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Irene McMullin
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Introduction

The aim of this book is to bring together virtue ethics and existential phenomenology to produce a phenomenologically sensitive form of virtue ethics. In doing so it resists the tendency in moral theory toward what existentialists call bad faith – namely, a tendency to conceptualize one's condition in terms of a false dichotomy and fluctuate between self-interpretations manifesting one or the other half of the dichotomy. We see this tendency in virtue ethics when flourishing is characterized as either a private state of the subject or an objective state of the person conceptualized as a worldly thing. In contrast, this book insists that excellent human lives are characterized by a kind of self-world fit at odds with such views – which either fail to demonstrate the essential dependence of the self on the world and the others who share it or fail to accommodate the lived normative responsiveness that defines us in our striving to be in the world well.

For many, the appeal of the revival of virtue ethics has been its insistence that we shift our focus from assessing isolated acts or act types to evaluating the shape and texture of lives as a whole. This shift has largely been motivated by the recognition that the meaning and motivation of individual acts cannot be understood in isolation from the context of the lives in which they occur. As a result, the suggestion is that we should be examining the extent to which a person is succeeding or failing at realizing an ideal of human excellence more globally understood.

Many recent virtue ethical attempts to define this human ideal – flourishing – have done so by relying on a naturalism that grounds moral theory in science-inspired analyses of characteristic human traits. While this approach has its merits, it can also come at the cost of both depersonalizing ethics and failing to account for its normativity. By conceiving of the moral agent simply as an instantiation of a natural kind, the individuation of the self in its struggle to be the best version of itself is obscured, as is the *ought* that underwrites ostensibly normatively neutral accounts of the characteristic human behaviours constitutive of human nature. On the other hand, attempts to define human excellence with reference only to the lived experience of the agent and her personal satisfaction levels risk isolating the agent from the worldly context of meaning in terms of which those satisfactions find content, expression, and some measure of objective legitimacy. Viewing the self as a theatre of representations and pleasures that can be privately organized in an enjoyable or efficacious way loses the link to the world wherein the legitimacy of those thoughts and feelings is tested. On such an account, it would be possible to flourish in solipsistic isolation – a conclusion at odds with many of our intuitions about what a good human life looks like.

This book addresses these problems by making use of resources from the existential phenomenological tradition to provide an account of human flourishing that navigates a middle path between these two extremes. It also aims to provide phenomenological descriptions of what it is like to experience the normative claim particular to different virtues – descriptions that virtue ethical accounts have largely failed to supply to date. My approach in this regard is not characterized by simple fidelity to the existential phenomenological tradition but rather by creative appropriation of its best methods and arguments. I am committed to the idea that we can enrich our understanding of the issues by bringing this tradition into conversation with virtue ethics. When we do so, we recognize that the existential tradition affords us the following insights:

1. A recognition that to be human is to be consumed with the deeply personal question ‘What does it mean for *me* to be?’ and that flourishing cannot be understood without addressing this first-personal dimension of experience – this sense that each of us is at stake in our choices.
2. An understanding that we can answer this question only in dialogue with the world and the third-person normative categories it provides for defining our struggle to be who we are – which includes but is not limited to those categories used to specify a scientifically grounded account of human nature.
3. An acknowledgment that the immediate normative claims that other individuals make on us are irreducible to either first- or third-person categories but bear a distinctive kind of authority by which we are also bound in our struggle to be in the world well.
4. A recognition that the task of living well is necessarily fraught with an open-ended indeterminacy and irresolvable normative tension

between these three types of claim, a fact we must acknowledge and accept.

5. A commitment to the idea that it is in terms of the question of who one wishes to be in the world that one does the negotiation work necessary for navigating this plural normative terrain. Namely, each of us experiences herself as tasked with making her life a well-balanced unity in the face of this normative complexity.

A central argument of this book, then, is that there is no single normative perspective through which we understand and manage our relationship to self, other, and world. There is, on the contrary, an irreducible normative plurality intrinsic to the plurality of perspectives that we can adopt on the world – first-person, second-person, and third-person stances – all of which make claims on us that we understand ourselves as having reason to meet.

From the first-person perspective, the agent is claimed by the success of her own individual agency – she is concerned to be efficacious and autonomous and to realize the unique configuration of abilities and preferences to which she is born. But from the second-person perspective, an agent experiences herself as claimed by the specific others with whom she shares her life. She acknowledges their authority to make binding claims on her. And from the third-person perspective, she recognizes demands that arise from her membership in the human community and its commitment to intersubjective projects aimed at understanding and establishing a shared world. Each of the perspectives offers us a set of distinct reasons that cannot be reduced to or translated into the others.

A flourishing life requires us to both respond well to these distinct normative terrains and negotiate the tensions that might arise between them. Each domain has its own internal standard for assessing what counts as a legitimate claim within it. Determining which claims we have reason to act on in each circumstance will depend both on the normative structure intrinsic to each domain and the demand to balance the claims arising from these normative domains against each other such that one's life as a whole embodies a responsiveness to all three types of claim.

This condition should be entirely familiar from the experience of our daily lives. While walking through the city you observe a man selling homemade plastic crafts and you feel claimed by competing demands: the sense of immediate obligation toward him in his poverty and enterprise, the urge to use that money to satisfy one's own preferences instead, and the belief that the endless consumption of useless plastic items – let alone the endorsement of individual charity instead of structural solutions to poverty – will not create a world in which the needs of all are best met. These classes of normative claim cannot be reduced to each other or to a non-normative natural state. Nor is there a clear hierarchy among them. The consequence is that there is a fundamental and irresolvable tension characterizing human life; we are tasked with negotiating competing claims with no recourse to an overarching or ultimate metric in terms of which these conflicts can be neatly adjudicated. Understanding flourishing means acknowledging this lived indeterminacy and tension rather than dissolving it via a neat theoretical solution. Flourishing requires an ongoing negotiation of these competing types of legitimate claim in order to achieve a kind of proportionality – a fragile and shifting balance – between the different normative terrains. Flourishing is best defined as human excellence within each of these domains (self-fulfilment, moral responsibility, and responsiveness to intersubjective norms) but achieved in such a way that success in one domain does not compromise success in another. As we will see in Chapter 3, the task of negotiating these competing normative domains ultimately falls under the purview of the virtue of justice, since justice is the stance according to which one gives competing legitimate claims their due. In Chapter 4 we will discuss the role that *phronēsis* plays in this negotiation work. And in later chapters we will see that each specific virtue is best understood as such skilful negotiation work in the face of different kinds of challenging circumstance innate to the human condition.

The difficulty of performing this negotiation work helps explain problems that arise within the virtue ethical literature itself. One such difficulty is the so-called action-guidingness issue, according to which virtue ethics supposedly does not offer sufficient guidance for answering what one ought to do – at least compared with deontology or utilitarianism. But on my account both deontology and utilitarianism succeed in offering such guidance primarily because they tend to operate almost exclusively in terms of the norms of a single stance – a stance according to which all first-person and second-person claims can be translated into a single third-personally available universal standard, whether it be utility or rational duty.

This is not to oversimplify these positions, however. Kantian deontology prioritizes the third-person universality of a reason that is understood to be identically present in all agents, but it attempts to accommodate the other normative perspectives through the notions of respect for others (the second-person dimension) and respect for self (the first-person dimension). Similarly, utilitarianism prioritizes the third-person norm of universal utility, but it attempts to accommodate the other perspectives through the fact that one's own utility does not automatically trump the other person's (the second-person dimension) and the fact that the nature of its guiding norm – *satisfaction* – includes a fundamental reference to the first-personal domain. But in both cases the intention – an intention that is understood as realizable – is to provide a decision procedure that stipulates adopting a neutral third-person stance that purportedly captures the normative force or authority of the other two normative domains.

Indeed, virtue ethical accounts themselves fail to understand the nature of flourishing when they insist that such messiness can be avoided – by claiming, for example, that the fully virtuous person would never experience virtuous action as a sacrifice.[1] Failing to recognize the compromise among perspectives *as* compromise – i.e., as a condition in which legitimate claims sometimes cannot be met fully – is a failure to acknowledge the legitimacy of the claims. But by shifting our emphasis from specific acts to lives as a whole we can overcome this difficulty to some degree, since each agent will be assessed on the extent to which her life embodies a general respect for the different kinds of normative claim that she is tasked with meeting, not necessarily on the extent to which she does so in each particular act. However, we will see in Chapter 4 that certain deontic constraints must be operative – lowest common denominators below which the agent cannot go if she is to count as meeting the minimal requirements of each normative domain. Nevertheless, these constraints are both minimal and specific to the domains in question – and thus incapable of dissolving all possibilities of conflict. I will argue in Chapters 5 and 6 that ultimately we must look to specific virtuous lives as exemplars of the kind of perspectival balancing that is at stake in flourishing. There is no simple decision procedure or algorithm for determining what one ought to do or how one ought to be in every situation. But this is the truth of our moral predicament, not a flaw in our moral theory.

An existentialism-informed virtue ethics is a natural fit for accommodating this irrevocable tension at the heart of human life. It acknowledges that the messiness and complexity involved in negotiating such a normative plurality cannot be avoided. Broadly understood, existentialism analyzes the nature of human existence – understanding it above all in terms

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[1] See McDowell 1980 and Phillips 1965.

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of the fact that human beings take their existence to be at issue for them, relating to it in terms of questions of success and failure. Human existence is fundamentally oriented to questions of better and worse, and each of us experiences ourself as being at stake in how we navigate such normative demands. We care about doing what we have reason to do, and since practical reasons arise from incommensurable domains of value in human life, this means we care about knowing how to navigate this irrevocable tension well.

Phenomenology is the method regularly endorsed by thinkers of this existentialist tradition – largely because it explicitly attempts to embody this normative plurality in its methodology.[2] Phenomenology is a method committed to uncovering universal truths about the structure of meaning (third-personal categories) through descriptive analyses of one's first-person experience. These descriptions are aimed at evoking in others a corresponding grasp of that experience – a second-personal stance that recognizes others as occupants of their own first-person domain of experience. Though this characterization of phenomenology in many ways applies to philosophy in general, phenomenology understands itself as tasked with negotiating the plurality and tension that existentialism describes: it analyzes how objects both immanent and transcendent to first-person experience – the self, the world, and the others in it – are structured within that experience such that they accomplish their meaning *as* what they are for the agent engaged in her struggle to be. As such, it bears within its methodology an explicit acknowledgment of the plurality of perspectives with which it is operating: A good phenomenological analysis is aimed at examining and describing the nature of one's own first-person experience in such a way that it provokes in others similar first-personal self-grasping intuitions that can serve to confirm or disconfirm one's understanding of the structures of intelligibility that govern the possibility of that meaningful experience. And, importantly for my claim that phenomenology strives to embody methodological variations of all three normative stances, Husserl insisted that first-person reflection on the field of meaningful experiences could yield universal structural necessities. The most fundamental meaning structure of this kind, according to Husserl, is the fact that all consciousness is characterized by intentionality. Namely, consciousness is always consciousness *of* something; it is always directed toward some meaningful object. This relationship is therefore composed of two *relata*: the act by which the meaningful appearance comes to manifestation and the object in its appearing. Phenomenology studies the correlation of these two elements, i.e., the dynamic interplay between the experiencer and the experienced such that meaning arises. Though it is possible to tease them apart in analysis, these two 'sides' of the meaning experience belong together inseparably (Husserl 1999, 39/77). Phenomenology's insistence on the importance of examining all meanings from the perspective of lived experience is motivated by its recognition of this necessary interplay between self and world.

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[2] Though we sometimes see the expression 'phenomenology' used to refer simply to the 'what it is like' nature of experience, here I use it in the sense developed by Edmund Husserl and his critical admirers in the early twentieth century. For a good introduction to this tradition, see Crowell 2013.

Heidegger famously builds on Husserl's analyses of intentionality, critiquing the philosophical tendency to conceptualize lived experience through the lens of a kind of subject/object dichotomy that artificially separates the self from the world. He insists that being true to the nature of lived experience requires us to recognize that we are not typically 'subjects' grasping 'objects', but rather agents immersed in the world in a way that belies such a divide. Indeed, Heidegger more explicitly links phenomenology with existentialist themes by insisting that experiencing and analyzing meaning in this way depends on a normatively governed striving to be who one is in the world.

As will become evident, this existential-phenomenological approach is at work throughout the book. We see it in particular in my application of Heidegger's challenge to views of flourishing that isolate a subjective inner life from an objective external world, in my insistence that the dynamic correlation between experiencer and experienced – between agent and world – requires us to think differently about what kind of agents we are in our striving to flourish. Further, when we attend carefully to the phenomena we are forced to reject moral theories that model praxis on abstract knowledge or that prioritize one normative domain to the exclusion of others – whether that reductionist agenda is understood in terms of individual desire-satisfaction or in terms of third-personally conceived realizations of objective values or human nature. Genuinely understanding what a good human life is requires us to acknowledge the complex normative terrain and perspectival manifold that characterizes the experience of human life as it is lived – not to look for an artificial simplicity that can be applied to it from without. Succumbing to that temptation is a common human tendency since it offers clarity and direction to those yearning for it. But doing so involves bad faith: it is a failure to face up to the paradox and complexity of being subjects who are also worldly objects that can conceptualize themselves as such.

As we will see, this existential-phenomenological approach is in many ways a natural fit with a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics insofar as the latter emphasizes the necessity of understanding agents as a whole: our striving for an excellence that manifests as both subjective pleasure and worldly achievement and the practical reason that allows us to navigate the normative questions intrinsic to a life that is always understood as governed by questions of success and failure. As I will show, humanity's characteristic activity in this regard is indeed 'an activity of the soul in accordance with reason',[3] but in what follows I will argue that 'reason' must be understood such that it accommodates the normative plurality of perspectives through which the world shows up as meaningful in the way that I have specified above. As such, defining reason as deliberation about how best to realize first-person preferences or conform to third-person categories of universalizability or scientific objectivity is too narrow. Reason must instead be understood in terms of a person's capacity to see the world not merely from the constraints of her own projects, but also in terms of the individual others we encounter and the intersubjectively determined standards established by the human community for sharing the world. These domains all provide flourishing agents with reasons – considerations that count in favour of an action or belief – and there is no ultimate perspective from which the different classes of reason can be definitively ordered. As a result, flourishing requires that one negotiate the complexity and tension that is characteristic of a life experienced from multiple perspectives and governed by the different demands that those perspectives reveal.

Chapter Breakdown

In Chapter 1, 'What Is Flourishing?', I defend the virtue ethical claim that the ultimate objects of moral assessment are lives, not actions, and I challenge both subjectivist and objectivist models of what an excellent or flourishing human life looks like, arguing that both approaches obscure the complexity of creatures who exist simultaneously as experiencing subjects and worldly objects. In contrast, I argue that practical rationality must be understood as the way in which agents enact their commitment to the project of being in the world well: a condition that overcomes the false

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[3] Aristotle 2000: I.7.1098a10–11. All references to Aristotle 2000 – the *Nichomachean Ethics* – will henceforth be referenced in the text as *NE* followed by book, section, and line number.

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subject/object dichotomy with which other accounts of flourishing tend to operate.

Chapter 2, 'Three Domains of Reason', builds on the claim that the right way to understand flourishing is in terms of different possibilities of self-world fit that arise from the three normative domains to which flourishing agents are appropriately responsive: first-person claims of the self, second-person claims of the other, and third-person claims of the shared world. This chapter examines each of these normative domains and the standards internal to them.

In Chapter 3, 'Justice, the Virtues, and Existential Problem-Solving', I address the question of how to integrate the different normative perspectives within one's life. This chapter also discusses what virtues are and how they relate to flourishing. I argue that they are problem-solving stances that overcome recurring existential problems that undermine our ability to flourish. I examine the virtue of justice in particular, endorsing the ancient claim that justice can serve as a stand-in for all the virtues, since its purview is the appropriate balancing of the three normative domains.

Chapter 4, 'Unity, Comparison, Constraint', examines the relationship between the virtues and defends a version of the ancient 'unity of the virtues' thesis. Here I also consider how practical wisdom allows us to compare claims arising from the incommensurable normative terrains and reach a decision on what to do. I also respond to the objection that a virtue ethical account of this kind has no room for deontological constraints. To the contrary, I argue that there are minimal requirements governing what counts as responding to each of the three different normative domains.

Chapter 5, 'Called to Be Oneself: Role Models and the Project of Becoming Virtuous', examines the claim that virtuous agents are the ultimate criterion of right action. I present an account of role models and moral development that echoes the tripartite structure of norm-governed agency developed in Chapters 1 and 2 by arguing that the three key modes of moral development – imitation, habituation, and critical comparison – are shown to particularly rely on and enable the second-person, first-person, and third-person normative stances, respectively.

By making moral agency dependent on habituation and the imitation of exemplars, this view is open to a major objection: namely, that there seem to be no protections against bad exemplars who model the wrong kinds of life and thereby pervert one's moral agency. Chapter 6, 'Corrupting the Youth', addresses this worry by demonstrating the role that the third-person perspective plays in introducing critical distance between the agent

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and her exemplar. It also considers the role that deliberation and moral perception play in the flourishing agent's life.

Chapter 7, 'Patience', examines the way in which patience is a response to the challenge posed by temporal finitude. It discusses how this finitude manifests as both temporal scarcity and in terms of the fact that the project of human self-becoming is dispersed in time such that it necessarily resists completion and determinacy.

Chapter 8, 'Modesty', argues that modesty is a stance the virtuous agent adopts in the face of differences in accomplishment or status that might be experienced as painful to others. Modesty requires one to engage in pain-alleviating behaviour aimed at helping others cope with those differences and involves an appropriate understanding of the degree to which public measures of success ought to be taken as definitive of one's identity and value.

Chapter 9, 'Courage', examines the specific virtuousness of courage and, in particular, the extent to which we can accept Aristotle's claim that this virtue applies only when one faces death in battle. Building on Aristotle's claim, I argue that courage must be understood as arising in conditions of crisis where one's way of being is at stake. Courage enables one to choose one's better self – as measured by first-, second-, or third-person norms of assessment – in situations where one's identity is on the line.

A Note on the Virtues

The four virtues chosen for extended examination in the book – justice, modesty, patience, and courage – are meant to be illustrative, not exhaustive, since a full enumeration of how many (and which) virtues there are would require a complete taxonomy of the human condition and the challenges that arise therefrom. However, I have not chosen them at random. As we will see in Chapter 3, justice is a particularly central virtue insofar as it is both a specific virtue and a name for virtuousness as such. It is therefore essential to my account. The remaining three virtues were chosen not because they too have such a central status, but because each of the three tends to be interpreted primarily in terms of one of the three normative perspectives. For example, patience tends to be viewed primarily as an accommodating passivity in the face of another person's needs (a primarily second-person stance), while in contrast courage is typically characterized as a heroic virtue involving a kind of active self-assertion (a primarily first-person stance). Modesty, on the other hand (if recognized as a virtue at all), is regularly understood as involving an individual's