Virtue Recaptured: A Survey and Defense of Aretaic Ethics
Senior Honors Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University
Undergraduate Program in Philosophy
Professor Marion Smiley, Adviser

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

by
David Cory Altman

May 2015

Copyright by
David Cory Altman

Committee members
Name:______________________________ Signature______________________________
Name:______________________________ Signature______________________________
Acknowledgments:

I am extremely grateful for the assistance of many people as I reflect upon the completion of this project. First and foremost, Professor Marion Smiley has been an invaluable and constant source of support, insight, and comfort ever since being assigned as my faculty adviser the summer before my first year at Brandeis. Her guidance in selecting classes, mastering the Philosophy and Politics majors, and navigating the academic world of ethics have both greatly enriched my learning and enabled me to pursue this senior honors thesis and many other tremendous opportunities. Professor Smiley is an unmatched resource for this institution. It was her Intro to Ethics class in the fall of my first year that converted me into a Philosophy major—although the course, and perhaps this project, could have benefited from slightly more coverage virtue ethics—and her timely feedback and revisions on this thesis greatly enhanced the quality of this work. I am indebted to her and profoundly thankful for her consistent support and mentoring.

The contributions of other faculty at Brandeis have also been key to enabling me to undertake this major task. I have received excellent faculty instruction overall across the university, and I am confident that my skills as a thinker, student, and writer have grown as a result. I especially, though, wish to thank Professor Bernard Yack for his outstanding quality of instruction and thought-provoking courses, which certainly have helped me greatly as a student and as a human being. I am also very appreciative of Professor Eugene Sheppard for his willingness to serve as a second reader for this thesis and to Professor Palle Yourgrau for his seemingly endless philosophical insights and for introducing me to the greatness of Plato and Aristotle.

The unwavering support of family, friends, and peers has also been an integral part of this process and my entire education. I want to thank my parents, especially, and the rest of my family for providing me with the privileges and opportunities that I have been given and without which none of this would be possible. My mother, Gail, and father, Monte, are each truly the best human beings and most moral people that I know—so perhaps it should come as no surprise that I am writing about ethics. I was extremely fortunate to benefit as an underclassman from engaging conversations with and the examples of some fellow Brandeis Academic Debate And Speech Society members that came before me: Michael Perloff, Keith Barry, Russell Leibowitz, Kim Brouchard-Chaimowitz, Rena Singer, Alex Self, and Richard Weisbach. Their brilliance, advice, academic excellence, and company were highly formative (in a good way).
Table of Contents:

Introduction..................................................................................................................1

Chapter One: The Project of Virtue Ethics.................................................................9

Chapter Two: Theories, Developments, & Differences.............................................24

  Aristotle.....................................................................................................................25
  Alasdair MacIntyre.................................................................................................33
  Rosalind Hursthouse............................................................................................46
  Michael Slote.........................................................................................................53

Chapter Three: Criticisms & Responses.................................................................61

  Operability.............................................................................................................62
  Relativism.............................................................................................................71
  Collapse................................................................................................................79
  'Courageous Thieves'........................................................................................87
  Circularity..............................................................................................................92
  Teleology...............................................................................................................98
  Progressivism?..................................................................................................107

Conclusion...............................................................................................................111

References..............................................................................................................113
Introduction:

For reasons that are somewhat difficult to fully express, I have consistently felt more comfortable with virtue ethics than any other competing framework since the start of my ethical studies. In addition to providing a tremendous context for general philosophical inquiry and critical thinking, virtue ethics best matches my own moral intuitions and seems less contrived and more legitimate than other approaches. Although I can readily grasp the concepts and justifications underlying deontological or consequentialist theories, engaging with them feels more like an intellectual exercise than earnest normative process, and the fundamental critiques levied against those systems are more palpable and penetrating for me than I think they are for most others. I recognize, though, that these personal tendencies and preferences place me among a clear minority of contemporary students of moral philosophy—a stark reality that I both acknowledge and find difficult to accept.

I am also concerned that virtue ethics is not now presented in a way that brings out its strengths. It is often discussed today in the context of a response to the deontological and consequentialist moral philosophies that followed it—even though its roots, dating back to Aristotle and Plato, are by far the oldest and it is more than capable of operating as an independent approach to ethics with its own standards and normative criteria (which, as will be shown, are distinctly different from those of deontology or consequentialism). This particular placement or mapping of virtue ethics within the larger field of moral philosophy is quite unfortunate. It not only distorts virtue ethics, but also unfairly demotes it from its rightful place immediately alongside deontological and consequentialist approaches and ultimately deprives us of an ethical framework that has considerable normative and prescriptive powers.
In this work, my goal is to explore and challenge my initial intuitions in favor of virtue ethics. Although I will ultimately seek to justify virtue ethics and provide reasons for why my initial intuitions are legitimate ones, I am also interested in exposing virtue ethics to as much criticism and scrutiny as possible to discover possible weaknesses in it. Through such an exercise, I hope to present a balanced, honest, and whole picture of virtue ethics that both emphasizes its merits and understands its limitations as a normative philosophy. In sum: this paper is motivated by my own personal intuitions and beliefs but driven methodologically and substantively by standard investigative, analytic philosophy.

It is important at this juncture to make a series of general remarks about the broad commonalities of virtue ethics approaches. I will provide a simple framework for classifying virtue ethics theories and elucidate the normative terrain and parameters of the framework. After doing that, I will conclude this introductory section by making some general comments about the scope of this project and some of the major challenges that I anticipate encountering in the course of it. Then, in Chapter One, I will outline some of the general functions of a good moral philosophy and demonstrate why virtue ethics fulfills them by articulating some general strengths of the approach that can be found in almost any aretaic theory. In Chapter Two, I will conduct a selected survey of the major developments and turns that the virtue ethics approach has undergone and articulate the core tenets and shape of some of its most important theories—of which there are, contrary to the assumptions of many misinformed individuals, more than one. In doing so, I will draw out the implications of the distinctions between different formulations of virtue ethics and then settle upon a particular version to more specifically defend that is rooted in Aristotle and then influenced most significantly by Alasdair MacIntyre and Rosalind Hursthouse. Finally, I will engage in Chapter Three with seven major
criticisms levied against virtue ethics and demonstrate how it can overcome the challenges against it that are presented by those critics.

It should be noted here that virtue ethics is not an especially complicated or abstruse moral philosophy. It is not premised on a bedrock of nuanced metaphysical claims or contingent upon a particular thesis regarding epistemic limits or epistemological processes. Although it may implicitly set certain meta-ethical parameters by conceiving of normativity in the general way that it does, those effects arise as a secondary result of its primary moral analysis and are caused by—rather than causal of—the normative nature of the framework. Any account of virtue ethics, despite the relative simplicity of the approach and minimal footprint on the non-normative facets of philosophy, does advance a series of strong positive tenets that constitute 'virtue ethics' as it is commonly understood and used—including both internal/definitional and de facto requirements. First, virtue ethics does present substantive account of the Good and how one should seek to live, be, and conduct themselves. There are real and generally objectivist values (virtues) that are either facilitative or constitutive of what is good/right, and they are by no means arbitrary, transient, relativist, or more social invention or construct. Morality, here, is more discovered, recognized, or identified than it is invented or designed, and it is compatible with either a secular or theological/supernatural backdrop or paradigm. Second, virtue ethics is an agent-centered approach that places the normative locus on the characters of individuals than on actions (or even intentions). An action, in itself, is non-moral and lacks any ethical intelligibility. The moral nature or dimension of it exists vis-à-vis the agent and the ways in which that action, conduct, or behavior reflects upon their character. People as moral actors and human specimens, then, can certainly be virtuous (or not)—although the extent to which one must be virtuous to be considered such on the whole is not
set and can vary according to the different theories. Undertaking actions, therefore, is virtuous (or not) depending upon how acting in a given manner facilitates (or impedes) the virtues and, as a result, affects or reflects upon one's character.

Third, the 'virtues' are traits and ideals for character that serve as the moral units and building blocks of ethics. One who possesses a given virtue has internalized that disposition as a part of themselves and sees it reflected across not just a wide range of actions, but also their own instinctual and habitual attitudes, emotions, and ways of thinking. The virtues, I will argue, are both constitutive of the good as well as the means by which individuals can themselves become good and act morally/be moral. Any virtue ethics approach must operate with the virtues as its primary ethical means and mechanism and locate morality vis-à-vis the virtues; their presence and primacy is integral and necessary for any theory to be legitimately categorized as one of virtue ethics. Fourth, a form of practical reasoning (or something that functions in a parallel role) must exist as a mechanism by which virtuous individuals naturally regulate their relations to the virtues. By this, I mean that one must have an awareness or sense of what degree or extent to which they should fulfill the ideals implicit within the virtues and in what contexts (and with which motivations/emotions) they ought to do so to actually achieve virtuousness.

Practical reason, then, is critical both because it is the catalyst necessary to engender virtuousness from the virtues (by enabling individuals to actually apply the virtues properly and, by extension, act virtuously/be virtuous) and also because it affirms and facilitates the agent-centeredness of virtue ethics. Fifth and finally, theories of virtue ethics must—at least in part—contain an element or concept of 'flourishing' (or some other similar, rich metric for wellbeing)
that relates the virtues back to one's own life. To live a good life cannot merely consist in pleasure or material goods but must also contain virtuousness as well (at least to a significant degree). The moral, therefore, does not exist in its own domain wholly independent of other aspects of one's life. Rather, it is deeply intertwined with the worth of individuals and value of their lives on deeply personal levels that are relevant from both their own internal perspectives and those of third-parties. Being virtuous is more than just what one should do or strive for; it is good for them normatively, prudentially, and even ontologically. To say that someone is bad is also to say that they are necessarily worse off for it—beyond just the purely ethical implications that necessary follow from that claim—as unique individuals and human beings more broadly.¹ These are the core pillars that any theory of virtue ethics must somehow incorporate and balance in order to rightfully hold that categorization.

Describing and illustrating the value and worth of the virtue ethics approach, however, is not exactly an easy task. Briefly outlining some of the reasons why that is the case before articulating the general merits will help to further elucidate the conditions and context from which this project begins. These points are merely intended to provide some background for what follows and are neither exhaustive nor answered in this section. First, the contemporary vernacular of ethics itself has been largely formed by the same forces integral in the development of deontological and/or consequentialist approaches—rendering the moral language that is used largely skewed in their favor and tainted against virtue ethics. Talk of obligations, duty, the rightness of actions, and maximizing the good has come to affect our

¹ Although flourishing/wellbeing (derived from Aristotle's eudaimonia) are certainly compatible with teleology, I will argue in the third chapter that teleology is not a necessary facet of virtue ethics and that flourishing can intelligibly operate independent of it—even though I do believe that teleology is a natural partner to virtue ethics and ought to be incorporated in an optimal theory of it because it is a correct lens on human existence and the human experience.
common expectations of what answers good moral philosophy must provide. Thus, the most accessible and prevalent vocabulary that one might engage to attempt to justify the worth of virtue ethics is already biased against it. Second, virtue ethics, as a result of its aretaic nature, relies on a somewhat different core viewpoint of the descriptive role of ethics in human life compared with deontic and consequentialist approaches in some key ways that will concern the later parts of this project. Third, lofty and broad meta discussions of ethics like this one are difficult in general because it is quite hard to evaluate and articulate the worth of something without relying on some presupposed normative backdrop from which to draw upon standards or warrant particular claims. By this, I mean that is all too easy to simply extol the purported merits of any approach but fail to independently substantiate or ground it outside of arguing merely according to the particular paradigm that is being evaluated in the first place. Avoiding arguing by tautology, for example saying that Kantianism is good because it universalizes maxims or always values moral agents as ends, is not easy to accomplish because of this difficulty in establishing the value or worth of an ethical system independent of relying upon that evaluative system itself. Alternatively, perhaps it is simply impossible and/or unnecessary to undertake this burden, and it is instead acceptable to simply justify a moral theory by fleshing out its details in a manner that is internally consistent—without regard to its interplay with competing approaches. Fourth and finally, comparative analysis is complicated by the fact that one should recognize that demonstrating the coherence or strength of one moral framework does not necessarily detract from the value of any other(s). It is conceivable that the worth and validity of virtue ethics is not mutually-exclusive to deontological or consequentialist approaches. It could also be the case that it is incompatible in some instances but not others, or that any tension is natural and a perfectly legitimate fact or facet of moral philosophy.
These significant challenges, however, are simply that: challenges to be considered, and hopefully overcome, that can be useful in shaping the parameters and methodology for this project. In what follows, I will work to justify my appreciation of virtue ethics by engaging in a robust and critical survey of the literature of the field. In that vein, the claims made in the first chapter that seek to present what I consider to be among the most attractive and important features of virtue ethics broadly—especially when contrasted with deontological and consequentialist approaches—will focus primarily on three major points: (1) the benefits of an agent-centered approach; (2) the compatibility of virtue ethics with commonsense morality and intuition; and (3) the value of the structure of virtue ethics and the usage of the virtues as the basic ethical building blocks. Then, to recognize the very variance in formulations that theories of virtue ethics have developed over time, I will introduce more nuance into what exactly can be meant by 'virtue ethics' in the second chapter by discussing the implications and insights of some of the key differences between major aretaic theories. Finally, I will engage with seven of the most significant criticisms of virtue ethics and argue why they fail, represent mischaracterizations or misunderstandings, or are actually perfectly tolerable and acceptable conclusions. There, I will fully explain each critique and its potential implications and then respond to them in detail. Ultimately, my aim is to take very seriously the challenges to both virtue ethics and this kind of project. Although I personally hold a strong intuition towards this approach, I recognize the value of competing ones and that most individuals do not agree (a fact that is unlikely to change anytime soon) on account of a variety of compelling, and also not so compelling, rationales. My hope, therefore, is that this project will be persuasive and interesting to both supporters and non-supports of virtue ethics alike and constitute a reasoned and articulate contribution to these dynamic discussions.
Chapter One: The Project of Virtue Ethics

I believe that most people, in most cases, possess a sense of what generally constitutes the 'right thing to do' or how they ought to act. Granted, there are some individuals for whom this is never the case, but they surely represent outliers and a clear minority of persons, and I will, nonetheless, discuss the problems that they potentially present for virtue ethics later. For most other individuals, however, the general right direction in which to act tends to be fairly apparent—whether on account of our moral intuitions, common sense, socio-political habitation/education, etc.—until the point of certain key details that give way to unclarity, ambiguity, and confusion. To what extent is there an obligation? How much should one have to sacrifice in order to achieve moral ends? Who should be the one to act when there are many potentially able? What is the best strategy for navigating human society and actually go about implementing some moral aim? Why should one act as they are expected to do? One might recognize the need to be charitable and or from actively harming others but not necessarily know how to identify worthy circumstances for best fulfilling those interests or how to respond to those acting contrarily.

The point here is that, in most cases, a majority of people are well aware of approximately how they should be acting but lack the confidence, direction, or motivation to maneuver themselves accordingly. The fundamental role of ethics, as I see it, is to provide some of that guidance for those who are willing to accept it—namely by addressing key ambiguities in how individuals should go about conducting themselves (either in specific cases and on the whole), clarifying upon what type of basis moral agents should act/live, and providing some sort of prompting or nudging down that path. In its simplest form, then, ethics must do two
things. First, it must elucidate and make tangible and practicable the general moral imperatives that most decent individuals intuitively understand. Second, it must help to develop and inculcate the motivations for actually behaving in those ways because pure theoretical knowledge is rarely a sufficient human motivator in and of itself.

Before outlining why I believe virtue ethics does a good job of undertaking those overarching functions of moral philosophy, I want to acknowledge two other significant sets of cases that function somewhat differently: instances in which 1) most individuals are simply unsure in which direction at all the good/right conduct lies and 2) instances in which large portions of the same population arrives at widely disparate, even contradictory, ethical intuitions. As to the first class of cases, one might look to the example of whether or not to have biological children as an example of a situation in which individuals who consider this question tend to be inexorably conflicted and diametrically opposed regarding whether or not doing so would be right for them or is an ethical choice to make overall. Although most agents could easily generate potential problems or merits for each position, the overall sentiment associated with the question could easily be one of confusion and indecisiveness more so than being tinged with some version of rightness or wrongness. This class of exceptions, though, is less concerning to me than second because instances of it are fairly rare within moral or daily life and there may well be good reason for ambiguity in these cases since they represent the intersection of different human needs, desires, or even duties. Perhaps there are simply multiple reasonable, albeit mutually-exclusive, courses available to different actors or certain dilemmas that lack a definitive resolution—a point that will be considered in later chapters.
The second group of outlying cases, in which large swaths of reasonable and earnest moral agents have wildly disparate intuitions surrounding a particular question, presents what I consider to be a more serious threat to the conception and purpose of moral philosophy that I hold. Regarding abortion, for example, people of all different walks of life arrive at different and opposite intuitions about the acceptability of the practice. Whereas it is clear for some that human decency demands that no woman be made to go through pregnancy and likely parenthood for the sake of a potential person when that is not desirous to them, others cannot fathom the idea of letting personal or societal conditions, failings, or misgivings justify an abortion and loss of what they consider to be a life. Under both perspectives, agents are endeavoring to act morally and can intuit the ethicalness of their positions—yet their ultimate moral evaluations vary significantly.

There are, I believe, three major strategies that can be employed to resolve, or at least better frame, this conundrum. According to the first, there is only a problem if what one expects of moral philosophy is to render particular, defined, and concrete answers to all ethical issues. But, I contend that moral philosophy is better understood as treating the particular content of the conclusions reached as secondary to the normative nature of the deliberative normative process that individuals engage in—both for its own sake and also to ensure that they are conducting themselves with sufficient deference and consideration to possibly make a reasonable decision. Under that kind of paradigm, differing intuitions and conclusions are potentially ethically compatible as long as they are properly formulated and motivated. Rosalind Hursthouse argues along these lines at times and explains that genuinely virtuous persons can
earnestly arrive at different conclusions in tough cases without doing so arbitrarily, e.g. flipping a coin (which a virtuous person would never do).²

Second, questions like abortion might run into this trouble surrounding differing intuitions because of a failure to arrive at a consensus empirical appraisal of the facts or stakes actually at hand. The exact composition of an embryo or fetus, for example, was not well known at all until fairly recently in human history and is still quite vague (even inaccurate) in the minds of many individuals. As fundamental an issue of determining what constitutes a life may actually be a question better left for biology than philosophy. Even if that factor is not an especially significant one, any lingering intuitional disagreement may be more grounded in divergent intellectual understandings of the identity, metaphysics, and ontology of potential persons than they are in ethics per se.

Finally, it is possible that situations like abortion are sufficiently ethically and conceptually complex and layered that no intuition (or even maxim or utility calculation) could ever consistently satisfy or make sense of it as a whole. Aquinas argues in his analysis of law that, although intuition derived from the basic first principles that practically all people are naturally and divinely hardwired to accept may suffice ethically in 'easy' situations that are clearly and directly reflective of those principles, that intuition ceases to function as well under circumstances like abortion that are more complicated or removed from those basic principles. The most important and relevant aspect of this discussion, however, is that a virtue ethics approach need not rely on the validity of intuitionism alone to justify or substantiate it. The virtues themselves and other components of aretaic ethics can plausibly be applied independent

---

² Darwall 197.
of intuition and help guide conduct and normative pursuits even in the most difficult and controversial cases.

Having considered those outlying areas, it is now possible to address what about the substance of virtue ethics differentiates it from other approaches to moral philosophy and articulate some of its broad thematic advantages. As a starting point, I am deeply attracted to the agent-centeredness of virtue ethics. A major practical advantage of structuring virtue ethics in that way is that virtuous people possess the capacity to recognize how they should conduct themselves across a wide variety of situations that could not necessarily be anticipated or accounted for by other approaches. I do not mean to imply that a virtuous person is able to somehow always arrive at moral decisions without having to engage any critical thinking skills or rationality, but rather that virtue ethics on the whole lends itself towards empowering truly moral-agents as opposed to merely directing agents to act morally. The critical distinction lies in where the normativity is being directed: onto the agent versus onto the action(s). No particular action in itself, therefore, is right or wrong (or virtuous or unvirtuous) because actions are not intelligible units of morality. It is the individual, in conducting themselves in a certain regrettable and vicious manner, who is either moral or immoral (virtuous or unvirtuous). The normativity is tied not to their behavior or choices, but rather directly to their character and identity.\(^3\) Because it is infeasible to generate a list of all possible scenarios or always be able to extrapolate the salient moral circumstances from one known context to use as guidance in somewhat similar cases, it seems that virtue ethics has at least a capacity to offer normative direction in more cases than other approaches because of its agent-centeredness. Thus, morality

\(^3\)This distinction contains ontological implications for some virtue ethicists (especially those following a Platonic tradition) because of teleological and other forces, but there is no need to incorporate ontology here; the normative dimension is certainly prior and prime.
is better able to fulfill one of its fundamental purposes and offer guidance across far more instances than it otherwise could.

There is a deep insight underlying this advantage that goes beyond the important practical advantage of facilitating ethical behavior across a wide variety of unpredictable contexts. Virtue ethics’ agent-centered structure that prioritizes engendering virtuous characters, temperaments, and persons reflects a desirable account of the moral world and the role of ethics that substantially differs from those of deontological and consequentialist theories. The most important implication of this distinction is that particular actions or behaviors, for virtue ethics, are the results or byproducts of a virtuous character rather than themselves the primary moral loci—as they are in deontology and consequentialism. The function of ethics is quite distinct under an aretaic approach because the normativity of actions is unintelligible without reference to the relevant details surrounding the agent undertaking them—like their character, psychology, disposition, motivations, etc. Although Kantianism certainly does take matters like intentionality and reasons for acting very seriously, it does so vis-à-vis an evaluation of actions themselves as the core units of morality. There, elements related to agents’ justifications or motivations for acting serve one of two purposes that are both quite different than the role taken on in virtue ethics. First, those details may be relevant for determining to what extent moral agents should be credited for actions that they either undertook or failed to undertake. In that case, the manner in which actions themselves contain rightness/wrongness independent of the particularities of a given moral agent becomes clear, and it is in sharp contrast with the agent-centered aretaic position. Second, the presence of certain agent-related elements like intentionality (e.g. acting out of duty) may sometimes be necessary conditions for constituting a certain right action, but their role there is still only secondary to the fixed moral nature of the
action itself. This role is, at most, a supplement for agent-centeredness and is reinforced by Kant's Categorical Imperative, holding that one should act only in such ways that could be willed into universal law. This deontological universalization requirement further distances that framework from the type of agent-centered basis found in virtue ethics because of how the Categorical Imperative implicitly structures Kantianism in an action-oriented manner. The agent-centeredness of virtue ethics, therefore, affects not only its scope and situational operability but also promotes a distinct and attractive account of the role and function of ethics in human life.

This agent-centeredness, moreover, also better accounts for _individual_ moral agents beyond just their capacity as general moral agents. As will be discussed later, it is true that virtue ethics largely relates to moral agents in terms of their general standing as human beings—which creates ethical implications relevant to all people. Virtue ethics does not, however, limit the scope of its normative inquiry to just those more consistent and universal attributes; it also strongly considers personal details and circumstances in its normative judgments. The contextual and particularistic nature of virtue ethics in this sense is another dimension of the advantage of its agent-centered model. The morally right or virtuous conduct, under virtue ethics, is contextual and based on acting not just in the right way but also at the right time, to the right degree, with the right intentions, from the right motivations, and so on (and achieved through practical reasoning). What constitutes these factors is very much dependent upon a variety of variable and contextual circumstances that are related both to the inner workings and psychologies of the individuals involved—and certain external factors as well. These personal and more situational normative components add a further dimension to the agent-centeredness of virtue ethics that gives moral weight to some of peculiarities of particular individuals. Virtue
ethics, however, does not say that any distinguishing detail about a person is necessarily legitimate moral fodder or somehow ethically relevant, but it does demonstrate the extent to which aretaic ethics incorporates actual persons into the ethical discussion in a much richer sense than other theories.

The second major advantage of virtue ethics is its natural inclination to conform with common sense and intuitive notions of what is good. A system of ethics is far more likely to be properly adhered to and thrive if it is consistent with general common sense. In addition to making moral philosophy more user-friendly, conforming to general common sense and reflecting basic intuitions carries with it two further profound implications. First, it means that virtue ethics is actually deeply grounded in the human experience and takes seriously some of its most significant descriptive elements. Second, and borrowing from Rawls, there is a degree of 'reflective equilibrium' involved as well. Common sense/intuition, on both individual and societal levels, can be informed by the virtues and molded by a virtuous life. Incorporating and utilizing common sense notions and intuitions in ethics, then, is both internally instrumental to connecting individuals with the virtues and also key for forming intuitions and common sense in ways that are themselves more virtuous.

One should note, however, that common sense or intuition alone do not themselves contain independent normative authority, and much of what they dictate may ultimately be in tension with the virtues. Ethics, in fact, largely exists to constrain and direct our natural or primal desires and inclinations. Therefore, it is important to make two points clear. First, there is a difference between common sense and intuition in the way that I refer to them and just basic desires that people may naturally have. The former are intimately, though unobviously,
related to reason and reasonability and partake in very foundational human notions about the nature of goodness and normativity broadly—as opposed to merely catering to particular inclinations or desires regarding specific cases or situations. Second, intuitions and common sense regarding these basic conceptions of morality and how it ought to function and be shaped are not necessarily legitimate. Rational thinking, lessons of history, and other forces have sometimes taught us to reject these intuitions in favor of what we learn to be right.

I consider significant compatibility and connection with common sense and intuition to be an advantage on the whole, but certainly not in all cases. A strong relationship with and the clear inclusion of those forces in moral philosophy is both instrumentally prudent and, I believe, indicative of a reasonable and plausible system of ethics overall—even though the function of ethics in many cases will be to override or correct some of those very dispositions. To recap, there are three general reasons to support the connection between virtue ethics and common sense on the whole (albeit not in all cases). First, it makes the approach more practicable and hospitable to potential adherents, meaning that living morally is more plausible and likely. Second, it helps to infuse common sense and intuition with virtue and make them more virtuous than they otherwise would be. Third, it deeply cements the virtue ethics approach in fundamental descriptive aspects (and normative intuitions) of the human experience that better fulfills the core functions of moral philosophy. Having made those points, it is now time to consider in what ways virtue ethics actually incorporates common sense and intuition and to analyze their significance to the aretaic approach.
A major way in which virtue ethics is compatible with common sense and intuitionism is its general conception of the good.\(^4\) According to Aristotle, although the *good* can broadly be thought of as "that for whose sake everything else is done," it varies by context and is, for instance, much differently properly understood in the field of medicine than it is in art.\(^5\) According to this understanding, developing a moral disposition or instinct becomes especially valuable because that is what sets aims and values and enables individuals to actually act virtuously. This position that the good and what is appropriate and ought to be strived for varies across different parts of the human experience is, I believe, a fairly intuitive one. Most people do not recognize a universal, monolithic, and all-encompassing Good that is uniformly imbued across the meta-ethical world. That virtue ethics, unlike more rigid utilitarian and Kantian approaches, is able to adapt to this intuition is a great asset for it as a normative framework. Adopting this contextual conception of goodness, moreover, fosters a broader and richer sense of wellness and excellence than would otherwise exist. It diversifies and deepens what it means to excel or succeed as an individual and helps the ethical life to subsume other important issues, like happiness, welfare, and wellbeing more broadly. When considering for they ought to strive, most individuals do not imagine either an incredibly moral but generally unfulfilled, unsuccessful, and wretched person or someone who is incredibly well-off or self-fulfilled but wholly immoral and normatively problematic. The ideal human worth aspiring to, rather, is someone who combines those attributes and seems both ethical in the narrow, purely moral sense as well as flourished and happy—in the thick wellbeing sense and not just in terms

\(^4\) Although not all theories of virtue ethics necessarily hold this position, it is certainly common among the most widespread and accepted theories and is highly compatible with the approach.

\(^5\) Darwall 7.
of simple pleasure. This intuitive model of the ideal person, someone both moral and otherwise thriving, is most likely to emerge under the virtue ethics approach.

Acting virtuously, furthermore, requires not just identifying the proper trait or virtue to act upon, but also doing so to the right degree and in the right manner—which concerns why and how something is done. Thus, one is both doing what the just or virtuous person would do and also doing it as they would do it. In this sense, as Howard J. Curzer argues in the spirit of Aristotle, each virtue conforms to the 'doctrine of disjoint spheres' and functions as a disposition to act rightly in a diversity of situations. Conceiving of ethics in this way, I believe, facilitates common sense notions of goodness and decency because it allows for the nuanced social and psychological parts of ourselves to participate in moral life. Almost everyone has an intuition that someone who is acting well with a bad attitude or from pernicious motivations or attitudes is far less praiseworthy than one who is able to unite all of those factors and both produce good actions/outcomes and also be a good and decent human being. It is seemingly uncontroversial that the degree of esteem that we ascribe to people performing the same task or action fluctuates considerably based on other factors about their motivations, demeanor, character, and so on. Virtue ethics, because it is agent-centered and concerned with the attitudes and contexts surrounding actions as much—if not more—than the actions themselves, is uniquely positioned among moral philosophies to account for this distinction and align ethics accordingly Deontology, furthermore, even seems to recognize the importance of this insight because it places having the proper reasons for action and intent as its ethical locus. Theories of virtue ethics, however, are far more nuanced in how they are able to incorporate these intuitions

---

6 Darwall 16.  
7 Curzer 3.
and define the intelligibility of actions themselves according to these details rather than treating them as independent variables that attach to already existent and separable actions.

The structure of virtue ethics, especially when contrasted with popular deontological and consequentialist theories, is of great interest and value and constitutes the third major advantage of the virtues ethics approach that should be highlighted. Stephen Darwall writes that virtue ethics departs from moral theories in the conventional sense and functions as "an account of other, ethically deep aspects of human life that are, it is sometimes argued, potential rivals to and perhaps replacements for morality and its distinctive forms".\(^8\)\(^9\) Any validity arising from this claim is based in the structure of virtue ethics and in the way that normativity emanates from the virtues in particular. They are the conduit through which one can move beyond analysis that solely surrounds actions and instead is able to permeate the deeper phenomenological aspects of (what ought to be) moral life. In this same vein, Gary Watson writes that "an ethics of virtue is not a code or a general moral claim but a set of abstract theses about how certain concepts are best fitted together for the purposes of best understanding morality".\(^10\) Here, again, virtue ethics is unique in that it is less substantively rigid and systematized than other approaches, yet uses a strong abstract conceptual structure to develop a normative theory nonetheless. It is important to note, though, that this structural (rather than substantive) foundation does mean that virtue ethics retreats from its normative/prescriptive function or is diminished as a moral philosophy. John McDowell addresses this point and recognizes that the process of ethical reflection within virtue ethics still circles around the

---

\(^8\) Darwall 1.
\(^9\) In general, I would argue contrary to Darwall that these other 'ethically deep aspects of human life' are part of morality—although I accept and appreciate the distinction between these facets and morality as it is conventionally and narrowly construed in contemporary Kantian or utilitarian thought.
\(^10\) Darwall 231.
question of how one should live, with the biggest distinction being that "that question is necessarily approached via the notion of a virtuous person. A conception of right is grasped, as it were, from inside out".\(^{11}\) A state of character informed by the virtues, therefore, serves as the basis of virtue for Aristotle and others\(^{12}\), and Watson augments that stance by saying that "action appraisal is derivative from the appraisal of character".\(^{13}^{14}\)

To ground this discussion, some theorists like Rosalind Hursthouse contend that virtue ethics is at least as apt as any other moral philosophy in generating action-oriented moral guidance and may, in fact, be even better positioned to render those kinds of prescriptions because of how it is constructed. In brief, virtue ethics does not negate the possibility of one having an ethical duty to act in a particular manner in a given context. Rather, it rejects the total primacy and normative locus of such an approach in favor of a broader and more holistic lens. Michael Slote refers to this difference in focus as the *explanatory primacy* of virtue ethics and argues that a strong notion of duty still exists even though virtue ethics is concerned with priorities that are more agent-centered and less hierarchical and rigid than found in other approaches. Slote writes that "We might grant that an ethics without deontic concepts could represent an important fragment of the ethics we ultimately seek, but we can't imagine a complete ethics doing without such notions altogether".\(^{15}\) The virtues in particular—as will be discussed in more depth later—can yield specific rules or obligations for individuals to abide by, and the virtue ethics structure can be especially useful for resolving otherwise difficult and taxing ethical

---

\(^{11}\) Darwall 121.
\(^{12}\) Darwall 17.
\(^{13}\) Darwall 232.
\(^{14}\) The inclusion of these attributes, however, should not be seen as coming at the expense of other normal functions of ethics or supporting the criticism that virtue ethics struggles to yield practicable answers to how one should act in particular circumstances—a concern that will be discussed seriously significantly in Chapter Three.
\(^{15}\) Slote (*From Morality to Virtue*) xiv.
dilemmas in which multiple values (virtues) conflict because of the important normative role that practical reasoning plays in the framework. In addition to the fact that practical wisdom helps to alleviate any tension when it does arise, any such tension emerging in the first place is also less likely to occur because the structure of virtue ethics does not *prima facie* generate universal obligations or hard-rules to be constantly obeyed but rather emphasizes the internal dynamics and nature related to character.

On a slightly broader conceptual level, moreover, virtue ethics benefits from departing from a scientific-style model by becoming more accommodating and useful to human actors.\textsuperscript{16} Rather than focusing on precise commands or justifications for far-reaching principles, motivation and context—as has already been discussed—takes priority. Talbot Brewer describes motivation as "what human beings must see in their doings if these doings are to be intelligible as action," but stresses that the source must be rooted in *why*, broadly, someone acts as they do, as opposed to granting too much focus to more strict notions of literal behavior causality (like studying neuron firing patterns in the brain).\textsuperscript{17} For Brewer, this is important because the judgment and processes underlying our decision-making are not as limited or simplistic as is often assumed.\textsuperscript{18} One, for example, does not often wish to have children only to have them be raised by others. Rather, the desire to have children is actually a more complicated and robust one that includes certain aspirations and aims within that broader objective. From Aristotle's perspective, this more thorough and full attention being paid to motivation and the particularities of how and why one is acting in varying circumstances is important because "we cannot fully understand the intrinsic value of any human activity without grasping the place of

\textsuperscript{16} Darwall 198.  
\textsuperscript{17} Brewer 13.  
\textsuperscript{18} Brewer 30.
that activity in a full and flourishing human life".\textsuperscript{19} This quality identified by Alasdair MacIntyre as a virtue of integrity or constancy, and it is said to imbue human life with a crucial sense of wholeness.\textsuperscript{20} As a result, a means of flourishing is worked directly into the ethical theory and can be accessed by operating according to that evaluative framework and coordinating different aspects of one's experience as a cohesive normative package. This teleologically-inspired perspective on the good eases the potential for tensions between personal wellbeing/happiness and what ethics/morality seem to demand. The role of flourishing, then, is to help bridge any existing divide between those two fundamental interests in people's lives, and this seems to be a major structural advantage of the virtue ethics approach that ought not to have its profundity understated.

\textsuperscript{19} Darwall 41.
\textsuperscript{20} Darwall 166.
Chapter Two: Theories, Developments, & Differences

It is not my intention to undertake an in-depth history of all aretaic ethics that traces each and every philosophical turn, contribution, or disagreement that has every occurred within the field. It is also not my intention to offer any definitive or rigorous theory that seeks to demonstrate a clear trajectory of the approach or argue that it has advanced (or ought to do so) in any particular direction or manner. Rather, I will analyze some of the major philosophical developments of virtue ethics that with three goals in mind. The first is to provide a more specific illustration of the virtue ethics framework and to highlight the most salient facets of certain key theories and contributions to the literature. The second is to outline some major distinctions and disagreements across the theories and to elucidate some of the internal tensions that exist across virtue ethics. The third is to provide a basis for picking a particular conception of virtue ethics to prefer and defend.

The specific accounts that I choose to investigate in this chapter are surely limited, but their selection is neither arbitrary nor merely anecdotal. I believe that they represent among the most important and interesting developments within aretaic philosophy and that their amalgamation will provide an insightful means through which to explore and more deeply understand the virtue ethics approach. Although I will offer a fairly in-depth illustration and analysis of their most salient elements, I will not offer exhaustive accounts of entire theories or accounts and identify or flesh out all of their major details. In leaving many of their particularities and specifics out of this exploration, the key elements that are considered will hopefully be clearly defined, articulated, and emphasized. Ultimately, my aim in this chapter is
to further demonstrate some of the strengths of virtue ethics as a moral philosophy that will be useful in the next chapter when I defend it from various serious criticisms.

*Aristotle:*

Aristotle is the most important individual thinker within virtue ethics—both on account of historical timing and his intellectual and substantive contributions.\(^{21}\) Although one cannot reduce all of virtue ethics to merely his work or theory, it is a crucial foundation for any later aretaic ethics and presents a clear and robust account of the general structure, style, and spirit of the entire framework. His theory is also unique among others in the virtue ethics tradition in that it comes before the establishment of any more modern consequentialist or deontological paradigms on moral philosophy and is, therefore, not composed in either direct or implicit response to those other approaches. Aristotle presents a perfectionist and teleological account that defines the virtues as traits or *excellences* of one's character (manifested in characteristic activities) that relate to one's proper function as a human being.\(^{22}\) Puala Gottlieb notes here an important background detail for Aristotle about virtue—that it is a *hexis* (settled disposition) as opposed to a *pathos* (emotion).\(^{23}\) The significance of this distinction is that one does not experience virtue in the same phenomenological manner that they would an emotion. Rather, the virtues settle within individuals and affect them on a fundamental level by becoming a part of them—as opposed to functioning as distinct entities that then act independently upon them.

---

\(^{21}\) Any student of virtue ethics, however, must also be deeply indebted to (among others) Aquinas for re-discovering, preserving, and expanding upon Aristotle's work and G.E.M. Anscombe for initiating the 20th century revival of virtue ethics that has led to the modern resurgence of precious new literature and contributions.

\(^{22}\) Darwall 2.

\(^{23}\) Gottlieb 47.
This tight integration of the virtues with the self has practical and ethical implications that extend beyond just meta-ethical or ontological interest. Howard Curzer aptly recognizes that the manner in which an individual interacts with and possesses a given virtue matters as much (if not possibly more) than whether or not they strive for the virtue at all. More specifically, Curzer argues that a truly virtuous person for Aristotle is generally not someone who must actively overcome significant hesitations and begrudgingly compel themselves to act well. Instead, they are someone who is habituated to do so nearly automatically and as a matter of personal instinct and encounter little resistance or doubt about their inclinations or how they ought to act. Underlying this important nuance is Aristotle's conclusion that the genus of a moral virtue is definitively that of a *state* of character and not a passion or faculty. He writes that "For in speaking about a man's character we do not say that he is wise or has understanding but that he is good-tempered or temperate; yet we praise the wise man also with respect to his state; and of states we call those which merit praise excellences." Aristotle inquires further here, though, and asks what type of state a virtue is and what classifying it as such means—leading him to write that:

> We may remark, then, that every excellence [virtue] both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing be done well; e.g. the excellence of the eye makes both the eye and its work good; for it is by the excellence of the eye that we see well. [...] Therefore, if this is true in every case, the excellence of man will also be the state which makes man good and which makes him do his work well.

The virtues, then, for Aristotle are what brings humans themselves into good condition and what makes their work and efforts good and moral.

---

24 Curzer 3.
25 Ackrill 381/ EN 2.5, 1106a11-12
26 (Ackrill 376/EN 1.13, 1103a6-10)
27 (Ackrill 382/EN 2.6, 1106a14-23)
Some background Aristotelian knowledge about the nature of the good is needed before discussing the particular virtues that Aristotle identifies. Contrary to the notion of a universal Platonic Good, Aristotle believes that the good varies by context and is much different in medicine, for example, than it is in art. This claim also leads him to recognize that not all ends or goods are final ones—like, for instance, wealth—and that they may yet exist for the sake of something else. The chief good, even if it is not the only good, must be something final that exists exclusively for its own sake and not that of anything else. Before settling on an answer to what fits this criterion, Aristotle first dismisses a few other possible contenders for it. He writes that:

Life seems to belong even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but it also seems to be shared even by the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle [...] Now if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle, and if we say a 'so-and-so' and 'a good so-and-so' have a function which is the same in kind, e.g. a lyre-player and a good lyre player, [...] human good turns out to be activity of soul exhibiting excellence, and if there are more than one excellence, in accordance with the best and most complete.

As an alternative to life, perception, and even rationality itself for the place chief/final good, Aristotle argues that happiness (eudaimonia) meets this definition—but it is meant in a very different and deeper sense than most readers today would normally interpret it. Happiness for Aristotle does not correlate with simple pleasure, satisfaction, or the fulfillment of one's desires.

---

28 Ackrill 363/EN 1.1, 1094a1-15
29 Ackrill 364/EN 1.2, 1094a18-25 & 1094b1-12
30 Ackrill 370-371/EN 1.7, 1098a1-19
or conscious aspirations, and although each of those elements may, in part, participate in the formation of happiness or be necessary for its actualization, the core basis of it can only be understood through considering the characteristic function (telos) of human beings. Happiness, under this conception, involves flourishing and wellbeing in a robust sense that incorporates the phenomenological domain with ontology and ethics as a metric for overall thriving and success.

Interestingly, though, the virtuousness itself and the virtues are insufficient on their own to constitute happiness/flourishing because that also requires the presence of certain external goods and factors. One must, for instance, have a life that is sufficiently temporally long to enable happiness and flourishing, as Aristotle writes "But we must add 'in a complete life'. For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy". Beyond just length of years, Aristotle claims that humans need other external goods in order to be virtuous because "it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment". He argues that individuals need friends, riches, good fortune/luck, good birth, goodly children, beauty, and political power—among other things—as instruments for achieving happiness or flourishing. I believe that Aristotle can be legitimately interpreted in either of two manners in this regard—as saying either (1) that there is an internal connection between these external goods and happiness/flourishing or (2)

31 Aristotle writes, in fact, that "Happiness is then the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing in the world [...]" and explains that virtuous actions are pleasant and pleasurable to the lover of virtue because pleasure is a state of soul (Ackrill 373/EN 1.8, 1099a24-25).
32 Ackrill 353/EN 1.2, 1094a18-22.
33 Ackrill 371/EN 1.7, 1098a1-19.
34 Ackrill 373/EN 1.8, 1099a32-33.
35 Ackrill 373/EN 1.8, 1099b1-7
36 Elsewhere, Aristotle emphasizes the importance that context also plays in determining to what extent one can exercise the virtues or flourish and argues that soldiers in war are presented with unique opportunities to do so (like display courage or act well in the face of death) that are simply unavailable to most others.
that there is a *de facto* connection between these external goods and happiness that requires them for the facilitation of happiness/flourishing but does not also constitute an internal connection. In either case, the argument that external goods (especially some material ones) are necessary for one's *eudaimonia* is highly controversial among later virtue ethicists and represents a significant and distinct element of Aristotle's theory.

Philippa Foot rightly characterizes Aristotle (as well as Aquinas after that) as presenting a scheme of the virtues that is far broader than what students of philosophy today tend to consider and consists of, for example, excellences of the arts and intellect in addition to the more obvious moral virtues.\(^37\) Keeping in mind that virtues are that which the practice of makes humans into good specimens of their kind and enables them to function well, Aristotle explains that there are two types of virtues/excellences—moral and intellectual—and that neither arises in human beings naturally but rather must be acquired and habituated into our characters.\(^38\) 39

With both the intellectual and moral virtues, we acquire first the potentiality to live according to a particular excellence and then later the actual capacity to do so, which is generally achieved by undertaking actions that condition and habituate us as to enable states of character arising out of our activities.\(^40\) Curzer does a good job of describing the nature of the relationship between the different moral virtues and writes that "each virtue conforms to what I call the doctrine of disjoint spheres. Each virtue is a disposition to act and feel rightly within completely different situations".\(^41\)

\(^{37}\) Darwall 106.
\(^{38}\) Ackrill 376-377/EN 2.1, 1103a14-1103b25.
\(^{39}\) Practical reasoning/wisdom is perhaps chief in importance among the intellectual virtues because it is an absolutely essential component of acting virtuously and enabling the moral virtues to be instantiated across the lived human experience.
\(^{40}\) Ackrill 376-377/EN 2.1, 1103a14-1103b25.
\(^{41}\) Curzer 3.
human life, Aristotle identifies several particular moral virtues that include courage, temperance, generosity/magnanimity, ambitiousness, gentleness, friendliness/sociability, honesty, and being appropriately charming.

The qualities constituting a given virtue, however, are not most virtuous or excellent when actualized to upmost possible degree. Rather, the virtues represent equilibriums—what Aristotle calls 'means'—between the excess or deficiency of a given quality. He writes:

Excellence, then, is a state concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason and the way in which the man of practical reason would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while excellence [virtue] both finds and chooses that which is intermediate.

Aristotle locates the virtues as equilibriums between the possible 'extremes' of certain qualities because the extremes are 'undiscriminating' and only a correctly balanced human being can, like a scale, be calibrated to react appropriately and to particular unanticipated situations that may arise. Virtuous individuals are like correctly strung strings of a lyre in that the right notes can triggered by the right plucking, which could not happen if the strings were strung too tightly or too loosely. Courage, for example, represents an equilibrium between rashness (excess) and cowardice (deficiency), and generosity is the proper balance between wastefulness and

42 These concepts are separated by Aristotle into a few particular and more nuanced sub-species but can all be considered together for the purposes of this analysis.

43 EN 3.6-4.8

44 The quality of justice is also later discussed by Aristotle but does not seem to function like a moral virtue/excellence in this same way. Rather, many different things can be meant by justice, and it is necessarily more political and community-focused than any of the other moral virtues.

45 Gottlieb (p. 22) argues that Kant errs by interpreting these means as a form of 'moderation' of a given virtue and its underlying qualities and that the concept of an appropriate equilibrium is a better understanding of this balancing.

46 Ackrill 383/EN 2.6, 1106b36-1107a5

47 Darwall 23.
stinginess. Humans, then, become virtuous once they are conditioned to develop the practical reasoning necessary to achieve these virtue-specific equilibriums, as well the equilibrium overall\textsuperscript{48}, and enable the virtues to become self-sustaining.\textsuperscript{49} It is important to note, however, that there are some qualities, like envy, shamelessness, and murderousness, that are just bad/vicious by definition and for which it is unnecessary to identify them as either excesses or deficiencies impeding the equilibrium needed for the fulfillment of some virtue.\textsuperscript{50}

Despite providing this fairly clear explanatory model for virtue, Aristotle explicitly warns that virtue is nonetheless difficult to achieve and promulgate for two reasons. First, correctly adopting virtuousness vis-à-vis the virtues is quite difficult for actual individuals to accomplish—even if they are aware of the principle of the golden mean and other Aristotelian ideas—because certain people are simply ill-equipped to do so. In explaining this point, Aristotle writes:

Hence also it is no easy task to be good. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle, e.g. to find the middle of a circle is not for everyone but for him who knows, so, too, anyone can get angry—that is easy—or give or spend money, but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not for everyone, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble. Hence he who aims at the intermediate must first depart from what is the more contrary to it [...].\textsuperscript{51}

This difficulty in truly actualizing the virtues is not at all surprising when one considers it in the context the rest of Aristotle's theory. Some individuals may just lack the natural inclination towards appreciating these fairly fine-grained nuances or motivation to live well, act virtuously,

\textsuperscript{48}This overall equilibrium and balance is also key because a cohesive account of the virtuous individual is needed for any virtues to become truly settled dispositions and be actualized. Like with the lyre, the virtues in humans are all interconnected—and one string that is out of tune will make the others sound that way as well. Hence, one disposition or state of character that is out of equilibrium affects the others as well, for one cannot fully possess ethical virtue without also possessing the rest (Darwall 25).
\textsuperscript{49} Darwall 24.
\textsuperscript{50} Ackrill 383-384/EN 2.6, 1107a17-27.
\textsuperscript{51} Ackrill 386/EN 2.9, 1109a24-30.
and flourish. Other, still, may have the advantage of the virtues and practical reasoning being better inculcated in them than they are in others, thus making success in this regard far more likely. Others, further, may—admittedly arbitrarily—lack either the external goods (e.g. wealth) or necessary opportunities or occasions (e.g. serving as a soldier) to practice the virtues and develop the practical reason and states of character that make them good, flourished, and happy. The sad truth of ethics for Aristotle, then, is that some people cannot and will not be virtuous despite even their best intentions and desires. The second major impediment to a precise and easily-internalized or adopted applied system of ethics relates to the nature of moral philosophy itself. Ethics, according to Aristotle, is in an imprecise science in that no one can simply deduce the virtues and good as they may be able to in more theoretical pursuits and sciences.\textsuperscript{52} Rather, ethics is a more practical than theoretical pursuit in this sense, and its whole cannot be definitively or exhaustively illustrated or described on a theoretical level (especially in the type of delineative way that Kant does).

These difficulties surrounding the virtues, however, are not meant to detract from the normative potency and importance of Aristotle's ethics. He especially emphasizes the importance of virtue from the type moral perspective focused upon today but also from the subjective standpoint of bettering individuals in a personal sense. Developing wisdom, good judgment, and practical reason are integral to the internalization of the virtues and actualization of virtuousness in one's soul and life, and one can only hope to flourish or experience genuine, robust happiness/\emph{eudaimonia} through that difficult—and sometimes impossible—task. Goodness, then, is itself made better by these challenges and impediments to its fulfillment, and the importance of a political and social context that eases those challenges and facilities

\textsuperscript{52} Ackrill 364/EN 1.3, 1094b13-27.
virtuousness among individuals becomes quite clear. Excellence, for Aristotle, is riddled with seeming paradoxes and impossibilities. One must be virtuous vis-à-vis their own intentionality and choices (and for the right reasons) but also develop the virtues as near-instinctual settled dispositions that approach sub-conscious states of character. The foundation of moral philosophy is heavily agent-centered and based upon internal dynamics for Aristotle, and yet the external and material world is a powerful and equal partner in achieving the fulfillment of virtue. Ultimately, Aristotle's approach to virtue ethics is an extremely important one. It both establishes the substantive and stylistic foundations from which the rest of the framework builds (and sometimes departs) and also on its own provides a rather complete account of moral philosophy that is extremely compelling and insightful.

*Alasdair MacIntyre:*

*What we possess, if this view is true, are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance is derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, or morality.\(^53\)*

*Only in fantasy do we live the story we please. In life, as both Aristotle and Engels noted, we are always under certain constraints. We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. Each of us being a main character in his own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each form constrains the others. In my drama, perhaps, I am Hamlet or Iago or at least the swineherd who may yet become a prince, but to you I am only a Gentleman or at best Second Murderer, while you are my Polonius or my Gravedigger, but your own hero. Each of our dramas exerts constraints on each other's, making the whole different from the parts, but still dramatic.\(^54\)*

Alasdair MacIntyre is perhaps among the strongest and most vocal critics of most contemporary moral philosophy. He deeply laments the Enlightenment and post-

---

\(^{53}\) MacIntyre 2.  
\(^{54}\) MacIntyre 213-214.
Enlightenment ethical theories that, he believes, represent mere fragments of genuine ethics and often abandon the Good in exchange for far more hallow and morally vacuous and bankrupt concepts. MacIntyre especially criticizes the ethics of liberal individualism emerging from those schools of thought and argues that they fail to counteract Nietzsche's claim that morality merely masks the 'will to power' and arbitrary impositions of individual choice. Far from endorsing Nietzsche's moral skepticism and falling into nihilism, MacIntyre calls for a genuine and robust pursuit of the good by individuals that is heavily informed by certain fundamental moral truths about the nature of the human experience and their personal social contexts. He writes:

I have suggested so far that unless there is a telos which transcends the limited goods of practices by constituting the good of a whole human life, the good of a human life conceived as a unity, it will both be the case that a certain subversive arbitrariness will invade the moral life and that we shall be unable to specify the context of certain virtues adequately. These two considerations are reinforced by a third: that there is at least one virtue recognised by the tradition which cannot be specified at all except with reference to the wholeness of human life—the virtue of integrity or constancy. 'Purity of heart,' said Kierkegaard, 'is to will one thing.' This notion of singleness of purpose in a whole life can have no application unless that of a whole life does.

Here, a sense of MacIntyre's overall project becomes clear. In addition to presenting a substantive account of morality and virtue, he is especially interested in discussing the scope and place of morality and describing the nature of its interactions with other social phenomena. I will first describe the series of issues and failures of moral philosophy that motivate much of MacIntyre's work and then move into more positive material in which MacIntyre outlines his conceptions of ethics and the role that the virtues play within it.

---

55 Lutz 1.
56 Darwall 166-167.
MacIntyre begins *After Virtue* with a lengthy analogy that serves the purpose of repudiating the contemporary state of moral philosophy. He draws a hypothetical parallel to a quasi-dystopian world in which some sort of disaster has nearly eliminated all scientific knowledge and literature and left behind only fragments of vocabulary and theorems with which to operate but no guiding principles, cohesion, or general understanding. MacIntyre argues that analytic philosophy written over the past few centuries, including even that of the existentialists and phenomenologists, is essentially descriptive in nature and would find no significant issues with this obviously problematic moral state of affairs because it is representative of those exact flaws and vulnerabilities. Moral philosophy, on account of this condition, faces three major problems according to MacIntyre. First, he identifies the problem of 'conceptual incommensurability' and argues that valid conclusions follow from reasonable premises but that here is no reasonable method with which to weigh the claims of rival premises against one another. He writes that "For each premise employs some quite different normative or evaluative concept from the others, so that the claims made upon us are of quite different kinds [...and from] our rival conclusions we can argue back to our rival premises; but when we do arrive at our premises argument ceases and the invocation of one premise against another becomes a matter of pure assertion and counter-assertion". Here, I believe the major issue that MacIntyre identifies is one of grounding, namely that modern theories fail to have a strong substantive foundation for their postulations and, regretfully, prioritize matters of internal consistency or rigor over substantive validity or moral truth.

---

57 MacIntyre 1.
58 MacIntyre 2.
59 MacIntyre 8.
60 Ibid.
Second, MacIntyre claims that the rationalistic arguments advanced by modern ethics are overly impersonal. Instead of one's motivation for action being linked to another individual with whom they are in some kind of personal or moral relationship, they instead act out of a 'reason-giving force' based on a general duty or the enhancement overall utility.\(^{61}\) This purported problem is certainly relevant to the overall project of virtue ethics in that it regards both the personal motivations underlying why and how in particular one acts as well as the emphasis on agent-centeredness. Third, modern ethics relies far too heavily on attaching principles or philosophies to particular thinkers and makes the mistake of implicitly treating famous philosophers as if they are all contemporaries.\(^{62}\) In doing so, MacIntyre argues that we neglect salient details about the social and historical context surrounding thinkers and their beliefs and forget, for instance, that Hume was Scotsman living during the eighteenth century or that Kant was Prussian rather than an ancient Athenian.\(^{63}\) This modern philosophical phenomenon consists in both the undue attribution of certain thoughts to particular individuals in particular and also, then, the failure to contextualize those thoughts through the socio-historical circumstances of their originators.\(^{64}\) As a result of those errors, we underestimate the complexity of these ideas and how they relate to forces of history and ancestry and also arrive and irresolvable moral disagreements caused by the inapt comparison of incomparable philosophies.\(^{65}\)

MacIntyre goes on to illustrate a structural flaw that has irreparably damaged moral thought since the Enlightenment. He argues that it is bound to failure because of its tendency

\(^{61}\) MacIntyre 8-9.
\(^{62}\) MacIntyre 10.
\(^{63}\) MacIntyre 11.
\(^{64}\) MacIntyre 10.
\(^{65}\) MacIntyre 10-11.
to move from premises about human nature to normative analysis despite an 'inracticable discrepancy' caused by the presence shared conceptions of moral rules and precepts concurrent with major disagreements in conceptions of human nature—each of which is only intelligible in the context of the particular history from which it emerged.\textsuperscript{66} Shared core beliefs lose their coherence when built upon a shaky and commonly-undefined foundation because they lack the context needed to render them intelligible.\textsuperscript{67} General shared conceptions like the importance of promise-keeping are reduced to fragments of their former normative states when (as Enlightenment-inspired thought tends to do) the teleological basis of ethics from which they emerged is rejected and they are severed from it.\textsuperscript{68} Thus, modern notions of individuality and a non-teleological worldview resulted in a new and flawed emotivist social context that helped to enable the aforementioned problems in contemporary ethics.\textsuperscript{69} MacIntyre argues that utilitarianism and Kant's Categorical Imperative emerged as responses to the justificatory vacuum created by the abandonment of teleology—with the former seeking to amend it and the latter seeking to replace it altogether—but that attempting to do so (in addition to failing) made significant social and intellectual transformations that ought to affect the substance of ethics and were not properly reckoned with when many of the same core principles were alleged to remain unaffected.\textsuperscript{70}

These critiques of modern moral philosophy are neither ungrounded nor made from a perspective that is internal to any of the theories being criticized. Rather, they constitute an external and general evaluation that is heavily influenced and inspired by MacIntyre's own

\textsuperscript{66} MacIntyre 52. 
\textsuperscript{67} MacIntyre 51. 
\textsuperscript{68} MacIntyre 54-55. 
\textsuperscript{69} MacIntyre 61. 
\textsuperscript{70} MacIntyre 60.
account of ethics and the virtues. Although he believes strongly in the need for conceptual unity within a given tradition to lend the necessary intelligibility to moral theses, he recognizes that there is wide disagreement among rival approaches to virtue. MacIntyre acknowledges different (sometimes mutually-exclusive) conceptions of virtue have emerged within the same traditions across different specific societies and times—as exemplified by the various versions articulated by the Homer, Aristotle, the New Testament, Ben Franklin, Jane Austin, and so on. These varying formulations contain very different substantive accounts and lists of the virtues as well as prioritizations of certain values and constitute differences that cannot be resolved by steps like merely re-translating 'excellences' into 'virtues'. Homer praises warriors; Aristotle lauds the temperate Athenian gentleman; and the New Testament stresses humility and beneficence. Whereas Aristotle argues that external goods are necessary for virtue, Jesus firmly believes that they corrupt and that true virtue is reserved for the poor and powerless. While Homer insists that the particular role of an individual in society is determinate of virtue, Aristotle attaches it to their *telos* as a human being more broadly, and Franklin converts Aristotle's internally-oriented teleology into an outward-focused utilitarianism. MacIntyre, responding to these major differences, asks if a conceptual unity can nonetheless be found, if these are all accounts of different or the same things, and what might explain their differences despite arising out of a common tradition. He concludes that some form of virtues/excellences relating to truthfulness, justice, courage, and possibly some other qualities exist across all contexts and that people identify themselves with them regardless of variations.

---

71 MacIntyre 186.
72 Darwall 144.
73 Darwall 145.
74 Darwall 146.
75 Darwall 147.
76 Darwall 149.
in the particular form that they take.\textsuperscript{77} Having established this overlap, MacIntyre is now ready to address his account of what virtue is and how ethics functions.

MacIntyre argues that there are three necessary ordered stages for a tradition and virtue: a background account of a practice, a 'narrative order of a single human life', and a background moral tradition.\textsuperscript{78} Each later stage presupposes the earlier one(s), but the reverse is not necessarily true even though the earlier states are constitutive of the later ones.\textsuperscript{79} I will follow MacIntyre's structure of explaining each (of the three) elements needed to construct a tradition and virtue and then offer his partial definitions of virtue after the first two and final definition of virtue after the final one. It is important to note, however, that the existence, construction, and recognition of a background tradition is absolutely crucial to this account from an internal perspective as well as in terms of understanding MacIntyre's unique contribution to the virtue ethics framework more broadly.

The identification of established practices is the necessary first step for MacIntyre's theory, and he offers a precise definition for a 'practice' that is somewhat different and far more specific than what is conventionally understood. In defining a practice, he writes:

\begin{quote}
[It is] any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.\textsuperscript{80}
\end{quote}

It is important to recognize, though, not any activity one partakes in satisfies the necessary conditions to be considered a practice. There must be not just similar actions being undertaken

\textsuperscript{77} MacIntyre 156.
\textsuperscript{78} MacIntyre 186-187.
\textsuperscript{79} Darwall 150.
\textsuperscript{80} MacIntyre 187.
but also sets of guiding rules or principles and cohere those actions within the category of a single practice. So whereas bricklaying and throwing a football well are not practices for that reason, architecture and the game of football are legitimate examples. MacIntyre concludes, therefore, that "Every practice requires a certain kind of relationship between those who participate in it. Now the virtues are those goods by reference to which, whether we like it or not, we define our relationships to those other people with whom we share the kind of purposes and standards which inform practices". One must also understand the earlier distinction between 'internal' and 'external goods to fully make sense of these definitions.

MacIntyre states that, unlike internal goods that can only be achieved through a particular practice and are good for the whole community, external goods are 'continentally-attached' to a given practice (like giving a child candy for winning at chess) and are fungible and encourage cheating—which is self-defeating to a practice. Responding to Aristotle's stance on the role of external goods in enabling the virtues, MacIntyre argues that they can, indeed, contribute to excellence(s) but that only internal goods can contribute to an individual actually being an excellent specimen of a certain kind, e.g. an excellent painter. The style, rules, goals, and shape of a given practice will vary and form according to its particular history of development, but practices can flourish in societies with very different codes as long as similar virtues themselves are valued—i.e. it is not an issue if one society believes that it is never acceptable to

81 MacIntyre 187.
82 MacIntyre 191.
83 He notes also that this includes not just contemporary practitioners, but also those who have preceded us in a given practice and whose achievements have helped to shape the practice into its current form (MacIntyre 194).
84 MacIntyre 188, 190.
85 According to MacIntyre, "Virtues then stand in a different relationship to external and to internal goods. The possession of the virtues—and not only of their semblance and simulacra—is necessary to achieve the latter; yet the possession of the virtues may perfectly well hinder us in achieving external goods" (MacIntyre 196).
86 MacIntyre 190.
87 MacIntyre notes that practices should not be conflated with institutions, which are somewhat similar but are concerned primarily with external goods (MacIntyre 194).
lie and another accepts that one can still be honest/truthful and still make whit lies in certain circumstances. With this conception of practices in mind, MacIntyre gives his first account of virtue and states that "A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods".

For MacIntyre, the virtues and the existence of practices are significantly intertwined. He argues that the integrity of practices depends upon how the virtues interact with the 'institutional forms' of practices. Despite this close connection, though, MacIntyre—like Aristotle—affirms the conceptual independence and primacy of the virtues and believes that they do intelligibly exist distinct from the practices even though practices contain the 'point and function' of the virtues. In situating his theory so far, MacIntyre identifies two significant ways in which his approach departs from that of Aristotle and then three major areas of agreement. The first difference is that, although MacIntyre's approach is teleological, it does not rely upon Aristotle's 'metaphysical biology' or thoughts in De Anima. Second, MacIntyre believes that conflicts or dilemmas among the virtues can emerge not just from flaws in character (as Aristotle would say) but also from inevitable conflicts in goods caused by the multiplicity of human practices and goods. Following from Aristotle, first, MacIntyre endorses the distinction between intellectual and moral/character virtues and the relationship between...

---

88 MacIntyre 190, 193.
89 MacIntyre 191.
90 MacIntyre 195
91 MacIntyre 201.
92 It is conceivable for MacIntyre that there are some evil practices, but we need not condone such evils or hold that "whatever follows from a virtue is right". Courage, for example, sometimes enables injustice, but that does not mean that it is not a virtue (MacIntyre 200).
93 MacIntyre 196.
94 MacIntyre 197
practical reasoning and the moral virtues. Second, he adopts Aristotle's conception of happiness and writes that "As Aristotle says, the enjoyment of the activity and the enjoyment of achievement are not the ends at which the agent aims, but the enjoyment supervenes upon the successful activity in such a way that the activity achieved and the activity enjoyed are one in the same". Third, MacIntyre accepts the explanatory (in addition to justificatory) power of a teleological backdrop and believes that teleology can also descriptively explain why a given action was performed over other possible candidates.

Nonetheless, MacIntyre maintains that everything said so far is insufficient to elucidate the nature and functions of the virtues and explain how they inform human life. Put simply, excellence in practices is not necessarily excellence as a human—i.e. some masterful painters are wretched persons. More specifically, he explains, first, that this limited account allows for too many conflicts and too much arbitrariness because of the multiplicity of conflicting practices and how they relate to the virtues. Second, any understanding of the virtues is necessarily incomplete without "an overriding conception of the telos of a whole human life, conceived as a unity [...]". Third, there is a still undefined virtue of integrity that both cannot be specified outside the context of the 'wholeness of a human life' and is crucial to all of the other virtues actually being virtues instead of mere qualities because it constructs a place, purpose, and coherence for them from which to derive normative value. One must, therefore, introduce a

---

95 MacIntyre 197.  
96 MacIntyre 198.  
97 MacIntyre 199.  
98 MacIntyre 125.  
99 MacIntyre 201.  
100 MacIntyre 202.  
101 MacIntyre 203.
further dimension to MacIntyre's account of virtue thus far and develop his second stage: the narrative order or *telos* of single human life.

The first step that MacIntyre undertakes in developing a conception of each human life as a teleological whole is to acknowledge the sociological and philosophical impediments to doing so. Sociologically, he recognizes that we tend to partition our lives into many discrete domains rather conceptualize of each facet as an element of a cohesive whole all working towards a common aim.\(^{102}\) Philosophically, analytic philosophy tends to think too atomistically about human action and separate individuals themselves from the roles that they play—e.g. Sartre's existentialism—rather than treating one's function(s) and actions as necessary for any intelligible conception of personhood.\(^{103}\) As a result, an unfortunate compartmentalization of persons occurs in which individuals lack a fully *unified* identity.\(^{104}\) MacIntyre describes this ideal of unity as "a concept of self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end".\(^{105}\)\(^{106}\) He argues that an adequate account of human action (let alone human life or virtue) is impossible without the incorporation of the social settings and histories in which agents act.\(^{107}\) Behavior, therefore, cannot be identified prior to or independent of intentions, beliefs, and settings because actions are only intelligible insofar as they instantiate and enact our worldviews and narratives.\(^{108}\) Generally, this narrative is consistent with teleology in that one begins by considering what is good subjectively (for them)

---

\(^{102}\) MacIntyre 204.

\(^{103}\) Ibid.

\(^{104}\) Lutz 123.

\(^{105}\) MacIntyre 205.

\(^{106}\) By discussing unity of identity in terms of phenomenology and narratives by conceiving of the unity of an individual life as the unity of a narrative embodied across a single life, MacIntyre avoids a metaphysical grounding for his theory of identity and sidesteps having to take a direct position on Aristotle's controversial ontology & metaphysics and can provide a far more uncontroversial account than would otherwise be possible (Lutz 124).

\(^{107}\) Lutz 124.

\(^{108}\) MacIntyre 208 & Lutz 124.
and then naturally moves towards more objective questions about what is good as a result.\textsuperscript{109}

Following from his analysis on the importance of narrative and teleology, MacIntyre offers a second definition of virtue and writes:

\begin{quote}
The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good.\textsuperscript{110}
\end{quote}

One major issue with this definition, however, still remains for MacIntyre. He believes that it succeeds in describing individuals in a vacuum but does not properly address their social context or apply to humanity more broadly.\textsuperscript{111} One, therefore, must add a third and final dimension to the account of virtue to remedy this deficiency—moral traditions.

For MacIntyre, the history of one's community, its historic debts (either owed to others or owed to it by others), responsibilities, and so on comprise an 'ineliminable part of the setting for human agency'.\textsuperscript{112} MacIntyre describes this relation and writes that "I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships".\textsuperscript{113} Morality, following from this account, is social, defined, and constituted largely by our relationships with one another and cannot be reduced to either universal norms/natural rights or to the isolated personhood of any individual within society.\textsuperscript{114,115} MacIntyre, in giving his final revision of the definition of virtue, states:

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{109} MacIntyre 219. \\
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{111} Lutz 125-126. \\
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{113} MacIntyre 221. \\
\textsuperscript{114} Lutz 126.
\end{flushleft}
The virtues find their point and purpose not only in sustaining those relationships necessary if the variety of goods internal to practices are to be achieved and not only in sustaining the form of an individual life in which that individual might seek out his or her good as the good of his or her whole life, but also in sustaining those traditions which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context.\footnote{MacIntyre sees this account as an alternative to what he views as a bifurcated emotivism that holds that morality can be construed based on rights while policy is crafted according to utility (Lutz 130).}

At the core of this added dimension is an attempt to infuse a deeper sense of intelligibility into actions and virtue that requires more than just technical correctness and achieves a rich sensibleness that would be otherwise lacking. This definition, for MacIntyre, is also far more representative of people's actual lived experiences. He argues that considering the concept of an action itself to be secondary to that of an intelligible action is reflective of the constraints and circumstances that we all face. To illustrate why that prioritization is warranted, MacIntyre gives the example of a man making conversation at a bus stop and referring to a passing duck by its scientific name and notes that, although correct and able to convey some degree of meaning, it fails to be intelligible in the same way that we would expect or desire and feels somehow lacking and inadequate.\footnote{MacIntyre 223.}

This conception of virtue builds directly on the foundation established by Aristotle and borrows much of its structure and general philosophy—especially in regards to agent-centeredness and incorporating the importance of the telos of human life. Although he does not explicitly emphasize it to the same degree that Aristotle does, I believe that MacIntyre's account is wholly consistent and compatible with practical reason and even relies upon it to actually facilitate the identification, cultivation, and inculcation of the virtues. The major contribution of MacIntyre's work is to revive the aretaic framework in the modern context and in response to deontic and consequentialist paradigms that emerged long past Aristotle's era. In doing so, it also extends and further develops the virtue ethics approach—\footnote{MacIntyre 210.}
albeit in a manner that, as will be discussed later—opens it to significant potential criticism.

**Rosalind Hursthouse:**

As will be discussed in significant detail in the next chapter, MacIntyre and other virtue ethicists attracted significant criticism on account of their theories and claims about the nature, proper structure, and function of moral philosophy and the virtues. It is from that context that Rosalind Hursthouse advances her account of virtue ethics, which she also approaches from the standpoint of a perceived blurring between the different common subfields of ethics. On one hand, Kant and Aristotle have been brought closer together by certain strains of virtue ethics that attempt to bring deontic-style rules and more rigid structure and codifiability into virtue ethics. On the other hand, some other corners of virtue ethics have become imbued with a consequentialist spirit that generates accounts of the virtues based on either their utility or, more broadly, ability to engender certain types outcomes. These developments have made it more difficult than before to concisely or definitively articulate a definition or even fundamental description of virtue ethics on account of the greater diversity and internal tension that has developed. Reacting to the plethora of criticisms levied at virtue ethics and some of these internal tensions and ambiguities, other thinkers have strived to develop more systematic, particular, and exacting accounts of the virtues in order to counter some of those concerns and narratives. Hursthouse, however, chooses a different project instead and seeks to undertake two main tasks. First, she aspires to be less abstract and systematic and provide details, examples, and qualifications that further elucidate the virtue ethics approach. Second, she responds

---

118 Hursthouse 3-4.
119 Ibid.
directly to several major critiques of virtue ethics and argues that it is as practicable, able, useful, and moral as any other ethical approach. Virtue ethics, Hursthouse argues, is in fact perhaps the best way to determine which actions should be taken and how to construe morality, and she is a fierce advocate of applying the contemporary language of morality to the virtue ethics approach.

Hursthouse shares a common thesis with Aristotle and MacIntyre: that perceiving of ethics as a scientific enterprise is ultimately misguided and can only explain a limited degree of the whole of ethics. Virtue ethics, however, represents an alternative to that approach that better grapples with issues of motivation, moral character, moral wisdom, friendship, familial relationships, happiness (in a robust sense), the role of the emotions, and the broader questions of what sort of person one ought to be and how they should choose to live. Because of its focus on these important and intimate elements of human life, a good system of ethics cannot position itself from an abstracted and purportedly third-party, neutral vantage point and requires an internal perspective beginning with these critical, morally constitutive details. Virtuous individuals, as a result, do not just feel compelled to make the right choices but also reliably act in such ways on their own accord and attract and encourage similar attitudes that only further enable that type of behavior in themselves and others. Hursthouse writes that "One important fact about people's virtues and vices is that, once acquired, they are

---

120 I will not cover much of this second task that Hursthouse engages in during this chapter, as the one that follows is dedicated to articulating and responding to those (and other) critiques and will feature much of Hursthouse's thought.
121 Darwall 3.
122 Hursthouse 21.
123 Although it will not be included here, Hursthouse deals in-depth with the way in which virtue ethics best accounts for how the emotions factor into reason, decision-making, and motivations rather than subjugating them to mere impulses as occurs in some theories (Hursthouse 19).
124 Hursthouse 3.
125 Hursthouse 20.
126 Hursthouse 11.
strongly entrenched, precisely because they involve so much more than mere tendencies to act in certain ways. Acting well, then, is not an activity that one merely decides to undertake or a state of character that one chooses to adopt; it takes time and gradual process and must occur at the deepest levels. In this regard, Hursthouse's thinking is especially close to that of Aristotle—even though she thinks that he was 'dead wrong' in his beliefs about slaves and women and does not endorse his exact rendering of the particular virtues. Although she readily accepts the concept of eudaimonia, Hursthouse believes that there is no English translation of the concept that truly does it justice—holding that 'flourishing' is inapt because plants, too, can flourish, that 'happiness' implies too much subjectivity and individualism, and that 'wellbeing' is simply too clumsy and vague. Hursthouse, furthermore, makes a point to agree with Aristotle that desires are neither fully rational nor irrational and that virtues themselves can never be the cause of bad action/viciousness and that any situations seeming to function that way are more so failures of a moral agent's character.

With the mapping of Hursthouse's theory within what has been discussed so far and some the inclusion of a few introductory remarks now complete, I will focus on two main aspects of the rest of Hursthouse's philosophy—(1) the implications of agent-centeredness (and responses to its critics) and (2) a detailed discussion of moral dilemmas in which the virtues seems to conflict and yield contradictory guidance on action. Regarding the first main area, Hursthouse is adamant that—contrary to many critics—virtue ethics can provide 'specification of right action' despite it being aretaic instead of deontic. This instruction can occur either

---

127 Hursthouse 12.
128 Ibid.
129 Hursthouse 8.
130 Hursthouse 9-10.
131 Hursthouse 14-16
132 Hursthouse 17
through extrapolating action or general guidance on how to act from considering what a truly virtuous person would do under given circumstances or by generating a Kantian-style duty to act in a certain way by rooting that duty in character traits.\(^{134}\) Hursthouse cautions that prescriptive guidance is not diminished by emphasizing the moral nature of concepts like friendship and that virtue ethics is certainly not merely a supplemental normative theory (to either deontology or consequentialism) as some have claimed.\(^{135}\) As long as we can individually flourish in the same ways and not at each other's expense, Hursthouse argues that the virtues suit human beings well and construct a morality that incorporates the deep and important aspects of life.\(^{136}\)

How, though, should one proceed when the virtues (seem to) conflict? What if the virtue of honesty instructs us to be truthful and avoid lies but beneficence seems to demand a false compliment or dishonest answer? In approaching this question, Hursthouse believes that one must take a step back and examine what exactly the function of ethics in our lives is supposed to be.\(^{137}\) Should it, first, lead us to expect that any moral dilemma must have a resolution and that it is the job of ethics to provide it? Second, should it take as a basic premise that there are certain irresolvable and undecidable questions where there is no reasonable practical answer? Or third, should it be flexible and allow for disagreement on this issue between virtuous individuals and avoid taking a hard answer? For Hursthouse, virtue ethics can accommodate this third possibility and allow disagreement to manifest itself among moral agents.\(^{138}\) This issue, however, is not a unique one for virtue ethics. Hursthouse reminds her

---

\(^{133}\) Again, this question will be explored in more depth in the following chapter.

\(^{134}\) Hursthouse 17-19

\(^{135}\) Darwall 184-185.

\(^{136}\) Hursthouse 22.

\(^{137}\) Darwall 195.

\(^{138}\) Darwall 196.
readers that it is an active concern in Kantian ethics when different maxims appear to conflict and argues that many of the solutions offered there to resolve possible tensions are also applicable to virtue ethics—\(^{139}\) in addition to the fact that virtue ethics also produces certain virtuous individuals who are imbued with practical wisdom and can naturally resolve these dilemmas through experience and instinct.\(^{140}\) Hursthouse divides the rest of her analysis into two segments, dealing first with what she calls 'resolvable dilemmas' and second with 'irresolvable' ones.

According to Hursthouse, irresolvable dilemmas—in which both 'x' and 'y' are truly equally wrong or problematic—are actually very rare for virtue ethics; it is, instead, far more common that both are awful but one is clearly preferable nonetheless.\(^{141}\) Following Hume, she agrees that one does not deserve full credit or praise for choosing the lesser evil and argues that they can be left with some kind of 'remainder' or difference between the two.\(^{142}\) This concept of crediting the 'remainder', though, is absent in much of contemporary ethics because it is action-focused and becomes consumed with the badness of the action undertaken (even if it is the lesser of two evils) instead of being agent-centered like virtue ethics and crediting the individual to the extent that they acted well.\(^{143}\) In these situations, virtue ethics is also well-poised because it is able to laud the manner in which someone conducts themselves when faced with two very poor choices and praise them for how they arrive at their decision.\(^{144}^{145}\) In this vein, one can

---

\(^{139}\) One, for example, may attempt to resolve these situations as many deontologists do by contending that any contradictions only exist \textit{prima facie} and that there is no need to engage in an evaluative judgment on the comparative importance of the deontic maxims or aretaic virtues (Hursthouse 52).

\(^{140}\) Hursthouse 18.

\(^{141}\) Hursthouse 45.

\(^{142}\) Hursthouse 47.

\(^{143}\) Ibid.

\(^{144}\) Hursthouse 48.

\(^{145}\) Hursthouse acknowledges that certain forms of neo-Kantianism and even consequentialism strive to take these factors into account but that they necessarily do so less successfully than virtue ethics because of its agent-centeredness (Hursthouse 48).
imagine a doctor faced with two regrettable options during surgery but choosing to prioritize the patient's wellbeing however they can and acting without callousness when making that choice and speaking with the patient's family.

This crediting of the 'remainder', however, is only legitimate when one is involved in a dilemma not of their own creation, as there can be nothing virtuous about making what would otherwise be the more virtuous choice if one is to be blamed for the dilemma itself because no virtuous person would ever get themselves in that sort of situation in the first place.146 Even in situations of resolvable dilemmas that are not of one's own creation, there is no need or reason to praise the decision itself that is made. Rather, we ought to recognize a morally right decision without assessing what was done as itself morally right.147 To conclude her analysis of the so-called resolvable dilemmas, Hursthouse rather eloquently ties the optimal resolution back to the core tenets of virtue ethics. She argues that virtue ethics would reject any kind of strong codifiability seeking to explicitly delineate solutions to particular resolvable dilemmas because it would be too rigid.148 Instead, she argues that these types of situations especially demonstrate the importance of moral judgment (practical reason/wisdom) of the type that cannot be learned in lectures or be known by 'highly intelligent adolescents' but requires a special sort of character and is exposed to significant experience so that it is equipped to handle the hard cases where ethics may be needed most.149

Regarding 'irresolvable dilemmas', in which no available option is morally preferable than any other150, Hursthouse claims that they are far less problematic for virtue ethics than

\[\text{146} \text{ Hursthouse 50-51.}\]
\[\text{147} \text{ Ibid.}\]
\[\text{148} \text{ Hursthouse 56-57.}\]
\[\text{149} \text{ Hursthouse 59-60.}\]
\[\text{150} \text{ Hursthouse writes that "I take an irresolvable dilemma to be a situation in which the agent's moral choice lies between } x \text{ and } y \text{ and there are no moral grounds for favouring doing } x \text{ over doing } y." (Hursthouse 63).}\]
other moral philosophies because virtue ethics is less concerned with a particular, exact decision procedure for determining a 'right' outcome in every potential case and is instead more interested in how the agent composes themselves—which can still be relevant in these sorts of cases.\footnote{Hursthouse 68.} She believes, though, that virtue ethics uniquely can provide a satisfying account of the differences between the unworrying and tragic classes of these instances to the extent to which they are plausible and possibly worrisome.\footnote{Hursthouse 18.} First, some seemingly irresolvable dilemmas can actually become resolvable under virtue ethics based on the particular values or preferences of a given moral agent (assuming that the more general and universal virtues and values do indeed reach and 'irresolvable dilemma') because of the agent-centeredness of the approach.\footnote{Hursthouse 70.} Second, it is actually not problematic for virtue ethics that two virtuous agents who are similarly situated may act differently under the same conditions in these cases because virtue ethics is more concerned with aretaic concepts than deontic ones like duty.\footnote{Hursthouse 69}

The significance of this distinction here is that no tension necessarily must emerge because, although acting in accordance with virtue can largely be reduced to doing 'what is right', aretaic ethics possess a far broader and more varied set positive moral concepts—like goodness, wellbeing, pleasure, advantage, and so on.\footnote{Hursthouse 82} Each agent, then, may be acting virtuously/rightly (to the extent that those labels can be used at all in these dilemmas) even if undertaking contrary actions. Moreover, Hursthouse also argues that there is even some further reprieve for the virtuous in truly irresolvable dilemmas where even what was just mentioned is not possible. She writes that "The charitable, honest, just agent, even when faced with a tragic dilemma, does not act callously, dishonestly, unjustly, that is 'at (in the manner) the callous,
dishonest, unjust agent does'. She acts with immense regret and pain instead of indifferently or gladly [...]". In these truly irresolvable cases, however, Hursthouse does not believe that there is any value in seeking to adjudicate some degree of 'remainder' and states that one must simply recognize that the virtuous agent's life has been marred or even ruined—and that, tragically, nothing can be done about that fact.157

Michael Slote:

*In a period when virtue ethics is flexing its muscles, it needs a more varied diet than Aristotle or Aristotelianism alone can provide.*158

Michael Slote offers a self-identified account of virtue ethics that departs significantly and explicitly from much of the foundation established by Aristotle and continued by thinkers like MacIntyre. He argues that one can adopt an agent-based moral philosophy that rejects Aristotelian perfectionism and explores virtue ethics that have been underexplored.159 Perhaps most interestingly, he distinguishes between 'agent-focused' and 'agent-based' approaches to virtue and argues that the latter is a preferable approach that ought to be adopted. Agent-focused theories of virtues, according to Slote, include that of Aristotle and are agent-centered, but not in a robust manner. Although the focus is on moral agents, the underlying normativity of a given action or disposition is ascribed independent of the agent—as is evident by the conception that virtuous agents do what is right or internalize virtuous character traits, implying that they would be virtuous regardless of whether or not the virtuous agent were to undertake

---

156 Hursthouse 73
157 Hursthouse 77.
158 Slote, in Darwall 224.
159 Darwall 203.
them. Agent-based approaches like Slote’s, however, are more radically agent-centered in that a trait, disposition, or action achieves its virtuous status because it is what a virtuous person does or would do. Here, the entire normative emphasis and power lies within the fact that the virtuous person is the source of what is good/right—as opposed to making that derivative of certain fundamental aretaic facts or claims.

In exploring the agent-based paradigm for virtue ethics, Slote articulates three possible theories worth considering: morality as inner strength, morality as universal benevolence, and morality as caring. First, he refers back to Plato and many other philosophers (like the Stoics, Nietzsche, and Spinoza) who relate moral health, fortitude, and wellbeing to a form of inner strength—often of the soul. This is an example for Slote of a 'cool' agent-based theory as opposed to a 'warm' one because any sort of 'humane concern for other people' (presumably an integral part of ethics) cannot be directly derived from notions like health and strength.

Although there is something intuitively desirable about this inner strength, the Platonic account seems too consequentialist for Slote and appears to treat virtues like benevolence, compassion, and kindness as only derivatively admirable insofar as they facilitate that inner strength. Therefore, it makes sense to Slote to move towards a 'warm' agent-based model of morality/virtue that avoids this problem by placing those virtues squarely at the heart of normative considerations.

---

160 Darwall 203-204.
161 Ibid.
162 Ibid.
163 Darwall 208-209.
164 Darwall 209.
165 Slote explains that other theories that have a more direct linkage between their normative motives and a 'humane concern for other people' can be classified as 'warm'. Examples of such 'warm' theories include James Martineau's compassion-based theory of virtue and also thinkers like Hume, Hutcheson, and Jorge Garcia who emphasize motives like benevolence (Darwall 209).
166 Darwall 213.
Accordingly, Slote investigates a conception of morality based in universal benevolence that achieves many utilitarian aims while maintaining the integrity of the motives themselves independent of any greater goal that they may help to facilitate. He writes that "By contrast, morality as universal benevolence, precisely because it insists that the moral elevation of motives depends on their inherent character as motives rather than on their consequences, allows for the distinction and comes much closer to an intuitive conception of what makes motives morally better or worse". Here, although the agent-centeredness of Slote's approach is clear, I am not sure that the agent-based orientation of it (as opposed to being agent-focused) is as clear or self-evident as he believes it to be. It is unclear that he can attribute normativity under 'morality based in universal benevolence' solely in the agent-based way that he claims. Perhaps the virtue itself (independent of the moral agent and their character/motives) is still the integral basis for the morality and is merely activated by the virtuous character/motives or working in collaboration or partnership with them.

Morality as caring, however, provides another opportunity for Slote to present a 'warm' agent-based account of ethics. There, he explains that feminist philosophers picked up where St. Augustine left off in terms of developing and applying a particularistic ethics of caring—one that he believes can ultimately balance concern for (certain) others with self-concern and qualify as being agent-based. Slote goes on to write:

To be sure, there will be times when morality as benevolence [or caring] won't be able to solve our moral difficulties.[...] But any consequentialism worth its salt will also come up empty in such a case. It is a strength of such views, but not less of agent-based morality as benevolence, whether in partialistic or universalistic form, that such views do not presume to know the answers to difficult moral questions in cases that outrun our human knowledge or reasoning powers. Any ethical theory that makes it too easy always to know what to do or to feel

\[167\] Darwall 216.
\[168\] Darwall 219-220.
will seem to that extent flawed or even useless because untrue to our soberer sense of the wrenching complexity of moral phenomena.\textsuperscript{169}

In that passage, I believe that Slote makes the ultimate aspirations of his project quite clear. He seeks to develop an account of virtue ethics that is not only agent-based in the way that he describes but also highly practicable and able to compete with and fulfill the same merits as deontological and consequentialist theories. His book \textit{From Morality to Virtue}, in fact, focuses heavily on bridging some of the divides between the major ethical paradigms and seeks to demonstrate how virtue ethics can accommodate their strengths and act as a moral unifier.

Although I agree strongly with a major premise of Slote's work that virtue ethics has been underexplored and that there is a great diversity of compelling and legitimate aretaic theories and perspectives that are yet to be constructed and promulgated, I do not particularly care for his own formulation because I believe that he makes a number of missteps. First, his distinction between agent-focused and agent-based approaches to virtue ethics is problematic in that it posits a false dichotomy. Agent-centered virtue ethics does significantly partake in both objectivist sources of normativity in which the virtues themselves possess independent and generally fixed moral weight and the ascription of ethical importance to the virtuous agent qua virtuous agent. Hence, Slote's thesis that moral weight in his account rests purely with the virtuous agent and does not sufficiently do so elsewhere is misguided. Virtue ethics as I understand it in fact views each of these processes as inexorably intertwined and reflexive—especially in light of MacIntyre's account of the importance of narrative and an overarching virtue of constancy/integrity that enables the intelligibility of the virtues.

But even if one could separate agent-based and agent-focused approaches, Slote's analysis would still be questionable with respect to his claim that the former is the more

\textsuperscript{169} Darwall 223.
intuitive one and that it should be prioritized. The definition of virtue ethics that I offered at the start of this work even seems to largely contradict Slote's perspective on this issue, and I do not see any sufficient justification offered to abandon it on his behalf. Historically, a deep intuition favoring an objectivist good and set of virtues that consist of or partake in it has existed on a widespread level, and it seems odd to argue, as Slote does, that most people believe that the source of that goodness/virtue has rested per se in the virtuous individual and their character. I imagine instead that most people attribute the source to an innate quality within the virtue itself—especially given that doing so requires one less mental step and degree of connection. It is further, unclear, why an agent-based approach ought to be favored even if it is more intuitive. There seems an issue with saying that something is virtuous if is undertaken by a virtuous person and their virtuous character because it becomes unclear how that character and person became virtuous in the first place. The circularity problem for virtue ethics, which I will discuss in detail in chapter three, seems exacerbated by this approach in an unnecessary and uncalled for manner.

Second, Slote's characterization of Aristotelian perfectionism as consequentialism is deeply misguided. Although any perfectionist or teleological conception can roughly be described as consequentialist, that stretch is only possible insofar as the boundaries of consequentialism are expanded to included perfectionism/teleology. Especially in the case of Aristotle, there seems to me a strong case for a non-consequentialist interpretation given that interpreting it otherwise so stretches the meaning of consequentialism that I believe it could reasonably subsume deontology too given that one might follow a certain duty because it brings about the fulfillment of their obligation and is, therefore, consequentially the right thing to do. Any such
notion of consequentialism, which is not far off from what Slote is doing when he subsumes Aristotle's perfectionism, is absurd.

Third and most important, though, is a fundamental flaw in Slote's project and structure. By trying to incorporate so many deontic and utilitarian elements into virtue ethics, he sacrifices the very core nature of the framework that he purports to be growing by overshadowing some of its most important motivations and basic tenets. First, the structure of the ethical system is itself altered when all of these other considerations are absorbed into virtue ethics. More deontic-style rules and utilitarian-inspired ends become infused with the aretaic style, degrading its primacy and normative potency—even if virtues are still technically the primary moral building blocks. In doing so much, Slote compromises the foundation of virtue ethics and thins its essence. Second, even if none of what was just said is true in a technical meta-ethical sense, Slote so significantly broadens the emphasis and character of the virtue ethics approach that its focus moves increasingly further away from character and locating normativity within the virtues (or in a virtuous character as such in the ideal formulation of Slote's agent-based virtue ethics). The gist and character of the framework, through incorporating more codifiability and seeking to subsume certain key Kantian and utilitarian aims, is pulled away from the archetypal aretaic foundation that construes of normativity in a far broader sense than do more modern theories. Virtue ethics ought to be concerned with a conception of the good that relates to one's overall wellbeing—either in a teleological or non-teleological sense\textsuperscript{170}—and not center itself around narrower concepts like the 'right' or utility. These other concepts fail to do justice to the importance flourishing component of virtue ethics as a result and also even diminish from the role that practical reason plays in determining

\textsuperscript{170} The exact relationship between teleology and virtue ethics will be discussed in the next chapter.
conduct across an array of contexts because of this enhanced tendency to reduce normativity along more Kantianism and utilitarian terms.

For these reasons, I do not intend to consider or defend Slote's work in the next chapter, where I will defend virtue ethics from some of its most serious and significant critiques. The conception of virtue ethics that I plan to defend follows instead from an amalgamation of the other approaches that I have outlines in this chapter and reflects the strain of intellectual and philosophical development that begins with Aristotle and is heavily influenced by MacIntyre and Hursthouse. Although I will reference other thinkers in defending virtue ethics from its critics, it is these three philosophers who have most shaped virtue ethics for me. More specifically, I intend to defend the core structure and insights articulated by Aristotle—including his general meta-ethical construction of the virtues and conceptions of flourishing and practical reasoning. From MacIntyre, I augment what Aristotle began with the need for a deep sense of constant intelligibility and the more nuanced definition of virtue that locates it within specific narratives and broader moral traditions and instantiates it according to certain practices.

Finally, I eagerly embrace Hursthouse's efforts to strike a balance that Slote does not by asserting the full moral standing of virtue ethics immediately alongside consequentialist and deontological approaches without compromising the uniqueness of its distinctive normative aims and endeavors relative to the two other major frameworks. In this vein, I defend her claim that virtue ethics can generate clear rules and duties for its adherents to follow and that it is both highly operable and also true to its substantive basic tenets. Although there is no one particular articulated theory that expresses each of these elements, it is the conception of virtue ethics that I find most compelling and will have in mind in the next chapter. In any case, as I
have argued before, I do not believe that generating or defending a particular list of the virtues is necessary for either this project or the legitimacy of virtue ethics. It is the overall structure and style of this approach to moral philosophy that is being considered, and defining the particular virtues is simply not critical to that task. If one were to comment that this position is problematic given that the virtue ethics approach is built upon an objectivist account of certain virtues themselves, the response would be that I am simply in no position to definitively do that work myself and can only hope to be so wise through the adoption and inculcation of this approach more broadly.
Chapter Three: Criticisms & Responses

Like any moral philosophy, virtue ethics as a whole can be legitimately criticized on a wide variety of grounds. Although certain criticisms are only germane to particular formulations of virtue ethics, there are seven major threads of criticism that I believe have a broader application and can potentially pose a serious threat to any aretaic system of ethics. In this chapter, I will articulate each of these challenges in the strongest reasonable terms and then defend virtue ethics against them (with reference to the work of prominent virtue ethicists). In some instances, my aim is to demonstrate that a critique is wholly misguided, inapplicable, and unfair—e.g. that virtue ethics is somehow inoperable. In others cases, I am more willing to accept particular concerns and will explore the extent of their harmful implications—e.g. that virtue ethics functions best against a teleological backdrop. In other cases still, including the potential issue of moral relativism, I will draw parallels with deontology and/or consequentialism in terms of deviations from a normative ideal and argue that virtue ethics is no more susceptible to a given criticism than either of the two major competing frameworks. Finally, I will sometimes argue that what may be perceivable as a disadvantage is either a worthwhile opportunity cost or actually valuable from a perspective that is internal to virtue ethics. I will deal first with the common challenge that virtue ethics is inoperable, unwieldy, and functionally useless for the vast majority of moral agents dealing with real world situations that require them to determine how to act. Second, I will grapple with arguments that virtue ethics, and especially the virtues themselves, are susceptible to a strong form of cultural relativism and that aretaic normativity is significantly context-dependent. Third, I will reject the notion that rendering virtue ethics applicable and meaningfully prescriptive then causes it to devolve into or become subsumed by either deontology or consequentialism. Fourth, I will consider the
problems for virtue ethics raised by occasional tension between a virtue and virtuousness more broadly by examining circumstances in which a given virtue appears positioned to reward or laude seemingly otherwise blameworthy conduct, e.g. describing a courageous thief' or 'benevolent liar'. Fifth, I will address concerns surrounding circularity, especially that virtue ethics is ultimately tautological at its core by relying in a fundamental sense on asking what a virtuous person would do in a given case as a heuristic for determining proper conduct for others in that or similar situations. Sixth, I will engage with the position that theories of virtue ethics presuppose backdrops of particular (peculiar) schemes of metaphysics or teleological/perfectionist worldviews and conceptions of normativity that are in some fashion arbitrary, undesirable, or undefended. Seventh and finally, I will respond to the belief that the historical proponents of virtue ethics have tended to be conservative and often Christian-inspired thinkers and that the approach and the virtues are somehow skewed or deeply susceptible to those dispositions today. Ultimately, I hope to both restore any direct damage that appears to be done to virtue ethics by these critiques and also continue to articulate its overarching merits and form in the process.

On Operability:

Opponents to virtue ethics have long criticized it for offering insufficient guidance to moral agents on how to act. Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, for example, is held by some to be perhaps conceptually valuable to the philosophizing theorist but of little use to the individual striving to determine which path before them constitutes an ideal balance between excess and deficiency.\textsuperscript{171} This line of concern centers around the notion that virtue ethics is imprecise and

\textsuperscript{171} Curzer 1.
unable to yield actionable and clear instruction regarding particular actions and specific situations, focusing instead on building general character traits or promoting flourishing and excellence in a broad and less moral sense. More specifically, there is concern that aretaic aspirations surrounding living well, flourishing, and pursuing the good life are too nebulous and ambiguous compared to the Right or utility to have any bearing on particular actions—especially in the hard cases where ethics is needed most.\textsuperscript{172} For others, virtue ethics is thought to have little substantive analysis about the actual nature of virtue and vice and conflate them with skills and excellences more generally, thus distorting the worth of particular values by treating them all as 'virtues'. To illustrate these issues, imagine an otherwise unremarkable person who is concerned with doing what is right but lacks any rigorous philosophical training or saintly disposition. To the critic of virtue ethics, such a person would be fairly lost in determining how to bridge the gap between an identified virtue and its application and left wondering if they had acted rightly or discharged their responsibilities sufficiently. This potential problem, moreover, is of even greater concern when one departs from the hypothetical example of an average person and considers instead a 'bumbling fool' who desperately wants to do good but lacks any strong, natural moral compass with which to be guided. How can they possibly expected to determine what is moral or even internalize the necessary dispositions and states of character needed to flourish and become more virtuous? Unlike other approaches that premise themselves around providing clear answers to these types of very questions, virtue ethics may seem unable to meaningfully compare or compete.

There are five major responses that I wish to offer in the face of this criticism. First, one has to take a step back and examine the purpose or function of moral philosophy in order to

\textsuperscript{172} Hursthouse 28.
better consider the contingent question surrounding the operability of virtue ethics. As I said in the Introduction, historical events and trends have imbued the language used to discuss ethics with certain biases that suggest a particular function for any ethical system to fulfill. Ethical discussions are oriented in an action-focused manner and form issues of worth or value around obligation, duty, and a particular conception of moral life. Therefore, a theory that fails to function along those lines and deviates by drawing a different picture of how one should act may seem as if it is failing more fundamentally as a moral system. This conclusion, however, need not to follow from such a distinction; the purpose of ethics can be construed much broader. Stephen Darwall, in exploring this question, writes about ethics:

Should it [...] (1) direct us to think about moral dilemmas in the belief that they must have a resolution, and that it is the business of the normative ethics in question to provide one? Or should it (2) have built into it the possibility of there being, as David Wiggins puts it, some 'absolutely undecidable questions -- e.g. cases where...nothing could count as the reasonable practical answer', counting questions about dilemmas of the sort described against them? Or should it (3) be sufficiently flexible to allow for a comprehensible disagreement on this issue between two proponents of the normative ethics in question?173

There is no internal, necessary connection between a moral system and providing concrete action-regarding prescriptive claims. It is perfectly plausible to imagine a moral system that guides human conduct, elucidates critical normative insights, and functions largely prescriptively but does not define itself primarily around the rendering of specific actionable instructions.

Rather, that may be a secondary or subsidiary function to other aims — like articulating a coherent narrative of the good/good life, developing a scheme of desirable character traits, finding purpose for human life and how it can be enhanced or perfected, etc. Recognizing the legitimacy or even primacy of these additional moral dimensions is important not only because

173 Darwall 195.
they are critical and foundational philosophical elements of ethics that have innate value. This broader conception of the function of moral philosophy is also necessary because there are instances in which there genuinely are no outwardly correct or incorrect courses of action. By this, I mean that choosing one action or the other divorced from other internal, specific factors, including attitude, temperament, and context, one's 'psychological autobiography'¹⁷⁴ may not be sufficient to constitute an intelligible ethical account of a situation. Rather, these other factors can be integral to forming normative evaluations and providing an intelligible ethical picture—especially if there are different, mutually-exclusive sets of action that could each be legitimate depending on how these other facets interact in a given case. As a result, it is as essential that a system of ethics is responsive to these elements and treats them prominently and foundationally as it is important to recognize and fulfill the deontic priorities to which most students of ethics are more accustomed. The existence of coexisting or competing basic normative functions demonstrates that it is not the case that issuing rigid action-oriented prescriptive claims that are applicable in a wide variety of practical situations is a necessary condition for an 'operable' ethical system. Virtue ethics, even if this criticism is fully valid, can therefore remain a legitimate and operable moral system by clearly engaging in these other important normative functions.

There is no need, however, to rely on just that defense alone against the operability challenge, for virtue ethics is also perfectly capable of providing clear prescriptive claims about actions—even under a far broader conception of virtue than is typically accepted today, like that of Aristotle or Aquinas. According to Hursthouse, and as a second response to this overarching critique, it is simply wrong to believe that virtue ethics only serves to emphasize supplemental non-denotic facets of moral life (like friendship or courage) and enhances deontological or

¹⁷⁴ Darwall 198.
consequentialist approaches rather than treating it as a fully rival normative theory.\textsuperscript{175} Instead, every virtue establishes a duty to act accordingly whenever possible, and every vice establishes a moral prohibition against doing those things.\textsuperscript{176} Demonstrating that these rules can function very similarly to their counterparts in deontic ethics, Hursthouse explains that "According to virtue ethics, I must not tell this lie, since it would be dishonest, and dishonesty is a vice; must not break this promise, since it would be unjust, or a betrayal of friendship, or, perhaps (for the available virtue and vice terms do not nearly cover every contingency), simply because no virtuous person would".\textsuperscript{177} The development of a series of actionable prescriptive commands (to borrow some deontological vernacular) to guide conduct, then, naturally follows for virtue ethics from identifying virtues (and vices).

Just as Kantians must determine particular maxims to be universalized in order to instantiate particular duties and utilitarians must calculate utility in order justify certain obligations, virtue ethicists need only to identify and expound upon the appropriate virtues in order to render parallel prescriptive claims. Gary Watson explains that virtue ethics, despite being aretaic, is not incompatible with having ethical duties of this sort as long as it rejects a complete focus around that as a sole purpose. He writes that "Duties and obligations are simply factors to which certain values, for example, fidelity and justice, are responsive. They do not compete with virtue for moral attention".\textsuperscript{178} In this sense, the virtues themselves (as opposed to the moral rules derived from them) remain the core building blocks and constitutive elements of morality while still producing particular prescriptive guidance on conduct. For Hursthouse, virtue ethics is even equally capable of articulating the same set of rules as deontology (although

\textsuperscript{175} Darwall 184-185 & 194-195.
\textsuperscript{176} Darwall 190.
\textsuperscript{177} Darwall 191.
\textsuperscript{178} Darwall 231.
not necessarily bound to do so), but differs in the backing behind a given rule—avoiding X because 'X is prohibited' under a deontological approach versus avoiding X because 'X is a vice' in virtue ethics. Although it would not accept a strong codifiability of morality that delineates set solutions to moral dilemmas in which virtues conflict (and instead prioritizes moral judgment, practical reasoning, and other factors), virtue ethics is compatible with the codifiability of ethics generally and does not face any necessary tension from articulating particular moral statements derived from the virtues. In addition to the explicit stating of moral principles, Hursthouse further argues that they are also implicit within and embodied by the virtues themselves, which serves to thicken the link between virtue ethics and practicable, applicable prescriptive guidance.

Skeptics, however, may question the ease with which one could reasonably act upon these types of virtue-based 'commands.' What can and cannot constitute a virtue? How can the average moral agent go about answering that question? What does it actually mean to 'be charitable' in practical terms? Interestingly, Hursthouse states that a larger number of generally agreed upon vices has been amassed compared to the quantity of accepted deontological maxims, suggesting that virtue ethics is perhaps even better codified and more practicable than competing approaches. The third and fourth responses to this overarching operability critique of virtue ethics, however, will now arise by further answering these logistical challenges to the formation and implementation of specific virtue ethics rules or commands. One reasonable strategy for identifying the virtues or how to apply them in a given situation is to use either the heuristic of imagining how a virtuous person might conduct themselves in those particular

179 Hursthouse 39.
180 Hursthouse 56-57.
181 Hursthouse 41.
182 Hursthouse 41-42.
circumstances or actually finding such a person and seeking their guidance explicitly. Even if the outcomes of using these approaches are less consistent than referring to a pre-ordained and fixed list of rules or statements of guidance, their helpfulness in guiding action is undiminished. Almost everyone knows of at least one or two people in their lives who seem to regularly, habitually, and instinctually conduct themselves morally and virtuously—whether it is a grandparent, friend, mentor, coworker, or even fictional ideal. One can generalize reasonably well from the enumerated virtues (charity, honesty, benevolence, etc.) and often develop a fairly reliable sense of what one with those character traits engrained in them would do and then act in that fashion.\textsuperscript{183} Here, even if considering how they might act does not necessarily shed light onto the reasons why it is most appropriate to do so or provide instruction in how to come to such realizations in the future, it can nonetheless serve as a powerful and quite accessible source of guidance. Taking the other path of directly asking such a figure, when possible, achieves this same end and also may help to inculcate their type of thinking, awareness, and insights to help train the original agent to act more confidently and virtuously moving forward.

The fourth response in support of the operability of virtue ethics is that some degree of ambiguity and variability is not at all unique to aretaic moral philosophy, and therefore not a mark against its practicability or usefulness. Deontologists, for example, dispute the constituent facets of the Right and disagree over whether God, universalizability, or the Categorical Imperative are prime.\textsuperscript{184} Although the process for doing so not in doubt, it is often unclear to Kantians how to figure which potential rules should be universalized and how to determine which subsidiary or ancillary situations are germane to certain rules or what to do in the case of

\textsuperscript{183} Hurthhouse 35-36.  
\textsuperscript{184} Hurthhouse 28.
conflict between competing claims on ethical obligation. Utilitarians, further, face significant
ambiguity in deciding how to maximize utility or even go about developing a process or system
for doing so. Any unique element of ambiguity that may exist within virtue ethics, moreover, is
not necessarily problematic for helping facilitate eager moral agents to Turning to others and
accepting a process that does not purport to provide the same type of certainty or rigid clarity
that many modern students of ethics expect may seem unjustifiably vague or unhelpful.
Morality, however, should not function as an isolating or fully autonomous quest for some
hidden correct answer. Hursthouse writes that through engaging in the process of virtue ethics,
one uncovers "a straightforward explanation of an important aspect of our moral life, namely
the fact that we do not always act as 'autonomous', utterly self-determining agents, but quite
often seek moral guidance from people we think are morally better than ourselves".185 In some
degree of 'ambiguity', a fairly loaded term, we actually come closer to the nature of ethics in this
important sense and can see that it functions as an asset instead of liability when considered
from a certain perspective that treats that variability or seeming ambiguity as valuable
byproducts of these interactional and phenomenological (normative) dimensions of moral life.

Fifth and finally, one can challenge critiques of virtue ethics' ability to produce
operable guides to action or conduct for the average well-intentioned moral agent by arguing
that no theory of the Right could provide a complete guide to action without being at least
complemented, if not substantiated altogether, by a theory of virtue ethics. It is quite unclear
how, without the additional presence of a virtue ethics approach emphasizing elements like
character and practical wisdom, one could apply rules or moral principles beyond the delineated
cases to which they specifically or obviously apply. In deconstructing the command 'don't lie', a

185 Hursthouse 35.
number of questions emerge. Do omissions constitute lies? What about embellishments or broad morals taught to children? Theories of the Right may actually require something like virtue ethics to render them applicable in a large segment of important cases. More fundamentally, moral rules may be too general and simplistic to sufficiently apply to or do justice to the gamut of complex, nuanced moral situations.\footnote{186} Having a virtuous character, then, may be essential for determining if one is able to act well in accordance with those prescriptions and commands, even if the virtues themselves are not the main moral building blocks. Gregory Trianosky writes that "What makes an action right in these instances will instead be simply that it is the particular choice endorsed by thoughtful judgment or practical wisdom, informed by virtuous concern. In these instances at least judgments of virtue will be primary and judgments of rightness derivative."\footnote{187} Hence, even under this kind of outlook, virtue ethics is not, as Hursthouse firmly rejects, supplementary to an overarching deontic framework. Rather, it demonstrates how virtue ethics can be compatible with and also ultimately breathe normativity into moral rules or principles.

On their own and when considered together, I believe that these five responses sufficiently counteract the broad criticism that virtue ethics is impracticable and significantly less operable or useful for determining specific actions than other competing approaches. An agent-centered aretaic system can both subsume many of the applicability-related benefits touted by deontology and consequentialism and also offers significant unique normative advantages. By providing specific rule-based guidance, offering strategies for navigating challenging or ambiguous cases, and accounting for the multi-dimensional nature of human moral life, virtue

\footnote{186}{Trianosky 342.}  
\footnote{187}{Ibid.}
ethics surely offers an operable approach to normative philosophy.

The Relativistic Challenge:

Because of the importance that it places on the particular virtues, virtue ethics is sometimes criticized for rendering normativity too susceptible to arbitrary or changing norms within particular societies and being too culturally-defined and sociologically-dependent as a result. In some cases, the actual traits that are ultimately deemed virtuous may vary from place to place (for example, strength could be perceived as virtuous in some contexts and instead as unvirtuous or non-moral in others). Even more common, the character, form, boundaries, and constitutive elements of a given virtue may vary tremendously across classes, societies, and eras. What counts as courageous in one place and time might seem rash in another, and how one considers notions like cowardice, benevolence, or honesty (especially in grayer matters like omission and embellishment) has tremendous potential for variation. Essentially, then, this vein of criticism perceives regrets virtue ethics as being significantly intertwined with particular sociological forces or milieus in this way. To deconstruct this viewpoint, I will first clarify the nuance of the relationship that exists between societal norms/practices and the virtues themselves and then argue that any existing influence is anything but regrettable.

It would be simply false to believe that whatever an individual earnestly believes to be virtuous is, necessarily, so. Virtue ethics is, in fact, unsympathetic to hedonistic self-indulgency or solipsistic denials of moral truths. Despite being agent-centered, it is not agent-relative in a robust sense and does not place its normative locus on the individual moral agent qua individual or treat their personal desires, psychology, or community standing as an ethical starting point—
although those factors can still be morally relevant in a supplementary sense. Similarly, it is
equally erroneous to accept that the prevailing beliefs of a particular community or society,
especially regarding the virtues, have normative force simply because they hold that dominant
status. Just as certain individuals may be wicked, so, too, are some norms and practices. Virtue
ethics is not built upon an unquestionable descriptive foundation that then sets certain rigid
parameters for normativity. No student of aretaic ethics can be justified in entertaining the
belief that one is acting virtuously as long as their actions are informed by widely accepted ideas
and ideals surrounding the virtues, for virtue ethics maintain a substantive, realist conception of
the good.

In contrast to a classical liberal perspective in which the good life is subjective to the
individual and cannot be identified according to any collective or universal scale, virtue ethicists
are bound to a more determined and objectivist conception. For them, whether or not
something is virtuous refers to factors that are not merely phenomenological and is, instead,
deeply rooted in human nature more and broadly based on its essential features. This paradigm
makes quite a bit of sense given the teleological or perfectionist basis for virtue ethics and the
belief that the moral life is that which allows individuals to achieve excellence, flourish, and
fulfill their purpose in their capacity as human beings—as such. For Aristotle, it is our status as
rational, thinking agents that comprises the key constitutive element of that identity, and that is
something that does not vary by culture or time. Virtues under this framework, then, function
as the aspirational or ideal traits that are conductive towards that end, and they are influenced
by that meta-ethical background as a result. Despite what this analysis may seem to imply, it
would also be incorrect to extrapolate from it that there is one wholly definitive or absolute list
of virtues or a single conception of virtuousness that one can therefore prescribe onto all
communities, contexts, or times. A substantive, non-subjectivist understanding of the good (and the good life for human beings) need not be completely monolithic or maintain a universal, hegemonic form for virtue in every place and at all times. Conduct for human behavior, on the contrary, must somehow recognize and be reasonably responsive to major descriptive differences in the contexts in which people live without letting those forces take too prominent a place in the ascription of normative status to the virtues themselves. By this, I mean that sociological variations may, legitimately, inform and affect the virtues and normative force, but they may not be its source or justification. Accordingly, the following two perspectives would both be erroneous: (1) that the particular ancient Greek virtues that are no longer held in ethical esteem today were/are illegitimate or un-moral because they were inspired by and intertwined with accidental expressions of the human condition and (2) that they were somehow legitimate, justified, or right in the past simply because they were closely held at a given time.

Clearly, there is some degree of apparent tension in this position that maintains, on one hand, the normative insignificance of the contextual or accidental properties of particular communities while also claiming that those forces are legitimate in shaping the virtues themselves. I believe, though, that virtue ethics is able to overcome this tension and reconcile itself in such a way that neither needs to endorse the core of moral relativism when it comes to the virtues nor forcefully oppose all of those tendencies or implications either. As background before further articulating the nature of this particular, complex relationship, though, it is important to first make a powerful observation about the relationship between normative theory and sociological settings more generally. As Alasdair MacIntyre recognizes, any moral philosophy must necessarily presuppose and impart at least some kind of sociological backdrop
and worldview.\textsuperscript{188} He writes that "For every moral philosophy offers explicitly or implicitly at least a partial conceptual analysis of the relationship of an agent to his or her reasons, motives, intentions and actions, and in doing generally presupposes some claim that these concepts embodied or at least can be in the real social world".\textsuperscript{189} Following from that, I agree that it is implausible for any ethical theory to fully disavow a significant connection to the circumstances that surround its application. The normative implications of a concept like integrity, for example, cannot conceivably be considered without first substantially presupposing some kind of descriptive idea of what that even means. Traits common to someone who exemplifies integrity include elements like honesty, honor, constancy, trustworthiness, and sincerity. Each of these aspects, like the overall characteristic of integrity itself, lacks any specifically defined intrinsic meaning that can be separated or divorced from that which gives those terms their concrete meanings.

The actual meanings of these terms as understood by those using them, beyond just the most general and vague definitions like the one given above, depend on factors that change across communities—like the effects of certain historical events, legal customs, dominant narratives and prevailing norms, institutions, religious beliefs, etc. None of these forces exists in isolation; each of them directly shapes our understandings of seemingly basic and self-evident concepts such as integrity or sincerity. The very nature of language and society and the ways that we form basic understandings necessarily lend themselves to shaping and formation by these forces. Even if the main thrust or gist of a concept can be identified independently across different cultural contexts, the clarity of understanding that is required to actually act upon

\textsuperscript{188} MacIntyre 23.
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid.
virtuous conduct requires more than just an ambiguous understanding. It requires a sharper awareness that can allow someone to not just understand what is virtuous on a broad theoretical level, but actually know how to apply it throughout daily life. This distinction is especially key because the very nature of daily life dramatically varies according to one's place, time, and role in society.

Under a virtue ethics approach, one must be able to engage in two critical normative enterprises. First, one must be able ask what a virtuous person would do in a given circumstance, which requires that they be able to hypothesize about how an actual individual might conduct themselves. Since individuals do not exist independent of places and societies and imagining what one would do necessarily presupposes such contexts and all the forces that underlie them, it follows that the virtues must also recognize those varying peculiarities as a means of practicably accessing the virtues themselves. Second, practical wisdom, which is a crucial component of any virtue ethics framework and essential for its functionality and operability, also must rely—at least in part—on the particular qualities of a given context because it is based on certain lived experiences and insights that are deeply rooted in the characteristics of a place or time. One cannot gain or exercise practical wisdom without it being somehow channeled through particular circumstances and then associated with them in the human mind.

How, then, can it also be said that the virtues are not culturally-relative in a robust normative sense in light of the inevitability and strength of the connection just described? First, although a specific context-dependent conception of a given virtue is a necessary part of any functioning virtue, the particular form that it takes is merely an accidental property. By this, I
mean that even though there must be one general cultural formulation of a virtue like integrity or courage, no one understanding itself is required. Just as all people must have eyes of some color but no one color is any more 'human' or representative of humanness than any other, the same general principle can hold true for the ways that the virtues take their particular shapes. Following from this, it would be impossible to fully isolate a virtue from any contextual conception that underlies it but possible to transition from one conception to another without compromising the virtue itself. This relationship between virtues and their conditional meanings is not substantially different from that of form and substance for Aristotle. Like substance without a form, the contextual facets of a given virtue have no meaning or existence without the actual fundamental virtue itself—both intellectually and metaphysically. And like a form with no substance to instantiate it, a virtue cannot exist in the real world or have intelligibility for human moral agents without that context-variant structure to render it. Despite this symbiosis, it is the virtue itself that constitutes the essential ingredient and, therefore, carries the coveted normative status. The virtue qua virtue, then, possesses all of the moral weight even though its intelligibility is contingent on a particular contextual formulation of that ideal that actually instantiates it.

The second reason that the virtues are able to resist a strong form of cultural-relativism is because of the role of human flourishing in aretaic ethics. The telos of a human life, especially following from Aristotle and MacIntryre, does not vary by place or time. Flourishing, instead, is related to humans qua humans and is linked to their purpose in their capacity as members of the species. Excelling as a person is not especially susceptible to cultural norms or mores because the relevant criteria transcend particular contexts. They are based in broader facets of the human identity that are, by definition, attached to the essential characteristics in which all
people share. Living the good life, therefore, appeals to more basic and fundamental components of the human experience that are accessible and familiar to all individuals, regardless of their personal setting. There are, however, two general conceptions of flourishing. In the first, virtuousness itself is both necessary and sufficient for flourishing. In the second, virtuousness is a necessary condition but must also be supplemented by external goods, like health or basic comfort. Under the first conception, the same arguments just made to defend the virtues themselves from having to derive their normative force from contextual circumstances hold just as well in the case of flourishing, for any inevitable context-dependent features of flourishing are merely accidental and cannot be said to be the bearers of moral or teleological weight. Under the second conception, there is still not a significant problem in terms of somehow necessitating some kind of cultural-relativism. Most basic human external goods that would be included as part of human flourishing are sufficiently basic and rooted in human nature as such that they are also fairly universal as a result. Basic measures of welfare that are likely candidates for inclusion—such as physical health, the availability of requisite food and shelter, basic access to accumulated knowledge or the arts—tend to be consistent and stable across times and societies even if their particular forms may somewhat vary. External goods significantly more contextual or variable than these are unlikely to be fundamental enough to qualify as necessary goods for flourishing, and thus do not create a serious issue. Human flourishing, therefore, is comprised primarily (if not exclusively) by universal elements that relate to persons as such and are not bound up in the types of transient external goods that are appreciated more subjectively.

Context-contingent factors and forces, ultimately, are clearly highly relevant, important, and integral facets of the virtues and human flourishing. They are, furthermore, necessary
insofar as the virtues could not meaningfully exist without their instantiating powers and presence. Such necessity, however, is not 'necessity' in its most important form, and the role of each of those particular cultural features individually is ultimately an accidental one. There are many virtues that uncontroversially have major applicability in all contexts, like honesty, beneficence, and courage—albeit taking on somewhat different functions, boundaries, and forms. Although these setting-dependent forces may dictate the precise expression of particular virtues, they do so for reasonable and often highly relevant reasons and determine formulations of particular virtues that fall within the legitimate range of expression inherent within any given virtue as such—isolated from variant contextual forces. In these cases, it is the fundamental virtue itself that contains the normative force and is constitutive of any moral relevancy. Admittedly, though, other virtues themselves may vary by context. Whereas modesty and strength are treated as virtues in some communities, it is not difficult to imagine other settings in which they are largely rebuffed or even wholly rejected by dominant norms and basic intuitions. In these situations, there are two steps worth taking. First one should question whether a potential virtue is actually just that, or if it is instead subsumed by some other or is one version or formulation of a different virtue that is taking on a different, inapt expression in this settings. If so, then any type of conflict is fairly easily avoided. When this move is not successful, though, and the virtuousness of a candidate for virtue is truly in doubt or disagreement, a student of moral philosophy must default to the realist basis for aretaic ethics and decide whether or not that candidate is, indeed, a genuine virtue—thus endorsing some contexts or cultures over others. Here especially, the normativity of the virtues in their purest, most independent form is demonstrated.
Preventing Collapse:  
*Why Virtue Ethics Does Not Rely Upon Deontology or Consequentialism:*

Put simply, virtue ethics is said by some to collapse into deontology if one accepts that there is a moral duty to follow the virtues—an intuition that many virtue ethicists would otherwise eagerly endorse. Other critics postulate equally fiercely that virtue ethics ultimately collapses into consequentialism because the identification of the virtues themselves must, or at least usually does, rely on determining their worth based on some conception of usefulness or their capacity to facilitate positive outcomes. An easy response to these claims would be to refer them to each other and cite the concurrent existence of both seemingly opposite claims as evidence that neither one can certainly be true of all virtue ethics. These criticisms, however, deserve a more robust approach and thorough analysis than that flippant response offers.

Perhaps virtue ethics is less unique than its supporters maintain, and certain formulations of aretaic ethics are merely deontological theories in disguise because they ultimately must rely on an imperative to abide by deontic-style rules, whilst others represent consequentialist theories at their core and are simply being approached from a virtue-laden lens or emphasis. It is also plausible that virtue ethics functions as a hybrid model between these two approaches and, although unique in many significant respects, must ultimately rely on one or the other to derive its normative force. In disagreeing with those claims, I will first explain why virtue ethics does not collapse into deontology on a fundamental level, and also further articulate the basis for that criticism, by demonstrating how any moral rules, duties, and obligations included within it are distinct from deontological ones. Then, I will do the same for the consequentialist form of that critique and distinguish the virtues from rule-utilitarianism.
In defending the operability of virtue ethics, I presented an argument for treating the virtues as if they generate moral rules for agents to follow, like an obligation to act honestly deriving from the virtue of honesty. Since virtue ethics offers a moral philosophy, it is not unreasonable or inaccurate to borrow from the language of contemporary ethics and say that agents are duty-bound to according to relevant ethical rules. How, then, is virtue ethics both distinct from deontology and still robustly normatively obliging without compromising its ability to set prescriptive judgments? First, one can look for guidance to the catalyzing motivation for the modern resurgence of virtue ethics. G.E.M. Anscombe, in response to popular contemporary Kantian thought, argued that there is no secular moral 'ought' that can intelligibly be applied to all rational human beings independent of their interests and desires. Any attempt to create non-religious moral duties or obligations for individuals must take moral agents themselves as its starting point to gain legitimacy, rather than seek some kind of *a priori* or self-evident basis. This belief stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing deontological approach that Anscombe critiqued and demonstrates a historical and empirical differentiation between virtue ethics and Kantian deontology. The aspects of character and human nature that are integral to the virtues and flourishing are surely irrelevant to most deontologists and propagate a conception of the Good that is opposed to some of deontology's most core tenets. Although both frameworks can include rules and conceptions of duty, they do so from entirely different (perhaps contradictory) normative understandings and starting points and also, as will be discussed shortly, assign those duties radically different roles and priorities. The universal basis for Kantian normativity is not merely de-emphasized by Anscombe, but rather is wholly disavowed as an impossibility—barring any kind of divine backing. She denies the very

---

190 Anscombe 4-5 & Trianosky 336.
foundation for deontology as it is typically applied as fiction and, instead, offers a source for normativity rooted in human interests and core desires that is at odds with some of the most basic Kantian precepts.

Second, even if the foundational sources for normativity in virtue ethics and deontology are not as distinct as I (and I believe Anscombe) have argued, the function and purpose of rules and duties within virtue ethics is, nonetheless, sufficiently different from that of their deontological counterparts as to hedge against any concerns of virtue ethics ultimately collapsing into deontology. In that vein, one must examine the derivations of these rules and obligations to determine their significance to each respective ethical framework. Whereas these rules are constitutive sources of normativity in Kantian deontology and are essential facets of that theory, they have a quite different purpose in virtue ethics. There, the agent-centered foundation becomes very important, as the purpose and form of these rules relates to particular moral agents in some key fundamental ways. In Hume's quasi-aretaic philosophy, for example, a plausible rule gains its normative status and function because it is attached to a value or virtue that would be somehow agreeable to a moral agent. It is attached directly to them and elevates the moral agents themselves to at least the same level—if not a higher one—as the substance of the rule itself. This prominence of actual moral agents rests in sharp contrast with deontological ethics, in which the rules are simply applied to moral agents instead of making individuals active parties in the rules' creation and justification in a robust sense. Furthermore, if one interprets Aristotle's ethical theory as instantiating rules and, implicitly, duties based on the virtues—i.e. one should act courageously (in the appropriate manner given the context) because courage is a moral virtue—the primary justification for doing so is that the underlying virtue (and, by extension, the rule generated from it) are integral to human flourishing. One should follow a
rule because it is the virtuous thing to do, and one should act virtuously more generally on account of the teleological basis for the theory and, more specifically, the purpose of human flourishing in Aristotle’s theory. Not unlike Hume's approach, it locates the wellbeing (in a very thick, Aristotelian sense) of moral agents at the very core of the source of normativity for these moral rules and obligations/duties. The justification for the rules is not rooted ethereally or in abstract meta-ethical rationales but rather clearly linked to the needs and inherent aims of humans as such. Thus, even if the content of the ethical rules in virtue ethics and deontology were to wholly align, their fundamental functions and underlying justifications are quite different—which is especially significant given that both frameworks value reasons for action motivation on par with actions themselves in ethical matters.

Other critics of virtue ethics suggest that some formulations of it are consequentialist in nature because of how the virtues are selected. They claim that virtues are chosen based on nothing more than some kind of long-run consequentialist estimate of the effects of a given character trait on moral agents or society more broadly. Under that perspective, virtue ethics would—at its core—represent a gentle form of rule utilitarianism that is not fundamentally distinct from consequentialist morality because one's normative imperative to act virtuously would simply be a semantic reshuffling of an obligation to promote the greatest good according to certain prescribed dictums. It could be argued, further, that even an intentional strategy to avoid this problem—selecting virtues based on characteristics beyond just what maximizes the goodness or wellbeing in a colloquial sense—fail because of a sort of consequentialism imbued within human psychology. Even when not striving to directly satiate desires or pursue utility, human beings may be predisposed to attribute positive normative evaluations towards those things that are agreeable or comfortable to them and project consequentialist aspirations into
seemingly non-consequentialist judgments. Thus, there are two forms of this critique. First, the virtues are selected and implicitly legitimate on account of their ultimate ability to engender consequentialist desires. Second, any different normative criteria that used to select the virtues (including the claim that the virtues are somehow self-evident) are actually infused with consequentialist thinking and valuing to the point that anything distinguishing virtue ethics from consequentialism on this level is paltry compared to their overlapping interests.

It is fairly easy to distinguish virtue ethics from simple act or rule utilitarianism in particular for three reasons. First, those theories seek to quantify utility (wellbeing) in a way that virtue ethics would reject. In addition to presupposing a wildly different sociological worldview about the nature of human interaction than virtue ethics holds, this approach constitutes a difference in kind regarding utility/wellbeing. Aretaic ethics, especially following from MacIntyre, includes a sense of integrity and constancy among the virtues that is lost under a utilitarian framework. Instead of functioning as consistent traits and habitual, even instinctual, manners of orienting oneself towards the world, consequentialist virtues or rules exist more discretely. They lack the glue holding them in such a way so that, even if the rules or virtues themselves are the same, they are not encompassed in a thicker understanding of the Good or tied back to possessors’ overall philosophical wellbeing, as opposed to subsidiary pleasure or desires, in the same key way. Second, the content of the locus of concern for aretaic wellbeing and utility are quite different. Whereas the latter is usually concerned with aims like making individuals happy, promoting their interests or desires, or maximizing certain empirical markers of health, success, joy, and thriving, these goods are only external for wellbeing and flourishing in virtue ethics. Although, as has already been discussed, it is debatable as to whether they are necessary (in addition to virtue itself) for the good life, they are certainly supplemental to virtue
in importance. The worth of virtue, moreover, can still be measured independently of those other forces even if it may act in normative partnership with them to some degree. This relationship breeds a much thicker conception than would exist under other approaches because it highlights additional normative elements that are irrelevant to consequentialist thought but integral there.

Third and finally, the reasons why one follows a rule in utilitarianism or abides by a virtue within virtue ethics differ. Under utilitarianism, one acts according to utility because it generates utility for them or society by doing so; the action itself functions as the means for achieving the utility, which is both the end and reason for acting. Virtue ethics, however, is not the same. One acts in accordance with virtue or as a virtuous person would not just because the action leads them towards virtue. Virtue is both less tangible than utility in that regard and also not a discrete and intelligible end or moral substance in itself that one should strive to pursue as they would utility. A given action, rather, is right because it is the virtuous thing for a moral agent to do—and that virtuousness is a characteristic of the action in a given circumstance because a person undertaking it in the correct way is acting virtuously by doing the virtuous thing for them in that context. The key distinction here, then, is that the underlying action or choice itself takes on far more significance under virtue ethics than utilitarianism because it is not just a vessel for virtue as it is for utility. The underlying action, instead, is of its own moral worth, and we know that because it is virtuous (as a result). Although one could argue that normative worth is still a quality of an action in either situation, it is a more intrinsic and deeply-rooted one in virtue ethics than utilitarianism. The action itself is not an accidental element or somehow interchangeable so long as utility results; the goodness locked within it is far more everlasting and characteristic of the action itself in an internal sense.
Distinguishing virtue ethics from utilitarianism is fairly straightforward and clear because of how it has been shaped by certain key post-Enlightenment aims and assumptions. It is less obvious, however, that virtue ethics is protected from the criticism that it is ultimately collapsible into consequentialism more generally because human psychology leads us to determine what is virtuous or valuable according to its conduciveness to facilitating the types of outcomes or results that we consciously or subconsciously desire. Following this understanding of the virtues, a trait like courage would actually be interpreted as virtuous, despite other potential reasons offered, because it represents some kind of favorable or desirable state of affairs or promotes seemingly good outcomes in the long-run. Put simply, one could also say that virtue ethics is truly consequentialist because it instructs adherents to pursue certain values that are said to promote the Good. Although I am willing to admit that there are perhaps quite a few more similarities connecting virtue ethics and consequentialism than conventional wisdom recognizes, there is sufficient critical difference to avoid any sort of conflation or collapse. The starkest source of distinction between the two approaches relates to their conceptions of the Good. Unlike consequentialism, virtue ethics maintains a realist conception of goodness in which there are certain moral facts regarding key meta-ethical and moral possibilities. Virtue and the nature of the Good are as recognizable parts of the human experience as psychological observations or basic tenets of phenomenology. The virtues and Good do not just happen to be the way that they are but rather must be so in the same way as rules of formal logic. They refer to actual conditions of the world and are fundamental components of any worldview or potential normative evaluation. Consequentialist ethics, however, are different in this critical sense and invite no such internal connection between what receives moral status and the necessary state of existent affairs. Goodness and wellbeing in that
sense are both more transient and subjectivist—not just because different moral agents may perceive them differently but because there is no need for them to exist or function in any particular way. Although 'arbitrariness' may be too strong of a description, it is not far from being apt in the case of the 'virtues' within a consequentialist model. The entire foundation of ethics, then, is radically different in each of the two approaches because of this manner that goodness is posited.

A further line of defense against any purported collapse of virtue ethics into consequentialism is to simply reject the premise that the virtues are selected or at all legitimate on account of any consequences or outcomes that they may facilitate. Although fostering a desirable, good, and even utile state of affairs may be a byproduct or subsidiary function of virtue ethics, its structure and main motivations can be construed in terms that are non-consequentialist and that need not fall back onto deontology either. Virtuous action is neither formed on the basis of enhancing a certain class of outcomes nor subscription to certain deontic principles or duties. It is, instead, that which enables the moral agent to exist well. This distinction is more than semantic. It represents a major difference in the type pursuit in which ethics is engaged. Rather than constructing a certain type of world for the sake of people, it seeks to enable them to become certain types of people. Although particular actions, choices, and material conditions may greatly affect that purpose, they are supplemental to more inward-focused and character/identity-driven notions. If these traits or ways of living and approaching the world seem desirable or useful/beneficial, that is only a secondary fact about them that exists on account of their antecedently-virtuous nature. To argue that the virtues derive their status as such on consequentialist grounds, at best, constitutes an auxiliary account of their merits and, at worst, deprives them of what uniquely makes them virtues in the first place.
On the 'Courageous Thief' and Other Perplexing Cases:

Most observers would acknowledge that the commonest virtues tend to be rather uncontroversial. Internalizing and promoting traits like honesty, charity, beneficence, and integrity seem to have few downsides and are obvious candidates to serve as virtues within an aretaic approach. At some point, however, the appropriate parameters and scope for the virtues become more unclear on account of two major reasons. First, it is ambiguous how far a virtue may be comfortably stretched before what is left is no longer reasonably that virtue at all—i.e. courage blurring into rashness or someone offering charity to the point of their own poverty. Challenges relating to individual moral agents' abilities to practicably and confidently act upon the virtues have already been addressed in the section on operability, but here the question takes on a more meta-ethical and objectivist dimension compared to the previous, largely epistemic, discussion. Second, and more interestingly in my opinion, applying particular virtues to seemingly un-virtuous individuals and situations raises some perplexing questions. Is a concept like that of a 'benevolent liar' morally intelligible, or is it somehow self-defeating instead? Can virtue, at times, actually be exemplified or exercised through vice—for example in the instance of a 'courageous thief'? At stake in these cases and questions is more than just the adeptness of virtue ethics to deal with especially tough corner cases or its ability to provide a precise and exhaustive definition for each of the virtues. The deeper implications of these issues relate to the very nature of the virtues themselves and have the potential to deal penetrating blows to this framework if satisfying answers cannot be found.

How far can simple virtues be stretched before they lose intelligibility and normativity? Is it reasonable to say that an act of omission is contrary to honesty or that embellishing is acceptable in some cases and not others? These questions, I believe, contain an implicit false
presupposition that needs to be addressed. Virtue ethics is not action-oriented at its core. On the most fundamental of levels, it is character-based and dispositional in a robust sense that seeks to build moral traits and virtue within agents rather than instruct agents to generate virtue or morality externally. Asking whether given virtues can be applied to certain admittedly tough cases, then, is already barking up the wrong tree. No virtue can be applied to any action simply because actions are not their proper subjects. The parallel but germane version of this question and proper potential source for criticism would be whether virtuous persons are capable of acting virtuously in the tough, corner cases—relying only on their virtuousness in doing so. The answer is a resounding 'yes' for two reasons. First, developing the wisdom to be able to adjudicate difficult cases of ethics across daily life is a key aspect of virtue ethics. Internalizing certain character traits enables individuals to then approach the world and its diversity of circumstances as a generally virtuous agent. These tough cases, then, are arguably even better approached with virtue ethics than competing theories simply because it is the most adaptable across broad situations. That different individuals may parse similar contexts differently is not an indicator of a failure of the virtues. Rather, it indicates the moral complexity of situations like abortion, self-defense, and suicide relative to their more obviously heinous cousins. Virtuous people, in fact, should have much to say about these topics and feel confident that their virtue-infused instincts can guide them towards a legitimate position. Second, variations among the opinions or behavior of different virtuous people in these cases can represent more than just complexity of circumstance. The virtuous person not only undertakes and fosters behavior that is directly reflective of virtues like courage but just as importantly approaches life (especially ethical conundrums) with the right set of intentions and attitudes as to afford the appropriate due consideration. By this statement, I mean that a virtuous person does not just seek particular
behaviors or specific virtue-based dispositions for approaching others and certain situations but also strives to develop the right mindset, thought processes, and instinctual responses towards all situations. Lacking moral clarity as to the precise boundaries of each virtue or how to apply them to corner cases, therefore, is no failure of virtue ethics. Instead, it serves as both an affirmation of the difficult nature of certain cases and is supplemented and enhanced by a character whose overall virtue is truly greater than merely the sum of its parts. Under this conception of the virtues, they are inward-looking and agent-focused to the extent that thinking spatially about the scope of a given virtue only serves to obscure its actual form—which maps onto character rather than situations.

The analysis so far has responded to concerns surrounding the meta-ethical scope of the virtues themselves and argues why they lose no intelligibility by being 'stretched' into application in somewhat ambiguous cases. The more perplexing and difficult discussion, though, relates to the intelligibility of potentially self-defeating cases that may call for the seemingly unacceptable appreciation and approval of immoral actors/activities. A problem like this could arise if some particular facet of conduct or an identity that is reflective of viciousness, like being a thief or acting very rudely towards others, also appears to concurrently exemplify a virtue of some kind as part of the same process—like being a courageous thief or offering ruthlessly rude, but nonetheless still very honest, commentary at any and all opportunities to do so. Put simply, can expressions of virtue exist within un-virtuousness frames or towards vicious ends and still be considered virtuous in their own right?

Philippa Foot, in discussing this matter, offers three accounts of the virtues that each answer this question somewhat differently. First, she cites Aquinas' belief that virtues can only
produce good actions because they are "dispositions of which no one can make bad use." Most people, however, find this account hard to accept. Villains and liars can certainly exemplify certain other virtues in the course of their wickedness, and most conceptions of virtue recognize that it must be applied in the right manner, at the right time, to the right degree, etc.—as opposed to functioning as a limitless panacea that can be applied to the fullest extent in any possible situations. Foot says, then, that we are led by common sense to believe that a character like the courageous thief certainly should not be lauded in the way that one would a normally virtuous person but that they are, indeed, still acting courageously. She writes that "One way out of this difficulty might be to say that the man who is ready to pursue bad ends does indeed have courage, and shows courage in his action, but that in him courage is not a virtue". Here, however, another problem emerges because, although it is tempting to say that 'courage is not a virtue' in that person because they acting so un-virtuously despite possessing and actively reflecting it, that claim falls after being subjected to further scrutiny. That same courage may actually be a genuine virtue in many other facets of the thief's life and facilitate good conduct and actions in many other respects and circumstances. It is not that the thief possesses a warped or distorted species of courage that is somehow specially conducive towards bad ends but rather that courage as it is normally understood has willingly served such an evil master. Foot, therefore, argues for a third conception of the virtues that can recognize and overcome this issue. She argues that the virtues should be analogized to concepts like solvents because a given solution, depending with what it is mixed or in what context it is poured/applied, can be poisonous in some instances but not others. All solvents have the

---

191 Foot 117.
192 Foot 118.
193 Ibid.
capacity to be poisonous in certain circumstances, but many are certainly not inherently poisonous and are often quite useful. In the case of the thief, then, courage is not functioning as a virtue when it is turned to bad ends and operating uncharacteristically. It is instead like a solvent that is functioning as a poison in a given context despite a nature that is generally to the contrary.

I take the greatest implication of these strange cases, however, to be something far more practical than esoteric and meta-ethical. It seems obvious that virtue ethics (and common sense) must hold that a courageous thief should be blamed rather than lauded—and blamed as much as a similarly positioned thief who happens to be acting less courageously. One must then ask, is virtue ethics bound to credit or laude the virtuous thief on account of the courage being exemplified? This uncomfortable pronouncement of even quasi-approval is avoidable for two reasons. First, and following from Foot's account of the virtues, courage qua courage is not necessarily virtuous and deserving of appreciation. Courage applied rightly and virtuously, like anything else, is what garners our approval. The example of the thief, furthermore, is arguably even a subversion of the virtue of courage itself and deserving of extra condemnation as a result. The second defense against these types of situations is simply to say that no virtuous person would ever act that way—regardless of the presence of courage—and, therefore, no one doing so deserves to be lauded. Acting virtuously, if that is even what it is at all, in one capacity may just be insufficient on its own to constitute virtuous action or virtuousness, thus largely bypassing the possible practical harms of scenarios involving courageous thieves or benevolent liars.\footnote{Here, a liar is not just someone withholding a degree of the hard truth or even shading it for good reason while still conforming to Honesty more broadly. Rather, it refers to someone who is definitively dishonest and un-virtuous in that regard who also happens to, concurrently, otherwise be conducting herself benevolently.}

Virtue ethics, therefore, is readily able to handle seemingly difficult corner cases and
possibly self-defeating situations without sacrificing any of its major tenets. It may even be best positioned among the main moral theories in these situations because it maintain common sense understandings of the virtues while accommodating these perplexing and challenging scenarios in a manner consistent with tactics and conceptions present throughout the rest of the framework.

On Circularity:

A popular and significant criticism of virtue ethics holds that it is 'circular'. This belief generally arises when one observes that the right way to conduct oneself is how a virtuous person would and that a virtuous person is one who possesses certain virtues that enable them to act and live well. Hence, it is certainly at least reasonable to interpret this account of virtue as verging on tautological insofar as each of these two claims implicitly references the other and relies upon it for intelligibility. According to this critique, one seeking to act as a virtuous person would might turn to the virtues for guidance, only to then realize that discovering the virtues requires them to first determine how a virtuous person would act.\(^\text{195}\) An observer, accordingly, may conclude that virtue ethics must then necessarily become susceptible to one of two possible unacceptable outcomes—either it is left floating and lacks any kind of coherent grounding or foundation from which to generate normativity, or it is actually reliant on a hidden external normative source that actually imbues it with intelligibility and operability and provides answers to what the virtues are and how a virtuous person would act. This criticism, then, is rife with both practical and meta-ethical implications for virtue ethics and deserves thorough

\(^{195}\) This is an abridged version of what might otherwise involve many more intermediary steps in the chain of purported circularity between 'doing as a virtuous person would' and 'a virtuous person lives in accordance with the virtues', but it serves well as an explanatory model and representation of more complicated version.
consideration. In responding, I will generally offer two strains of defense by first opposing and
deconstructing the claim that virtue ethics is actually circular in the way that is purported and
then, second, arguing that the extent to which that characterization is legitimate does not pose a
serious threat for the approach and instead serves to affirm and further develop it.

Just because it is reasonable to interpret virtue ethics in such a way that conforms with
the circularity critique does not mean that it must be construed in that way or that conceiving of
it in that manner is the best or most accurate way of doing so. Rather than considering virtue
ethics to be saying that one should act as a virtuous person would and then that a virtuous
person would act consistently with the virtues/what is virtuous, those two statements can be
interpreted as different expressions of the same idea—that one should act virtuously. Instead of
implying circularity, though, one could instead ascribe the more favorable lens of conceptual
unity and posit that these two elements each seem to be saying the same thing because they are
the same thing. The first clause contributing to the circularity, that one should act as a virtuous
person would, and the second, that a virtuous person acts consistently with the virtues/what is
virtuous, may be descriptive of the same underlying phenomenon. It seems uncontroversial that
a virtuous person would act according to the virtues and that, therefore, one who truly does act
according to the virtues is a virtuous person. In saying that a virtuous person acts consistently
with the virtues, one is merely describing what it is that a virtuous person would do. One could
also add any number of other similar and redundant descriptions or heuristics that get at the
same idea and might seem to only further contribute to the circularity. Strictly speaking, the fact
that the two phrases can be properly understood to be saying the same thing is indicative of
(total) conceptual overlap but does not in itself necessitate circularity.
Circularity, I believe, is a particular species and connotation of overlap and sameness. Two statements possessing overlapping meaning and expressing the same core claim does not in itself make their application circular, for that implies some sort of dependency or justification structure between the two that is logically unfounded on account of their overlap. So a set of claims is circular if the basis for each rests wholly upon the other in such a way that each is co-referential but insufficiently justificatory. When circular, each claim appeals to the other for its meaning or value without demonstrating why it is that both cannot be either invalid or dismissed. The salient detail here and distinction from what is going on with virtue ethics is that the two (or more) units involved in instance of circularity must actually be different for their co-dependency to become an issue. Otherwise, any overlap and semblance of mutual-reliance and dependency is not problematic or demonstrative of circularity because there is no multiplicity of units to be connected in a circular fashion and instead exists only a single entity. A case with illustrative qualities for this discussion can be found in the infamous dilemma raised by Plato in the *Euthyphro* regarding piety. There, the question of whether that which is pious is so because it is loved by the gods or if the gods love that which is, in itself already, pious. A formulation of this puzzle could be expressed the following way: the gods love that which is pious, and that which is pious is that which is loved by the gods. In one sense, this statement has a distinctly circular quality to it if one interprets each clause as both holding a distinct meaning from and also relying upon the other for the intelligibility of the phrase overall. One, however, can also interpret the phrase in a more charitable light and construe each segment as a description of true fact: that which is pious is loved by the gods and that which is loved by the gods is that which is pious. The nature of these claims is not circular if each one actually does imply and necessitate the other because they are one in the same—perhaps different sides of the same
coin or interchangeable ways of expressing a singular notion or truth. The same, I believe, is true of the alleged circularity of virtue ethics. No such circularity exists if saying that 'one should do as a virtuous person would' is simply an alternate articulation of 'virtuous persons act consistently with the virtues/what is virtuous'. Each is descriptive of the same idea and—by extension—of the other as well, for the differences between the two are largely semantic and instructive on an illustrative level rather than significant for their denotations.

One may accept that plausibility of that argument—that the purported circularity of virtue ethics can be resolved if one interprets the two aforementioned claims as different descriptions of the same thing—but argue that doing so compromises the operability and practicability of virtue ethics because it damages the usefulness of the tactic of an individual mimicking a virtuous person they know or imagine in order to access the virtues and virtuousness themselves. Under this concern, one might fear that, whereas it had previously been a much lesser burden to achieve, determining how a virtuous person would act might now require as much moral adeptness as would actually *being* that virtuous person. This worry, though, is unnecessary for two reasons. First, holding that saying one should act as a virtuous person would and that virtuous persons act in accordance with the virtues/virtuousness are identical statements (other than, of course, in terms of how they are being expressed), may just as well carry the opposite implication—namely that actually being a virtuous person and developing that special sort of character is as easy as imagining how one might behave in a given context. Each of these interpretations, however, is both unnecessary and feels somewhat inconsistent with how virtue ethics has been described so far. A better solution to this problem, in my opinion, to make a distinction between how things are in a technical metaphysical sense and how they are perceived by people. Although it might very well be true that each of these
claims carries the exact same meaning and necessarily implies the other, that is not necessarily how humans experience them in everyday life. For reasons relating to the specifics and peculiarities of human psychology, the formulation of this claim about virtue that relates to what a virtuous person would do is likely far more accessible and useful for individuals striving to be virtuous than is its parallel formulation stating that a virtuous person acts in accordance with the virtues—even though, under this interpretation, both formulations are, in fact, saying the exact same thing. Hence, the operability of virtue ethics is not diminished by this solution to the issue of circularity because it does not limit the usefulness of the heuristic of imagining how a virtuous might conduct themselves under given circumstances.

One can also resist the charge of circularity leveled against virtue ethics without arguing that acting as a virtuous person would is indistinguishable from the claim that a virtuous person acts consistent with the virtues/virtuousness. A second defense against that critique is that the claims that 'one should act as a virtuous person would and 'a virtuous person would act in accordance with the virtues/virtuousness' have a relationship that is more aptly described as reciprocal than circular. By this distinction, I envision something emerging that is similar to Rawls' reflective equilibrium in that there is dynamic relationship that exists between each of these two poles that informs both the other and what comes between them. More precisely, virtuousness may not be totally reducible to either how virtuous people act or the amalgam of the virtues themselves and rather exist in accordance with both elements and derive from their interplay. Instead, it is an ideal character, form of existence, and manner of interacting with oneself and the world that is a function of both the certain virtues in which it is rooted and how those virtues take hold in an actual (virtuous) human being. It is neither the virtues themselves nor how a virtuous person would act that are independently virtuous, but rather the coming
together of both those forces that is truly constitutive. Observing a degree of circularity, then, is reasonable until/unless one attributes a purpose or reason for the nature of that relationship and instrumentalizes it in this way. The result of that process is that the perceived circularity dissipates and becomes a completely different sort of relationship that is actually integral to virtue ethics and the nature of virtue.

Third, one can reject complaints of circularity by grounding both 'what a virtuous person would do' and that a virtuous person would act consistently with the virtues/virtuousness in an external source that imbues each with its merit and normative authority so that they need not fall back on one another in a circular fashion. For virtue ethics, the perfectionist/teleological role of flourishing may provide the unifying backdrop that serves this purpose. With that in mind, one should act as a virtuous person would because that is conducive to flourishing, and a virtuous person knows that flourishing is generally achieved through internalizing and acting upon the virtues. Because of the character and process-driven structure of virtue ethics, one can pursue flourishing by striving to act as a virtuous person would even if they do not necessarily have a firm grasp on the meta-ethical nature of the virtues/virtuousness themselves. It is through that very process, in fact, that one then can become familiar with the virtues/virtuousness proper. In this sense, one can construct the seeming circularity by beginning with the premise that an action is virtuous if a virtuous person would undertake it, and a virtuous person is someone who possesses and exercises certain traits that are conducive to human flourishing. Thus, in practice, asking what a virtuous person would do is both a method of discerning which character traits are conducive towards human flourishing and also a way of putting into use those same traits if they are, indeed, known. Circularity, in this context, ceases to exist or pose any significant difficulties for virtue ethics.
Even if a robust circularity does persist within virtue ethics according to the critique that I outlined earlier, I do not believe that its presence necessarily constitutes a problem for the moral framework for two reasons. First, Aristotle recognizes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that ethics as a discipline is distinct from other fields like geometry, engineering, logic, and even ontology in that it is far less rigid and precise by their standards. Instead of offering an exacting series of maxims and a perfectly universal and internally consistent, technical system of moral philosophy, the nature of ethics demands a more general approach. Despite any circularity that might exist on the technical or logical level, a clear and functional picture of how one should live is nonetheless created without any significant tangible disruption or negative implications. Although circularity here may mean that certain individuals in some contexts may find little guidance from merely asking what a virtuous person would do without knowing the nature of the virtues/virtuousness (or vice versa), most attempts are likely to still succeed despite this concern. Second, any lingering circularity also serves as an affirmation of the agent-centered form of virtue ethics and strong connection to intuition that have previously been discussed. That there is any circularity in this regard demonstrates that asking what a virtuous person would do implies the virtues themselves and highlights the special places that character and agent-centeredness have in virtue ethics.

*On Teleology:*

For many contemporary students of philosophy, teleology is associated with concepts like the Platonic Forms and can seem like a repudiation of modern analytic philosophy and ill-equipped to handle the most interesting and sophisticated theories and questions raised today. Although utilitarianism and consequentialist theories more broadly are widely categorized as
teleological because they situate the good as that which is facilitative of certain states of affairs or outcomes/aims rather than innately good, I am concerned primarily with the more traditional type of teleology introduced by Aristotle. Teleology, rightfully, is strongly thematically connected to virtue ethics on historical grounds and shares its Platonic and Aristotelian roots. Early formulations of virtue ethics, moreover, are explicitly teleological and readily rely upon it as a backdrop or even source of normativity for the virtues themselves. Some critics of virtue ethics, though, construe this connection as problematic for aretaic ethics. They argue that virtue ethics can only be justified or coherent under a teleological framework, and that such a framework is either somehow overly-limiting or simply empirically preposterous. In deconstructing this viewpoint and defending virtue ethics, I will argue first in support of the presence of teleology in virtue ethics and then demonstrate in spite of that that having an intelligible account of virtue ethics does not necessitate teleology. Ultimately, my position is that there is no absolute internal connection between teleology and virtue ethics that causes the latter to be causally or logically dependent upon the former, but that teleology is nonetheless valuable to moral philosophy and a facet of an optimal theory of virtue ethics.

Teleology derives from the intrinsic purposes or functions of objects and beings. It is an intersection of what might otherwise be characterized as descriptive and normative claims that derive their legitimacy from the intrinsic 'final causes' of those objects. One can generally identify what the purpose/function of something is by determining that which it can uniquely do or uniquely do best, and that is somehow generally specially and specifically related to it in particular. Whereas the telos of an acorn is to develop into a full tree, that of a human being (according to Aristotle) is to flourish. This type of ethical worldview is a perfectionist one and is representative of the prevailing system of socio-moral thought throughout the last few
thousand years. More recently, certain philosophers, scientists, and other thinkers have rejected this approach and the notion that there are certain ends or purposes that objects naturally do and/or ought to strive towards and prefer models that they argue better capture something’s nature and essential properties without also imbuing it with or projecting onto it teleological concepts loaded with certain values or meta-ethical beliefs. They might prefer non-teleological conceptions of duty that, as described by Trianosky, take basic moral judgments to be 'autonomous' instead of derivative of some telos or end/purpose. Given all this, then, why is teleology valuable as a backdrop to virtue ethics?

Watson convincingly argues that teleology is an integral element of virtue ethics in particular because of its agent-centered orientation, especially when compared with other moral paradigms. To illustrate the argument, Watson offers the example of a gangster—someone who is by very definition not virtuous and living an unvirtuous life. For a virtue ethicist, the gangster is best understood as not merely deficient in virtue and lesser as a human being in terms of moral standing, but they are also personally worse off than they would have otherwise been vis-à-vis their own flourishing and wellbeing on account of those traits and that lifestyle. They are more than just bad or immoral actors and are lesser/damaged human beings and individuals because of how their character is harmed and degraded by their vicious manner of conducting themselves. This added teleological dimension allows for a richer and deeper ethical insight for a character-driven framework than would otherwise exist and also helps to substantiate its normativity and answer the question of why one should be virtuous (beyond mere abstract appeals to what is good/right). The significance of this point is enhanced by an insight made by MacIntyre that any ethical theory necessarily presupposes some kind of

196 Trianosky 338.
197 Darwall 244.
sociological basis and background (which could be teleological or anything else). For a moral philosophy to garner intelligibility, it must make sense in light of some kind of surrounding background context with which it fits and to which it implicitly refers. Kantianism, for instance, presupposes certain general assumptions of its own about psychology and ontology that conceptually rely upon a particular understanding of the world and nature of things. A particular thick teleological conception is one such version of this descriptive sociological background, and I believe that it is a rather good one for the reasons already mentioned—especially given that no moral philosophy can totally divorce itself from making some set of implicit meta-ethical, metaphysical, ontological, psychological, and natural claims.

Macintyre, though, goes even further and anticipates a possible critique against the place of teleology in virtue ethics that worries that it inappropriately instrumentalizes the virtues by fashioning them into mere means for some grand abstruse teleological end. He recognizes that teleology implies a purpose for the virtues that gives them their meaning and force and explains that for Aristotle, Homer, and the New Testament, "the concept of the good life for man is prior to the concept of a virtue [...]. Once again it is the way in which the former concept is applied which determines how the latter is to be applied. In both cases the concept of virtue is a secondary concept". 198 This type of context surrounding virtue may very well sound unproblematic to many individuals who readily embrace articulating a fully teleological source of normativity—a perspective that was historically uncontroversial. There is, however, a fairly important piece of additional nuance that MacIntyre introduces that may help assuage or mitigate some lingering concerns that individuals worried about how this sort of conceptual connection might diminish or degrade the robustness and importance of the virtues. He writes:

198 Darwall 148.
Although Aristotle treats the acquisition and exercise of the virtues as means to an end, the relationship of end to end is internal and not external. I call a means internal to a given end when the end cannot be adequately characterised independently of a characterization of the means. So it is with the virtues and the telos which is the good life for man on Aristotle's account. The exercise of the virtues is itself a crucial component of the good life for man.\(^\text{199}\)

Applying the standard means-end characterization and criticism to the place of virtue within a teleological framework is, therefore, too un-nuanced to carry and significant weight here.

Although it is certainly the case that virtue is necessary for the facilitation of flourishing and functions in a teleologically-charged manner, it is also both independently valuable and a necessary condition for any teleological role within virtue ethics. MacIntyre's analysis, again, is useful here for providing yet another reason to admire the virtues independent of their connection to teleological ends or certain goods. He states that "although the virtues are just those qualities which tend to lead to the achievement of a certain class of goods, none the less unless we practice them irrespective of whether in any particular set of contingent circumstances they will provide those goods or not, we cannot possess them at all".\(^\text{200}\) Clearly, then, an appraisal of the role of virtue within teleology (especially under a virtue ethics approach) that more charitably and favorably describes the relationship is warranted. I believe that conceiving of the virtue and flourishing as ultimately a common end—or perhaps, better put, overlapping ends—is more appropriate. The virtues are not subsumed by teleology or flourishing, nor do they rely upon them for their intelligibility, worth or power—even if they are thickly and inseparably conceptually linked. The relationship, then, is one of mutual-benefit and in which each distinct part is made more robust by the other and their common whole.

\(^{199}\) Darwall 148.

\(^{200}\) Darwall 162.
Dissenters of teleology, however, also tend to dismiss it on empirical grounds and advocate that it has no factual basis in the real world. They judge it to be rooted in fictitious Forms or other similar constructs that contradict the actual metaphysical and natural state of affairs. The ascription of final causes and intrinsic functions appears to function more as a (faulty) normative invention than natural discovery or matter of fact. Following from this criticism, conducting oneself in the appropriate manner is sometimes presented as the proper end in itself rather than preferring the facilitation of other goals. Although I believe that it would be less robust as a result of the reasons previously articulated and because I have a personal intuition in favor of teleology, one can reasonably imagine a coherent system of virtue ethics that is non-teleological—and also secular. Trianosky describes such a non-teleological form of virtue ethics in which "basic judgments about virtuous traits can be grounded without appeal to any independently-formulated account of the good". Within this type of account, virtues may be constitutive of the good itself rather than means for accessing or attaining it. The substance of the 'good' in such a theory is fairly naturally undefined and unrestricted and could take either a form that is somewhat similar to the type of flourishing imbedded within a teleological theory of virtue ethics' or, alternatively, be radically different. One can imagine, for instance, a more utilitarian version in which virtues are defined as those traits that are utile. Despite the quasi-teleological nature of utilitarianism (in that it situates the right as that which is facilitative of utility), rightness here is imbedded directly within utility and constituted by it—whereas teleological theories tend to distinguish the virtues and the 'good' itself and treat the former as a means towards accessing the latter.

---

201 Trianosky 338.
202 Ibid.
203 Ibid.
Slipping utilitarianism into virtue ethics, though, is not the only way to separate it from teleology. Anscombe discusses the possibility of a non-teleological ethics of virtue that avoids collapsing into utilitarianism, and Trianosky argues that she and Foot each arrive at a description of that type of theory. He writes that "One may combine a perfectionist view of the human good with the claim made by both Anscombe and Foot that one always has reason to do what is on one's interest. Taken together these entail that moral virtue is a form of human excellence, or a state of character which there is reason to pursue for its own sake as a constituent of one's good". Although similar to Aristotle's theory, I believe the approach here takes on a definitively distinct emphasis. Here, the moral agent has reason to act well/rightly because doing so is good for their own personal welfare and interests vis-à-vis having a good character. This rationale is non-utilitarian and non-teleological in that they do not do so because of some greater reason or context on in accordance with a more macro system of utility or function/direction. Rather, that flourishing of character is the Good itself and should be promoted simply on those grounds. Characterizing this position as a deontic-consequentialist hybrid is not unreasonable, but it is also described equally validly as its own distinct theory. Common sense, moreover, endorses the position that virtue ethics can exist independent of teleology. One can imagine an agent-centered moral philosophy that uses the cultivation of particular virtues as its building blocks and is non-teleological because the normative status of the virtues does not derive from some outer aim/end associated with it and instead locates that normativity internally and autonomously. How can one justify the moral force/weight of the virtues without a teleological backdrop or by defaulting to either utilitarian or Kantian theories? Why should those given traits—when actualized in the right manner, to the right degree, at the

Trianosky 239.
right time, with the right attitude, etc.—be the internalized into one's character and incorporated into daily and ethical life barring all of those justifications and reasons? To answer these questions, one can adopt an objectivist or strong moral realist approach that relates the Good/Right directly and specifically to the particular virtues and consists in their worth/value as self-evident and formative of the Good/Right. This type of non-teleological virtue ethics, further, remains distinct from deontic approaches in that the relationship between the virtues and the Good/Right is not one of duty or obligation vis-à-vis the particular actions at stake but rather is relevant to the character of agents themselves and important on that account. Although it would be reasonable to say that one would, therefore, have an obligation to act virtuously and in accordance with the Good/Right, any such duty stems from the agents' characters and is a derivative—as opposed to emphasized or acting as the moral locus.

The final related issue that arises and is worth examining regards the coherence of applying the 'Good' at all in the context of a non-teleological approach to virtue ethics. It is legitimate to question whether one can accept a cogent conception of the Good/goodness without necessarily implying a teleological backdrop that underlies it, and this is germane regardless of whether one is considering a singular, universal Platonic conception of the Good or instead independent conceptions of it for each relevant domain—i.e. the good for medicine versus the good for carpentry. The potential issues is that when one references the goodness of something, it seems to imply something special about it that goes beyond just saying that it is moral, right, or how one should act to conform ethically. Goodness can be interpreted as containing a richer meaning that relates to some quality of a thing or practice that is worthwhile and valuable on account of some reason. It is associated with some sort of particular judgment of value and may imply that a certain state of affairs is indeed the desirable one in this special
sense. Goodness, then, can begin to sound significantly like the presence of some kind of fulfillment or success in the context of a particular (albeit perhaps quite broad) narrative, aim, or purpose—which appears to open the door to teleology. To say that something is 'good' invites the question: good for what? In what ways is that thing good, and how is the good itself defined and determined? Unlike deontic rightness, which seems to exist in its own right, goodness is less conceptually independent and instantiates more surrounding context for the sake of its intelligibility—increasingly so as accounts of goodness become more robust, complex, or detailed.

Upon first consideration, I am greatly sympathetic to this concern and agree that, because of its orientation around the concepts of the Good/goodness, virtue ethics is largely skewed towards teleology by design. Conceptions of the 'Good' fit well within teleological frameworks and certainly seem to require some kind of broader meaning and values-framework to guide and substantiate them. Upon further consideration, however, I believe that theories posited around goodness rather than rightness can exist without teleology—even though I continue to find teleology a highly valuable and attractive backdrop to moral philosophy and virtue ethics in particular. I believe that it is plausible to accept a conception of the Good/goodness that is self-contained and does not require a teleological backdrop for its intelligibility. This sort of account identifies that Good in relation to nothing but itself and holds that the internalizing the virtues is the process by which individuals can become good. There is no appeal to the purpose or function of people or things or even necessarily concern with where the Good comes from or what its basis is; that the Good is good is a basic first-
assumption from which all else builds and the virtues are comprised. Although this conception of a non-teleological virtue ethics is not mutually-exclusive to a teleological conception, it is nonetheless at least non-teleological in the sense that it is a-teleological and still, plainly because of the mechanisms by which it operates, an agent-centered account of virtue ethics.

A Progressive Ethics of Virtue?

Any reasonably astute student of the history of philosophy, and ethics in particular, would recognize a connection between virtue ethics and what are considered today to be conservative thinkers and institutions. Aquinas, for instance, is heralded as a great among Catholic theologians but is characterized by many modern secular scholars and students as a dogmatist and religious figure rather than a philosopher. Virtue ethics, similarly, is sometimes conceived of in the same manner and associated more with its famous, often religious and seemingly conservative, advocates than some of the particular claims that it advances. The very structure of the framework, according to some, is such that it enables that connection in more than just an accidental sense. They may maintain that theories of virtue ethics are constructed in manners that predispose them towards certain substantive ends—perhaps on account of the role that 'virtue' plays in society or because of the implications of putting the moral locus on agents' 'characters'. The use of the virtues as moral building blocks seems deeply conservative to some contemporary ears because of the way in which our history and ethical expectations have developed against that strain of thinking in favor of radically different models. Talbot Brewer attributes much of this sentiment to the tension that prima facie exists between virtue ethics and

---

205 I do not think that it matters here if one says that the virtues are composed of the Good, or that the Good is composed of the virtues. Each of these claims, rather, is saying the same thing.
classical liberalism—namely the fundamental tenet that there is no objective conception of the Good or set of virtues that universally represent it. Liberalism tends to affirm the individual and their preferences and locates normativity as an offshoot of that core truth (whether through the maximization of utility or some other metric) and reject the foundational meta-ethical claims advanced by most theories of virtue ethics. The specific virtues that have been most prominent across major theories, moreover, are not especially progressive according to modern conceptions. Courage, moderation, and beneficence come across as antiquated and reflective of traditional values. Progressivism, some would argue, is inherently opposed to virtue ethics because the virtues tend to based in existent values and conceptions of what is good—instead of challenging the prominent and prevalent foundations.

Regarding this historical association between virtue ethics and conservative/religious sentiments and stances, I think that much of it can be attributed to historical accident. That certain individuals were the ones primarily exposed to a particular theory and had thoughts that were able to permeate it and help to shape does not make those particular thoughts essential to the theory itself. Aristotle's articulation of the virtues, for example, is by no means exhaustive of all plausible or reasonable formulations that could otherwise exist, and totally secular theories of virtues ethics plainly now widely exist (e.g. Hursthouse, Slote, and others). Although the structure and nature of virtue ethics certainly place some constraints and limitations on which conceptions of the Good can legitimately be selected (in that it cannot be arbitrary, overly variable, or individually-relativistic), there is still a significant degree of flexibility that exists—and one does not become bound to accept any one specific formulation of the virtues as

---

206 Brewer 6.
207 Some may even find it rather odd that virtue ethics is premised upon agent-centeredness (as opposed to focusing on acts/actions) yet leaves individuals without much discretion to develop or pursue their own subjective conceptions of the good life.
absolute. Put most simply, there is no internal connection between virtue ethics as an approach to moral philosophy and conservative or religious ideology or philosophy. The extent to which there has been such a correlation represents an accidental peculiarity of history and does not limit or restrict the capacity or scope of the framework generally. A critic, however, might find this response unsatisfactory and argue that the mere existence of such an association is itself sufficient to have left an imprint on virtue ethics and genuinely affected how it can function on both a concrete meta-ethical level and also in people's perceptions and expectations of it. In response, though, I believe that it is fair to say that this phenomenon is only true to the extent to which those qualities are naturally a part of virtue ethics to begin with. So for a property like some sort of conservative tendency, the extent to which it can actually truly affect or shape virtue ethics is limited to the degree to which that theory is intrinsically positioned towards it to begin with. Otherwise, any effects or perceptions are merely transient, fleeting, and can be deprogrammed.

One can, furthermore, dispel this entire concern by demonstrating on two grounds that the type of thick connection feared between virtue ethics and conservative/religious values is a fiction. First, I believe that a large part of this critique is based on a conflation of the actual denotations and connotations of certain virtues. There is nothing inherently conservative about an ideal/virtue like courage, moderation, or anything else. It is, rather, the surrounding social context today the implies and instantiates that extra meaning—a problem that is self-correcting once more progressively-inclined individuals take seriously theories of virtue ethics. This solution is not meant to suggest that the virtues are culturally relative or formed merely according to the sentiments and inclinations of those who purport to follow them. Instead, it is consistent with the account of the virtues already given in which the virtues themselves exist
independent of any such forces, although the particular nature of their expression and how they are specifically understood/instantiated may legitimately and contextually vary (within reasonable bounds). A progressive, liberal, and secular formulation of any commonly-presented virtue, like courage, is as plausible as a more conservative version if only those with such perspectives are engaged enough to promulgate them. Second, there is no impact from the force of this connection, even if the appearance of conservatism (i.e. what most people today would characterize as conservative) necessarily exists and lingers, because it makes a major logical misstep. Evaluating certain virtues (moral units) as 'conservative' requires an external and independent evaluative system with which to do so. The problem with having this kind of a system to characterize and evaluate the virtues is that it unacceptably demotes the virtues themselves as the arbiters and adjudicators of any such judgments. A virtue is a trait which is, depending on one's position regarding teleology, is either facilitative of the Good in some sense or actually constitutive of it. Under either paradigm, there is no way that is internal to virtue ethics to then further label a virtue as conservative (or something similar) without presupposing separate evaluative criteria needed to do so and usurping the role of the virtues in the process. This defense is especially valid here given that notions like conservatism are wholly subjective and relative to the perspectives of certain individuals and lack any strong connection autonomous standing or intelligibility. On the structural level, too, it is also problematic to argue that virtue ethics is conservative or anti-progressieve on the whole because that sort of interpretation places ideas like conservatism as prior to the virtues themselves—which is impossible from any account internal to the virtue ethics framework.
Conclusion:

The aim of this project has not been to argue that Kantianism, utilitarianism, or any other ethical theory is somehow undesirable or disproven in the face of virtue ethics. Although articulating the worth of any moral philosophy is necessarily a comparative enterprise to a significant degree, that aspect of this analysis is secondary to simply affirming the normative legitimacy of virtue ethics. No approach to ethics, moreover, can ever be perfect or perfectly uncontroversial, and a rigorous debate about the merits and vulnerabilities of any framework is healthy and highly valuable. In my opinion, however, virtue ethics has received an unduly uncharitable reception from many of its critics and is evaluated especially unfairly in many circles within normative philosophy as a result. It is too often relegated to the shadows of deontological or consequentialist thought when taught in college classrooms or featured in ethical discussions and debates, and despite its proponents and scholars, virtue ethics simply does not enjoy the credibility and respect that it deserves from the overall philosophical community and general public.

The response to chronic mischaracterizations of virtue ethics, though, should not be to strive to make it more like other approaches or schools of thought. Although virtue ethics is certainly 'operable' in that it is capable of rendering specific action-guidance and incorporates many facets of deontological and consequentialist theories, it ought not to be framed around fulfilling those functions in the ways that those other frameworks do. Virtue ethics should not shy away from the fact that it is fundamentally different than other ethical paradigms in that it is neither act-centered nor structured around Enlightenment era ideals. Virtue ethics holds an objectivist conception of the Good that it defines on grounds radically different than those found in other moral philosophies. The actual virtues themselves, flourishing, and practical
wisdom, moreover, are all integral to aretaic ethics and largely absent from other approaches—a distinction that is illustrative of certain quite major paradigmatic differences. Nonetheless, virtue is plainly still a fully normative and prescriptive philosophy that fulfills the traditional array of moral functions; it provides a framework for answering questions of how one should act and why they ought do so. Beyond that, however, virtue ethics delves a little deeper. It questions how we all ought to live our lives and is uniquely positioned around those sorts of subjects relative to other theories.

In this work, I have not offered a robust list of the particular virtues or even defended virtue ethics in light of any specific virtues. Beneficence, courage, integrity, honesty, and so on are all key constitutive elements of aretaic ethics, but disproving the moral valence of any one of them is no more of a blow to virtue ethics than demonstrating that a certain widely-held deontological maxim is misplaced would be for Kantianism. The importance of this discussion relates to moral philosophy on the structural level, and that is where my intuitions favorable to virtue ethics reside. This project has attempted to investigate and challenge those intuitions in such a way that also elucidates the terrain of aretaic ethics and highlights its strengths and any shortcomings. Ultimately, the approach is (unsurprisingly) most intelligible and useful when one examines it on its own terms by considering virtue ethics through an internal perspective—albeit one that is still also sensitive and responsive to general reason. It is certainly true that one cannot say that Aristotle 'got everything right' or that the augmentations of his theory made by MacIntyre, Hursthouse, and others perfectly satisfy any and all concerns, but I am confident that virtue ethics is as relevant and powerful a moral philosophy today as it was in Aristotle's Athens. Moral philosophy is an expansive and wide space—one that virtue ethics ought to occupy an increasingly larger share of moving forward.
References:


