Virtue Ethics without Character Traits

Gilbert Harman
Princeton University
August 18, 1999

Presumed parts of normative moral philosophy

Normative moral philosophy is often thought to be concerned with at least three questions. Using standard (misleading) terminology, these questions are: (1) What is it for something to be one's moral duty? (2) How are we to assess the relative goodness or value of situations? (3) What are the moral virtues and vices? So, normative moral philosophy is often supposed to have at least three parts: the theory of duty, the theory of value, and the theory of virtue.

Deontology, or the study of moral duty is supposed to be concerned with what agents ought morally to do on various occasions, what they have to do or are morally required to do, what they may do or are morally permitted to do, and what it is morally right or wrong for them to do. The theory might also discuss what sorts of moral obligations people have and perhaps even what sorts of moral duties they have in some ordinary sense of "duty."

The theory of value is supposed to try to say what it is for a state of affairs to be good, all things considered, and for one situation to be better, all things considered, than another. More generally, such a theory might try to indicate what it is for a situation to be correctly evaluated as right or wrong, just or unjust, and so forth. There is a disagreement as to whether it makes sense to ask whether one state of affairs is simply better than another, all things considered, as opposed to being better in one or another way. Philippa Foot[1] and Judith Jarvis Thomson[2] have argued that this does not make sense. Others believe that it does make sense to ask what Foot and Thomson say does not make sense. One complication is that Thomson does allow that it makes sense to say that one situation is better than another for people in general. In any event, she has a theory of value in the sense of a theory of what it is for something to be good or bad in one or another way.

Finally, the theory of moral virtue is supposed to try to specify the moral virtues and vices. It would try to indicate what it is to act virtuously or viciously on a particular occasion and how that is related to what it is to have a good or bad moral character. It would try to specify which traits (of acts or character) are moral virtues, which are moral vices, and which are neither moral virtues nor moral vices.

It is controversial whether moral philosophy has these three parts or whether the relatively standard terminology I have used is the best. One might object to calling the first sort of theory a "theory of moral duty" on the grounds that the ordinary notion of "duty" is too narrow or that there is no such thing as "moral duty" in any strict sense. I have already mentioned that Foot and Thomson object to the idea that there is a single sort of goodness of situations relevant to morality. There are reasons to doubt the existence of the sorts of robust character traits that
figure in standard accounts of virtue.[3] Many writers distinguish "the right" from "the good," where this might be the distinction between what I called the theory of duty and what I called the theory of value.[4] with or without a special theory of the goodness of situations. The theory of "the good" is sometimes taken to include the theory of virtue. Alternatively, the term "virtue" can be used to stand for any good-making characteristic whatsoever, so as to be able to talk e.g. about the virtues of aerobic exercise, in which case the theory of virtue is the same as the theory of value. Sometimes the right is taken to include the rightness of states of affairs and even the basic justice in a state,[5] which for many writers are issues that fall under what I am calling the theory of value rather than the theory of duty. So, there are various issues both of terminology and of substance. Nevertheless, many writers do accept something like the threefold distinction in notions that I am using here.

**Treating one notion or theory as basic**

General normative moral theories sometimes take one of these notions to be more "basic" than the others. There are at least three ways to do this, deontological ethics, consequentialism, and virtue ethics.

*Deontological ethics* takes the theory of duty to be more basic. For example, a deontological theory might say that a situation is good to the extent that it involves a person's doing his or her duty or (in one sort of Kantian version) in a person's *trying* to do his or her duty. A virtuous character might be identified with a robust disposition to do one's duty. Different virtues and vices might be identified in terms of dispositions to perform different duties.

Utilitarianism or *consequentialism* takes the theory of value to be more basic and explains the rest of morality in terms of value. Moral duties might be explained as acts that make things better (or better for people generally) or that tend to do so or that are instances of rules that would make things better if everyone followed them. Moral virtues might be identified with those character traits possession of which tends to make things generally better (or better for people generally) and moral vices might be identified with those character traits possession of which tends to make things generally worse.

Finally, *virtue ethics* takes virtue and vice to be at least as basic as moral duty and the goodness of situations. Many versions of virtue ethics take character traits to be basic. For example, one version supposes that the goodness of a situation (at least, how good it is for people in general) has to do with the extent of human flourishing it involves, where human flourishing requires full possession of the morally virtuous character traits. To be a virtuous person is identified with being a person in full possession of the virtuous character traits. This version explains moral duty in terms of a virtuous person: what one ought morally to do in a particular situation is to do what a virtuous person would do in that situation.[6]

In recent work, Judith Jarvis Thomson has also been developing a moral theory that in some ways resembles or sounds like virtue ethics although it differs in significant ways from the standard version.[7] The purpose of the present paper is to discuss certain aspects of this theory of Thomson's.
My purpose is quite limited. I do not discuss Thomson's objections to consequentialism, for example. Instead I am concerned entirely with her virtue ethics. In particular, I want to examine the extent to which Thomson's version of virtue ethics avoids objections that seem to me to be conclusive against a different version. So, I begin by describing that other version and the serious objections that have been raised to it. Then I describe some aspects of Thomson's view and consider how it does with respect to those objections.

**One Version of Virtue Ethics**

In one version of virtue ethics, moral virtues are robust character traits possessed by ideally morally virtuous people. The character traits in question are acquired robust habits of perception, motivation and action: habits of perceiving situations in certain ways, habits of being motivated to act in certain ways, and habits of actually acting in those ways. In this view, to specify a moral virtue is to specify the relevant perceptual, motivational, and behavioral habits.

I quickly list some points about character traits. First, they are to be distinguished from possession of certain knowledge or skills or innate temperament, or psychological illness. Second, people are thought to differ in what character traits they possess. Third, the traits are supposed robust in the sense that they are relatively long lasting and are or would be exhibited in a variety of circumstances. Fourth, character traits are supposed to be explanatory in the respect that it will at least sometimes be correct to explain actions in terms of character traits and not just in terms of features of the situation. For example, it will at least sometimes be correct to explain an honest action by appeal to the honesty of the agent and not just to features of the situation that would lead anyone to act honestly in that situation.

Possession of moral virtue is often supposed in this approach to be a necessary condition of leading the best sort of life for a human being; in other words, possession of the moral virtues is often taken to be part of what is involved in human flourishing. Even if a person was materialistically successful and content with life, if the person lacked an important moral virtue, he or she could not be leading the best sort of life and could not flourish in the relevant sense, in this view.

In this view, ideally virtuous people are robustly disposed to do what they ought morally to do. Other people should try to become so disposed and should in various situations imitate virtue. In a typical situation of moral choice, an agent ought to do whatever a virtuous person would do in that situation.

However, in this view the goal is not just to do the right thing. It is to be the right sort of person. One needs to develop a virtuous character. So, the moral education of children should be aimed at such character development and might consist in describing to them the ideal virtues as they are expressed in action together with the sort of training that will lead children to acquire virtuous habits.

**Objection to explaining what one ought morally to do in terms of what an ideally virtuous person would do.**
One obvious objection to the standard form of virtue ethics is to its account of the relation between what a person ought morally to do and what it is to be a virtuous person. The objectionable claim is that what one ought morally to do in a given situation is to do what a virtuous person would do in that situation. The objection is that this cannot cover all cases, because someone a nonvirtuous person will be in a situation that a virtuous person would never be in.[11]

To some extent the point is acknowledged in the idea that a person who is not yet virtuous should try to develop the virtues. That is something a virtuous person does not need to do, so it is a way that the non-virtuous person should act that is not just to imitate the way a virtuous person would act. But there are various other cases as well.

For example, a person who has done something wrong often ought morally to apologize to those affected by his or her action. However, an ideally virtuous person would not have done the wrong thing in the first place and so would have nothing to apologize for.

Similarly, consider a person who is aware that he or she tends to be weak-willed and to give into temptation. Should such a person make plans with others that will be undermined if the person gives into temptation in the midst of carrying out the plans? Perhaps not; but an ideally virtuous person would not suffer from weakness of the will and could make plans with others without fear of ruining everything by giving into temptation at just the wrong moment. In this sort of case a person should precisely not do what an ideally virtuous person would do because that would in a way to pretend that he or she had the sort of character that he or she does not have.

Doing what a virtuous person would advise one to do

One might try to modify the account of what a not wholly virtuous agent ought to do as follows by saying that an agent ought morally to do what a virtuous person would advise the agent to do. This would be to move some distance from the original version of virtue ethics in the direction of a critic-centered or spectator-centered moral theory and it has its own problems. A morally virtuous agent might think that he or she ought not to give another person advice about certain matters, perhaps because it would be better for the other person to figure things out for him or herself, or for other reasons. Furthermore, an agent who is good at acting virtuously might not be good at advising others what to do, just as some people are good at giving advice but not good at doing the right thing themselves.[12]

Objection to reliance on character traits

A less obvious but in my view more important objection to any appeal to what an ideally virtuous person would do comes from current social psychology. It seems that, when people attribute robust character traits to other agents, they do so on the basis of minimal evidence and tend completely to overlook the relevance of features in agents' situations that help to explain why they as they do. And, although people routinely explain the actions of others by appeal to robust character traits, there is no scientific evidence for the existence of the sorts of traits that people standardly attribute to others. What a person with a seemingly ideal moral character will
do in a particular situation is pretty much what anyone else will do in exactly that situation, allowing for random variation.[13]

This is not to deny all individual differences. People have different innate temperaments, different knowledge, different goals, different abilities, and tend to be in or think they are in different situations. All such differences can affect what people will do. But there is no evidence that people also differ in robust character traits or that differences in goals, knowledge, etc. are to be explained by differences in robust character traits.

People unfamiliar with social psychology find these conclusions incredible, just as psychoanalysts find it incredible when they are told that there is no evidence that psychoanalysis has therapeutic value. But our ordinary convictions about differences in character traits can be explained away as due to a "fundamental attribution error" together with "confirmation bias". I have discussed this elsewhere and won't try to say more here.[14]

Similarly, there is no evidence that moral education via "character development" is required for ordinary moral behavior or indeed that it ever happens. The thought that such training is necessary is similar to the thought that children normally have to be taught their first language.