

Virtue Ethics

A Pluralistic View

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goodness in humans and a good *life* for a human which is so intimate that for eudaimonism, the Ultimate Question of ethics is what it is for a human being to have a good life.

It is the task of this and the next chapter to explore the connection between the possession and exercise of virtue as a disposition of excellent (or good enough) responsiveness to the demands of the world, and the living of a good life. I argue in this and the next chapters that there are deep connections, but that they are not as tight as is claimed by eudaimonism. To explore these connections, we need a basic concept of the good life. Unfortunately, what is the basic concept of the good life and how it differs from the concept of what it is to be a good human are questions not easy to answer, for there are several basic concepts of the good life in the current literature. Here is the first:

- (1) A good life is a flourishing or thriving life.

According to Guignon:

The question of the good life aims at identifying the most fulfilling, meaningful, and satisfying life possible for humans, a life which may be described as thriving, flourishing, and (to use a still older vocabulary) 'blessed'.⁴

This is the basic concept of the good life employed in standard eudaimonistic virtue ethics. Such an ethics claims that a virtue is not merely a good quality in a human being (i.e. something that makes for goodness in humans), but is also needed for a thriving or flourishing life. That is, a virtue is characteristically beneficial to a human being. Eudaimonistic virtue ethics, then, makes a rather tight connection between the good life and goodness in humans. The precise nature of this connection and the credentials of eudaimonistic virtue ethics is the topic of the next chapter.

Another concept of the good life makes moral meritoriousness an essential component of the good life, explicitly, and by definition. So we have:

- (2) A good life is both morally meritorious and personally satisfying (thriving, personally successful).

A view such as this is held by John Kekes:

A life will be called ... 'good' only if it is both personally satisfying and morally meritorious. Either component alone would not be sufficient to make life good.

⁴ Ibid.

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Virtue and the Good Life

(i) Introduction

In *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*,¹ we know the Answer to the Ultimate Question, but we don't understand the Ultimate Question. In a sense this is true of ethics. At a mundane enough level, we know what counts as being morally decent. There is pretty solid agreement on many of its features: treating people with respect and consideration, being loyal to friends and colleagues, being charitable, showing appropriate care and affection. But what is the question to which these are answers?

Even for virtue ethicists, this is not obvious. For some in the eudaimonist tradition, the Ultimate Question is 'What is it to live well?'² That is, given a standard reading of 'living well', ethics begins with a conception of the good life. However, according to the definition of virtue given in Chapter 1, virtues are qualities which enable their possessors to respond well to the 'demands of the world', as a matter of disposition. Such dispositions make a person good, but do they make for a good *life*? As Charles Guignon notes, 'asking about the good life for humans is not the same—or is not obviously the same—as asking what it is to be a good human'.³ So maybe, for virtue ethics, the Ultimate Question is 'What makes a person good?'

It remains unclear then, what is the Ultimate Question for a virtue ethics. On my account, virtue by definition makes for goodness in human beings, and the Ultimate Question is what constitutes this goodness. Eudaimonism shares this view, but argues for a connection between

¹ Douglas Adams, *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy: A Trilogy in Four Parts* (London: Pan Books, 1979).

² See Rosalind Hursthouse, 'Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics', in *Philosophers Ancient and Modern*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series 20 (suppl. to *Philosophy*) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 35–53, at 35.

³ Introduction to Charles Guignon (ed.), *The Good Life* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), p. vii.

For personal satisfaction may be obtained at the cost of causing much evil, and the price of moral merit may be the frequent frustration of reasonable desires, and neither evil nor frustrated lives should be supposed to be good.⁵

Kekes's account of the good life, however, does not effect a conceptual tie between the good human and the good human life, since it is at least conceptually possible for a human to lead a morally meritorious life, but lack elements of a good life which are necessary to, or further enhance, her personal satisfaction.

A third account of the good life is the following:

- (3) A good life is a life in which personal goods dominate.⁶

On this concept, personal goods are contrasted with moral goods, and on standard views are assumed to come into conflict to some extent with the living of a moral life. Concept (3) of the good life is not equivalent to either concept (1) or (2), since the notion of enjoying personal goods is not equivalent to that of flourishing, thriving, and personal satisfaction. There is a further problem in understanding how the good life and the moral life on concept (3) are related. It would be odd to class the appreciation of nature, love of individuals, and the products and results of creativity as (mere) personal goods like the enjoyment of tennis or eating. So are they moral goods? Not obviously, for on dominant current conceptions of morality in the analytic tradition, to class all of these as *moral* goods would be to espouse a problematically broad conception of morality. It is unclear then how to classify aspects of the profiles of virtues—such as creativity, love, and appreciation—in terms of the disjunction between 'personal' and 'moral' goods. Here as elsewhere, the interests of virtue ethics are not well served by current classifications which arise within alternative traditions and systems.

How then can the problem of the relation between virtue and the good life be conceived in virtue-centred terms? Given that a person who consistently responds appropriately to the demands of the world is good (even if not fully excellent if they do not do so from a state of virtue), the following problem arises for the good life. How severe is the tension between so-called 'prudential' components of the good life, such as per-

sonal satisfaction and thriving, and (consistent) appropriate responsiveness to the demands of the world?

For the sake of terminological convenience, I shall assume that a good life has both prudential components (personal satisfaction, thriving, and so on), and a component of moral meritoriousness, that is, consistent appropriate responsiveness to the demands of the world. In terms of this terminological assumption, we can understand the central, substantive claim of this chapter as follows. A *virtuous* life, that is, one in which virtue is possessed and exercised consistently, reduces the potential tension between these two broad components of the good life in two main ways. First, we can show a certain sort of connection between the thriving, flourishing life of personal satisfaction and the life of *virtuous* responsiveness to the demands of the world. Second, we can show that *virtuous* responsiveness to the demands of the world should not be understood in terms of the narrow understandings of the moral, and moral virtue, currently popular in much philosophy, and that as a result, the gap between the good and the moral life is reduced. The first way of reducing the tension between the two broad components of the good life in the assumed sense is the topic of section ii below, 'Virtue and Flourishing', and the second way is the topic of section iii, 'Virtue and the Demands of the World'.

A claim that virtue integrates the two broad components of the good life has both a stronger and a weaker reading, which I shall call the 'optimistic' and the 'less optimistic' views. Though virtue ethics in general rejects the common presupposition of severe tension between the components of the good life, species of virtue ethics can be distinguished according to their relative optimism or pessimism about the potential for tension between these components. On the optimistic view, the components of the good life are not only broadly integrated, but the virtues central to the moral meritoriousness of a life are also characteristically good *for* the agent. When possessing and exercising the virtues does not lead to the benefit of the agent, that is due to ill luck rather than to a tendency of the virtue itself. On the less optimistic view, it is possible for a virtue to have tendencies to reduce personal satisfaction by causing harm and unhappiness to the agent. Such harm and unhappiness cannot be laid at the door of ill luck. Though the optimistic view is most closely associated with virtue ethics, I shall reject it in Chapter 4, and defend a version of the second, less optimistic view.

In short, I aim to show how a virtue-centred ethics can reduce the gap between the potentially conflicting components of the good life, but, I

⁵ *The Morality of Pluralism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 9.

⁶ This is the notion of the good life adopted by Brian Leiter in 'Nietzsche and the Morality Critics', *Ethics* 107 (1997), 250–85, at 260. See also Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 193 ff.

shall claim, the gap cannot be closed completely. Having brought the components together in this chapter, I pull them apart somewhat in the next, arguing against the eudaimonistic claim that a virtue should be understood not merely as a trait that makes humans good, but as a trait that characteristically benefits its possessor.

Let us turn now to the first of the two prongs of my virtue-ethical argument for a claim that virtue is central to the good life.

(ii) Virtue and Agent-Flourishing

I consider here the first of the two main ways my virtue-ethical theory integrates the two components of the good life: namely the connection between virtue and the flourishing of the agent. The theory shares the following standard feature of virtue ethics. A conception of the virtues is partly shaped by a conception of the flourishing of the kind of being who possesses them. Human beings are creatures who develop or mature: they grow both psychologically and physically. On this conception of virtue, any theory of virtue must have a conception of excellence of character (partly) shaped by a conception of healthy human growth. If this is so, then a full theory of virtue is parasitic on a 'background' theory of human psychology and development. An adequate theory of the virtues would then be answerable to a constraint, which I shall call the Constraint on Virtue:

A correct conception of the virtues must be at least partly shaped by a correct conception of healthy growth and development which in part constitute our flourishing.⁷

In Chapter 1, I defined a virtue as a disposition of acknowledging items in the fields of the virtue in an excellent or good enough way. The Constraint on Virtue is not entailed by this definition, but is part of a substantive virtue ethics, which aims to be naturalistic, at least in a weak sense. Note that it is not thereby committed to a stronger naturalism espoused by Rosalind Hursthouse (discussed in Chapter 4, section v). Note, too, that the constraint does not claim that the point of a virtue is to maximize or even conduce to the health or flourishing of the possessor of the virtues, but it does suggest that our conceptions of virtuous

⁷ I say in part, because I share Aristotle's view that external factors such as lack of resources and very bad fortune can prevent human flourishing.

modes of moral acknowledgement should be appropriate to both human development and to ideals of human health. This has two general implications. First, virtue may be relative to phases of development (so that there may be virtues of childhood that are not virtues of adulthood and there may be virtues of old age that are not virtues of those in their prime).⁸ Second, the characterization of the profiles of the virtues is at least influenced by conceptions of human psychic and physical health.

A conception of virtue partly shaped by the Constraint on Virtue allows for a close connection between virtuous, morally meritorious lives, healthy growth and development, and personal satisfaction and flourishing. The connection between virtue and the flourishing of the agent is confirmed by psychological findings. For example, as Daniel Goleman points out,⁹ chronic anger and hostility form the basis not only of much vice, but also of human ill health: ill health that can be averted by the cultivation of virtue:

The antidote to hostility is to develop a more trusting heart. All it takes is the right motivation. When people see that their hostility can lead to an early grave they are ready to try.¹⁰

Furthermore there is a connection between chronic hostility and vice. As Goleman puts it,

hostility becomes so constant as to define an antagonistic personal style, one marked by repeated feelings of mistrust and cynicism and the propensity to snide comments and put downs, as well as more obvious bouts of temper and rage.¹¹

On the positive side, a conception of virtue subject to the Constraint on Virtue provides an understanding of psychological health as a state necessitating the living of lives that are virtuous in (at least) many respects. Karen Horney puts the point this way:

Apparently, [a human being] cannot . . . develop his full human potentialities unless he is truthful to himself; unless he is active and productive; unless he relates himself to others in a spirit of mutuality. Apparently he cannot grow if he

⁸ For a defence of this view, see ch. 1 of Michael Slote, *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

⁹ In *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can Matter more than IQ* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 172.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 173.

indulges in a 'dark idolatry of self' (Shelley) and consistently attributes all his own shortcomings to the deficiencies of others.¹²

Finally, mature, healthy agents characteristically derive personal satisfaction from morally meritorious behaviour which springs from virtuous character. This is not to say that they are self-righteous or self-congratulatory: rather, as Aristotle notes, for such agents virtuous behaviour is standardly pleasurable,¹³ or at least not irksome. In brief, then, the first main way in which virtue is central to the good life by integrating its two components is through the Constraint on Virtue.

However, this claim needs some explication and qualification. A number of difficulties stand in the way of a correct understanding of the Constraint on Virtue, and its ability to integrate the two major components of the good life. First, does it follow from the fact that a correct conception of the virtues is (partly) shaped by a correct conception of human development, growth, and flourishing, that living a life in accordance with the virtues is necessarily good for the agent, barring ill luck? Second, does it follow from the fact that a correct conception of the virtues is (partly) shaped by a correct conception of human flourishing that the specification of the virtues is entirely determined by the qualities of a fully flourishing human agent? And if virtues are so determined, but it is rare for us fully to flourish, how can virtues be central to the good life for most of us?

My discussion of these questions will reveal my understanding of the Constraint on Virtue, and the nature of its ability to integrate the two components of the good life. It will reveal the character of my virtue ethics as the 'less optimistic' variety identified above. The first question concerns the issue of whether a virtue ethics which accepts the Constraint on Virtue should be eudaimonistic in character. This issue is so complex, and so central to the modern conception of virtue ethics, that it deserves a separate chapter. Acceptance of the Constraint on Virtue does not entail eudaimonism; indeed, I shall reject eudaimonism.

The second question is whether it is the fully healthy individual who sets the standards for virtue. We should not understand the Constraint on Virtue to entail that all virtues are traits which only fully healthy,

mature agents possess. For as has been noted (by e.g. Linda Zagzebski), 'to have a virtue it is not necessary that one be perfect'.¹⁴ This permissiveness about virtue has two aspects, one of which is noted by Zagzebski. She claims that a virtuous agent, virtuous in respect *x*, need not display *x* on every occasion in which displaying *x* is the appropriate behaviour. 'It is sufficient if one is reliably virtuous in sensitivity and behaviour.'¹⁵

Furthermore, the standards of what counts as displaying a virtue need not be set by the perfectly healthy person. One reason for this is that 'virtue' is a threshold concept. A person can be virtuous while another can be even more virtuous. Even if only the perfectly psychologically strong and healthy person can be perfectly virtuous because, for example, only such a person is entirely free of those vices associated with hostility, fear, anxiety, and lack of self-love, the standards for virtue *tout court* should be less lofty. For our standards for virtue *tout court* should be responsive to the state of the world relative to the costs borne by individuals in achieving utopian or perfect virtue. It may be the case, for example, that the demands the world places on us are seen by some as calling for considerable self-sacrifice. But maybe only the strongest, healthiest agents can bear such sacrifice with complete virtue. On my view, defended in later chapters, altruism that exhibits less than the full profile of relevant virtues (such as generosity, compassion, or benevolence), or exhibits them in a less than excellent way, can be regarded as manifesting virtue in certain circumstances, even though the altruism is expressive of states not fully psychologically healthy (see Chapters 4, 6, and 9).

The above point is particularly important given the real possibility that, as Nietzsche says, sickness caused by factors obstructing health, is a standard condition and difficult to ameliorate. This is how Nietzsche puts it:

For man is more sick, more uncertain, more mutable, less defined, than any other animal ... he is *the* sick animal.¹⁶

He is ... the most endangered, the most chronically and deeply sick of all sick animals.¹⁷

¹² *Nietzsche and Human Growth*, 15.

¹³ Though not necessarily always: see Rosalind Hursthouse's discussion of virtue and self-control in 'Virtue Ethics and the Emotions', in D. Sturman (ed.), *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 99–117.

¹⁴ Linda Trinkhaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 156.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3rd Essay, sect. 13, p. 100.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

The question arises: do we want to confine virtue in general to 'mankind's strokes of luck'?¹⁸ Why not reserve for them a special type of virtue, analogous to Aristotle's heroic virtues? Let us leave open the possibility of a conception of virtue which permits us lesser mortals to display virtue in relation to the demands of the world and ourselves.

Nietzsche's pessimism is echoed by later psychoanalytic theory influenced by Nietzsche's thought, and by subsequent neurophysiological study. In his *Understanding Human Nature*,¹⁹ Alfred Adler points out the variety of vicissitudes to which we are standardly subject, and which cause our natural striving for growth to be in various ways stunted and inhibited. This view is confirmed by neurophysiological studies, as Daniel Goleman claims:

Le Doux turns to the role of the amygdala in childhood to support what has long been a basic tenet of psychoanalytic thought: that the interactions of life's earliest years lay down a set of emotional lessons based on the attainments and upsets in the contacts between infants and caretakers. These emotional lessons are so potent and yet so difficult to understand from the vantage point of adult life because, believes Le Doux, they are stored in the amygdala as rough, wordless blueprints for emotional life.²⁰

Add to this the fact that these attainments and interactions are all too frequently negative and damaging, leading to fear and anger as forms of 'blueprints' (see further Chapter 8), and you have Nietzsche's 'impaired' status of human beings. If the views of Nietzsche and post-Nietzscheans on human nature are correct, it is vital that we form a conception of virtue that is appropriate for what Nietzsche has called 'the convalescent'. Such a conception is open, indeterminate. There are two broad possibilities. We could lower our sights, tempering the extent of our benevolence, caring, perseverance, or courage, and call these virtues. Or we could directly emulate and cultivate the virtues of the strong, 'being virtuous beyond our strength', and call that virtue. This, however, is a risky manoeuvre, possibly resulting not just in harm to the agent but in, for example, damaging, misguided altruism, which is based more on resentment than on genuine love for fellow human beings (see further Chapter 6). Or it may result in apparently strong, ruthless leaders, who

¹⁸ Ibid. 3rd Essay, sect. 14, p. 100.

¹⁹ Trans. Walter Bevan Wolfe (London: Allen & Unwin, 1932).

²⁰ Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 22.

are convinced that they are doing good, but are really motivated by greed or power needs reflecting a weak psyche.

Whether or not less than ideal virtue reaches the threshold for virtue is a matter of judgement, involving assessments about the degree to which the exercise of such putative virtue meets the demands of the world in its various forms. Since the demands of the world which it is the point of the virtues to acknowledge include not just the demands of the agent (to e.g. realize herself), and insofar as some pessimism about the capacities of agents to attain full strength and health is warranted, I am led to reject a strong version of 'an ethics of self-realization'. According to Karen Horney, we should espouse what she calls a 'morality of evolution', 'in which the criterion of what we cultivate or reject in ourselves lies in the question: is a particular attitude or drive inductive or obstructive to my human growth?'²¹ The combination of a suitably pessimistic view about the possibilities for full health, and the fact that personal growth is but one value which makes demands on us, leads me to adopt a conception of virtue which is constrained by views on human health and growth, but virtues are not actually defined as 'dispositions conducive to personal growth'.

My warnings against strong versions of a connection between virtue and health allow me to escape the following objection of Gary Watson: our conception of morality resists the analogy with health, the reduction of evil to defect.²²

My view avoids this rather familiar objection to virtue ethics. A virtue, as a good quality of character in a human, is a disposition to acknowledge the 'demands of the world' in ways suitably constrained by human nature. However, this constraint is not to reduce virtue to health. The constraint entails only that, although there are many possible ways of meeting the demands of the world, some of these ways are not excellences in humans.

In summary, the Constraint on Virtue allows for a connection between morality and the flourishing of the individual agent, and thereby a closing of the putative gap between so-called prudential and moral components of the good life. However I have claimed that the connection is not tight for two basic reasons. As I shall argue in the next chapter,

²¹ *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 15.

²² See Gary Watson, 'On the Primacy of Character', in D. Flanagan and A. O. Rorty (eds.), *Identity, Character, and Morality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 449–83, at 462.

the constraint does not entail eudaimonism (the view that all virtues—barring ill luck—benefit their possessors). Secondly in imperfect worlds, the standards for virtue should not be set by the fully strong, healthy, flourishing individual, though according to the constraint, they are influenced by their qualities.

The Constraint on Virtue is implicated in another aspect of a lessening of the contrast between 'self-interest' and morality, namely a certain virtue-ethical conception of the place of the 'subjective' and 'self-interest' in the objective requirements of morality. Through the concepts of objectivity, impartiality, and demandingness or stringency, morality is conceived as an enterprise in which we to an extent transcend the lower, base, or 'juvenile' aspects of our nature in responding to the demands of the world. The idea of virtue is friendly to the possibility of personal satisfaction in the moral life because the notions of objectivity and stringency are understood through the idea of human virtue rather than through abstract idealizations inimical to human nature. On my view, explicated in Part III, objectivity and demandingness or stringency should be virtue-centred notions, and in this way the ideas of appropriate personal satisfaction and moral meritousness are integrated through what I have called the 'shape' of the virtues. If the shape of a virtue is too demanding, because, for example, the requirements of objectivity are set at too transcendent a level, success in integrating the moral meritousness of a life and the personal satisfaction of that life will be elusive. The more transcendent is the shape of a virtue the more disconnected will be the moral life and the good life. It will be my purpose in Part III to bring together the ideas of the moral and good life through a suitable conception of the shape of a virtue, and a virtue-centred conception of objectivity and demandingness.

We turn now to the final way in which virtue closes the gap between the components of the good life, via a connection between virtue and the flourishing of the agent. This has to do with the nature of virtue itself as an excellence of *character* in which the agent's affective, motivational, and rational dispositions are all in good order. Only if one's character conforms to standards of moral merit will personal satisfaction and flourishing coincide with moral merit. For only if such coincidence flows from character will one's inclinations, emotions, and reasons meet moral standards as a matter of disposition. Mere knowledge of moral demands does not motivate in a frictionless way unless desire to respond to them is built into the fabric of one's emotional disposition. This feature is also necessary for the good life as a social being. For rules (with sanctions)

alone do not make for a good society. Not only do rules have to be made and interpreted by agents, but where there is no desire to obey them appropriately as a matter of disposition, socially necessary rules will too often be circumvented, interpreted in self-serving ways, interpreted inhumanely or excessively rigidly, or interpreted loosely in ways that display weakness and cowardice. The social importance of the 'inner' life of virtue is expressed powerfully by C. S. Lewis:

What is the good of telling . . . ships how to steer so as to avoid collisions if, in fact, they are such crazy old tubs that they cannot be steered at all? What is the good of drawing up, on paper, rules for social behaviour, if we know that, in fact, our greed, cowardice, ill temper, and self-conceit are going to prevent us from keeping them? I do not mean for a moment that we ought not to think, and think hard, about improvements in our social and economic system. What I do mean is that all that thinking will be mere moonshine unless we realize that nothing but the courage and unselfishness of individuals is ever going to make any system work properly. It is easy enough to remove the particular kinds of graft or bullying that go on under the present system: but as long as men are twisters or bullies they will find some new way of carrying on the old game under the new system. You cannot make men good by law: and without good men you cannot have a good society. That is why we must go on to think . . . of morality inside the individual.²³

Lewis focuses on the integrative function of virtue in the good life: on virtue as a property of human beings in which their 'inner' lives are in order, and in harmony with and expressed by, their 'outer' actions.

Understanding the distinction between the harmony of virtue and the relative disharmony of self-control, and understanding the relationship between these distinctions and the fully excellent and moral life, are not without problems. Two issues deserve (and have received) attention. First, the facts that a virtuous agent's *choices* are in line with virtue, and that such an agent finds non-virtuous choices repugnant or distasteful, does not entail that she necessarily exercises those choices gladly and with pleasure, and ought to do so. There are two kinds of difficult cases. Some virtuous actions are (and ought to be) unpleasant for virtuous agents. Such cases are the bearing of very painful news to friends and relatives.²⁴ And Aristotle himself speaks of a virtuous agent's sacrificing himself

²³ *Mere Christianity* (London: Fontana, 1955), 68–9.

²⁴ Karen Stohr's example in 'Harmony, Continnence, and Virtuous Agency', unpublished paper read to the American Philosophical Association (Pacific Division), Albuquerque, N. Mex., April 2000.

courageously as something not done with enjoyment.²⁵ Another kind of case is discussed by Hursthouse.²⁶ A virtuous agent, being a human being, is often overcome, quite properly, with strong emotions such as grief, and may be in straitened circumstances. Such emotions and circumstances may impede the performance of virtuous actions. Of course, it is controversial just what virtue requires in these kinds of case. Poverty should not tempt a virtuous agent to steal for the sake of possessing designer clothes; but temptation to steal in these circumstances for the sake of feeding one's severely malnourished children is another matter.

To emphasize the harmony of outer and inner in the life of virtue is not therefore to say that the moral life is always easy for the virtuous agent. Furthermore, even in normal circumstances, the attainment of emotion so that it is, as a matter of disposition, appropriately responsive to the complexities of the situation is not easy. Though the work of Rosalind Hursthouse, Nancy Sherman, Michael Stocker, Robert Solomon, and others has eloquently advocated the return of the emotions to centre stage in ethics, and deplored the suspicion with which emotion has been treated, virtue ethics is suspicious of *inappropriate* emotion. As Goleman claims:

Our passions, when well exercised, have wisdom; they guide our thinking, our values, our survival. But they can easily go awry, and do so all too often. As Aristotle saw, the problem is not with emotionality, but with the appropriateness of emotion and its expression. The question is, how can we bring intelligence to our emotions—and civility to our streets and caring to our communal life?²⁷

And as Aristotle says:

Anyone can become angry—that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way—this is not easy.²⁸

(iii) Virtue and the 'Demands of the World'

We turn now to the second main way in which virtue integrates the two major components of the good life. I wish to show how a virtue-centred

conception of morality renders problematic certain narrow conceptions of 'morality' which tend to drive the concepts of the good life and the moral life apart. Since the distinction between the moral and the non-moral, the distinction between moral and personal goods, and the distinction between the prudential and the moral are not well suited to virtue ethics, it is difficult to find non-tendentious language to express this argument. I shall argue for the 'pervasiveness of the moral' in a virtue-ethical sense, through the following claims.

- (i) Virtue is pervasive in the sense that character is expressed in the warp and woof of daily life, and such expression should be seen as important.
- (ii) To the reply that *moral* virtue is not pervasive, I argue that a distinction between a narrow set of 'moral' virtues (the cardinal virtues) and other so-called 'non-moral' virtues such as tact and charm is arbitrary.
- (iii) Even those virtues seen as paradigmatically moral have a complex profile, constituted not merely by modes of moral response acknowledged in the dominant consequentialist and deontological traditions (namely, respectively, promotion of value, and respect for individuals in virtue of status). Their profile is also constituted by receptivity, appreciation, love, and creativity—forms of moral acknowledgement which, though clearly not merely in the domain of personal goods and the prudential, are not always recognized as clearly 'moral' either.

Given (i), (ii), and (iii), virtue (and vice) seep into every nook and cranny of life. Let me now consider my first claim—that character is pervasive and important. For a virtue ethicist, ethics is quotidian in two ways.

- First, morality is not just about one central feature of human life—justice and the regulation of conflict.²⁹ The 'warp and woof' of life in its various facets—the expression of culture or heritage, central activities such as bringing up children, work, or leisure—are part of the stuff of morality. Second, morality is quotidian in the sense that character is expressed in,

²⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1117b10.

²⁶ 'Virtue Ethics and the Emotions'.

²⁷ *Emotional Intelligence*, p. xiv.

²⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics*, cited by Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, p. ix.

²⁹ See e.g. David Wong, for whom morality is a system of rules whose rationale is to resolve 'internal conflicts of requirements ... that affect others and ... interpersonal conflicts of interests in general': *Moral Relativity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 1.

and either enhances or blights, all those activities. Let me illustrate these claims with an example.

One may imagine that nothing can be further removed from the heady, not to mention heavy domain of 'morality' than the world of 'talk sport' radio in a far-flung Pacific nation. Perhaps some moral rules apply: don't be racist or sexist, don't blaspheme, don't be obscene. (The last two in mild incarnations are not taken very seriously in all countries like the author's.) But my example does not bear on any of these traditional 'moral rules'. Here is the case. It applies to New Zealand, a tiny country of little more than three and a half million people, where sport is almost a religion, and for a great number of people substitutes for culture and for what Heidegger calls 'heritage'. Sport gives many New Zealanders a vicarious sense of importance through national success. Talk sport radio is very popular. Especially during the period before and after the rugby football World Cup, 1999, callers often vented their spleen against Auckland, New Zealand's largest city (now four contiguous cities), containing one-third of New Zealand's population. Callers denigrated Auckland players and attitudes, claimed that X, Y, and Z not from Auckland should replace Aucklanders in national sports teams, and demanded that the Auckland-based national rugby coach should be replaced. What is the relevance of this for a virtue-ethical conception of morality? One may argue that these callers were exhibiting resentment as a vice, which in this case manifested itself in hostility towards a (relatively) large and rich city. Such a vice blights a wide range of activities. In the area illustrated, Aucklanders who would otherwise enjoy talk sport radio turned off their radios in irritation, and resentment-filled individuals have booed Auckland players playing in national sides, whom they thought should be replaced by locals.³⁰ But resentment-filled, angry individuals may manifest this vice in more serious forms: in racism, abuse against children and women, murder, and genocide.

Let us now consider my second claim—the arbitrariness of a narrow understanding of *moral* virtue. Even if it is agreed that character is expressed in a wide range of activities constituting the good (or not so good) life, many of these traits are thought not to be *moral* virtues. There is a tendency to fixate on the 'cardinal' virtues as truly moral virtues,

whereas other virtues, though important for the good life, have nothing to do with morality. This would not be so serious if a tendency to identify the 'moral' with the important or the overriding did not also exist. This tendency downplays the significance of those virtues relegated to the 'non-moral', for example, the quotidian, the 'merely' practical, or those such as solid self-confidence which are thought to be relevant to psychological health rather than 'morality'.

My view that moral virtues are legion (and not just limited to so-called 'cardinal' virtues) is disputed not just by dominant neo-Kantian traditions in contemporary American moral philosophy, but also by some sympathetic to virtue ethics. For example, Julia Annas takes Aristotle to task for failing to make a sharp distinction between the 'moral' and 'non-moral' virtues, citing magnificence and tact as non-moral virtues which Aristotle wrongly places in the category of the moral.³¹ Arguing against Aristotle's view that magnificence is a (moral) virtue because it aims at the fine (*kalon*) rather than at mere display of wealth, Annas makes two points. Magnificence is not a moral virtue because it is limited to the rich, and the corresponding failures are mere lapses of taste involving issues of rather trivial convention rather than morality. I disagree with both of these claims. First, not all moral virtue need be universal. Certain virtues may be relative to role (e.g. that of parent, business executive, doctor), to circumstance, and even to abilities. (As I shall claim below, certain creative virtues may not be virtues in the totally talentless.) The fact that Aristotle considered magnificence to be a (moral) virtue showed that he had a substantive moral position with respect to one aspect of a very important field, namely, the spending of money. He believed that with respect to this one field the nature of virtue is relative to amount of disposable income: to be merely thrifty and just when one has large resources is to fail to be virtuous. Individuals with large resources are required to display their resources in splendid ways. Whether or not we agree with this position, it is clear that we are not talking of *conventions*: we have here a substantive ethical position concerning splendour and magnificence that Aristotle appears to share with Hume. The point can also be applied to civic and corporate spending—issues of considerable importance by comparison to mere matters of taste. If a corporation in a tiny country

³¹ See 'Aristotle and Kant on Morality and Practical Reasoning', in Stephen Engstrom and Jennifer Whiting (eds.), *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stars: Rethinking Happiness and Duty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 237–58.

³⁰ Here is another everyday example. It may be said that choosing an apple or a pear for lunch is paradigmatically a 'non-moral' choice. But either choice may be temperate (and thereby virtuous) when the agent could have eaten three doughnuts instead.

builds a tower in its largest city, a tower heralded as the tallest in the southern hemisphere, do we praise the corporation for its magnificence, or do we accuse it of a puerile grandiosity borne of the psychological failings of its managers? When a city spends lavishly on an annual fireworks display, not celebratory of any national day, justice may feature as part of the analysis of the morality of that expenditure, but even where there is poverty in the city, we may justify the expenditure in terms directly connected with the display of magnificence. We may say that the magnificence is expressive of a city's vibrancy, its delight in having its citizens come together to witness an event of splendour, its celebration of being situated alongside a magnificent harbour where the display takes place. None of these magnificence-connected justifications is exhausted by issues pertaining to 'cardinal' virtues of justice or temperance.

Annas believes also that Aristotle's conversational virtues such as tact are not moral. On my view tact is an important virtue relating to daily interactions. The issues of when tact becomes a dialogical vice of failure to disclose, or of when frank disclosure shades into a vice of absence of tact, are subtle and important (see further Chapter 12). Why are issues of tact not seen as moral? Lack of tact can hurt, harm relationships, destroy diplomacy, be expressive of hostility. 'Excessive' tact can be expressive of cowardice, but need not be. It too harms relationships through a failure to confront problems, to disclose concerns, to communicate. If anything is part of the domain of the moral, it is the quality of relationships.

In answer to those who cannot contemplate the idea that wit is a moral virtue,³² let me content myself simply with a quote from Aristotle showing the importance of (proper) wit in conversation and the good life, and the avoidance of correlative vice:

32. In his 'Interpersonal Virtues: Whose Interests do they Serve?', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 71 (1997), 31–60, J. L. A. Garcia asks, rhetorically, 'why should anyone today count charm or wit—let alone being "great-souled"—as a moral virtue?' (39). Well, I do (provided charm and wit are understood as 'proper' charm and wit): Garcia's point is much too dismissive. It is odd that Garcia holds such a view, since he regards virtues as features of character involving responses to value. The quote from Aristotle in the text immediately below pinpoints the value of (proper) wit in conversation (and the value of conversation in a good life). Maybe Garcia thinks that wit cannot be a character trait. But wit, too, involves a disposition of choice 'in a mean': a disposition to avoid showing off, vulgarly, sourness. Maybe some people cannot cultivate wit, and for this reason (proper) wit can't be a virtue. But just as some excellences of character are relative to circumstances which may be beyond one's control, so some may be relative to ability. Not all moral virtues need be universal. At any rate, even if one's capacity for wit is slight, it is an achievement to avoid correlative vices of mocking banter, cynical cleverness, and so on, especially when one's own culture is steeped in such vice.

Since one part of life is relaxation, and one aspect of this is entertaining conversation, it is considered that here too there is a kind of social conduct that is in good taste; that there are things that it is right to say, and a right way of saying them; and similarly with listening. And it will be an advantage if those in whose presence we talk and to whom we listen accept such standards. Clearly in this field too it is possible to exceed or fall short of the mean.

Those who go too far in being funny are regarded as buffoons and vulgar persons who exert themselves to be funny at all costs and who are more set upon raising a laugh than upon decency of expression and consideration for their victim's feelings. Those who both refuse to say anything funny themselves and take exception to the jokes of other people are regarded as boorish and sour; but those who exercise their humour with good taste are called witty, as one might say 'nimble-witted'.³³

The moral domain of virtue ethics is particularly rich, detailed, and broad-ranging, and attention to this richness contributes also to a recognition of the artificiality of the moral/non-moral distinction in much contemporary ethics. This detail and broad range is reflected in the subtle vocabulary of virtues (and vices). However, that vocabulary is not the standard fare of philosophical ethics: for that, one needs to turn to psychologists and novelists. For example, in 'What We Know about Leadership', Robert Hogan, Gordon J. Murphy, and Joyce Hogan use a large array of virtue and vice terms in evaluating leadership and leadership potential.³⁴ 'Surgency' includes readiness to make decisions, activity and energy, extraversion, sociability; 'conscientiousness' includes responsibility, industriousness, initiative, honesty; 'agreeableness' includes concern for social appropriateness, sensitivity to social cues, ability to control expressive behaviour, warmth, friendliness; 'emotional stability' includes resistance to stress, tolerance of uncertainty, self-confidence, independence, and ability to adjust. A similar array of vices of leaders is also discussed, including arrogance, hostility, boastfulness, passive aggressiveness, and dictatoriousness. Not only are virtue and vice terms rich, but their nuances and areas of applicability may vary according to different roles, all of which are important in the moral and good life. Leadership is but one facet of the good and moral life, yet an extremely rich virtue and vice vocabulary reveals its anatomy. Virtue ethics not only reveals the multifacetedness of our lives, but evaluates it

33. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1127b27–1128a11.

34. *American Psychologist* 49 (1994), 493–504.

richly. For example, Hogan and his co-authors note the importance of leadership to the good and moral life: 'reactions to inept leadership include turnover, insubordination, industrial sabotage, and malingering'.³⁵ They may also have mentioned the bad effects of the stress that is brought home at night. And 'organizational climate studies from the mid-1950s to the present routinely show that 60% to 75% of the employees in any organization . . . report that the worst or most stressful aspect of their job is their immediate supervisor'.

An objection to a broad conception of morality is that such a conception would undermine the status of morality as important. To say that morality is important is not, however, to say that each action that is to be evaluated morally is important. The failure to return a small favour is squarely within the domain of the moral, but is not itself of great moral significance. Secondly, habits or patterns of small failures may be considerably important.³⁶ Regular failures of tact, ignoring of favours and good turns, resentful dealings with individuals of certain types, habitual unhelpfulness, are all important in a failure to lead a moral life.

Another objection is that some of the virtues recognized above, and others recognized by Hume (such as charm), do not involve choice of the good or fine, but are mere 'personality' traits. However, traits such as charm, tact, 'surgency', and cheerfulness can involve choice and be cultivated as virtues. Charm, for example, can be aimed at the good and the fine, or misaimed at the evil or sleazy, quite deliberately. It can be misemployed to seduce, and can disguise lack of talent in the acquiring of jobs. On the other hand, it can be employed to make difficult and taxing social occasions pleasant and even delightful. A person who makes efforts (and succeeds) in being charming in these situations is to be admired, as opposed to one who is surly or withdrawn, leaving others to make the effort. Robert Audi claims that 'charming personality can go hand in hand with execrable character'.³⁷ This is true. But this does not show (as Audi thinks) that there is an interesting philosophical distinction between a narrow set of 'moral' character traits and a broad set of personality traits. A charming person of execrable character possesses charm as a vice, and has an execrable personality.

³⁵ Ibid. 494.

³⁶ See Marcia Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995).

³⁷ *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character*, 160.

The same applies to cheerfulness, a 'personality' trait. Like charm, cheerfulness can lapse into vice—cheerfulness may be a front disguising problems that need to be confronted, or may persistently disguise sadness that needs at times to be expressed. The recognition of (proper) cheerfulness as a virtue underscores the artificiality of thinking that optimism and pessimism for example are 'mere' personality traits rather than virtues or vices. Excessive pessimism is a vice insofar as, in a myriad of small ways, the agent chooses to behave (and reinforces emotions) in ways that are inappropriately negative and cheerless, complains excessively, sees the glass as half empty rather than half full, and so forth. Excessive optimism is a vice insofar as the agent, through his choices or lack of effort, persistently fails to recognize difficulties or bad consequences of certain actions, calls people who understand these things 'negative', is too ready to embark on grand but costly schemes. The idea that these traits are not vices suggests that the agent is in no sense to be blamed for failures to ameliorate or attempt to ameliorate these tendencies, or is in no sense to take responsibility for inappropriate behaviour associated with them.

We turn now to the third aspect of the pervasiveness of the moral in my pluralistic virtue ethics. As we have seen, my virtue ethics recognizes a *wide range* of what I have called the fundamental *modes* of moral acknowledgements of items (whether things, activities, emotions, or feelings) within a virtue's sphere of concern (its field). These modes are forms of responsiveness to the different types of morally salient features of the world (which I have called *bases* of moral acknowledgement). Because of the wide range of modes of moral acknowledgement or responsiveness recognized by the various virtues, a morality in which *virtue* is central has more of a chance of integrating moral meritoriousness and personal satisfaction than does a narrower conception of morality, such as a conception according to which morality is merely concerned with the *claims* of others.

For example, creativity is squarely within the domain of the moral, being essential for the realization of Kant's obligatory end of self-perfection. And other 'values' which John Kekes has labelled non-moral are also important for this Kantian end—appreciation of beauty, playfulness, career plans, adventure.³⁸ Others, such as friendship, Hume's charm, affability, or Aristotle's conversational virtues, are essential or at

³⁸ Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism*, 11.

least significant for sociability—an important aspect of morality. Virtues focused on other people may be concerned with property relations, with relationships in general, with collegiality, with conversational interaction. All these virtues (and their corresponding vices) recognize our nature as social beings and may include anything from the virtue of justice to the vice of buffoonery. In regard to the field of art works or cultural icons, we may focus on creative or appreciative activity or (relatedly) that of preservation and public display. Virtues applicable to those activities recognize our nature as creative and cultural beings, and our need for a 'heritage'. Finally, as Susan Moller-Okin has recently emphasized, the morally essential task of raising happy, healthy children of good character throws into the spotlight family and parental virtues;³⁹ and Michael Stocker has recently drawn our attention to the moral significance of work and the work place, which highlights not just virtues of leadership, but virtues of collegiality.⁴⁰

If one sees the moral domain through the prism of virtue, one will see it as a rich kaleidoscope, complex and multifaceted. One is less likely to ignore important features of our nature which yield rich sets of virtues: one is less likely to consign these features and those virtues to the lesser domain of the 'non-moral'. On my view, then, the moral swallows up an enormous amount of what has traditionally (in modern ethics) been consigned to the non-moral.

³⁹ See *Justice, Gender and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), and 'Feminism, Moral Development, and the Virtues', in Roger Crisp (ed.), *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 211–29.

⁴⁰ *Valuing Emotions*.

4

What Makes a Character Trait a Virtue

(i) The Nature of Eudaimonism

The Constraint on Virtue, discussed in the previous chapter, implies that a correct conception of virtue is constrained by a conception of flourishing. But it does not in itself yield a view of what makes a trait of character a virtue. In modern virtue ethics, which is largely inspired by Aristotle, the dominant account of what makes a trait a virtue is eudaimonism. In this chapter, I first define eudaimonism before defending it against a criticism. Nonetheless, I reject the view, instead favouring a pluralistic account of virtue status which is given in the final section.

In the words of Rosalind Hursthouse eudaimonism is the view that:

A virtue is a character trait that a human being needs for *eudaimonia*, to flourish or live well.¹

This view comprises two theses. The first is:

It is a necessary condition of her flourishing that a human being possess and exercise at least the core virtues (assuming that not all virtues (even for Aristotle) are universal, for some are relative to circumstances).

The above thesis is not at issue in this chapter. What is at issue is the second thesis: a eudaimonist thesis of virtue status, which I call (E).

(E) It is a necessary condition of a trait being a virtue that it characteristically (partially) constitute (or contribute to) the flourishing of the possessor of the virtue.

¹ *On Virtue Ethics*, 167.