VIRTUE ETHICS AND PROFESSIONAL ROLES

JUSTIN OAKLEY

Monash University

DEAN COCKING

Charles Sturt University

Contents

The nature of virtue ethics[1]

The current renewal of philosophical interest in the virtues is one of the most noteworthy developments in contemporary ethical theory. The first signs of this revival appeared in 1958, when Elizabeth Anscombe called for the restoration of Aristotelian notions of goodness, character, and virtue as central concerns of moral philosophy.[2] While initial reactions to Anscombe's call were modest, interest in the virtues gathered momentum during the 1980s, largely because of the work of philosophers such as Philippa Foot, Bernard Williams, and Alasdair MacIntyre. The philosophical literature on the virtues is now vast, and there is a great variety of different views which advertise themselves as forms of virtue ethics.[3] Many of those who hold such views argue that virtue ethics can lay serious claim to rival Kantianism and utilitarianism as comprehensive normative ethical theories. But what exactly is virtue ethics? What are the central claims which the variants of virtue ethics

---

[1] Earlier versions of this chapter were read at the 'Consequentialism, Kantianism, and Virtue Ethics' conference at Monash University, at an Ethox seminar at Oxford University, at Kyoto University, and at a seminar in Tokyo organised by the utilitarian studies research group in Japan. We would like to thank those audiences for useful discussion on those occasions. We are especially grateful to John Campbell, John Cottingham, Brad Hooker, Per Sandberg, and Christine Swanton, for their very helpful comments on previous versions, and to Kazunobu Narita for his detailed critique of a late draft of this chapter.

[2] G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33, 1958.

[3] A comprehensive bibliography of material on virtue ethics can be found in Robert B. Kruschwitz and Robert C. Roberts, *The Virtues: Contemporary Essays on Moral Character*, Belmont, Wadsworth, 1987. For good recent collections of papers on virtue ethics, see Roger Crisp (ed.), *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996; Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (eds.), *Virtue Ethics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997; Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, and Howard K. Wettstein (eds.), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, Volume 13: Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue*, Notre Dame, Notre Dame University Press, 1988; and Daniel Statman, *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1997. See also the survey articles on virtue ethics by Gregory E. Pence, 'Recent Work on the Virtues', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21, 1984; and Gregory Trianosky, 'What is Virtue Ethics all About?', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 27, 1990. Pence summarises and compares certain key texts in the recent history of virtue ethics, while Trianosky offers a more systematic guide to the different forms of virtue ethics, in terms of a range of common targets which unite various writers in the field.

share, and how is virtue theory distinct from other, more familiar ethical theories?

There is a somewhat bewildering diversity of claims made by philosophers in the name of virtue ethics. Many of those claims are put in negative form, and are expressed in terms of an opposition to an 'ethics of principles', or to an 'impartialist ethics', or to 'abstract ethical theory', or simply to an 'ethics of action'. Unfortunately, this negative emphasis has resulted in virtue ethics becoming better known to many by what it is *against*, rather than by what it is *for*. Of course, given that the revival of virtue ethics has been sparked by dissatisfaction with standard Kantian and utilitarian ethical theories, it is not surprising that those negative claims have gained prominence. However, to focus only on those claims in an outline of virtue ethics and its variants would be inadequate, for this would not sufficiently distinguish it from other approaches – such as an ethics of care, and various forms of feminist ethics – which are also often advanced in terms of a rejection of similar features of orthodox ethical theories. While virtue ethics does share certain common targets with these and other ethical theories, it can be more clearly distinguished from them by its positive features.

When virtue ethicists *do* enunciate their positive claims, however, there is often a lack of clarity and specificity which does not help in fixing the theory's distinctive content. Thus, when virtue ethicists suggest how the theory can overcome many of the perceived vices of Kantianism and utilitarianism, there is often a failure to articulate virtue theory in ways which make clear how or why its features cannot simply be appropriated by more sophisticated or ecumenical forms of these more familiar ethical theories. For example, many regard virtue ethics' emphasis on an agent's character in justifying right actions as a feature which distinguishes virtue ethics from other ethical theories. However, while the virtue ethics movement has helped bring considerations of character to the fore in contemporary ethics, it is not alone in emphasising the important connections between right action and an agent's character. For recent influential versions of Kantianism and consequentialism have also moved towards endorsing the idea that the morally good person would have a certain sort of character.[4] So, while many writers on virtue ethics assume that arguments for the importance of character necessarily lend support to a

---

[4] See, for example, Barbara Herman, 'The Practice of Moral Judgment', and other essays in her *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993; and Peter Railton, 'Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality', in Samuel Scheffler (ed.), *Consequentialism and its Critics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988.

virtues-based approach to ethics, the moves by contemporary Kantians and consequentialists to recognise the importance of character in evaluating actions indicate that this broad assumption is unjustified. What virtue ethicists need to show, in addition to the importance of character, is what makes a *virtue ethics* form of character-based ethics distinctive, and why such an approach is to be preferred to character-based forms of Kantianism and consequentialism. Thus, in order to show how virtue ethics resists assimilation to a form of Kantianism or utilitarianism, one needs to bring out which features of virtue ethics could not consistently be endorsed by someone who holds one of those theories.

In this chapter we set out the basic features of virtue ethics, by presenting a systematic account of its main positive claims, and by showing how these claims help to distinguish it from other approaches. We also develop certain aspects of this basic virtue ethics approach, introducing the concept of a 'regulative ideal', and demonstrating how this concept helps to clarify and strengthen virtue ethics. At the end of the chapter, we consider several criticisms of virtue ethics which are commonly made by philosophers, and we discuss how virtue ethics might be defended against these criticisms.

I THE ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF VIRTUE ETHICS

There are at least *six* claims which seem to be essential features of *any* virtue ethics view. The first and perhaps best-known claim, which is central to any form of virtue ethics, is the following:

(a) An action is right if and only if it is what an agent with a virtuous character would do in the circumstances.

This is a claim about the primacy of *character* in the justification of right action. A right action is one that is in accordance with what a virtuous person would do in the circumstances, and what *makes* the action right is that it is what a person with a virtuous character would do here.[5] Thus, as Philippa Foot argues, it is right to save another's life, where life is still a good to that person, because this is what someone with the virtue of benevolence would do. A person with the virtue of benevolence would act in this way because benevolence is a virtue which is directed at the good of others, and to have the virtue of benevolence, according to Foot,

---

[5] For an explicit statement of this claim, see, e.g., Rosalind Hursthouse, 'Virtue Theory and Abortion', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20, 1991, p. 225. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II.6.1107a1–2.

is to be disposed to help others in situations where we are likely to be called upon to do so.[6] Similarly, as Rosalind Hursthouse argues, it is right in certain circumstances to reveal an important truth to another, even though this may be hurtful to them, because a person with the virtue of honesty would tell the truth here. For example, if my brother asks me whether his wife is being unfaithful, and I happen to know that she is, I ought to answer him truthfully because this is what a person with the virtue of honesty would do here.[7] Likewise, in regard to justice, Foot argues that I ought to repay you the money I have borrowed, even if you plan to waste it, because repaying the money is what a person with the virtue of justice would do.[8]

Now, as we noted above, the primacy given to character in (a) might also seem to be endorsed by recent influential forms of Kantianism, consequentialism, and utilitarianism, which invoke one of these theories to give content to the notion of a 'virtuous person'. For example, Barbara Herman has argued that the Kantian Categorical Imperative, which provides the standard of rightness for actions, is best understood as a normative disposition in the character of a good agent to rule out certain courses of conduct as impermissible.[9] Similarly, Peter Railton has argued that the consequentialist requirement to maximise agent-neutral value can be understood as a normative disposition in the character of the good agent, and R. M. Hare suggests that the utilitarian requirement to maximise utility can be thought of in the same way.[10] How can (a) help distinguish virtue ethics from these other theories?

Virtue ethics gives primacy to character in the sense that it holds that reference to character is *essential* in a correct account of right and wrong action. However, the examples from Foot and Hursthouse do not bring out fully how virtue ethics envisages (a) operating as a standard for determining the rightness of actions. For (a) might be proposed as providing a purely 'external' criterion of right action, which a person may meet no matter what kinds of motives, dispositions, or character they act from in performing the action the criterion directs them to do. On this interpretation, acting rightly would not require modelling oneself on a virtuous

---

[6] See Philippa Foot, 'Euthanasia', p. 54; and 'Virtues and Vices', p. 4, both in her *Virtues and Vices*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978. Foot sometimes calls this virtue 'benevolence', while at other time she refers to it as 'charity'.

[7] See Hursthouse, 'Virtue Theory and Abortion', pp. 229, 231.

[8] See Foot, 'Euthanasia', pp. 44–5, and 'Virtues and Vices'. See also William Frankena, *Ethics*, 2nd edn, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1973, pp. 63–71.

[9] See Herman 'The Practice of Moral Judgment'.

[10] Railton, 'Alienation'; and R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981.

person or a particular aspect of their character, but would involve just having a good idea of what kinds of acts such a person would perform in various circumstances. In that case, (a) would be analogous to the role in certain ethical theories of an Ideal Observer, whose deliverances may guide one even though one lacks the qualities of such an observer oneself (and indeed, even if there were no 'natural' persons who embodied all the characteristics of an Ideal Observer).[11] Alternatively, the criterion of right action in (a) might be proposed as carrying certain 'internal' requirements, such that a person can act rightly only if they themselves have and act out of the kinds of motives, dispositions, or character-traits that a virtuous agent would have and act out of in the circumstances.

Now, it is clear from (a) that virtue ethics makes character essential to right action at least in the sense that its criterion of rightness contains an essential reference to the character of a hypothetical figure – namely, a virtuous agent. And this feature is already enough to distinguish virtue ethics from forms of act-utilitarianism and act-consequentialism which evaluate an act according to the consequences that it *actually* results in, as Railton's act-consequentialism does. For unlike virtue ethics, these actualist approaches allow us to say what acts are right, with no reference to the character of a hypothetical agent (or, for that matter, to the character of the real agent whose action is being evaluated) at all. For these actualist versions of act-utilitarianism and act-consequentialism hold simply that an act is right if and only if it results in the best consequences.[12]

However, many contemporary utilitarians and consequentialists repudiate actualism in favour of some form of expectabilist approach, where actions are evaluated according to their *likely* consequences, rather than their actual consequences. One widely held expectabilist form of act-consequentialism evaluates an act according to the consequences it is *objectively* likely to result in, and this approach can be interpreted as having a criterion of rightness containing an essential reference to the character of a hypothetical figure.[13] For this form of

[11] See Roderick Firth, 'Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12, 1952. We thank John Campbell for pointing out this similarity between virtue ethics and an Ideal Observer theory.

[12] Railton uses the term 'objective consequentialism' to refer to what many call 'actualism'.

[13] For one account and defence of this approach, see Graham Oddie and Peter Menzies, 'An Objectivist's Guide to Subjectivist Value', *Ethics* 102, no. 3, April 1992. This form of expectabilism is to be distinguished from that form which evaluates an act according to the consequences it is *subjectively* likely to result in. This subjectivist approach holds that the consequences relevant to the act evaluation are those which the agent *believes* are probable consequences of the act (rather than those which are *objectively* probable consequences of the act). For one account and

expectabilism can be presented as evaluating the rightness of an act by
looking at which of its possible consequences a reasonable person in the
agent's position would judge to be likely (whether or not the act does
actually result in those consequences). And so, the essential reference in
virtue ethics' criterion of rightness to the character of a hypothetical
figure might be seen as insufficient to distinguish the approach from this
expectabilist version of consequentialism.

 But in addition to its essential reference to the character of a hypo-
thetical figure, unlike the expectabilist approach described above virtue
ethics' criterion of rightness also contains an essential reference to the
character of *this particular agent* who is performing the act. That is, 'doing
what a virtuous person would do' in (a) is to be understood as requiring
not merely the performance of certain acts, but also acting out of certain
dispositions and (in many cases) motives. So, acting rightly requires our
acting out of the appropriate dispositions and, for many virtues, suitable
motives also. Or better, we cannot meet the criterion of right action in
(a) in a particular case unless we ourselves have and act out of the virtu-
ous disposition appropriate to the circumstances.[14] For example, to act
as a person with the virtue of benevolence would do, I must not only
provide help to another, but I must do so out of a benevolent disposition
and a genuine concern for their welfare. And it should be noted that, as
this also illustrates, while virtue ethics holds that acting out of the appro-
priate dispositions is *necessary* for right action, it does not claim that acting
out of such dispositions is *sufficient* for right action. Not only is a virtuous
agent well disposed (and with many virtues, well motivated) when they
act, but they also perform appropriate actions from those dispositions
(and those motives, where the relevant virtue requires this). (As we

Footnote 13 (*cont.*)
   defence of this subjectivist approach, see Frank Jackson, 'Decision-Theoretic Consequentialism
   and the Nearest and Dearest Objection', *Ethics* 101, no. 3, April 1991. (As Oddie and Menzies
   explain on pp. 515–16, the objectivist version of expectabilism is still distinct from actualism,
   since acts sometimes actually result in consequences which – at the time of the act – are objec-
   tively highly *im*probable.)
      Note that we are talking here about genuinely expectabilist theories, rather than about theo-
   ries which tell us to use the reasonably expected best consequences as a useful heuristic for iden-
   tifying right actions, on the grounds that this provides us with the most reliable 'rule of thumb'
   to determining which of our actions will result in the *actual* best consequences (but it is upon the
   latter which rightness is ultimately based).
[14] In making this claim, we agree with Aristotle, who held that: 'It is not merely the state in accor-
   dance with the right rule, but the state that implies the *presence* of the right rule, that is virtue'
   (*Nicomachean Ethics* vi.13.1144b26–9; see also ii.4.1105a26–33). See John Cooper, *Reason and Human
   Good in Aristotle*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1986, p. 78; and Christine Korsgaard, 'Aristotle on
   Function and Virtue', *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 3, no. 3, 1986, pp. 266–8.

discuss later, virtue ethics recognises that there is a variety of reasons why good dispositions and motives may on occasions lead someone to act wrongly.)

The essential reference in virtue ethics' criterion of rightness to the character of the agent performing the act distinguishes the approach from actualist versions of act-consequentialism and from the expectabilist version of act-consequentialism described above, since these consequentialist theories allow us to say what acts are right without referring to the character of the agent at all.[15] For act-consequentialists hold simply that an act is right if and only if it results in (or can reasonably be expected to result in) the best consequences. They typically add that the best humanly possible character is the one with the best (actual or expected) consequences. But the best humanly possible character *may* be one that will *not* allow the agent in every possible situation to do the act with the best (actual or expected) consequences. Thus, act-consequentialists admit that a person with a virtuous character might not always perform the act with the best (actual or expected) consequences – i.e. may not always do what is right according to act-consequentialism.[16]

Nevertheless, there are forms of utilitarianism, consequentialism, and Kantianism which *do* give the character of the agent performing the act an essential role in the justification of right action, for they hold that right actions must be guided by a certain sort of character, and that such actions are justified because they flow from agents' having the requisite kind of character. For example, Richard Brandt proposes a form of rule-utilitarianism which

orders the acceptable level of aversion to various act-types in accordance with the damage . . . that would likely be done if everyone felt free to indulge in the kind of behaviour in question . . . The worse the effect if everyone felt free, the higher the acceptable level of aversion.[17]

On this view, we cannot say what rightness is without referring to the aversions in the character of the agent. Indeed, some have taken the idea of a character-based utilitarian or Kantian ethics to suggest that these

---

[15] Note that this feature is not sufficient to distinguish the virtue ethics criterion of rightness from that form of expectabilism which relies on what consequences of an act *the agent* believes to be likely, since this approach also contains an essential reference to the character of the agent performing the action. Nevertheless, virtue ethics is distinguishable from this subjectivist form of expectabilism in terms of how virtue ethics grounds the normative conception to govern the character of the good agent, which we discuss below.

[16] We are indebted to Brad Hooker here.

[17] Richard B. Brandt, 'Morality and its Critics', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 26, 1989, p. 95. See also Brad Hooker, 'Rule-Consequentialism', *Mind* 99, 1990.

theories can actually be recast as derivative forms of virtue ethics. For example, Philippa Foot has suggested that we could consider utilitarianism a form of virtue ethics, insofar as it tells us that we ought to act and be motivated as a person with a good utilitarian character would. The character of such a person, as Foot sees it, would be governed by just *one* disposition – the virtue of universal benevolence – and the rightness of their actions would be judged according to whether they conformed with what such a disposition would have them do.[18] Likewise, Barbara Herman suggests that Kant (especially in his later work) tells us to act as a good Kantian agent would, and that such an agent would have and act out of certain emotional and partial dispositions, which are regulated by a commitment to not acting impermissibly.[19]

These forms of utilitarianism and Kantianism indicate that it will clearly not do to talk about virtue ethics as distinctive simply by the primacy it gives to *character* in the determination of right action.[20] One

---

[18] Philippa Foot, 'Utilitarianism and the Virtues', in Scheffler (ed)., *Consequentialism and its Critics*, pp. 224–42.

[19] See Barbara Herman, 'Agency, Attachment, and Difference', and other essays in her *The Practice of Moral Judgment*. See also Kurt Baier, 'Radical Virtue Ethics', in P. French et al. (eds.), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, Volume 13: Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue*; Robert B. Louden, 'Kant's Virtue Ethics', *Philosophy* 61, 1986, esp. pp. 478–9, 484–9; Robert Louden, 'Can we be too Moral?', *Ethics* 98, 1988; Onora O'Neill, 'Consistency in Action', in N. Potter and M. Timmons (eds.), *Morality and Universality*, Dordrecht, Reidel, 1985; and Nancy Sherman, 'The Place of Emotions in Kantian Morality', in Owen Flanagan and Amélie O. Rorty (eds.), *Identity, Character, and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1990. A criticism analogous to that which Foot makes of a utilitarian virtue ethics may also be made of a Kantian virtue ethics, which took conscientiousness (as the disposition to act according to duty) as the only virtue. See N. J. H. Dent, *The Moral Psychology of the Virtues*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 27–31; and James D. Wallace, *Virtues and Vices*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1978, p. 130.

[20] The primacy of character is taken as distinctive of virtue ethics by Frankena, *Ethics*, pp. 63ff.; Pence, 'Recent Work on the Virtues'; Gregory E. Pence, 'Virtue Theory', in Peter Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991; and Gary Watson, 'On the Primacy of Character', in Flanagan and Rorty (eds.), *Identity, Character, and Morality*.

There is an important body of research in social psychology which provides substantial evidence that the variations in behaviour displayed by different individuals in a given context are often better explained by relatively minor situational variations than by the assumptions we commonly make about differences in character-traits. (For a good summary of this research, see Lee Ross and Richard Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1991, esp. chapters 2 and 5.) Some take this as a reason for scepticism about the value or legitimacy of talk of character-traits at all, while others see the research as indicating that whatever character-traits we have are significantly less powerful determinants of our behaviour than is commonly thought. This research has been argued by some to pose particular problems for virtue ethics, given its reliance on the notion of character. However, given the moves by contemporary Kantians, utilitarians, and consequentialists to develop their own forms of character-based ethics, the normative upshot of these research findings may be broader than is usually realised. In any case, the apparent fact that the standing dispositions we take ourselves and others to have are often swayed by relatively trivial situational factors does not mean that we should not *try* to have more robust dispositions, as virtue ethics suggests; and so these research

needs to point to additional features in order to show what is distinctive about virtue ethics as a form of character-based ethics.

One important way of distinguishing virtue ethics from Kantian and utilitarian forms of character-based ethics is by bringing out the differences in how each theory grounds the relevant normative conception which would govern the character of a good agent. These differences should become more apparent as we go on, but let us say something about them here. Kantians claim that the goodness of an agent's character is determined by how well they have internalised the capacity to test the universalisability of their maxims, while utilitarians claim that a person with a good character is one who is disposed to maximise utility. Virtue ethicists, however, reject both Kantian universalisability and the maximisation of utility as the appropriate ground of good character, and instead draw on other factors in substantiating the appropriate normative conceptions of a good agent.

There are broadly speaking two main kinds of approach taken by virtue ethicists in grounding the character of the good agent. The more prominent of these approaches draws on the Aristotelian view that the content of virtuous character is determined by what we need, or what we are, qua *human* beings. Many virtue ethicists develop one particular version of this approach, taking the eudaimonistic view that the virtues are character-traits which we need to live humanly flourishing lives. On this view, character-traits such as benevolence, honesty, and justice are virtues because they feature importantly among an interlocking web of intrinsic goods – which includes courage, integrity, friendship, and knowledge – without which we cannot have *eudaimonia*, or a flourishing life for a human being. Moreover, these traits and activities, when co-ordinated by the governing virtue of *phronesis* (or practical wisdom), are regarded as together partly *constitutive* of *eudaimonia* – that is, the virtues are intrinsically good components of a good human life.[21] Aristotle

findings may not undermine virtue ethics' claim to provide appropriate normative ideals of character (although achieving those ideals might perhaps be significantly more difficult than people usually think). For discussion of the implications of this research for virtue ethics and moral psychology, see John Campbell, 'Can Philosophical Accounts of Altruism Accommodate Experimental Data on Helping Behaviour?', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 77, no. 1, March 1999; John M. Doris, 'Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics', *Nous* 32, no. 4, 1998; John M. Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behaviour*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001; Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1991; and Gilbert Harman, 'Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99, 1998–1999.

[21] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. See also Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, pp. 79–88; and J. L. Ackrill, 'Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*', in Amélie O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980.

thought that humans flourish by living virtuous lives because it is only in doing so that our rational capacity to guide our lives is expressed in an excellent way. Human good is a function of our rational capacity because what counts as good in a species is determined by its characteristic activity, and the exercising of our rational capacity is the characteristic activity of human beings.[22] It is this Aristotelian approach to the grounding of the character of the good agent that we take in this book. On this view, the good is not a passive external consequence of acting virtuously, and so it would be incorrect to say (as utilitarians might) that acting virtuously typically results in our living a good human life; rather, the good is active, and acting virtuously is a constituent part of what a good human life consists in.

Some virtue ethicists develop this general approach by grounding the virtues not so much in the idea of a good human being, but rather in what is good *for* human beings. The best-known exponent of this view is Philippa Foot, who in her early work argued that a feature of the virtues is that they are beneficial to their possessor. Foot thought that this helped explain why courage and temperance count as virtues. However, she later found this rationale unpromising with such common-sense virtues as justice and benevolence; so she broadened her account to derive virtues from what is beneficial to humans either individually or as a community.[23] This brought her closer in some respects to Alasdair MacIntyre, who argues that such qualities as truthfulness, courage, and justice are virtues because they enable us to achieve the goods internal to the characteristically human practices which strengthen traditions and the communities which sustain them.[24]

An alternative version of a broadly Aristotelian approach is put forward by perfectionists, who reject both the eudaimonistic idea that virtuous living is necessary for happiness and the idea that such a life must be overall beneficial to the person living it. Perfectionism derives the virtues from those characteristics which most fully develop our essential properties as human beings. For example, love of knowledge, friendship, and accomplishment count as virtues because these states most fully realise our essential capacities for theoretical and practical rationality. And further, loving these goods would count as virtuous even where a person would lead a happier life, and would benefit more, by not loving

---

[22] This is Aristotle's well-known *ergon* argument, found in *Nicomachean Ethics* I. 7.
[23] See Foot, 'Virtues and Vices', and 'Moral Beliefs', both in her *Virtues and Vices*.
[24] See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd edn, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, esp. chapter 14.

them – say, because his accomplishment can be gained only at the cost of enormous personal hardship.[25] Nevertheless, despite the differences between this and the eudaimonistic development of the Aristotelian approach, the two views agree that to live a life without the virtues would in some sense be to go against our basic nature.

A different kind of approach to grounding virtuous character also rejects the eudaimonistic idea that the virtues are given by what humans need in order to flourish, and instead derives the virtues from our common-sense views about what character-traits we typically find admirable. According to this non-Aristotelian approach, developed principally by Michael Slote, there is a plurality of traits which we commonly find admirable in human beings in certain circumstances, and one way we can determine what these are is by examining our responses to the lives led by various admirable exemplars. Further, when we look at such exemplars, we see that some are quite different from those which would be held up by Kantians and utilitarians. For example, while people like Mother Teresa are undoubtedly thought admirable on account of the benefits they have bestowed on humanity, Slote claims that we may well regard people like Albert Einstein or Samuel Johnson as just as admirable as Mother Teresa, even though Einstein and Johnson were not exactly *benefactors* of mankind.[26] On this view, then, benevolence, honesty, and justice are virtues because, even if they are not necessary for human flourishing, they are nevertheless character-traits which we ordinarily find deeply admirable in human beings.

The differences between these forms of virtue ethics, on the one hand, and character-based forms of Kantianism and utilitarianism, on the other hand, would become apparent in practice in their different ways of handling cases where certain values conflict. Thus, consider a case where the requirements of duty or utility conflict with what a good or admirable friend would do. For example, suppose I console a close friend of mine who is grieving over the irretrievable breakdown of his marriage, and that in consoling him, I stay with him longer than would be required by my duty to him as a friend. A virtue ethicist might regard

[25] See Thomas Hurka, 'Virtue as Loving the Good', in Ellen F. Paul, Fred D. Miller and Jeffrey Paul (eds.), *The Good Life and the Human Good*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, esp. pp. 153–5; Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993; and L. W. Sumner, 'Two Theories of the Good', in Paul et al. (eds.), *The Good Life and the Human Good,* esp. pp. 4–5. See also John McDowell, 'The Role of *Eudaimonia* in Aristotle's Ethics', in Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, esp. pp. 370–1; and Korsgaard, 'Aristotle on Function and Virtue', pp. 277–8.
[26] See Michael Slote, *From Morality to Virtue*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1992; and Michael Slote, *Goods and Virtues*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1983.

my staying longer to console him as right, even if my doing so meant cancelling an appointment with a business associate I had promised to meet for lunch, and also meant that I thereby failed to maximise overall utility. As we explain in our chapter 2 discussion of similar cases, what makes it right to console the friend here is that this is the sort of thing which someone with an appropriate conception of friendship will be disposed to do, rather than that this brings about the best overall consequences, or that this is our duty as a friend. (In chapter 2 we go on to explain that this is not, of course, to suggest that just *any* other significant conflicting values will be justifiably trumped by such reasons of friendship.)

In this book, we base our arguments on the Aristotelian approach to grounding the character of the virtuous agent, and we take the eudaimonistic view that the virtues are character-traits which we need to live humanly flourishing lives. We take this broad approach because it seems to us to provide a more promising rationale for why certain dispositions are to count as virtues than do the rival accounts which we described briefly above. For example, while the dispositions proper to friendship might often be admirable, in our view what makes such dispositions virtues is their inextricable links with our basic nature as creatures who are social and who pursue understanding. Without friendship, our self-development and self-understanding would be stunted in ways alien to our condition as human beings. This view might be interpreted as deriving virtues from what humans as a species *tend* to do, and so might seem to count traits like aggression as virtues, insofar as humans tend to be aggressive. However, the central idea of this Aristotelian approach is the connection that various character-traits have to living a flourishing human life. And so while acts of aggression, or indeed, of nepotism, might be things that humans as a species tend to do, they are not – unlike friendship – tendencies that contribute to the flourishing of human beings. (Of course, as we argue in later chapters, some character-traits which are not virtues in general might nevertheless qualify as virtues in particular contexts – we would allow that character-traits such as aggression might form an important part of the virtues appropriate to, say, certain sporting or business activities.) So, on this approach, there is an interdependent network of intrinsically valuable activities which together are *constitutive* of a well-lived human life. And it is a *conceptual* requirement of the realisation of some of these goods (for example, love and friendship) that agents act out of certain *motives*, while other goods (for example, justice) have no such requirement with regard to motives.

Further, while some goods (for example, justice) are agent-neutral, virtue ethics holds (unlike standard versions of utilitarianism and Kantianism) that the value intrinsic to certain other goods is *agent-relative*. Thus, according to this conception of virtue ethics, what is intrinsically valuable ranges from agent-relative motive-dependent goods such as love and friendship to agent-neutral and motive-independent goods such as justice. Further, as we explain in section 2, virtuous dispositions embody conceptions of excellence or what we call 'regulative ideals', which guide us in our actions, and provide a standard against which our actions can be assessed.

A second claim made by all varieties of virtue ethics is:

(b) Goodness is prior to rightness.

That is, the notion of goodness is primary, while the notion of rightness can be defined only in relation to goodness: no account can be given of what makes an action right until we have established what is valuable or good. In particular, virtue ethics claims that we need an account of *human* good (or of what are commonly regarded as admirable human traits) before we can determine what it is right for us to do in any given situation. In terms of a familiar taxonomy of normative theories, claim (b) makes virtue ethics a *teleological* rather than a *deontological* ethical theory, and so would seem to place virtue ethics in the same family as utilitarianism and standard forms of consequentialism.[27] However, as we explain shortly, there are important differences between virtue ethics' account of the good and those given by most versions of utilitarianism and consequentialism, and in the light of this, it is misleading to group virtue ethics as a theory of the same type as utilitarianism and consequentialism. Indeed, we shall see that virtue ethics has important similarities with non-consequentialist and deontological ethical theories.

Claim (b) is actually implicit in (a) above, but making the claim explicit brings out an important difference between virtue ethics and any form of character-based ethics derived from traditional forms of Kantianism

---

[27] This way of classifying normative theories is increasingly coming under attack as inadequately sensitive to the issues which divide contemporary consequentialists and non-consequentialists. See Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, esp. chapter 10, 'Leaving Deontology Behind'; and Watson, 'On the Primacy of Character', p. 450. John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 24, assumes that all teleological theories must be consequentialist, and indeed, John Broome, in *Weighing Goods* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1991), chapter 1, argues that *all* ethical theories can be regarded as forms of consequentialism. On the other hand, Watson sees the possibility of teleological theories which are not consequentialist. For a good discussion of these issues, see James Dreier, 'Structures of Normative Theories', *The Monist* 76, 1993.

and deontology. For according to these latter theories, rightness is not derived from notions of goodness or accounts of human good, well-being, or virtue. Indeed, the Kantian notions of a morally worthy action or agent are derived from prior deontic notions of rightness and right action – a good Kantian agent, as contemporary Kantians explain, is one who is disposed to act in accordance with certain moral rules or requirements (which themselves are derived from, for example, the nature of practical rationality). By contrast, virtue ethics derives its account of rightness and right action from prior aretaic notions of goodness and good character, which (in Aristotelian virtue ethics) are themselves grounded in an independent account of human flourishing that values our emotional as well as our rational capacities, and recognises that our goodness can be affected for the better or worse by empirical contingencies.

A third claim made by virtue ethics is:

(c) **The virtues are irreducibly plural intrinsic goods.**

The substantive account of the good which forms the foundation for virtue ethics' justification of right action specifies a range of valuable traits and activities as essential for a humanly flourishing life, or as central to our views of admirable human beings. These different virtues embody irreducibly *plural* values – i.e. each of them is valuable in a way which is not reducible to a single overarching value.[28] The virtues themselves are here taken to be valuable *intrinsically* rather than *instrumentally* – i.e. they are valuable for their own sake, rather than as a means to promoting or realising some other value. For example, Aristotle argued that friendship is 'choiceworthy in itself', apart from any advantages it may bestow upon us.[29] The plurality of the virtues distinguishes virtue ethics

---

[28] On the evaluative pluralism of virtue ethics, see Aristotle's criticisms of Plato, in *Nicomachean Ethics* I. 6; Wallace, *Virtues and Vices*, e.g. pp. 27–32; Hursthouse, 'Virtue Theory and Abortion'; and Lawrence Becker, *Reciprocity*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986, e.g. chapter 4. Note that the Aristotelian notion of *eudaimonia* is not itself to be construed in an evaluative monist way. See the discussions of 'inclusivist' versus 'dominant' conceptions of *eudaimonia* in W. F. R. Hardie, 'The Final Good in Aristotle's Ethics', *Philosophy* 40, 1965; Ackrill, 'Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*'; and Cooper, *Reason and Human Good*, pp. 96–9.

[29] See John M. Cooper, 'Aristotle on Friendship', in Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, e.g. p. 338 n. 18. It should be noted that to claim that a virtue is intrinsically good is not yet to claim that it is unconditionally good. For example, that (the dispositions of) friendship is intrinsically good does not entail that friendship is *always* a good, wherever it is instantiated. When combined with intrinsic bads, friendship may no longer be a good, and may even be a bad. For instance, a relationship between two murderous gangsters that is governed by the dispositions and counterfactual conditions characteristic of friendship (rather than a disposition, say, to dispose of the other should he become a nuisance) might not be a good in that context. This raises large issues, which we cannot discuss here.

from older, monistic forms of utilitarianism, which reduce all goods to a single value such as pleasure.[30] Claim (c) would also distinguish virtue ethics from a simple 'utilitarianism of the virtues', which would regard the virtues as good, but only *instrumentally* – i.e. insofar as they produce pleasure.[31]

However, the evaluative pluralism of the virtues in (c) does not distinguish virtue ethics from contemporary preference-utilitarianism, which seems able consistently to recognise a plurality of things which are, at least in one sense, intrinsically valuable. For preference-utilitarianism attributes value to the plural things desired, and can allow that certain things – such as knowledge, autonomy, and accomplishment – have intrinsic value, at least in the sense that we desire to have these things for themselves, rather than for any consequences which having them may bring.[32] On this kind of view, the concept of 'utility' is not a substantive value, but is given a formal analysis in terms of the fulfilment of informed preferences. Thus, as James Griffin puts it,

Since utility is not a substantive value at all, we have to give up the idea that our various particular ends are valuable only because they cause, produce, bring about, are sources of, utility. On the contrary, they [our various particular ends] are the values, utility is not.[33]

Such a view might therefore allow that the virtues are plural, intrinsic values, in the sense that agents attach value to having them for their own sake.

Nevertheless, there is a further claim made by virtue ethics, which helps to distinguish it from any preference-utilitarian approach to the virtues, namely:

(d) **The virtues are objectively good.**

Virtue ethics regards the virtues as objectively good in the sense that they are good independently of any connections which they may have with

---

[30] See, for example, Bentham's hedonistic utilitarianism. But as Michael Stocker points out, in *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 184–93, hedonistic utilitarians need not have been evaluative monists; for pleasure, when properly understood, can itself can be plausibly thought of as plural.

[31] See, e.g., Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edn, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1981, pp. 391–7, 423–57.

[32] See James Griffin, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986, e.g. p. 31: 'It seems to me undeniable that we do value irreducibly different kinds of things . . . The desire account is compatible with a strong form of pluralism about values . . . On the desire account one can allow that when I fully understand what is involved, I may end up valuing many things and valuing them for themselves.' See also R. M. Hare, 'Comments', in D. Seanor and N. Fotion (eds.), *Hare and Critics*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988, pp. 239, 251.

[33] *Well-Being*, p. 32 n. 24. See also p. 89.

desire.[34] What the objective goodness of the virtues means in positive terms depends on the particular rationale given for them. As we saw earlier, one approach bases the goodness of the virtues on the connections they have with essential human characteristics, such as theoretical and practical rationality; another approach derives the goodness of the virtues from admirable character-traits. But neither approach makes the value of any candidate virtue depend on whether the agent desires it (either actually or hypothetically). For example, courageousness would still count as a virtuous trait, even in a person who had no desire to be courageous.[35] Further, the virtues can confer value on *a life*, even if the person living it does not (actually or hypothetically) desire to have them.[36] So, while preference-utilitarians might allow that certain character-traits have intrinsic value in the sense that we may desire to have them for themselves, preference-utilitarians would not allow that the value of the virtues can be independent of desire in these ways.

But while (c) and (d) distinguish virtue ethics from various forms of utilitarianism, they seem to leave open whether virtue ethics is different from those forms of consequentialism which accept the idea of irreducibly plural *intrinsic* and *objective* values. For example, some consequentialists believe that there are at least two irreducibly plural intrinsic and objective values – such as universal benevolence and fairness – while others believe that there is a whole range of such values – such as happiness, knowledge, purposeful activity, autonomy, solidarity, respect, and

---

[34] For this use of 'objective good', see Hurka, *Perfectionism*, p. 5. See also Sumner, 'Two Theories of the Good'.

[35] Could Philippa Foot allow this, given her well-known claim that we cannot have a reason to pursue something unless it is linked appropriately to some desire of ours (see 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives', in *Virtues and Vices*)? It would seem so, for in several places Foot suggests that a virtuous person is a good example of a human being. Foot's view then would be that while a person cannot have a reason to be virtuous unless this serves some desire of theirs, the *goodness* of their being virtuous does not depend on their desires. See 'A Reply to Professor Frankena', in *Virtues and Vices* p. 178: 'propositions of the "good F" "good G" form do not, in general, have a direct connexion with reasons for choice'. See also 'Goodness and Choice', in *Virtues and Vices*, esp. pp. 145–7.

[36] This is not to say that the virtues increase one's *well-being*. There is disagreement amongst virtue ethicists about whether the virtues are good *for me*, or make me 'better off'. As we saw earlier, Philippa Foot claims that virtues generally (i.e. except justice and benevolence) make their possessor better off; however, Michael Slote rejects any such general claim: see *From Morality to Virtue, op. cit.*, p. 209: 'I am ruling out the possibility that a distinctive ethics of virtue would want to reduce the admirable and the idea of a virtue to notions connected with personal good or well-being'. See also pp. 8 and 130.

Some would question whether a person who achieves certain characteristic human excellences could be living a good life if they do not *desire* (either actually or hypothetically) to have those excellences. For it might be claimed that living a good life has an ineliminable *subjective* element. See Gregory W. Trianosky, 'Rightly Ordered Appetites: How to Live Morally and Live Well', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25, 1988.

beauty.[37] What, if anything, is there to distinguish virtue ethics from these forms of consequentialism?

Two further claims are essential to any form of virtue ethics, and these help distinguish virtue ethics from most forms of consequentialism. The first is:

(e) Some intrinsic goods are agent-relative.

Among the variety of goods which virtue ethics regards as constituting a humanly flourishing life, some, such as friendship and integrity, are held to be ineliminably agent-relative, while others, such as justice, are thought more properly characterised as agent-neutral. To describe a certain good as agent-relative is to say that its being a good of *mine* gives it additional moral importance (*to me*), in contrast to agent-neutral goods, which derive no such additional moral importance from their being goods of mine.[38] For example, friendship could be regarded as either an agent-neutral or an agent-relative good. In the former case, it would be friendship per se which is intrinsically valuable, and a pluralistic consequentialist who believed that friendship is an agent-neutral value would tell us to maximise (or at least promote) friendships themselves – say, by setting up a social club. On the agent-relative account of the value of friendship, however, the fact that a certain relationship is *my* friendship would give it more moral relevance to my acts than would be had by, say, the competing claims of your friendships. Virtue ethics sees friendship (and certain other virtues) as valuable in the latter sense – were performing a friendly act towards a friend of mine to conflict with promoting friendships between others (for example, by throwing a party

---

[37] See, e.g., T. M. Scanlon, 'Rights, Goals and Fairness', in Scheffler (ed.), *Consequentialism and its Critics*; Railton, 'Alienation', pp. 108–10; Hurka, 'Virtue as Loving the Good'; Hurka, *Perfectionism*; Thomas Hurka, 'Consequentialism and Content', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 29, 1992, pp. 71–8; the 'Ideal Utilitarianism' of G. E. Moore, in *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1903, chapter 6; and Hastings Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil*, vol. I, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1907, chapters 7 and 8. David McNaughton and Piers Rawling, in 'Agent-Relativity and the Doing–Happening Distinction', *Philosophical Studies* 63, 1991, pp. 168–9, explain well how a consequentialist might be able to allow for plural intrinsic values. See also Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984, p. 26; and David Sosa, 'Consequences of Consequentialism', *Mind* 102, 1993.

Some might question whether the sense of intrinsic 'goodness' that certain pluralistic consequentialists allow such features to have really has much in common with the sense in which virtue ethics regards those features as intrinsically good, as the former are *welfaristic* while the latter are *aretaic*. (We thank one of the readers for noting this.) But if these really do turn out to be two entirely different senses of 'goodness', then this would further distinguish virtue ethics from consequentialist approaches.

[38] By this we do not mean to suggest that agent-relative value must be understood as *aggregative*. In describing the value of a certain trait or activity as 'agent-relative', one may be making a claim about its *qualitative* character.

for new colleagues), I would nevertheless be justified in acting for my friend.[39]

   Claim (e) distinguishes virtue ethics from most forms of consequentialism, whether monistic or pluralistic, since most consequentialists regard all values as agent-neutral.[40] But there seems to be no reason in principle why a consequentialist could not allow that some values are properly characterised as agent-relative. Indeed, some consequentialists do seem to accept that certain values (such as friendship and integrity) are irreducibly agent-relative.[41] However, most of those consequentialists would stop short of endorsing the following claim made by virtue ethics.

(f) Acting rightly does not require that we maximise the good.

The core thesis of most versions of consequentialism is the idea that rightness requires us to maximise the good, whether goodness is monistic or pluralistic, subjective or objective, agent-neutral across the board or agent-relative in some instances.[42] Virtue ethics, by contrast, rejects maximisation as a theory of rightness. Thus, in a case where I can favour *my* friendships over promoting others' friendships, I am not required by virtue ethics to *maximise* my friendships. Neither am I required to have the best friendship(s) which it is possible for me to have.[43] Rather, I ought to have *excellent* friendships, relative to the norms which properly govern such relationships, and an excellent friendship may not be the very best friendship which I am capable of having.[44] Virtue ethicists hold that in

---

[39] See Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values*, pp. 313–14; and Dreier, 'Structures of Normative Theories'.

[40] Indeed, some theorists, such as Samuel Scheffler (in his introduction to *Consequentialism and its Critics*) and Shelly Kagan, in *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989), regard a belief in the agent-neutrality of all value as a *sine qua non* of a consequentialist theory.

[41] See, e.g., Railton, 'Alienation'; and Sosa, 'Consequences of Consequentialism'.

[42] There are *satisficing* versions of consequentialism, which hold that acting rightly does not require us to maximise the good, but to bring about consequences that are *good enough*. See, e.g., Michael Slote, 'Satisficing Consequentialism', Part I, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 58, 1984; and Michael Slote, *Beyond Optimizing: A Study of Rational Choice*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1989. However, consequentialists commonly reject satisficing in favour of maximisation, as they argue that when one can have more of a certain good or less of it, it is irrational to prefer less. See the response to Slote by Philip Pettit, 'Satisficing Consequentialism', Part II, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 58, 1984; and Hurka, *Perfectionism*, pp. 56–7. For a critique of Pettit's arguments here, see Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values*, pp. 325–31. For discussion of satisficing in relation to virtue ethics, see Justin Oakley, 'Varieties of Virtue Ethics', *Ratio* 9, no. 2, September 1996.

[43] On Aristotle as a non-maximiser, see Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values*, pp. 338–42; and Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, pp. 87–8, and chapter 2.

[44] It should be noted that, in setting excellence as the standard of rightness, virtue ethics can allow that different individuals who have a certain type of disposition to varying degrees could still

acting towards my friends I ought to be guided by an appropriate normative conception of what friendship involves (such as the account of character-friendship given by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.9).

Claims (a) to (f) are made by all forms of virtue ethics, and the different varieties of the theory can be distinguished according to which of these claims they emphasise, and their reasons for making these claims. Some philosophers who do not (or at least, not explicitly) call themselves virtue ethicists nevertheless endorse one or more of these claims as part of their criticisms of Kantian, utilitarian, or consequentialist theories.[45] However, taken as a whole, these claims help show how virtue ethics constitutes a distinct alternative to familiar forms of Kantianism, utilitarianism, and consequentialism.

2 THE NOTION OF A 'REGULATIVE IDEAL'

In this section we introduce the notion of a 'regulative ideal', which is central to our arguments in this book. In our view, the best way to conceive of a virtue ethics criterion of right action is in terms of a 'regulative ideal'. To say that an agent has a regulative ideal is to say that they have internalised a certain conception of correctness or excellence, in such a way that they are able to adjust their motivation and conduct so that it conforms – or at least does not conflict – with that standard. So, for instance, a man who has internalised a certain conception of what it is to be a good father can be guided by this conception in his practices as a father, through regulating his motivations and actions towards his children so that they are consistent with his conception of good fathering. A regulative ideal is thus an internalised normative disposition to direct one's actions and alter one's motivation in certain ways. Principles of normative theories, the standards of excellence embodied in the virtues, a conception of friendship, standards of excellence in a musical genre, or principles of grammar in a natural language could all function as regulative ideals in various agents' psychologies.

---

have this disposition to an excellent degree, and so still count as virtuous in that respect. For example, while the disposition to medical beneficence of one's local family doctor might not reach the level of, say, Albert Schweitzer, she might nevertheless have developed her disposition to medical beneficence to an excellent degree, and so she could properly lay claim to having this medical virtue.

[45] See, e.g., Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982; Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1992; Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values*; and Bernard Williams, 'Persons, Character, and Morality', in his *Moral Luck*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

   Regulative ideals may be general in scope, or they may be specific to certain domains. For example, the good consequentialist's life will be guided by a general regulative ideal, as exemplified in their normative disposition to maximise agent-neutral value. However, the activities of a good person may be guided by specific regulative ideals in particular areas. For example, it may be thought part of being a good medical practitioner that one has internalised a conception of what the appropriate ends of medicine are, and one is disposed to treat one's patients in ways which are consistent with those ends. Further, since regulative ideals operate as guiding background conditions on our motivation, they can direct us to act appropriately or rightly, even when we do not consciously formulate them or aim at them. Thus suppose, for instance, that I have learnt some jazz theory and studied various jazz pianists, and have thereby developed a conception of excellence in jazz piano. I can be guided by this conception of jazz excellence when I am ensconced in playing jazz piano, without consciously formulating that conception as I play. Indeed, the absence of any need consciously to formulate such a conception while playing would probably be part of what I would take excellence at jazz piano to be. Similarly, in learning to speak Greek, I learn the principles of Greek grammar, which in the early stages I must explicitly formulate before I can string together a well-formed Greek sentence. But what I want is to shape and condition my linguistic dispositions in such a way that I no longer need to formulate the appropriate grammatical rule each and every time before I speak and respond in Greek. After I have reached that later stage, my speech will still in an important sense be informed and guided by an underlying regulative ideal which is the principles of Greek grammar. For clearly, the fact that I have now reached the stage where I do not need consciously to formulate the principles of Greek grammar before carrying on a conversation in that language is compatible with my speech being regulated by those principles – indeed, this is just what fluency in a second language *is*.[46]

---

[46] Compare this with a case in which I try to learn the underlying conception of performing a certain activity excellently, but then without going any further I jettison it entirely. For example, I may try to learn the underlying ideas of jazz theory, but then, failing to grasp them, I may go on to play excellent jazz. Here my playing jazz would not be informed or regulated by the underlying ideas of jazz theory, and so my playing jazz well may, in an important sense, not be due to *me*.

   There is, of course, the further issue of how to assess actions which are truly ungoverned or uninformed by *any* underlying conception of what an excellent example of that activity involves. Of such people we sometimes say that they are 'a natural' at that kind of activity (think here of certain musicians, writers, chefs, sportspeople, etc.). Critics of virtue ethics sometimes seem to assume that *this* is what Aristotle was telling us to take as a moral exemplar. However (apart from