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Edited by Lawrence Jost and Julian Wuerth

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## *Introduction*

*Lawrence Jost and Julian Wuerth*

The origin of the contemporary debate between Kantian ethics and virtue ethics can be traced back to G.E.M. Anscombe's 1958 essay, "Modern Moral Philosophy," which revived interest in virtue ethics in contemporary philosophy and challenged the way modern moral philosophy, including Kantian philosophy, was done, especially in contrast with Aristotle's classical version. But it was only later, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, that discussion between virtue ethicists and Kantian ethicists really picked up.

The Kantian ethics with which virtue ethics then clashed was one that had been defined and defended largely in contrast with utilitarianism. Where utilitarianism had struggled to provide an adequate account of individual rights, Kantian ethics provided a staunch defense. Kantians, most influential among them John Rawls, rested this defense largely on the lessons of Kant's *Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

As the title of the *Grounding* makes clear, Kant intended for this work to provide the foundation for a "metaphysics of morals," i.e. the foundation for an ethics grounded a priori, in pure reason, not a posteriori, in experience. And Kant believed that he accomplished this by clarifying the nature of the moral law, or the "categorical imperative." But all too often, Kant's defenders and detractors alike took this foundation for Kant's ethics as a whole, focusing their attention narrowly on the categorical imperative, even more narrowly on one particular version of this law, the "formula of universal law," and on Kant's views on how we should apply this version of the law to our subjective principles of action, or "maxims." The dominant interpretation of Kant's ethics to emerge reduced moral living to a life punctuated by isolated applications of a moral litmus tests of sorts to our maxims: we were to apply the categorical imperative to our maxims at the scene of action, sort out morally impermissible from permissible maxims, and then get on with living.

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Virtue ethicists reacting against this Kantian account charged that it had little or nothing to say about many aspects of moral living that should occupy, and traditionally had occupied, a central place in moral theories, most notably Aristotle's, such as moral agency, character, emotions, and the process of shaping these over time, and that it had little to offer regarding the concept of the good for man. They also held that the Kantian emphasis on a moral law rendered it rigid and unresponsive to specifics of context, leaving it unmanageable at best, plain wrong at worst.

Kantians responded in kind, charging that virtue ethics offered no insight into the foundations of ethics and why the purportedly moral character, motive, or action was moral, or the immoral immoral. This failure of insight, they held, left us without guidance, exposing the concepts of individual rights and justice to morally backward cultural and historical prejudices. All the while, Kantians repeatedly requested more clarity about just what virtue ethics is.

The new essays gathered in this volume reveal a changed state in the relation between Kantian ethics and virtue ethics. On the virtue ethics side, there is greater clarity about the meaning of virtue ethics, as is recognized by virtue ethicists and Kantians alike. Further, in recent years virtue ethics has expanded, now bringing in under its umbrella the sentimentalist tradition, going back to Hutcheson, Hume, and including even Nietzsche, as well as scholarly work on the Stoic tradition in Greek and Roman writers. Thus, while the Aristotelian tradition remains strong, new currents have been added.

On the Kantian ethics side, the most notable development is that Kantian ethics has now advanced well beyond Kant's *Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals*. The authors in this volume consider a wide range of Kant's recorded thought in ethics, including his other major works, especially his *Metaphysics of Morals*, his minor works, student notes on his lectures, and his own personal notes. They also work more closely with other areas of Kant's philosophy, including his theoretical philosophy and his anthropology. A host of factors have combined to make this transformation possible: the abundance of interpretive work on the *Grounding*, the availability today of much of Kant's thought in translation and in well-edited volumes, and the pressure that virtue ethics has exerted on Kantian ethics in this direction. The main philosophical bounty of this methodological development is a new awareness of and appreciation for Kant's views not just on isolated actions but also on the moral agent, virtue, character, emotions, and judgment grounded in

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experience, and the moral importance of actively shaping each of these over time.

The improved clarity about what virtue ethics is, together with new clarity about the broader scope of Kantian ethics, reveals that Kantians have come to agree with many of the virtue ethicists' original criticisms of earlier Kantian views. But while the improved clarity of these approaches to ethics reveals significant new areas of overlap, not all disagreement was the result simply of confusion. Far from it; it is clearer than ever that fundamental and philosophically interesting disagreements remain between these approaches. The new essays in this volume clarify and flesh out these approaches, reveal new areas of agreement, but also underscore these remaining points of disagreement.

We here provide a description of the essays in this volume.

In the opening essay, "Virtue ethics in relation to Kantian ethics: an opinionated overview and commentary," Marcia Baron offers an introductory overview as well as commentary on the debate between virtue ethics and Kantian ethics from a Kantian perspective. After reviewing a wide range of literature loosely classified as belonging to the virtue ethics tradition, and considering the sorts of problems addressed and solutions offered in this literature, Baron turns directly to the question of what virtue ethics is. Here she takes time to defend this question itself against virtue ethicists, in particular Rosalind Hursthouse, who have questioned its philosophical value. Next, relying on Christine Swanton's definition of virtue ethics, Baron advances to discussion of the relation of virtue ethics to Kantian ethics. Here Baron notes various points of agreement and disagreement between these approaches before expressing misgivings about the exercise, suggesting that it may not be fruitful given the current aims of virtue ethicists.

Often accompanying the question of how to define virtue ethics is the question of how virtue ethics can guide us. That is, as an ethics of ideals, not an ethics of principles, virtue ethics cannot be defined in terms of guiding principles, and it is this lack of guiding principles that leads people to ask not only what virtue ethics is but also how it can guide us, for what could moral knowledge consist in, if not knowledge of principles? In the next essay, "What does the Aristotelian *phronimos* know?" Rosalind Hursthouse explores this central question. In an Aristotelian virtue ethics, moral ideals are embodied in the *phronimos*, and so Hursthouse addresses the question of in what the moral knowledge of Aristotle's *phronimos* consists. There has to be more to this knowledge than the knowledge of ordinary moral principles that we have, because

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this knowledge is, *ex hypothesi*, what makes the *phronimos*, unlike us, excellent at knowing what to do. Stressing Aristotle's point that *phronesis* is impossible without virtue, Hursthouse argues that the knowledge is not that of the sorts of recondite principles that normative moral theorists usually seek but involves the mastery of a range of ordinary concepts, including those of the virtues.

Allen Wood, in "Kant and agent-oriented ethics," likewise directs attention to the question of what an ethics of ideals is and how it guides us, but he does this in the context of a broader discussion about the relation between Kant's ethics as an ethics of principle and virtue ethics as an ethics of ideals, and the relative merits of these approaches. Wood considers Kant's relation to "virtue ethics" first by examining Michael Slote's "agent-based" type of ethical theory and arguing that it is less plausible than what Slote calls an "agent-focused" theory. Then Wood examines the degree of "agent-focusedness" in Kant's ethical theory, by describing the role in it of good judgment, wisdom, and, above all, moral virtue, as Kant conceives virtue. Finally, Wood delimits the role of agent-focusedness in Kantian ethics, defending it on the basis of Kant's own view that an "ethics of ideals" was suitable to a pre-modern culture, while modern culture instead requires an "ethics of principles."

After emphasizing the need to ground ethics in principles that provide a standard of justification, Barbara Herman dedicates the bulk of her essay, "The difference that ends make," to spelling out the nature of the end that Kant's moral law enjoins us to pursue. This end is rational nature, and Herman sees her close examination of the manner in which Kant defines this concept in the *Grounding's* "formula of humanity" formulation of the moral law as providing us with a gateway concept to Kant's view of moral action and agency. Against interpretations of Kant that have him bootstrapping the value of rational nature into his ethics by claiming that every choice we make commits us to this value, Herman argues that Kant instead believes that we must regard the principles of our reasoning as providing authoritative standards of correctness in acting and so view our own rational nature as an end in itself. We are accordingly not roped into duty, and are not envisioned by Kant to follow a moral principle imposed from without and independent of our own judgment, but instead cognize the worth of rational nature and so view moral action as an exercise in self-expression, self-realization, and autonomy.

With Talbot Brewer's "Two pictures of practical thinking," the discussion turns directly to theories of action, with Brewer arguing that there is a fundamental difference between how Aristotelian ethics and

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Kantian ethics understand thought to become practical. Brewer argues that, on the Aristotelian view, practical thinking is a continuous activity that accompanies those activities it guides and that involves an appreciation of their intrinsic value. In his view, Kantians and other modern theorists, by contrast, tend to picture practical thinking as a discrete and occasional process that precedes and initiates action by establishing justificatory connections between circumstances and action types. The aim of Brewer's essay is to show that we cannot offer a complete account of ethical excellence in practical thought unless we retrieve the unfamiliar conception of practical thinking that frames Aristotle's ethics.

In "Moving beyond Kant's account of agency in the *Grounding*," Julian Wuerth provides an overview of the theory of agency and action underlying Kant's ethics. One of virtue ethicists' central complaints about Kantian ethics is that it is narrowly concerned with individual actions, not agents. Wuerth notes that while Kant discusses a broad range of duties to shape our agency in sources other than his *Grounding*, a problem keeps us from appending these broader accounts of moral duties to those in the *Grounding* focused on individual actions. This problem is the common interpretation of Kant's practical agent, based on the *Grounding*, which reduces Kant's practical agent to reason. For if Kant's practical agent is nothing but reason, Kant's discussions outside the *Grounding* of our duties to develop our feelings and desires make little sense. Looking beyond the *Grounding*, which provides a simplified account of agency for the purposes of a relatively simple account of autonomy, Wuerth shows that Kant's practical agent has not only a faculty of cognition, which includes reason, but also distinct faculties of feeling, of desire, and of choice. It is with reference to this recognizably human moral subject that Kant's richer account of duties to shape our own agency makes sense.

In her essay "A Kantian conception of human flourishing," Lara Denis offers an interpretation of Kant's ethics that has it extending far beyond a narrow focus on individual actions or even broader duties to our own agency, to an account of flourishing which is often thought to be absent from Kant's ethics. Denis argues that Kant's ethics implicitly contains a distinctive and appealing conception of human flourishing. Denis locates the skeletal framework for this conception in Kant's conception of the highest good in a person, and she sees Kant's doctrine of duties developing this conception of human flourishing and directing agents toward its promotion and approximation. This conception of human flourishing addresses us as rational *human* beings, enjoins the development and exercise of our moral capacities and natural talents, and encompasses our

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happiness. It also reflects the central Kantian commitment to respect for rational nature and leaves unquestioned the foundational role of the moral law.

Paul Guyer's essay, "Kantian perfectionism," likewise focuses on Kant's views on the broader moral project of shaping our own agency. He notes that in Kant's time, the successor to classical virtue ethics was the perfectionism of Wolff, Baumgarten, and Mendelssohn, which Kant famously criticized as empty or question-begging. Guyer notes, however, that Kant himself often used perfectionist language to characterize his own position. The crucial difference, Guyer argues, is that Kant's fundamental moral conception of the good is the perfection of the human will rather than of the human condition, suggesting that Kant's real criticism of Wolffian perfectionism is that it is not based on the idea of free choice alone but on an empirical conception of the human good. Basing his own theory on the perfection of the will allows Kant to introduce an a priori element into moral philosophy, the moral law, which lends structure to our individualized conceptions of human goods and virtues.

In her chapter, "Aristotle, the Stoics, and Kant on anger," Nancy Sherman explores the role of one particular emotion, anger, in an account of moral virtue. More specifically, how do ancient and modern theories of virtue, in particular those of Aristotle, the Stoics, and Kant, accommodate moral anger? Contrary to the Stoic view, Sherman argues that anger can be virtuous and that certain types of anger, such as moral outrage and indignation, are the deepest expressions of respect for humanity. Although she recognizes that Aristotle would not put the point in this way, she notes that he does insist that there are virtuous forms of anger and that failure to express these may be a sign of servility.

Christine Swanton's "Kant's impartial virtues of love" argues that proper recognition of love as a moral force in Kant's ethics undermines virtue-theoretic criticism of Kant's ethics in a variety of ways, showing Kant's ethics to be richer than many have supposed. Swanton argues, first, that the impartial and universal foundation of Kant's ethics rests not just on respect, but also on love, which involves beneficence, gratitude, and the cultivation of sympathetic feelings. Next, love can properly be seen as particular, as a love of individuals rather than a love of "mankind," and is compatible with partialistic forms of love or respect such as affection, friendship, and differential forms of respect based on roles. Finally, Swanton argues that the unconditional nature of the demand to love, irrespective of what an individual has done to us, is compatible with virtue. Universal love requires forgiveness, but forgiveness does not necessarily

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involve a restoration of previously partialistic relationships, nor does it entail that a wrongdoing is treated as less serious because it was forgiven.

Michael Slote's "The problem we all have with deontology" argues that Kantians, consequentialists, and virtue ethicists alike have a problem with deontology. Consequentialists deny deontology, and that is their version of the problem, he claims. Likewise, Slote thinks that Kantian ethics, the deontological approach par excellence, has struggled and struggled to offer foundations for deontological thought, but without much apparent success. Finally, virtue ethics, especially in its Aristotelian embodiments, has pretty much ignored the issue, he maintains, and sentimentalists seeking a basis for deontology have to work hard against the natural thought that deontology often has to stand in opposition to our feelings. Slote accordingly concludes that, since deontology is central to moral thought and action, it looks as if each of these approaches has its own work cut out for it.

In his essay, "Intuition, system, and the 'paradox' of deontology," Timothy Chappell also addresses the problem of deontology. Unlike Slote, however, Chappell presents what he takes to be a simple way out of the so-called "paradox" of deontology, which has any deontological approach requiring its own violation, by developing and defending the thesis that agency has more roles than the productive one that consequentialists fixate on. Chappell points out that many anti-consequentialist moral theorists are aware of this thesis as providing a way out of the "paradox," but he suggests that the thesis does not need to be presented within the framework of any moral theory, and indeed is better presented outside any such framework. He substantiates this by discussing Kant's defense of deontological constraints. This defense involves going deep into Kant's philosophy, but that is not an advantage, in Chappell's view, because it keeps us from giving the simple response to the "paradox."

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## CHAPTER I

*Virtue ethics in relation to Kantian ethics: an  
opinionated overview and commentary**Marcia Baron*

## I BACKGROUND AND PLAN

This paper originated as the opening lecture for a conference for which I was to provide an overview of virtue ethics in relation to Kantian ethics. My initial plan was to discuss the unclarity about just what virtue ethics is, articulate the various views of what virtue ethics is, and then to consider whether, or the extent to which, Kantian ethics is compatible with virtue ethics on each of these conceptions. But I soon had misgivings about this plan. An attempt to sort out all the different ways virtue ethics is understood by its proponents – let alone an attempt to assess the compatibility of each conception with Kantian ethics – would take up far too many pages, and make for tedious listening. What concerned me more, however, was that it might be viewed by some as a hostile act. Some who align themselves with virtue ethics take umbrage at the claim that it is not clear just what virtue ethics is, and view with mistrust, and sometimes annoyance, efforts to disentangle various theses associated with virtue ethics and to determine which theses are central, which are not, and whether those that are central are not also held by (many) Kantians (or utilitarians).

At first I saw the problem simply as a “public relations” matter, a question of tact. How could I present the material without seeming hostile? But my attention shifted to the question of why it would seem hostile. Why would anyone take offense at the claim that it is not clear what virtue ethics is and at attempts to sort out the possibilities and arrive at a clearer picture? Philosophers are *supposed* to seek clarity, and to disentangle theses in order to be clear on what is being said, so why would virtue ethicists mind if this

I am grateful to Kate Abramson, Christine Swanton, Kevin Toh, Allen Wood, and especially Julian Wuerth for their helpful comments, and to discussants at the Conference on Virtue Ethics vs. Kantian Ethics, held at the University of Cincinnati, where an early draft of this paper was presented.



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approach were taken to virtue ethics? After mulling it over, I decided to address that question, and not as a mere preliminary to get out of the way, but as a facet of the debate between virtue ethicists and Kantians (among others). I hope that by examining the underlying tension between virtue ethicists and Kantians I can shed light on the philosophical disagreements and perhaps also reduce the tension. To these ends I investigate, in section III of this chapter, the objection to a demand for clarity concerning what virtue ethics is, reasons for both the objection and the demand for clarity, and underlying sensitivities and disagreements. There is admittedly something awkward about this undertaking: I am playing family therapist despite being part of the family. But the job needs to be done, and it is unlikely that anyone not in the family would be interested in taking it on, so I will roll up my sleeves and try my best to be fair.<sup>1</sup>

First, though, I offer (in section II) a general, somewhat historical and largely introductory overview of contemporary virtue ethics.<sup>2</sup> I do not pretend to be thorough or to offer a survey of the literature; I aim, rather, to provide a (sketchy) map for the novice (with enough opinionated commentary to provide something of interest, I hope, for others), indicating various motivations for the contemporary revival of virtue ethics, and situating virtue ethics in relation to close cousins such as care ethics. I point out obstacles to addressing the question of whether Kantian ethics and virtue ethics are compatible, and also comment on some threads of the critique of modern ethics, a critique that fueled interest in reviving virtue ethics.

After examining, in section III, the tension described above, in section IV I return, albeit half-heartedly, to a question that I had postponed: is Kantian ethics compatible with virtue ethics? The difficulty that virtue ethics is understood in a variety of ways can be sidestepped thanks to Christine Swanton's very helpful distinction between virtue ethics as a species and virtue ethics as a genus. However, I end up deciding, partly as a result of reflecting in section III on Rosalind Hursthouse's complaint, that there is something wrongheaded about asking whether Kantian ethics is compatible with virtue ethics, understood as Swanton understands it.

<sup>1</sup> I take my assignment – of giving an overview of virtue ethics in relation to Kantian ethics – to be different from that of explaining or examining Aristotle's ethics in relation to Kant's ethics. That project is not hindered by the hostility of some virtue ethicists to questions about just what virtue ethics is, and has been pursued in a number of excellent works, most notably Engstrom and Whiting (1996) and Sherman (1997b).

<sup>2</sup> For other overviews (and in particular, overviews with a focus on the last decade), see Stohr and Wellman (2002) and Stohr (2006).

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MARCIA BARON

I want to clarify that I definitely do not think that there is anything wrongheaded about considering what light a Kantian approach can shed on character, individual virtues and vices, or virtue and vice in general; that I thoroughly applaud. I also cheer on (and myself have engaged in) projects of reading Kant with questions of character and virtue in mind, rather than focusing primarily on questions of rightness of actions, and the like. But for reasons reflecting my (possibly idiosyncratic) views about how the history of ethics is and is not best approached, I do not think it helpful, if we are thinking of Kantian ethics as closely tied to Kant's ethics, to ask whether Kantian ethics is compatible with virtue ethics understood as Swanton understands it. And even if we conceive of Kantian ethics as less tied to Kant, I have doubts about the value, and the appropriateness, of challenging the virtue ethicist's claim that they are incompatible.

#### II FOR THE BEGINNER (MAINLY)

Although the topic on which I have been asked to write is virtue ethics vs. Kantian ethics, we should keep in mind that it is part of a broader debate, virtue ethics vs. both Kantian ethics and utilitarianism, or broader still, virtue ethics vs. "modern" ethics. Contemporary virtue ethics emerged as a reaction to (or more accurately, from reactions to) perceived inadequacies. But inadequacies in what, exactly? The general suggestion shared by many who had differing but overlapping complaints about contemporary ethical theory was that we should look to ancient ethics for direction, and should have our focus in ethics be character and virtue (or perhaps virtues) rather than actions and rightness. Beyond this general suggestion, though, there was unclarity concerning which school of thought was being targeted. Sometimes utilitarianism, sometimes Kantian ethics, sometimes both, and sometimes, more vaguely, "modern moral philosophy," with "modern" sometimes reaching back to include Hume.<sup>3</sup>

It also sometimes happened that the target was clear, but the criticisms were of more limited application than the critics claimed. Uncorrected, this left many (in particular, non-specialists trying to get the lay of the land in contemporary ethics) with the impression that utilitarianism and Kantian ethics were entirely about the rightness of actions and not at all about character, and that virtue ethics was challenging both theories and,

<sup>3</sup> Here I am thinking of Alasdair MacIntyre's hostility to what he called the "Enlightenment project." See MacIntyre (1981). See also Anscombe (1958).