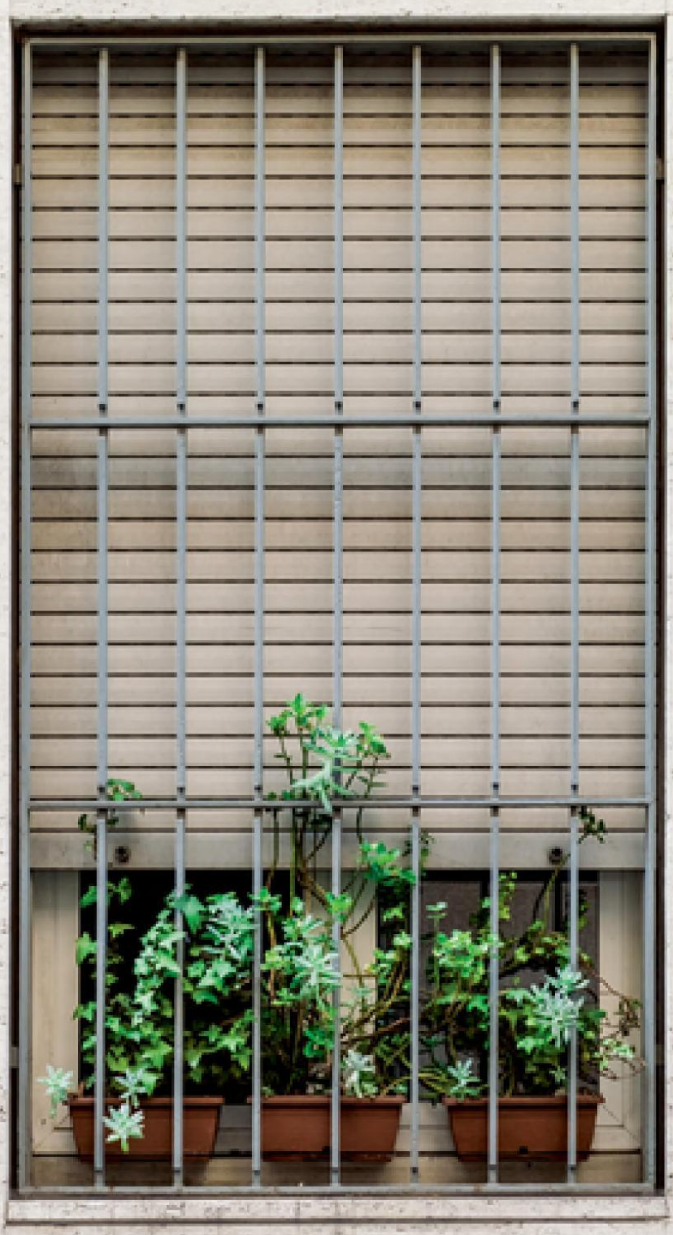

Inner Virtue

NICOLAS BOMMARITO

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Nicolas Bommarito

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Men imagine that they communicate their virtue or vice only by overt actions, and do not see that virtue or vice emit a breath every moment.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Chapter 1

Introduction

Take a few seconds to think of the various people you have met in the course of your life. Of these people, pick one that you think deserves to be called a good person. This should not be some pious and preachy self-styled moralist, but a *genuinely good person*. One who inspires in you admiration and respect. The sort of person you bring to mind to combat the sneaking suspicion that humanity is nothing but selfish assholes, allowing you to say to yourself, "Well, not *everyone* is so bad."

Of course, we think of people like this as behaving in certain ways. They help us up when we fall, give to those in need, and say kind things to others. But we also expect them to have a certain kind of inner life: They won't experience disgust toward people of a certain race or contempt toward those who are weaker than they are. They will feel grateful for benefits they receive and sadness when confronted with various types of human misery. A good person won't merely *express* such states outwardly but will *experience* them inwardly—even when unable to express them.

Questions about the morality of action are, of course, interesting and important questions. In many cases a person's inner life

doesn't matter much at all; I think people should not litter, but in this respect I care very little about the mental life of a stranger in the park, so long as their trash makes it into the garbage can. When I evaluate a *person*, however, it's a different story. It is not enough that my friend simply refrains from *making sexist comments*; it is important to me that he actually *lack a sexist outlook*. What I care about are my friend's inner mental features like his opinions, emotions, and desires.

One way to sharpen the point is to think of Robert Nozick's now infamous experience machine example. In the example, we must choose whether or not to be hooked up to a machine that hyperrealistically simulates any experience we'd like. One of the reasons to choose not to be hooked up to the machine, according to Nozick, is that doing so would destroy one's character. He writes,

> we want to *be* a certain way, to be a certain sort of person. Someone floating in a tank is an indeterminate blob. There is no answer to the question of what a person is like who has long been in the tank. Is he courageous, kind, intelligent, witty, loving? It's not merely that it's difficult to tell; there's no way he is.[1]

Leaving aside the question of whether or not one should choose to be hooked up to such a machine, it's worth considering what it would do to a person's moral character. According to Nozick, someone in the machine no longer has any character. For him, once in the machine, a jerk and a caring person are exactly the same—characterless blobs.

And yet those who enter the machine *can* still be better or worse in many ways. Some are nonmoral: An unimaginative person will

1. Nozick (1974, 43).

continue to be unimaginative, a clever person will still be clever, and a curious person will remain curious. Others are moral: Those who are jealous, spiteful, or cruel can be that way in the machine too. Those in the machine can still think and feel in ways that reflect poorly on their moral character.[2] One can feel the same feelings of racial contempt or schadenfreude in a simulated reality as in real life. Someone who takes great pleasure in experiencing a racially charged lynching in the machine is worse than someone whose pleasures don't involve such ill will. Seeing those in the machine as mere "blobs" ignores the many ways in which inner states are relevant to moral character.

OVERVIEW

In the broadest sense, the central question of the book is this: How does someone's inner life make them a morally better or worse person? Though my answer to this question will be crawling with the terms "virtue" and "vice," I must first admit that I have intense dislike for those terms and have turned to them as a last resort. For many of us, the very words are weighed down too heavily with baggage from ancient Greece to Christianity to Victorian England. When I talk of a vicious person, I do not mean to include someone who has a stutter or who smokes cigarettes; it has little to do with using swear words or wearing provocative clothing. When I talk of a virtuous person, I do not mean to conjure up images of virile "manly" men, chaste "pure" women, or holier-than-thou Puritans. One need not

2. This can also apply to "actions" performed within the machine. Committing a hyperrealistic, simulated rape reflects poorly on one's character. Julia Driver (2007) makes a similar point when she notes that immoral actions in a dream can reflect badly on one's character.

be Ned Flanders to count as a virtuous person. I use these terms primarily because if you want to write in English about what it means to be a morally good or bad person, those are the terms you're stuck with. It is my hope that a different picture of the "virtuous person" will emerge from my discussion—one that better resembles the people that inspire us and make life worthwhile.

I will not be engaged in many of the projects commonly associated with virtue talk. Virtue ethics is often dominated by lists, but I will not attempt to provide a complete list of virtues or even a list of cardinal virtues. My aim is to give an account of the role inner states play in making one a good person. My answer will not involve appealing to a list of morally good traits, but rather explaining what the items on such lists of morally good traits have in common.

Nor will I attempt to ground *all* of morality in the notions of virtue and vice; I will not attempt to derive other moral concepts like rights, well-being, blame, or obligation from virtue concepts.[3] I take virtue to be just *one part* of moral theory, though a rich and distinctive one. Questions about what makes a morally good person are important, but answering them does not provide the key to all other moral questions.

Because of recent work in the Aristotelian tradition, talk of virtues is strongly associated with a metaethical view that identifies goodness with natural human functioning.[4] Though I will call things good and bad, I will not rely on any particular account of the metaphysical nature of moral goodness or badness nor on any particular

3. Some theorists, such as Driver (1996, 111), draw a distinction between virtue *ethics* and virtue *theory*: The project of virtue ethics is to develop a theory of all of morality founded exclusively on virtues and vices, while the project of virtue theory is to provide an explanation of virtues and vices—the what, why, and when of being a good person. This work will be in the realm of virtue theory rather than virtue ethics.

4. See Philippa Foot (2001) and Rosalind Hursthouse (1999) for a defense of this kind of view.

semantics of the associated terms—this is a work in virtue theory, not in metaethical theory. Though I use a person's rights and well-being as paradigmatic cases of moral goods, my account of virtue does not depend on this. If you think there are clearer cases of moral goods, feel free to substitute in your favorite alternative.

Much discussion in virtue ethics, also inspired by Aristotle, is about what it means to live a flourishing human life. I will not assume that moral virtue is sufficient for the good life nor will notions of flourishing or the good life feature prominently in my discussion. I am concerned with the decidedly more narrow question of what it is to be a *morally* good person. Being a morally good person is compatible with being a better or worse person in many other respects.[5]

To talk of someone's character is to talk about what they are like, what sort of person they are. To talk of someone's *moral* character is to talk about what kind of person they are from the moral point of view. This is only a part of their overall character, one side of who they are, albeit a very important one. There are aspects of one's character, their sense of humor or their introversion, which are not part of their moral character. Having a sense of humor or being introverted does not make someone a morally better or worse person, even though those are important aspects of who they are. Again, my focus is on one's moral character, what kind of person someone is, *morally speaking*.

Virtue theory is, at its heart, about evaluating people. We talk about virtues and vices primarily as a way of making moral assessments of ourselves and others.[6] To say that generosity and kindness

5. Susan Wolf (1982) points out how moral virtue and living well more generally can be at odds by highlighting cases where those who are extremely moral often give up projects, pleasures, and relationships with nonmoral value.

6. This characterization is at odds with others, such as John Doris (2005) and Annette Baier (2008), who take virtues and vices to be primarily about predicting or explaining actions. We

are moral virtues is to say that these reflect well on a person's moral character. Virtues are traits that make a good person good; vices are traits that make a bad person bad. To say of a particular state or action that it is virtuous is to say that one is a (at least slightly) better person for it. An act of generosity is virtuous because doing so makes one a better person. Having a kind thought is virtuous because one is at least a slightly better person for having it.

This book has two main aims. The first is to establish a class of inner virtues and vices—states relevant to moral character that are independent of overt, voluntary action. It's not merely what we *do* that makes us virtuous or vicious but what happens to us on the inside; pleasure, emotion, and attention are all relevant to our moral character, even when confined to our inner lives. The second is to offer a substantive, unifying explanation of *how* these various inner states are virtuous or vicious; to explain what these diverse states all have in common that connects them to our moral character.

The essence of my answer is this: To be a good person is to care about moral goods. The most essential feature of a virtuous person is that moral goods like justice and the well-being of others matter to them—they care about such things.[7] Particular states (and actions too, though I will not focus on them) are virtuous by *manifesting* this care—by instantiating it in a particular way.

may use virtue talk in the task of making predictions, but that is at best a useful byproduct. If I want to *explain* why Jane returned the book, I'm willing to bet that action theorists have a better explanation than virtue ethicists.

7. My account is part of a more general family of accounts of virtue that link it with some positive orientation to moral goods. Thomas Hurka (2001) sees it as "loving the goods and hating evils," Robert Adams (2006) as "being for the good," and Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder (2014) as a special kind of intrinsic desire for the good. These accounts have also included discussions of inner states but have not focused on them. I don't mean to claim here that well-being and justice are the *only* moral goods; I just take them to be paradigmatic ones.

It is often natural to talk of particular virtues, to say that Mary is a generous person or that Michael is humble. I will take talk of virtues in general, things like gratitude or humility, to be derivative from particular virtuous states. These are complexes or patterns of states that have similar objects and similar domains—temperance involves a pattern of responses to consumables, patience involves responses to setbacks, and so on. In the case of inner virtues, these are patterns of inner states, mental and emotional responses to moral goods. To put it briefly: A virtuous person is someone who cares about moral goods, and a virtuous state is one that manifests such concern.

Things are a little more complicated in the case of vice. There are two ways to be a vicious person: One can lack concern for some moral goods, or one can care about things that are morally bad. Someone can be unjust by being indifferent to justice *or* by delighting in injustice.[8] Particular states are vicious by manifesting either indifference, a *lack* of concern for moral goods, or a positive, malicious concern for things that are morally bad.

Of course, many of these notions will require further unpacking—especially what it means to *care* about something and what it means for a state to *manifest* this care. Details aside, the essential point is what makes someone a morally good person is that morality *matters* to them in a deep way. Their actions and various aspects of their mental life are virtuous by embodying this concern. First, it will be important to clarify what inner virtues and vices are and why they are important.

8. Some, for example Julia Annas (2011, 102) and Gabriele Taylor (2006, 4–5), deny the existence of the latter type of vice. No one, they claim, *aims* to be vicious. It is not central to my account, but this strikes me as too naïve; many people have the positive aim of becoming less temperate (many college freshmen) or less honest (a budding con artist), often under that description. Aside from such examples, there are many sadistic and cruel people who are vicious even if they do not *aim* to be sadistic and cruel.

INNER VIRTUE AND ITS RELEVANCE

Inner virtues and vices are states relevant to moral character that do not require overt action. Overt action is what we normally think of when we think of actions; they are observable, voluntary bodily behaviors like eating lunch, reading a book, or playing a ukulele. These will contrast with covert actions—internal, mental actions like intentional attending, imagining, contemplating, or deliberating.

Covert actions are distinct from other involuntary mental phenomena, such as emotions or pleasures. Such states are not things we *do*, but things that happen to us. Many of the states I will focus on are not doings at all; feeling jealousy, pleasure, or anger is not something we *do*, though we may do things to encourage or avoid such feelings.

Many states blur the line between voluntary and involuntary. Consider things like breathing or blinking. Most of the time these are automatic events, though if we choose, we can intentionally decide to take deep breaths or blink rapidly. Similarly, sometimes thinking, remembering, or attending is an action, something that I *do*. Other times, however, it is something that *happens to me*. I can try to remember who sat next to me in algebra class or decide to think about my bank account balance. However, the memory of a classmate can also pop into my head, and thoughts about my financial situation can force themselves upon me. Though my discussion will focus on involuntary inner states, much of what I claim will also apply to covert, inner action.

Voluntary or not, what these inner states have in common is that they need not be displayed externally in our overt behavior. Even though they may be commonly associated with overt actions, they

are distinct from externally observable changes in conduct. One can be pleased to hear of a colleague's misfortune without expressing it. One can feel annoyed with a loudmouthed friend without showing it. One can miss a recently deceased friend terribly while keeping all outside appearances as usual. There's a world of difference between *being angry* and *behaving angrily*, between *feeling grateful* and *expressing gratitude*. Though they may normally go together, it's easy to have one without the other.

After discussing inner virtue and vice more generally, I will discuss a variety of mental states in detail. I will defend a variety of particular claims about how, when, and why pleasure, emotion, and conscious attention are relevant to our moral character. What these different types of inner states have in common, I will argue, is that they are all ways that our moral cares or concerns manifest in our mental lives. This explanation illuminates how such a wide variety of inner states can all be virtuous or vicious, how they can all be connected to our moral character.

Inner virtues and vices have both practical and theoretical significance. They are, of course, themselves an important area of moral life, one that has been neglected in recent English-language moral thought. Theorizing about inner virtue highlights the fact that there is more to a person's moral character than their actions and the mental states that accompany them.

Despite how it may seem, inner virtues and vices *are* relevant to everyday practice. Moral development, for example, looks quite different when you aim at cultivating not only certain intentions and overt actions but also at developing pleasures, emotions, thoughts, and habits of attention, many of which may not be outwardly displayed. Keeping in mind the importance of such inner states can also drastically alter our confidence when making moral assessments of

others. Seeing the ways in which we all have morally relevant states that are not easily seen from the outside should make us much more cautious when making such judgments about others.

Ignoring inner states in moral theory can make it tempting to think that a theory of virtue is parasitic on a theory of right or praiseworthy action. Without inner virtues, it can seem as though if we had a complete theory of morally good action, we would get a complete theory of virtue for free—the virtuous person would simply be someone who reliably performs those actions (or at least *intends* to perform them). The existence of inner virtues and vices shows that an account of what it is to be a virtuous person is not a corollary of an account of right action. It is a distinct mode of moral evaluation of its own.

Chapter 2

Inner Virtue and Vice

Recently, ethical theory has been an action-packed discipline. Not because ethics conferences feature car chases or gunfights, but because most discussion focuses on questions about what to *do*. "Which actions," most theorists wonder, "are permissible and which are obligatory? Which are blameworthy?" For many, these are *the* questions that constitute ethics as a discipline; it is seen as a field where we think about moral *agents* and what they should or should not *do*. Allan Gibbard puts this point of view plainly when he writes, "Ethics concerns what to do."[1]

This view of ethics is so pervasive that many philosophers will use the terms "agent" and "person" interchangeably. When inner states are discussed, they tend to be those connected directly with deliberate overt action, such as motives and intentions. I wish to suggest that this focus is a mistake—our inner lives are an interesting and ineliminable part of moral theory, even when involuntary or disconnected from outward behaviors.[2]

1. Gibbard (2003, 13). Here he is echoing G. E. Moore from the first chapter of his *Principia Ethica*: "For when we say that a man is good, we commonly mean that he acts rightly; when we say that drunkenness is a vice, we commonly mean that to get drunk is a wrong or wicked action. And this discussion of human conduct is, in fact, that with which the name Ethics is most intimately associated."
2. Somewhat surprisingly, the virtue ethics literature has also been guilty of excessive focus on voluntary action. Rosalind Hursthouse's (1996, 1999) attempt to show that virtue ethics *can*

Along with this view of ethics as a subject comes a particular way of understanding what it means to be a virtuous person. If ethics is about what to do, then being a morally good person is simply a matter of doing or not doing certain actions. On this approach to moral theory, once we have an account of right action, we get an account of the virtuous person for free: The virtuous person is just someone who does (or is at least *disposed* to do) the morally right actions.

We can include more than a few illustrious thinkers among those who think of virtue in this way: G. E. Moore writes that virtue "may be defined as an habitual disposition to *perform certain actions*" (1903/1993, 221). Henry Sidgwick (1907/1982, 219) defines virtues as "qualities exhibited in *right conduct*" and W. D. Ross (1936/1963, 292) identifies virtue with "tendencies to *behave*." Other prominent proponents of this view include John Rawls, who claims virtues are "sentiments and habitual attitudes leading us to act on certain principles of right" (1971/1999, 383) and Bernard Williams, who calls virtue "a disposition of character to choose or reject *actions* because they are of a certain ethically relevant kind" (1985/1998, 8–9).

This view also appears in more recent philosophical work. So we find Owen Flanagan claiming, "On every view the virtues are psychological dispositions *productive of behavior*" (1991, 282). Gilbert Harman has a similar view, describing virtues as "relatively long-term stable disposition to act in distinctive ways. An honest person is disposed to act honestly. A kind person is disposed to act kindly" (1999, 317). As Harman's comments suggest, this also comes up in discussions of particular virtues: So, for example, Elizabeth Anscombe

give us advice on how to act, that it provides action-guiding "v-rules," has generated much discussion. For just a recent slice, see Everitt (2007), Russell (2009), van Zyl (2009 and 2011), Hurka (2010), Stangl (2010), and Svensson (2010). See also Hacker-Wright (2010), who contrasts the role of right action in Foot and Anscombe with more recent work in virtue ethics.

(1958/1997, 43) and Judith Jarvis Thompson (1997, 280) both take a just person to simply be someone prone to performing just acts; George Sher (2002, 385) makes similar claims about a kind person.[3]

This is not to suggest that this view of the virtuous person is limited to English-language philosophers in the last hundred years. We can also find it in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, an early Indian philosophical text, where many passages explicitly claim that a person is made good by good actions and bad by bad actions.[4] Without belaboring the point, conceiving of the virtuous person in this way, as simply someone who behaves in certain ways, has been very popular for a variety of theorists.

And yet, there *is* much more to moral character than our overt actions. To see this, it will be useful to borrow an example from the philosophy of mind literature; consider a variation of fictional creatures imagined by Galen Strawson:

> **Weather Watchers:** Though appearing to us as giant stone monoliths, they are living creatures with mental lives much

3. The emphasis in all of these quotations is mine. It should be noted that some theorists seem to have this view in some places, but not others. Though Aristotle tells us that it is how we behave in our dealings with others that makes some people just and others unjust and what we do in terrifying situations that makes some people brave and others cowardly (*NE* 1103b14–17), he continues to say that this also applies to our appetites and to emotions such as anger (*NE* 1103b17–18). These states, however, are usually talked about in conjunction with overt action, as when he emphasizes that the continent person is different from the virtuous person (*NE* 1102b26–8 and 1151b43ff); performing a virtuous action is not the same as merely acting in accordance with virtue (*NE* 1105a33). This also happens in non-Aristotelian theory; Julia Driver describes virtue as a disposition to "produce intentional action" (2001, 25 and 107) and claims, "what is crucial is whether or not the person is *disposed* to act well" (2001, 53). However, she also talks about them as dispositions to "feel, behave, or act well" (1996, 124) and describes blind charity as a virtue "in thought rather than in deed" (2001, 28). More recently, she writes, "even when utterly ineffective, we admire good attitudes" (2016, 110). Robert Adams (2006) and Julia Annas (2011) also make claims about virtue that seem to vary in this respect.

4. See *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 3.2.13 and 4.4.5, among other passages.

> like our own—they have thoughts, memories, desires, emotions, sensations, and even fantasies and dreams. These creatures care very deeply about the weather; they are filled with joy when it is sunny out and melancholy when it rains or snows. Because of their physiology, they are completely incapable of any behavioral action—their rigid, heavy bodies are too firmly rooted to the ground to allow for any movement. Nevertheless, they do have various ways to sense the weather: Their hard exteriors can detect moisture, temperature, and even subtle pressure changes. Their stationary compound eyes are very perceptive and can see quite well in many directions at once. However, none of their rich mental lives are externally observable and, because of the kind of creatures they are, they are unable to perform overt actions of any kind. From the outside they are immobile sculptures, but internally they are very much alive.[5]

Just as beings like us cannot fly through the air unaided, see ultraviolet light, or be physically present in two places at the same time, Weather Watchers cannot do things like run away from the rain or physically harm another Weather Watcher. They will even lack the associated intentions—human beings may *wish* for or *dream* of being in two places at once or seeing ultraviolet light, but cannot *plan* or *intend* to do such things. So, too, with Weather Watchers; they may wish they could run from the rain or dream of rolling around in the sunshine, but they cannot do such things nor have the associated intentions.

In an extreme version of the case, Weather Watchers cannot even perform covert actions like performing mental arithmetic

5. This is my own description inspired by the one found in Strawson (1994, 251ff.).

or voluntarily focusing their attention; they cannot have intentions and are not rightly called agents at all. Such extreme Weather Watchers could be morally assessable by having the kinds of inner, involuntary states I will emphasize. Because my focus is on inner states more generally, I will stick to the less extreme case of Weather Watchers who can perform inner, covert actions (and have the associated intentions) but cannot perform or intend overt, external actions. It is worth keeping in mind that many of the states I will focus on are morally assessable independently of any associated covert actions.

If moral character is determined by our overt actions, then Weather Watchers will turn out to be completely amoral beings. If being virtuous is just a matter of reliably doing morally good actions, then Weather Watchers are neither virtuous nor vicious. Evaluated in this way, they seem to be, as Nozick might say, mere blobs. After all, they cannot help or harm anyone. They cannot make, steal, or donate anything; they cannot murder, rescue, cheat, help, or abuse anyone. Whatever psychological tendencies they have, they are not productive of behavior. If morality is about telling us what we should *do*, then morality seems to have little to say about creatures like Weather Watchers.

And yet, though unable to perform overt actions, there are many ways in which Weather Watchers *can* be morally virtuous or vicious. Just as they can feel relief when a storm is over and anxiety when there are dark clouds on the horizon, Weather Watchers can feel sorrow and grief over the fact that some of their fellow creatures are rooted in horrible climates, enduring near constant rainfall. A Weather Watcher can feel envious of another's sunny location or take malevolent pleasure in seeing a fellow Weather Watcher getting soaked in a storm. Or if, after such an intense storm, a fallen tree obscures the view of other Weather Watchers, one may wonder how

the others are doing and worry about their well-being. They are capable of feeling disgust and contempt for Weather Watchers that are missing an eye or deformed in some other way. Just as they might vividly imagine a sunny day in the midst of a terrible storm, they are capable of dwelling in gruesome and graphic fantasies involving the torment of their neighbors.

These features of inner life make a Weather Watcher morally better or worse despite not involving overt action and, in many cases, not involving action at all. Even without the ability to perform overt actions, Weather Watchers can have moral character. Their inner lives afford them a wide variety of ways of being virtuous or vicious. If there were a heaven and hell for Weather Watchers, the deity in charge of passing judgment would not be forced to abstain, with a divine shrug of the shoulders, because there is nothing for her to judge. Rather, there are a wide variety of features of their inner lives that would allow her to sort the good-hearted ones from the wicked.

Talk of imaginary creatures like Weather Watchers is likely to strike many as simply too outlandish. It can feel like a stretch to suppose that science-fiction scenarios involving bizarre, sentient statues can tell us anything about moral character in flesh-and-blood human beings.[6] There is something to this sentiment; after all, what we think of as virtuous and vicious often depends on the kind of creatures we are. If we were not the kind of beings who consume food and drink, there would be no such virtue as temperance. If we were not the kinds of beings that experience fear, we would not

6. Philippa Foot (1979, 8–14), for example, claims that virtues counter common *human* temptations to vice. She uses the example of courage; if humans had no temptation to run from danger or avoid painful facts, there would be no such virtue as courage. This notion of courage strikes me as far too narrow—after all, a Weather Watcher could courageously face an impending hurricane despite being unable to run away. I am, however, sympathetic with the general spirit of her claim.