdom which develops from, but goes beyond, that of his role models.<sup>11</sup> Or he may have developed a grasp of rules and principles such that he can apply them intelligently and with insight.<sup>12</sup> I take it that the term “virtue ethics” picks out a cluster of theories,<sup>13</sup> so that these and others are options within virtue ethics, and decision between them is not needed here. One thing, however, is true of all of them: becoming more fully virtuous requires each of us to think for ourselves, hard and critically, about the moral concepts, especially those of the virtues, that we have picked up from our surroundings.

How does this help us with the issue of being virtuous and doing the right thing? The learner starts by doing what he is taught is the right thing to do, copying the actions which in his society are conventionally marked off as the kinds of thing that, for example, a brave person does. As he progresses in virtue, he does these things as a virtuous person does them, with understanding, and also gets better at doing the right thing. He acts bravely with greater understanding of what bravery requires, for example, and does the right thing as the truly brave person would do it—from the right reasons, as a result of having the right disposition, and so on.

It is generally true that brave people in our society, for example, do certain actions, which can be independently specified. But most people in our society are only at the beginning, learner stage of virtue. They do the right thing for people at that stage. It is what bravery requires of them, demanded by society's rules, exemplified in people who are role models of bravery. When the completely virtuous brave person does the right thing it is not because it is required of him by the conventional account of bravery, but as a result of his own reflective understanding of bravery and its requirements, and his development of the appropriate disposition.

So if we return to the schema

An action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous person would (reliably, characteristically) do.

we can see that it can be applied in two quite different kinds of way. The beginner does the right thing in the following way: it is what bravery requires, it is the right, not the wrong thing to do; it is praised, emulated and so on. The fully virtuous person also does the right thing; in this case it is the right thing done for all the right reasons and from a disposition that has developed virtuously in both its intellectual and affective aspects, based on fully developed understanding of all relevant ethical factors.<sup>14</sup> These are obviously very different ways of being the right thing to do. We cannot, of course, give an account of doing the right thing as the virtuous person would do it, without reference to the virtuous person. So we cannot come up with independent characterizations of the virtuous person and the right thing to do if we take into account not merely the beginner in virtue but also the fully virtuous person. And if we omit the latter from our account of virtue, we are failing to notice a crucial point: the fully virtuous person is the ideal that the beginner in virtue is aspiring to be.

We can now see why we cannot give a satisfactory virtue ethical account of right action if we insist on independent characterizations of the virtuous person and the right thing to do; such an account (whatever else can be said for and against it) will capture only the learner, the person whose virtue is limited to doing the conventionally right thing. But the learner does not exhaust our conception of virtue; we also need to take account of the expert. And we will not get the point even of what the learner is doing if we take him to be merely doing the conventional thing, failing to notice that he is also aspiring to do better, and thus to get closer to an ideal. So we can also now see why rejecting

independent characterization of the virtuous person and right action is far from landing us with a trivially circular account.

Someone might say that, if we are going to distinguish the way the beginner does the right thing from the way the fully virtuous person does the right thing, then what the theory should say is that the right thing to do just is what the fully virtuous person would do, and the beginning virtuous person is not doing the right thing. This would be a rigorist approach, like that of consequentialists who hold that the right thing to do is what the ideal calculator of consequences would do, so that we ordinary people, however admirable our intentions, character, and so on, almost never do the right thing. This way of looking at things, however, has to hold that some of us are worthy of praise, emulation, and so on, even though we are not doing the right thing; and this is at least awkward. It is also difficult to make sense of moral education and improvement on this view; someone becoming brave, for example, would still never be doing the right thing until they became completely virtuous. It is worth noticing here that the Stoics were rigorists about virtue, holding that only the completely virtuous have virtue, while we are all vicious and base—but even they held that the nonvirtuous, as well as the virtuous, can do the right thing, though only the virtuous do the right thing in the fully virtuous way.<sup>15</sup>

Another response might be to suggest that we have two senses of “right” here. But this is surely implausible, for the same kind of reason that it is implausible that we would have different senses of “right” when the apprentice carpenter and the skilled carpenter both fix the shelves in the right way.

We can see, then, why the familiar schema cannot produce a decision procedure for virtue ethics if we take into account the point that virtue involves aspiring to an ideal; any account that could produce a decision procedure would be stuck at the level of the learner, helpless to deal with our ethical aspirations.

So, if I am wondering what the right thing is to do, and approach the virtuous person’s characteristic actions for guidance as to what that is, there are two important factors. Firstly, to what extent is the person I look to an expert or a mere learner? How virtuous are they, really? If they are a mere learner then their actions may be right, but only through doing what they were told without deep understanding. Only if they have developed the right kind of understanding will their examples be good ones from which I can learn. And secondly, to what extent am I an expert or a mere learner? How virtuous am I, really? If I am a mere learner then I may not have chosen the right model, and even if I have, I may not be emulating the right aspect of it.

If we bear these two factors in mind we see that and why the virtuous person cannot provide an all-purpose decision procedure that I can apply regardless of my character to find out what the right thing is for me to do. Even if I try to go through the virtuous person to find the right thing to do, the merits of my decision will depend not just on the goodness of my model but the degree of my own virtuous development in discerning what in it to emulate.

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Some people regard this result as a disaster, for it loses the one attractive aspect of the technical manual model, namely, its egalitarianism. We no longer have a decision procedure for working out the right thing to do in a way which is available to everyone. However, I have worked to undermine the thought that a decision procedure is what we want. And the result here is, I claim, supported by our everyday ethical discourse. We do recognize that the worth of the advice and direction we get from other people depends on their degree of moral development. We don't emulate, or get advice from, airheads, or untrustworthy people. When we take moral advice we assess its source; we know that the character of the person we go to will be shown in the advice we get. It would be bizarre for me to say that I will do what John tells me to do, though I thoroughly despise John. And we do take my actions to show something about my character, not just my ability to understand a theory.

What of the three common objections to virtue ethics I mentioned earlier? We can see, briefly, that and why they lose their force once we recognize that virtue involves a progress from the beginner to the fully virtuous.

How do we identify the virtuous people? We do so in the way that we identify good builders and pianists—that is, in a way which is initially hostage to our own lack of expertise. At first we just have to accept their credentials; as we improve in the relevant area we might end up by challenging them.

What of the unhelpful vagueness of the ideally virtuous person? This need not matter if it is not the ideally virtuous person we are appealing to for guidance in how we are to act. We start with teachers and role models who are braver, more generous, and so on than we are, but we do not need, or expect, them to be already completely virtuous for the process to get going.

What of the clear cases of right action which are not actions which a virtuous person would characteristically do? Again, we need to distinguish between what the ordinarily virtuous person, the learner, would do, and what the fully virtuous person would do. The person who is at the stage of learning to be virtuous and still aspiring to do better might quite well do the wrong thing and have to apologize. He might well try to improve his character, organize his life to help his improvement along, and need guidance from a person who is in the relevant respect better. These are all normal actions characteristic of someone who is developing a virtuous disposition, given ordinary facts about human weaknesses. Fully virtuous person would never need to do such things; but we are not fully virtuous people, though hopefully we are trying to improve.

We have seen, then, how virtue ethics is applicable. It is not a theory which tells us what to do; we have seen that we neither have nor should want any such thing. Rather, it guides us by improving the practical reasoning with which we act. It directs us, as we are wondering what to do, toward emulating people who are braver, more generous and generally better than we are, and does so in a way which recognizes

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the constraints put on this by the level of our development as well as that of the people we emulate. This result will be disappointing only to those who think that acting well can be reduced to the results of a formula applied across the board with no further moral effort. Virtue ethics does better, I have suggested, because it has a built-in recognition of the point that the moral life is not static; it is always developing. When it comes to working out the right thing to do, we cannot shift the work to a theory, however excellent, because we, unlike the theories, are always learning, and so we are always aspiring to do better.<sup>16</sup>

### Endnotes

1. This is what Rosalind Hursthouse calls thinking in terms of the 'v-rules'; see her *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
2. It is sometimes suggested that this happens only in relatively open societies, whose members are exposed to different ways of life and encouraged to think for themselves about them; in relatively closed and traditional societies this is unlikely to happen. I think that this makes an unwarranted inference from the fact that in traditional societies ethically more reflective thought may be repressed (sometimes harshly) to the claim that in such societies people are satisfied with unreflective thought. History strongly suggests otherwise.
3. There are theories which do not make this kind of demand, or which make it in their simpler versions but reject it in their more sophisticated versions. While I do not have the scope to develop the point here, I think that virtue ethics will converge with these theories, rather than provide an alternative to them. However, in my experience the need for a decision procedure is often assumed to be a requirement on a respectable moral theory. Cf. Mark Timmons, *Moral Theory* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 3: "The main practical aim of a moral theory is to discover a decision procedure that can be used to guide correct moral reasoning about matters of moral concern." Successfully meeting this demand is thus necessary for virtue ethics to be recognized as even a contender for being a type of moral theory.
4. In much of her work, but particularly in *On Virtue Ethics*.
5. Followers of the *Fox Trot* daily cartoon can think of this point as the Jason Fox point.
6. Hursthouse has made extensive use of this schema, but not to produce a decision procedure, something she rightly takes virtue ethics not to do.
7. This common example is found in Gilbert Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series (2000): 223-36; and John Doris, "Persons, Situations and Virtue Ethics," *Nous* 32.4 (1998): 504-30.
8. Robert N. Johnson, "Virtue and Right," in *Ethics* 113.4 (July 2003): 810-34.
9. *Nicomachean Ethics* II 1.
10. The analogy with building is relevant to the initial stage of moving from acquiring a conventional understanding of virtue to coming to have your own understanding of that virtue. Most versions of virtue ethics will also move on to further stages. The practice of the several virtues is not compartmentalized; reflection on the ways in which they interrelate generally leads to some form of unification of the virtues via the exercise of the practical reasoning displayed in them. Further, people both within a culture and between cultures will learn to respect one

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another's reasoning insofar as they recognize the practice of the virtues in different contexts and across cultural boundaries.

11. This, the Aristotelian model, is the most familiar, which is why I have used it as illustration in the present Address.
12. This would be required by religious versions of virtue ethics, in which the content of the virtuous person's reasonings would be initially given by religiously sanctioned rules (such as Mosaic law) which are not open to rejection or revision, but do demand intelligent interpretation to be correctly applied.
13. In a way precisely paralleled by consequentialism and deontology.
14. This is a gesture at what full virtue might require; different theories have different accounts here.
15. The distinction drawn here, between doing the right thing as the beginner (the learner) does it and doing the right thing as the fully virtuous person (the expert) does it, maps well onto the Stoic distinction between a *kathekon*, a right action which anyone can perform, and a *katorthoma*, a right action performed by a virtuous person. (For the Stoics, however, this would be limited to the sage or ideally virtuous person, nobody else being virtuous.)
16. Versions of this Address were given as a Hägerström lecture at the University of Uppsala in May 2003, and at the University of Notre Dame in September 2003. I am very grateful to my audiences at Uppsala and Notre Dame for helpful comments, particularly to Alasdair MacIntyre, and I am grateful for helpful written comments from Robert Audi and Dan Farnham.