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INTELLIGENT VIRTUE

JULIA ANNAS

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1

Introduction

This book aims to produce an account of virtue. Do we need one? In the last two decades there has been a deep and widespread revival of interest in virtue and systems of ethics centred on virtue, and we have had theories featuring versions of virtue presented in the tradition of Aristotle, the Stoics, Hume, Adam Smith, Kant, Nietzsche, and even consequentialism. It is reasonable to wonder whether we need yet another account of virtue. I have two reasons for thinking that the answer is yes. One is that these debates have made it clear that different theories do not share an agreed conception of what virtue is. It seems worthwhile, then, to begin with virtue, rather than with a type of ethical theory, and to see what kind of account can be produced. Even though disagreement will certainly remain, we may be able, if we can focus clearly on an account of virtue, to see more plainly ways in which disputes between kinds of ethical theory centring on virtue depend on their claims about what virtue is, and so we may be able to get a better view of the alternatives within this ethical tradition.

Second, I think that the present distinctive account of virtue results from attending to two ideas. One is that exercising a virtue involves practical reasoning of a kind that can illuminatingly be compared to the kind of reasoning we find in someone exercising a practical skill. Rather than asking at the start how virtues relate to rules, principles, maximizing, or a final end, we will gain by looking at the way in which the acquisition and exercise of virtue can be seen to be in many ways like the acquisition and exercise of more mundane activities, such as farming, building, or playing the piano. The other idea is that virtue is part of the agent's happiness or flourishing, and that it is plausible to see virtue as actually constituting (wholly or in part) that happiness. I shall develop these ideas in turn, but by the end of this book it should be clear that they are interrelated.

These two ideas turn up as familiar themes in the ancient ethical theories that I have studied for many years, and I have come to think them applicable to contemporary debates about virtue. Contemporary theories, of course, need support from, and relevance to, contemporary concerns, and the features of the skill analogy that I shall be focusing on overlap only partially with those that interest the ancients—unsurprisingly, since in a very different culture the skills we emphasize are different and we are interested in different aspects of them. What results is a distinctive approach to virtue ethics, one that runs contrary not just to many contemporary assumptions in ethics but to the assumptions of some contemporary virtue ethical theorists. This approach can be judged, I hope, by its attractions and its promise as a contemporary ethical theory.

The idea that the practical reasoning of the virtuous person shares important features with that of the expert in a practical skill is often referred to simply as the skill analogy. Some readers may come to think that 'analogy' is not the best term for a relation so close that some have come to think of virtue as itself being a kind of skill; but what is most important is to bring out the shared features and their importance. The idea that virtue constitutes (wholly or in part) the happiness or flourishing of the virtuous person will be discussed when I get to the part of the book on happiness in the tradition of thought which has been called eudaimonist. In the discussion of eudaimonism in Ch. 8 I face the question of whether we should think in terms of the agent's happiness, or whether modern influences on our use of that term are a barrier to that, and make it better to use the term 'flourishing'. Until that chapter I shall use the term 'flourishing', since the discussion will be neutral on that issue up till then, and a more neutral term is preferable.

I will plunge into developing the theory without first defending the skill analogy and eudaimonism in the abstract. There are two reasons for this. First, these terms are not part of contemporary ethical debate (indeed they are often misunderstood). Trying to establish them by offering definitions, or necessary and sufficient conditions, would fail to engage with familiar terms of ethical debate; moreover, it would miss the important point that these ideas are far more intuitive and empirically rooted than often assumed. Working from the ground up helps to make this clear. Second, I aim to present virtue and flourishing as parts of a theory in which neither of them is, in modern terms, foundational (in this the theory is like some ancient ones). Virtue and flourishing are both central in it, but neither is a basis or foundation from which other parts of the theory can be derived, nor do they jointly form such a foundation. Rather, the theory is holistic in structure; the different parts are mutually supportive. This is, obviously, something that can be apparent only by the end of the book.

I shall develop an account of virtue in which I show how central to it is the idea that the practical reasoning of the virtuous person is analogous, in important ways (which I will bring out in turn) to the practical reasoning of someone who is exercising a practical skill. This will go on to illuminate various aspects of virtue, and will in turn enable us to meet in a satisfactory way various kinds of objection that have been raised to the project of making virtue central to an ethical theory. I will then show how a virtue ethical theory with this conception of virtue enables us to see how virtue is constitutive (wholly or in part) of the agent's flourishing. Many contemporary virtue ethical theories see virtue as having a further aim, but one other than the agent's flourishing. This work will fall short of exhaustive arguments against them, but will show at least how their failure to connect virtue to eudaimonistic flourishing leads to problems for them, and also connects to their failure to deal with aspects of virtue that the skill analogy illuminates. The project is not intended to be an exhaustive discussion of all the disputable issues involved in a theory of virtue, but it will shed light on some: the unity of virtue, the relation between virtue as an ideal and virtue in everyday life, the relation between being virtuous and doing the right thing, and some others.

Two points about method will now be flagged. First, the following account focuses on the virtue of individual people, and although I stress, heavily, the importance of social context for the development and exercise of the virtues, this is a contribution to ethical rather than to social and political thinking; thus I discuss justice as the personal virtue of fairness rather than as a virtue of institutions.

Second, I talk throughout ot what 'we' think and say. Who are 'we'? I take this to be an inclusive, invitational, use of 'we' rather than an exclusive one privileging the views of the writer and those like her.[1] 'We' are the readers of this book, as well as the writer. If you, an individual reader, find yourself disagreeing about a claim, this is relevant to your receptivity to the account as a whole. The account, however, is not presented as a theory which can be refuted by a single counterexample, nor as a theory with foundations such that if these are weakened the superstructure collapses. In both respects the account is holistic: virtue and happiness are central in it, but not foundational, and the account answers to our experience as a whole. Disgreement with some aspects of the account thus does not cut off the possibility of agreement over others. Further, I use the term 'account' rather than 'theory' to avoid the idea that I am doing something common in philosophy, namely setting up a 'theory' on the basis of 'intuitions'. To accept this as a description of what I am doing would be to accept assumptions I am concerned to avoid, mainly the idea that the notion of 'intuition' can be introduced without a philosophical account of what intuitions are, something I do not have. In what follows I talk simply about what we think and believe about virtue, and also about skill and expertise.[2] I will return to the issue of methodology in the final chapter.

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[1] Bernard Williams (1985) has perceptive remarks on the use of 'we' in this connection.

In what follows I bring out a number of different points about virtue, which, I hope, develop into a cumulative whole.

In Ch. 2 I make the preliminary point that virtue is dispositional; a virtue is a disposition of character to act reliably, not a passing mood or an attitude. Nor is it just a trait or a mere disposition to perform acts that have been independently labelled as virtuous. Further, a disposition has to be acquired by habituation, but a virtue is not a matter of being habituated to routine. It expresses the kind of habituation that a skill does, one in which the agent becomes more intelligent in performance rather than routinized.

In Ch. 3 the skill analogy helps to show us how a virtue can be learnt and taught. Like learning a skill, learning a virtue requires us initially to trust the teacher and the context of learning, but also to go on to act from our own independent understanding. The important point emerges that this account of virtue is essentially developmental; we must always distinguish between the expert and the learner. The analogy with practical skill further helps us to see how thinking in terms of virtue can guide action; here I raise the issue of the relation of virtuous action to right action. We can then appreciate how the kind of learning involved in acquiring a virtue always takes place within an already given social and cultural context, but also always involves the aspiration to do better.

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[2] This is another reason for avoiding talk of 'intuitions', since intuitions about virtue are often taken to be 'moral intuitions', and, whatever these are, we surely do not have them about building or plumbing.

A problem remains for this picture, discussed in Ch. 4. If virtue is always learnt in given social and cultural contexts, and the learning of virtue requires that we progress by first trusting the teacher and teaching context, will the result not be essentially conservative? Virtue involves aspiration, but will the aspiration be strong enough to criticize the contexts and institutions within which virtue has been learnt? The answer is yes: this charge underestimates the resources of virtue, at least on this conception of it.

In Ch. 5 I turn to the point that any account of virtue should be able to say something about the difference between the virtuous person and the person who does do the virtuous thing, but reluctantly and against his inclinations. Virtue requires not just acting on reasons, but having the right feelings and attitudes, doing virtuous actions in an easy and unconflicted way that is characteristically enjoyed. This is generally taken to mark a sharp distinction between virtue and skill, since skill can be exercised without the right feelings, and is not usually associated with enjoyment. However, I argue that here too the skill analogy can help us to get on the right track for understanding the way in which virtue requires agreement of reason and feeling. I appeal to some contemporary psychology of pleasure (of a kind that fits Aristotle's approach to pleasure, though not that of most contemporary philosophers). There remain, of course, important differences between virtue and skill, but these support, rather than undermine, the analogy.

In Ch. 6 I turn to some important implications of the account so far, particularly the role in virtue of practical reasoning. We are led, I argue, to see the development of the virtues as aspects of an overall and unified development of character, and thus to see that there is much to be said for a version of the idea that the virtues form a unity. This discussion also brings out the ways in which virtue functions as an ideal in this theory, and how the ideal is related to virtue in everyday contexts.

The account of virtue is cumulative; each chapter has examined an aspect of virtue, so that we have built up an account of virtue from critical reflection on the analogy of skill. Chapter 7 takes up two important points about virtue that are independent of the skill analogy. Virtues are unlike other dispositions, such as wittiness, tidiness, or punctuality, in two ways: first, a virtue is admirable for itself; if we find a disposition valued as excellent is so valued merely instrumentally, it is not a virtue. Virtues are dispositions worthy of a distinct kind of admiration, which inspire us to aspire to them as ideals. I discuss how this distinguishes between virtues and other dispositions.

Second, a virtue requires a commitment to value. For a disposition to be a virtue, possessing it involves the person's orientation to something the person takes to be valuable. Some 'pluralist' theories stop at the stage of finding different values as the aims of different virtues; others unify these values as different aspects of the good. At this point there are many options, corresponding to different conceptions of what the good is that virtue is committed to.

Chapter 8 turns to the task of showing how virtue is related to our flourishing, and whether we can reasonably take eudaimonistic flourishing to be happiness. First, we have to distinguish between various different understandings of happiness. It is not episodes of feeling, or just getting what you want, but something achieved over a life as a whole. I introduce the notion of happiness in the eudaimonist tradition, and show how it avoids dilemmas that confront some modern accounts of happiness, and, unlike the latter, gives us a satisfying framework for ethical thought.

Chapter 9 takes up the challenge of showing that the virtues can plausibly be taken to constitute (wholly or in part) the agent's happiness or flourishing. The main obstacles to this come from the aspects of virtue brought out in Ch. 7, but I shall show that these problems can be met, and that theories which hold that virtue's commitment to value conflicts with eudaimonism run into problems which make their theories unattractive. I shall then show that we do justice to the points we have seen developed about virtue in the earlier chapters only if we do take virtue to be constitutive (wholly or in part) of the agent's happiness or flourishing.

Given the argument so far, we can see how the claims that virtue is either necessary, or necessary and sufficient, for the agent's flourishing are not far-fetched and implausible, but have much appeal to many of our everyday thoughts. We can also see why, with due caution, it is not unreasonable to think of flourishing as happiness.

In Ch. 10 I return to the issue of methodology, reiterating the point that I have stood aside from the philosophical project of producing a 'theory' as opposed to 'intuitions'. Rather I have sketched a holistic account whose claim to acceptance comes partly from the way it hangs together and partly from its answering to the way we regard virtue and happiness in our experience. I suggest briefly that further backing for the claims I make could well come from philosophically informed research in psychology. Critics of the so-called 'situationist' challenge to virtue have established that we need more sophisticated research than hitherto on the nature of virtue, and I think it is clear that we will be helped by empirical study of practical skills and the ways in which virtue is similar to them.

This way of proceeding inevitably brings the disadvantage that a straightforward account of the kind I propose will probably seem mundane at first, and it may take a while for the material in the early chapters to appear as a coherent whole with the resources to produce arguments against alternatives. I hope that the patient reader will be rewarded for forgoing, at the start, sophisticated arguments against contemporary alternatives in favour of working up from what is, as Aristotle says, familiar to us.

2

Virtue, Character, and Disposition

In ordinary life, although we may not often use the term 'virtue', we think and talk all the time in terms of virtues. We think (and frequently say) of others and ourselves that we are generous or stingy, kind or mean, helpful or selfish. What are we talking about? People, obviously, but are we focusing on their actions, their feelings, or something else?

What is it for Jane to be generous? It is not merely that she does a generous action, or has a generous feeling. Either or both could be true without Jane's being generous. She may have done a generous action, suppressing her normal stinginess, in order to impress a friend who really is generous and will respond favourably to her action. She may have had a generous feeling triggered by a sentimental song she has just heard. In neither case is *she* generous, because the action and feeling neither come from nor lead to anything lasting. For Jane to be generous, generosity has to be a feature of *her*—that is, a feature of Jane as a whole, and not just any old feature, but one that is persisting, reliable, and characteristic.

A virtue is a lasting feature of a person, a tendency for the person to be a certain way. It is not merely a lasting feature, however, one that just sits there undisturbed. It is *active:* to have it is to be disposed to act in certain ways. And it *develops* through selective response to circumstances. Given these points, I shall use the term *persisting* rather than merely lasting. Jane's generosity, supposing her to be generous, persists through challenges and difficulties, and is strengthened or weakened by her generous or ungenerous responses respectively. Thus, although it is natural for us to think of a virtue as a disposition, we should be careful not to confuse this with the scientific notion of disposition, which just is a static lasting tendency. A classic example is that glass has a disposition to break under certain circumstances. This is not the notion we need, since glass does not have a disposition by way of *doing* anything, nor can it learn to develop selectively as a result of encounters with different circumstances. A virtue is not a static condition like this; it is a disposition as a result of which Jane acts and thinks in a certain way, and which is at any time strengthened by her generous responses and weakened by failures to have them. If she is generous, her generous actions and feelings both come from a virtue and fortify it.

A virtue is also a *reliable* disposition. If Jane is generous, it is no accident that she does the generous action and has generous feelings. We would have been surprised, and shocked, if she had failed to act generously, and looked for some kind of explanation. Our friends' virtues and vices enable us to rely on their responses and behaviour—to a certain extent, of course, since none of us is virtuous enough to be completely reliable in virtuous response and action. This is an aspect of virtue which we are more aware of in others than ourselves; we have some idea of who can be counted on to be generous or stingy when collecting for disaster relief or a wedding present, even when we surprise ourselves sometimes by our readiness, or reluctance, to give.

Further, a virtue is a disposition which is *characteristic*—that is, the virtuous (or vicious) person is acting in and from character when acting in a kindly, brave or restrained way. This is another way of putting the point that a virtue is a *deep* feature of the person. A virtue is a disposition which is central to the person, to whom he or she is, a way we standardly think of character. I might discover that I have an unsuspected talent for Sudoku, but this, although it enlarges my talents, does not alter my character. But someone who discovers in himself an unsuspected capacity to feel and act on compassion, and who develops this capacity, does come to change as a person, not just in some isolated feature; he comes to have a changed character.[1]

One point is implicit right from the start in a virtue's being a disposition of the person to be a certain way, a disposition which expresses itself in acting, reasoning, and feeling in certain ways. This is that we do not, as in some kinds of theory, start with an account of what it is to make virtuous judgements and then, separately, go on to an account of how the person can be motivated to act according to these. Our motivations to be fair, brave, and so on are not extra ingredients that have to be sought for after the account of virtuous judgement has been developed. We *already* start with motivations, and our dispositions are ways in which those motivations have been educated and developed. To ask how someone who thinks he should act bravely can *then* be motivated to be brave is a mistake. It is to forget that a brave person is not someone who has learned about bravery, decided that he should be brave, and then somehow found a motivation to follow up on this. He is someone whose existing character tendencies have been formed in such a way that he acts, reasons, and reacts bravely, rather than in some other way. This is why virtue is a disposition which is from the start an active and developing one. It is not a passive product of a string of impacts from outside; it is the way I (or you), an active creature, develops a character through formation and education.

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[1] There are other dispositions, neither virtues nor vices, such as a disposition to be tidy, punctual, or hardworking, for example, which could in some circumstances come to be central to a person. We won't be in a position until Ch. 7 to see why these are not virtues.

As we shall see several times in this book, it is crucial to bear in mind that by the time we reflect about virtues, we already have some (and vices, and a lot of traits which are neither). We have developed to have the characters that we have by having been brought up and educated, and then living and reflecting, in ways that developed and built character in certain ways. This did not involve injecting new motivations into us, but in forming the unformed motivations that we start with. Aristotle discusses what he calls 'natural virtue', the character tendencies that we have before learning about virtue and vice. Some of these tendencies already suggest virtue, but, as we can see readily from studying small children, many do not. As parents and teachers know well, we teach children to be fair and honest not by teaching them what they should do and then trying to interest them in having a new motivation to do this. Rather, we try to educate and form motivations that are present already.

Both the reliability of a virtue and its being expressive of character have been challenged in recent years. Some philosophers have relied on results in social psychology to make two claims. One is that our actions are brought about much more than we think by the impact of the situation we are in and much less by the influence of our character traits.[2] If this were true, it would cast doubt on the reasonableness of taking virtue as a central concept in ethics. It would, for a start, cast doubt on the account I have just given of how the virtues are educated developments of our unformed motivations. The other claim is that the practical reasoning on which we act is, in ways that we are unaware of, faulty; we act on the basis of mistaken reasoning, and sometimes in ways that bypass reason altogether. We will return to these issues later (in Ch. 10), when we have a fuller account of virtue, since we clearly do not have enough material in hand at this point for there to be a fruitful discussion.

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[2] The terms I use in this account of virtue are meant to be ordinary and accessible, and do not conform to those familiar in the 'situationist' debates about virtue. I treat virtue as a disposition in a broader sense than the one it has in this literature, where 'disposition' is standardly *opposed* to a trait sensitive to situations. (See Russell (2009: pt. III).) Similarly, I have

We can, however, ask at this point why we make the disposition of the generous person central to an account of generosity. Actions and feelings are just as correctly called generous as are people. Perhaps a generous person is just a person disposed to do generous actions and to have generous feelings?[3] If so, we will be taking the actions and feelings to be more basic than the disposition, since we will need to be able to identify generous actions and feelings independently in order to understand that Jane is a generous person, disposed to do generous actions and to have generous feelings. For it would obviously be circular to say that Jane is generous because she does generous actions, if we could say no more about these actions than that they are the actions of a generous person.

We will see in the next chapter why this is not the right way to think of the relation between virtuous disposition and virtuous actions. At that point we will see that the fact that we can, as a matter of fact, identify generous actions and feelings before having a good grasp of generous dispositions is no objection to making virtuous dispositions central to an ethics of virtue.

There is, however, another point we can make at this stage. If generosity is just the disposition to do generous actions and to have generous feelings, the question arises why we would value having a *disposition* to do and feel these things. Why ever do we value having persisting, reliable, and characteristic dispositions to do and to feel these things? One response might be that we value the disposition to do generous actions because we

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used 'persistent' to suggest the active aspect of virtue and 'reliable' to suggest those aspects of it wider than mere frequent performance of stereotypical actions. Both persistence and reliability cover consistency of response in the same type of situation and also 'cross-situational consistency' over different types of situation.

[3] Thomson (1997), Hurka (2006).

value the performance of generous actions, and if a person has a generous disposition then she will probably produce more of them than someone without such a disposition.[4] On this view thoughts about the value of dispositions will always be dependent upon thoughts about the value of actions and feelings. This conflicts sharply, though, with our everyday thinking about virtues; when we praise someone as loyal we are praising *them*, and it is absurd to suggest that this is really based on (subconscious?) calculations about how many loyal actions they will perform and loyal feelings they will have.

Since virtue is a disposition of the above kind, becoming virtuous will naturally take time. Scrooge may have been converted suddenly to compassion and kindliness on Christmas Eve, but the story is careful to tell us that he continued over time the process of becoming a compassionate person. Coming to see that being loyal or brave is a worthwhile way to live is just the first step. Becoming virtuous requires habituation and experience. We encounter habituation first through our education, both in school and in the family. We are not just told what to do but given role models and encouraged to act in ways that promote and show appreciation of loyalty or bravery. Either in real life or in books or movies we experience (really or vicariously) situations where people behave loyally or disloyally, and we are encouraged to find what makes them praiseworthy or blameable. We need experience to understand what it is to be loyal or brave, and our experience is guided through habituation by parents, educators, and the ways our culture impinges on us.[5] We are trained and formed through being habituated to act in loyal and brave ways and to respond positively to presentations of loyalty and bravery. Small children, for example, are discouraged from cruelty to animals, and read and see stories where cruel children are presented negatively. They are encouraged to share their possessions, and told stories where generosity is rewarded and selfishness is presented as repellent.

It is natural to worry at this point whether habituation is just habit, and whether a virtuous disposition is just one built up by force of habit. Our experience leads us, in a number of areas of our lives, to develop habits which save time and effort. If developing a virtue is like this, why should we think it amounts to anything more than habit and even mere routine?

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[4] If we think it obvious that more is always better, of course. Generosity is a case casting some doubt on this, since an efficient way to produce more generous actions will often be to prolong, rather than to remove, the need met by generosity; but this can hardly be the product of *generosity*.

[5] We may reasonably worry whether this starting-point can be adequate to produce developed ethical thought: this issue will be discussed in Ch. 4.

Here is an example of habit becoming routine. I drive to my university job every day, following the same route to the parking garage. At first I have to think consciously about the best way to do this, avoiding traffic without going too far from the most direct way, modifying the route at different times of day and so on. Gradually I become used to driving on this route, and it becomes habit with me. I no longer have to think about which way to turn at every corner, where to slow down and the like. My driving has become routine. This does not make it mindless: I am still at some level aware of where I am going, since I stop at red lights, drive at the right speed, and behave cautiously around dangerous drivers. But driving has become detached from my conscious thinking, and my conscious and deliberate thoughts may fail to be properly integrated with it. I may find myself at the garage when I started out intending to go somewhere else en route, or find myself at the usual entrance even when I know it is closed for construction. A decision to act differently from usual has not penetrated the patterns of routine, which carry on unaffected. A change to routine has to be conscious, explicit, and sometimes repeated if it is to have appropriate impact.

Virtue is unlike routine in a host of ways. But rather than simply claiming this, we shall first look at cases where habituation does not lead to routine—practical skills. Suppose I am learning to play the piano. As with driving, I need first to work out consciously what is the right thing to do and then get used to doing it over and over again. This goes on from learning notes to learning scales and arpeggios and then learning how to play sonatas. As I become a skilled piano player (here the 'I' becomes fictional) I can play sonatas and other pieces in a way that, as with driving, proceeds without conscious thinking. My fingers pick out the right notes in the right relation to one another at the right speed, without anything like a decision or conscious thought before each action of striking the keys.

When we see the speed with which a skilled pianist produces the notes we might be tempted to think that constant repetition and habit have transformed the original experience, which required conscious thought, into mere routine. But this is completely wrong. The expert pianist plays in a way not dependent on conscious input, but the result is not mindless routine but rather playing infused with and expressing the pianist's thoughts about the piece. Further, the pianist continues to improve her playing. The way she plays exhibits not only increased technical mastery but increased intelligence—better ways of dealing with transitions between loud and soft, more subtle interpretations of the music, and so on. Rather than the rest of the mind being shut off from patterns of routine and proceeding independently, the ability, though a habituated one, is constantly informed by the way the person is thinking. If the pianist resolves to play the first movement in a different way, her playing will all reflect this in subtle ways; she won't 'wake up' and find herself at the end having played it the previous way, as I find myself at the parking garage despite having intended to go elsewhere. The practical mastery is at the service of conscious thought, not at odds with it.

This is, of course, an idealized picture; no doubt pianists do sometimes 'wake up' to find they have played the piece the standard way. But if so, this is a failure in the skill: if practical skills become routine they ossify and decay. Actual pianists also become worse as well as better at their skill, as any pianist will tell you. This emphasizes the point that a habituated activity does not reach a plateau of routine which, once established, is unchanging and can be left alone; it needs constant monitoring for improvement or worsening. Skilled dispositions are not static conditions; they are always developing, being sustained or weakened.

One of the major suggestions of this book is that virtue is like practical skill in this respect (as well as some others). Because a virtue is a disposition it requires time, experience, and habituation to develop it, but the result is not routine but the kind of actively and intelligently engaged practical mastery that we find in practical experts such as pianists and athletes.

The intelligence displayed in an expert tennis player's strategy, for example, has come from practice and habituation, but it is not mindlessly repetitive. Similarly, a brave person (not someone who has just decided to be brave, or read a book about it, but someone who has become brave as a result of habituation) is now disposed to be brave in a way which is persistent, reliable, and characteristic. But when faced by an occasion when he should face risk or danger for something worthwhile, his response is not a mechanical, habit-based one. Like the expert tennis player, he responds directly to the situation in an intelligent way, one which takes account of all the relevant factors; habituation has sharpened rather than blunted his response. Bravery may be shown by rushing to the rescue; it may also be shown by first carefully assessing the situation. Loyalty may be shown by unflagging support; it may also be shown by seriously questioning the person who demands unflagging support.

A central feature of routine is that the reaction to the relevant situation is always the same, which is why routine can be depended on and predicted. But practical skill and virtue require more than predictably similar reaction; they require a response which is appropriate to the situation instead of merely being the same as that produced in response to other situations. This appropriateness comes from the habituated disposition that a virtue is. As Aristotle says: 'It . . . seems to be characteristic of the more courageous person to be unafraid and unruffled in sudden alarms rather than to be so in those that are foreseen; it comes more from his state of character [*hexis*, often translated 'disposition'], because less from preparation. Foreseen actions can be rationally chosen on the basis of calculation and reason, but unforeseen ones only in virtue of one's state of character.'[6] Virtues, which are states of character, are states that enable us to respond in creative and imaginative ways to new challenges. No routine could enable us to do this.

The analogy with practical skill, then, enables us to see how virtue can be a disposition requiring habituation without becoming mere routine.[7] I have introduced the skill analogy in a way which I hope indicates how important it is for understanding virtue. Much more remains now to be said about it, what it reveals about virtue, and what its limitations are.

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[6] Aristotle (2000), *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Crisp, 1117^{a}17–22.

[7] Many of Kant's problems with virtue spring from suspicion that habituation will produce mere routine, virtuous actions being performed mechanically and thus without the proper participation of the agent's will.

3

Skilled and Virtuous Action

Skill and Virtue: The Need to Learn and the Drive to Aspire

Virtue is different from mere routine in a way we can also discern in practical skills such as piano playing and tennis. What is the basis of this similarity?

It is one which is not to be found in every example of everything that we are prepared to call a skill. Some practical skills do seem to involve mere routine—this is true of daily activities such as getting to work which we are sometimes prepared to call skills, though at other times we call them routines or rituals.[1] Nor is it true of skills where there is a large contribution from natural talent; where this is the case, the similarity we are interested in does not apply to the contribution made by talent. (In the contemporary world athletic skills are usually developed in a context of competition, and a particular skill may only be developed where there is enough natural talent to win competitions; nonetheless we can appreciate the exercise of skill apart from this.) We find the important similarity of virtue to skill in skills where two things are united: the *need to learn* and the *drive to aspire*.

Aristotle famously notes an important similarity between virtue and skill: both are practical, and so can be learned only by practice, by actually doing what needs to be done. Moreover, both involve *learning*. '[W]hat we need to learn to do, we learn by doing; for example, we become builders by building, and lyre-players by playing the lyre. So too we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions and courageous by courageous actions.'[2]

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[1] This account thus has little in common either with those which emphasize virtue as 'know-how', or with those which take the virtuous person to rely on immediate sensitivities to navigate the world. Neither of these kinds of account puts emphasis on aspiration. See Clark and Churchland (2000), Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1990). 'Know-how' is often used in a way which obliterates the distinction between learner and expert, which is so important in this account.

Building is not what we think of as a particularly intellectual skill, but there is still no such thing as learning to be a builder mindlessly, by rote copying. Even simple building skills are not easy or effortless to learn; they involve more than copying a role model and then learning by repetition how to do it routinely. We need experience and practice, and we have to learn from someone who can teach us. But from the start something is conveyed in the teaching which is not grasped by the person who merely tries to do exactly what the teacher does. The learner needs to trust the teacher to be doing the right thing to follow and copy, and to be conveying the right information and ways of doing things. And further, from the start the learner of a skill needs also what I have called the drive to aspire, manifesting itself first in the need the learner has to understand what she is doing if she is to learn properly.

The learner needs to *understand* what in the role model to follow, what the point is of doing something this way rather than that, what is crucial to the teacher's way of doing things a particular way and what is not. A learner who fails to do this will simply copy the teacher's mannerisms and style along with the teacher's exact way of doing things. But this is clearly a failure to learn the skill, not a success. Imagine a pianist whose goal is to play like Alfred Brendel, but mistakenly thinks that she will achieve this by copying all his mannerisms and niceties of style, playing only the pieces he plays and playing them just as he plays them. The result would be an impersonation of Brendel, not the achievement of his skill. The person who really learns to play in a way that could be called 'playing like Brendel' might do so in playing quite different pieces, in different ways from Brendel, but in ways that show that she has learnt about playing from Brendel and grasped what is central to his style.

What the learner needs to do is not only to learn from the teacher or role model how to understand what she has to do and the way to do it, but to become able to acquire *for herself* the skill that the teacher has, rather than acquiring it as a matter of routine, something which results in becoming a clone-like impersonator. To acquire the skill you have to be able to do it yourself, rather than stopping at a plateau of routine, where you can turn off thinking about further improvement. This is a point familiar in a whole range of skills: the moment comes when you have to stop just following the teacher and play, skate, dance, speak in Italian, for yourself. It is also clear that this is the point of the instruction: if you can't do it yourself in a way that is not merely parroting the teacher then you have not yet learned the skill. This point about self-direction links naturally to the first point: you have to make the effort to understand what you have been taught, and to grasp it for yourself, because this is the point at which you can exercise the skill in a self-directed way.

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[2] Aristotle (2000), *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Crisp, 1103^{a}32–^{b}2.

Finally, aspiration leads the learner to strive to *improve,* to do what he is doing better rather than taking it over by rote from the teacher. This is what a lot of practice is about—not perfecting a routinized movement but learning to do what is being done, but better: how to steer a car, skate a double axel, translate Homer, clear a hurdle. That there is this aspiration to improve might be doubted, since it often seems to disappointed teachers that some learners lack it, and have to be unwillingly prodded to go through the motions. These are, however, people who are not learning. The disappointed teachers will notice on their tests that they simply parrot what they have been taught, and have not learnt it; with physical skills they never advance to the next level. Where the aspiration to improve fails, we lapse into simple repetition and routine. This is a very demanding feature of a skill.[3]

Does the need to improve eventually recede, or is it always present? If it is, this seems to imply that nobody can master a skill completely. The need to improve never in fact entirely disappears, but the implication is simply that mastery of a skill is incompatible with its being mere routine; experts in a skill need to maintain it as a skill and not mere routine. Expert pianists, golfers, and climbers face this issue: if they don't use the skill they lose it, though they may retain mastery of technical matters required to exercise the skill. Experts thus face the same issues as learners, though in a modified form, since they have more resources of self-directed activity to draw on.

What is involved in coming to have a skill in this way, learning partly consisting in the drive to aspire? Something has been conveyed from the expert to the learner which cannot be reduced to showing the learner something to repeat. So far I have talked of the point of the activity. This may be a simple aim, easily understood, or it may be something more complex, involving grasp of a principle or a set of principles. Learning how to fix a computer involves more complexity than learning to ride a bicycle. The more complexity, the more there is to learning to exercise the skill for yourself.

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[3] It is the point at which some may feel that the notion of a skill here has been made too demanding, since we do not demand aspiration to improve in tying our shoelaces and a range of such activities. This point, however, really tells against calling such routine activities skills.

With skills of any complexity, what is conveyed from the expert to the learner will require the giving of reasons. The learner electrician and plumber need to know not just *that* you do the wiring or pipe-laying such and such a way, but *why*. An electrician needs to know more than she can learn by rote, since she will be dealing with a variety of different situations and will need to adapt what she has learnt to these; lessons learned by rote could lead to disastrous mistakes. Reasons enter in here as a medium of *explanation*: the teacher can, by giving reasons for what she does, explain to the learner why she must wire or lay pipe in such and such a way, as opposed to just showing her that you do it this way, The explanation enables the learner to go ahead in different situations and contexts, rather than simply repeat the exact same thing that was done. The ability both to teach and to learn a skill thus depends on the ability to convey an explanation by giving and receiving reasons. It thus requires some degree of articulacy.

This idea, that conveying and acquiring a skill requires articulacy, often meets resistance. This may take the form of pointing to skills where articulacy does not appear to be necessary; sometimes gardening is given as an example. In some cases, such as physical skills, the person outstanding in the skill may not be the best at conveying it (as with athletes and coaches). Many of these will be cases where what is at stake is really mastery of technical matters needed for the exercise of the skill, or where what is important is natural talent. In any case, it does not matter for this account if there are such cases, since the claim is simply that virtue has a structure which can be found in cases of skill which do exhibit the features of need for learning and drive to aspire. That we sometimes use the notion of skill more broadly than this does not affect the account.

This is a point on which our understanding overlaps with that of the ancients, but also differs. In ancient ethical theory, the analogy with skill is readily brought in and uncontroversially used. This is in large part because the ancients find unproblematic just the feature which apparently seems