DANIEL C. RUSSELL

Introduction
Virtue ethics in modern moral philosophy

Virtue ethics has a very long history – longer than any other tradition in moral philosophy – stretching back to the ancient Greek philosophers and, a world away, ancient Chinese philosophers as well. Its central concepts are the excellences of character, such as fairness, courage, and self-control, and it focuses on how such excellences help us live good lives, treat ourselves and others well, and share thriving communities.

What makes virtue ethics different from other approaches in moral philosophy? One way to answer that question would be to point out the distinctive way that it treats the notion of rightness: right action, in virtue ethics, can be understood only with the aid of an account of the virtues, which in turn can be understood independently of right action (see Watson 1990; Hursthouse 1999, chap. 1; D. Russell 2009, chap. 2). The trouble with this answer, though, is that it is so very broad, and there is enormous diversity among virtue ethicists as to how the relation between rightness and virtue might be made more precise (see van Zyl, this volume). More than that, virtue ethicists disagree over how important the notion of "right action" is in the first place (see the chapters by Chappell and Swanton in this volume).

However, even setting all that aside, to think of virtue ethics as giving a different answer to the same questions about rightness addressed by other approaches – utilitarianism and deontology, most notably – would be to understate what is really distinctive about virtue ethics and the radically different alternative it offers. As Matt Zwolinski and David Schmidtz observe in their chapter in this volume, virtue ethics

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is so different it might be best to see it, not as an alternative answer to the same question, but as responding to a different question altogether. Often associated with Aristotle, but with roots in various traditions as discussed in this volume, virtue ethics tells us that what is right is to be a certain kind of person, a person of virtue: courageous, modest, honest, evenhanded, industrious, wise. A virtuous person will, of course, express his or her virtue through action. But, for virtue ethics, the specification of rules of right action is largely a secondary matter – one that in many ways presupposes the kind of practical wisdom possessed by the person of virtue. (p. 221)

What sets virtue ethics apart is that it treats ethics as concerned with one's whole life – and not just those occasions when something with a distinctly "moral" quality is at stake. For virtue ethics, the focus is not so much on what to do in morally difficult cases as on how to approach all of one's choices with such personal qualities as kindness, courage, wisdom, and integrity. That difference in focus is an important one. People who may feel confident in the rightness of their actions can sometimes be brought up short when asked whether they are also being generous, or considerate, or honest. Rightness is about what we're doing; virtue is also about how we're living. It resists compartmentalization.

Writers of textbooks in ethics are becoming increasingly appreciative of this feature of virtue ethics. For instance, one textbook in engineering ethics considers an imaginary case of a dangerous and expensive spill at a chemical plant (Harris *et al.* 2008, chap. 4). The spill occurs in an outdated part of the plant that has raised the eyebrows of several engineers and technicians, although all of them accepted the situation as "just how things are." Now, in one way it's obvious what the plant workers should do: clean up the spill, fix the outdated fittings, perhaps implement new maintenance and reporting procedures, and so on. But the textbook's authors don't stop there, and for good reason. This is a textbook for future engineers, and they already know that spills need to be cleaned. What they need to learn is how to avoid getting into these kinds of jams in the first place. As the authors point out, the real problem was not that anyone perpetrated any heinous act; it was that several people might have taken responsibility for addressing the problem, but none of them did. The point is a crucial one: really what engineers need are virtues, because it's a virtue to take responsibility. The imaginary engineers who did nothing needed virtues like that because we

must also imagine that neither their professional nor their personal lives end here, with the clean-up of this spill. And the real engineers who learn from them need, not a decision procedure from a textbook, but the practical wisdom to understand for themselves how to be people who take responsibility and why taking responsibility matters.

AN OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

As I said above, virtue ethics is extremely rich in its history, and it is no less so in the diversity of forms it can take. As a result, it is impossible to give a brief characterization of virtue ethics that is both specific enough to be informative and general enough to be suitably inclusive. (Brief, specific, inclusive: pick any two.) So it would surely be wiser for me to quit while I am ahead and turn instead to giving an overview of the fourteen chapters that follow. They have all been specially commissioned so that, taken together, they might introduce readers to virtue ethics with all of its historical background, variety of interpretations, and diversity of applications. Several of the chapters deal with some basic concepts in virtue ethics, others with some major points in its development at different times and places, and the rest with some of its main contributions to moral philosophy today.

Virtue ethics: central concepts

The volume begins and ends with discussions of the virtues and how they come to bear on ethical thought. The first chapter (Daniel C. Russell) examines one approach – shared by all ancient virtue ethicists and still prevalent today – on which the virtues are those character traits that are essential to living a fulfilling human life, a life in which one both cares about the right things and has the wisdom and skill to act intelligently about those things. Christine Swanton closes the volume with a subtle discussion of the many different varieties that virtue ethics can take and has taken, arguing for a characterization of virtue ethics that is broad enough to include not only such obvious figures as Aristotle, but potentially some less obvious candidates as well, such as Hume and Nietzsche. This approach suggests new avenues for exploring innovative

directions both within virtue ethics itself and in the study of its history.

Virtue ethics: its history and development

The wealth of the history of virtue ethics is the subject of no fewer than six chapters in this volume. Rachana Kamtekar discusses the development of virtue ethics among the major ancient Greek philosophers – Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Epicureans – paying particular attention to their various treatments of wisdom or practical intelligence, which they all agreed in treating as the master virtue. Philip J. Ivanhoe explores two main lines of development within ancient Confucian virtue ethics: the view, represented by Mengzi, that the virtues are excellences of human fulfillment, and the view of Wang Yangming that the virtues are dispositions contributing to harmonious social interaction. Each of these chapters not only offers an instructive way to understand different ancient traditions in virtue ethics, but also illustrates where those traditions resonate with their modern counterparts.

Like other parts of ancient Greek thought, virtue ethics had a complex and often turbulent relationship with early Christian philosophers and, subsequently, with the philosophers of the early modern period. In her chapter, Jean Porter discusses the different ways in which ancient virtue ethics was received in the Middle Ages: among scholars, as a complement to the "theological" virtues of faith, hope, and charity, and among the pastorate as a central strand of a moral and disciplinary tradition. By contrast, as Paul Russell explains, David Hume explored the virtues as part of a larger and purely secular investigation of human nature, one that would both cast light on an array of social practices and explore the bases of human happiness.

While the virtues never disappeared from moral theory entirely, virtue ethics itself was eventually eclipsed in the West (but not, it is worth noting, in the East) by the major traditions of the early modern period, namely the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and the deontology of Immanuel Kant. Although the decline of virtue ethics during this period is a familiar datum among philosophers, its explanation has been controversial. Some have argued that virtue ethics was cast aside because of a general shaking off of Aristotelian

philosophy, or because it was simply found to have a theoretical center that could not hold. By contrast, Dorothea Frede argues in her chapter that the political catastrophes of the early modern period led to a decline in confidence in aspirational ideals of virtue and social unity, and in consequence to a search for new bases for moral philosophy. Lastly, Timothy Chappell argues that the revival of interest in virtue ethics in the mid-twentieth century was in fact a consequence of precisely that kind of search: philosophers like Elizabeth Anscombe and Philippa Foot, so far from pointing out an obvious but overlooked alternative in modern moral philosophy, advocated a turn to virtue ethics as the logical conclusion of the contemporary quest to clarify and ground the central concepts of ethics.

Virtue ethics in contemporary moral philosophy

The remaining six chapters examine the contributions of virtue ethics to moral philosophy today, both in theory and in application. Liezl van Zyl surveys the major alternatives within virtue ethics for characterizing right action: the view of Rosalind Hursthouse that an action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous person would do; Michael Slote's definition of right action in terms of the virtuousness of one's motive; and Christine Swanton's account of right action as hitting the "targets" associated with the various virtues. Just as important, van Zyl also looks critically at the very idea of a criterion of right action, clarifying what we should (and should not) expect such a criterion to tell us by way of action guidance.

Several of the chapters in this part of the volume survey the contributions of virtue ethics to various areas of contemporary applied ethics: human bioethics (Justin Oakley), environmental ethics (Matt Zwolinski and David Schmidtz), and business ethics (Edwin Hartman). As these authors point out, the advances made by virtue ethicists in these fields are especially important for our assessment of virtue ethics: there is no better reply to the early doubts as to whether the then newly revived field of virtue ethics could be "action guiding," after all, than for virtue ethicists to actually provide useful guidance to action.

In recent years, virtue ethics has also begun to make increasing inroads into political philosophy. Mark LeBar critically assesses several virtue ethical accounts of political justification that have been

particularly influential: that acts of the state are justified when they are virtuously motivated, or when they enable persons to cultivate human capabilities (including capability for the virtues), or when they provide the background conditions for self-direction (including self-directed pursuit of the virtues). LeBar argues that while proponents of these views have focused on their theoretical merits, they must also ask whether it can be virtuous to unilaterally require others to live according to one's own preferred theory, whatever its merits.

Of course, if an ethical theory is to be able to guide action, even in principle, its guidance must be applicable to creatures like us, with the kind of psychology that we have. Gopal Sreenivasan assesses recent claims that thinking of action in terms of virtues is antiquated, on the grounds that modern social psychology has revealed that even minor features of a person's situation have more to do with his behaviors than any alleged dispositions or character traits do. Sreenivasan argues that these critics have failed to make their case: their crucial objection is that behavior is inconsistent across different situations, but this objection has rested on assessing inconsistency from the researcher's point of view rather than the experimental subject's.

Aims of this volume

Our hope in producing this collection of new work on virtue ethics is threefold. One, we hope to give readers a sense of how virtue ethics has evolved to its current state, by tracing its development through the main periods of its history. Two, we also hope to clarify the theoretical structure of virtue ethics and its place in contemporary ethical theory. And three, we hope to explore the contemporary relevance of virtue ethics, some of the main challenges it now faces, and new avenues of exploration and development within virtue ethics. In all of these ways, our overarching aim is that the volume should be a very useful resource for a wide array of readers: hopefully for readers all the way up to full-time philosophers, but certainly for students of philosophy eager to understand this simultaneously very old and very new approach to ethics.

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1 Virtue ethics, happiness, and the good life

In its earliest versions, virtue ethics began not with the question "What is the right thing to do?" but with the question "What is the best way to live?" The first is a question for ethical reasoning specifically, while the second is for practical reasoning about one's life more broadly: it concerns what to do with one's life and how to make it a happy one. Answering these questions involves, among other things, reflecting on what sort of person to be and what sort of character to develop. And it is here that practical reasoning leads to thought about the virtues, excellences of character that consist in both caring about the right sorts of things and having the wisdom and practical skills to judge and act successfully with respect to those things. It seems appropriate, then, to open this volume on virtue ethics with an overview of this traditional approach to the virtues.

This approach is called "eudaimonism," from the Greek word 'eudaimonia,' the ancient Greek philosophers' term for a good human life, or more succinctly, happiness. By "happiness" here we do not mean a mood or a feeling but a life that is rich and fulfilling for the one living it. Specifically, 'eudaimonism' can refer to theories about practical reasoning, or about the nature of happiness, or about the virtues – or, more usually, to a theory of the relation between these three. Eudaimonism of this latter sort is the focus of this chapter: eudaimonism is the idea that we grasp which character traits are

the virtues by understanding what traits practical reasoning recommends as essential to living a fulfilling human life.

Eudaimonism dates to ancient Greece, where all of the major camps in moral philosophy (Platonists, Aristotelians, Epicureans, Stoics) were eudaimonists, and their influence in virtue ethics is still strong today. This is due to the work of philosophers like G. E. M. Anscombe, Philippa Foot, John McDowell, Rosalind Hursthouse, Julia Annas, Martha Nussbaum, and others who have seen in the ancient focus on human nature and flourishing a source of new vitality for contemporary philosophy.[1]

The most influential exposition of eudaimonism is still Aristotle's, so in the first three sections I outline eudaimonism along broadly similar lines. Then in the final two sections, I consider some challenges for eudaimonism as a contemporary approach in ethics.

EUDAIMONISM ABOUT PRACTICAL REASONING

Eudaimonism makes two main claims about practical reasoning. First, practical reasoning requires a "final end": an end we pursue for its own sake and for the sake of nothing else, and for the sake of which we pursue all other ends. Second, the final end is eudaimonia.

Take the first idea first, beginning with the notion of doing something for a reason. We don't do everything for a reason: someone might tap his foot while listening to music, but not for any *reason*. But think about someone making something: perhaps he begins with a long, flat piece of wood, cuts it into a certain shape, rounds one end of it into a handle, gives the other end of it a curved, flat face, and so on. We understand his reason for doing all of these things when we understand what his end is – in this case, making a cricket bat. Furthermore, we can ask about his reason for having that end; perhaps it is his job. We can keep going: someone employs him in order to sell cricket bats; people buy cricket bats to play cricket; and so on. In each case, we explain what people do in terms of their ends, and these ends fit together into a hierarchy, each end explained by the next end in this "chain" of ends.

What do we mean by doing something "for the sake of" an end? The bat-making example gives one answer: we make a bat for the sake of selling it – making the bat is a *means* to that end. But that is only one answer; obviously, there are many things we do for their

own sake, such as playing cricket. It is also possible to do something both for its own sake and for the sake of another end: for instance, a person might make bats both as a hobby and as a means of making some extra money. Or consider someone who plays a game of cricket for the sake of enjoying a sunny day. Obviously, playing cricket is not a means to the end of enjoying the day: the bat-maker thinks how to make the bat so that someone will want to buy it, but the player does not think how to play the next ball so that he can enjoy his day. Rather, playing cricket is for the sake of enjoying the day in the sense that it is a *way* of enjoying the day; and in order to enjoy a day of cricket, one must play cricket on its own terms, for its own sake.[2] And so on. The point is that we should interpret the "for the sake of" relation in these chains as broadly as the variety of our reasons demands.

Now, each "chain" has to end somewhere. If it were infinitely long or looped back on itself, then we could never say what the whole chain was for the sake of, and practical reasoning couldn't halt anywhere; the thought that the whole enterprise might have a point couldn't withstand scrutiny.[3] This is why practical reasoning requires a *final* end that all of the other ends in the chain are for the sake of, but which is not for the sake of anything else.

This is how Aristotle introduces the notion of a final end.[4] However, Aristotle immediately says a couple of surprising things about it: there is exactly *one* final end per person, and what's more, it is the *same* final end for each of us.[5] Strangely, Aristotle doesn't argue for these claims,[6] but they actually make a lot of sense: multiple final ends could conflict, and practical reasoning couldn't settle that conflict.[7] Besides, practical reasoning doesn't just work out how to reach our ends, if we have any; it also tells us to have ends, and more than that, to have ends *we can live for*, ends that give us a reason to go on in the first place, ends that our lives can be about. In other words, we have one very central end – the end of giving ourselves a good life. If that is so, then there really *is* just one end that makes sense of every other end, and it is the *same* one for all. That doesn't mean that everyone should live the same life, only that everyone needs to find a good life.

The idea that there is just one final end has led some to suppose that there must be some single theme or purpose, some "grand end" to one's life, and that one must deliberate about everything one does

as fitting into a sort of blueprint of a life organized around that grand end. The notion of such a blueprint also suggests a kind of fixity, laying out a master plan for the rest of one's days. However, that should strike us as an odd way of thinking about doing things for the sake of a good life; at the very least, it would be odd to suppose that that is generally how practical reasoning works. People find all sorts of things to live for – a loving relationship, raising a child, pursuing a career, enjoying pastimes – but usually not as part of a master plan, and not for the sake of some single grand end. One does not deliberate about how to pursue a career or raise a child so that doing so will lead to a grand end. One deliberates about them on their own terms. That is, one lives one's life.[8]

In what sense, then, do we do all of these things for the sake of a good life? Since the things we live for are in fact our ends, the question more precisely is how we might adopt these various ends for the sake of the single end of having a good life. The answer, I think, is that there are some ends we seek only by coming to have other ends, and that having a good life is the ultimate end of that sort. Consider an end like having a satisfying career: that just is the end of finding another end that one can pursue for its own sake.[9] (Consider how common such ends are among university students, for instance.) Ultimately, one's end in life is to give one's life meaning and to make it about something. When that process succeeds, one has several ends to pursue for their own sake and the life one lives in living for these ends is a good life. Of course, it would go too far to suggest that this is Aristotle's view; we are, after all, discussing a *gap* in his argument.[10] But I find it plausible in its own right, and at the very least it illustrates the kind of flexibility that the eudaimonist notion of a final end can have.

This brings us to the second main idea in eudaimonism about practical reasoning: the final end is a good human life, eudaimonia. For Aristotle says that when we talk about the final end, we are looking for the greatest good in life – and that is exactly what we are looking for when we talk about eudaimonia.[11] In both conversations, the central idea is that of the sort of good that could bring focus and direction to a person's life. Of course, people disagree about what exactly eudaimonia is: maybe pleasure, or fame or riches, maybe indulgence or, by contrast, being a good person, maybe it is just having good luck, etc. Aristotle rejects these views, but they reveal