

## Virtue Ethics: The Misleading Category

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La ética de la virtud es frecuentemente considerada una categoría singular de la teoría ética, y una rival del kantismo y del utilitarismo. Considero que es un error, puesto que tanto kantianos como utilitaristas pueden tener, y tienen, un interés en las virtudes y en la formación del carácter. Mas, aun si focalizamos el grupo de teóricos de la ética, comúnmente llamados “teóricos de la virtud”, porque rechazan la dirección tanto del kantismo como del utilitarismo y se inspiran en la ética griega antigua, hay poca unidad en este grupo. Aun cuando hay un delgado territorio común que vincula a todos los miembros del grupo —una preocupación por la formación del carácter, la naturaleza de las pasiones y por la elección sobre el transcurso entero de la vida— también hay diferencias cruciales entre ellos.

Virtue ethics is frequently considered to be a single category of ethical theory, and a rival to Kantianism and Utilitarianism. I argue that this approach is a mistake, because both Kantians and Utilitarians can, and do, have an interest in the virtues and the formation of character. But even if we focus on the group of ethical theorists who are most commonly called “virtue theorists” because they reject the guidance of both Kantianism and Utilitarianism, and derive inspiration from ancient Greek ethics, there is little unity to this group. Although there is a thin common ground that links all the group’s members — a focus on the formation of character, on the nature of the passions, and on choice over the whole course of life — there are also crucial differences among them.

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### I. *The Stereotype*

Here is a misleading story about the current situation in contemporary moral philosophy<sup>1</sup>: We are turning from an ethics based on Enlightenment ideals of universality to an ethics based on tradition and particularity; from an ethics based on principle to an ethics based on virtue; from an ethics dedicated to the elaboration of systematic theories to an ethics suspicious of theory and respectful of the wisdom embodied in local practices; from an ethics based on the individual to an ethics based on affiliation and care; from an ahistorical detached ethics to an ethics rooted in the particularity of historical communities.

This story (which from now on I shall call “the confused story”) is told with satisfaction by some, who see in the rejection of the ambitious abstract theories of the Enlightenment the best hope for an ethics that is realistic, historically grounded, perceptive, and worldly. It is told with deep alarm by others, who see in the ascendancy of particularity and local knowledge a grave threat to the Enlightenment’s noble aspirations to social justice and human equality. But the story is, even on its face, confused. It links elements of the moral life that are not at all necessarily linked and that may even turn out to be in tension with one another. (Can one be a good parent, for example, if one refuses on principle to criticize local traditions in the name of justice and equality?) By accepting the confused story we may come to believe that in order to attend to friendship we must give up on universal justice, that in order to care sufficiently about history we must abandon general theory, that in order to care about the psychology of character

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<sup>1</sup> I once offered a similar characterization and then said *afterwards* that it was “confused and confusing”: see my “Virtue Revived,” *Times Literary Supplement*, July 3, 1992, p. 9. This was a mistake, because I have since seen my characterization of the confused view quoted as if it is my own view: apparently people read one paragraph without consulting the next. (For one example, see Hekman, Susan J., *Moral Voices Moral Selves: Carol Gilligan and Feminist Moral Theory*, University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1995, pp. 37-38). I therefore *preface* the characterization with an indication of my opinion. One may at least hope that this will prevent its being attributed to me again.

we must abandon rational reflection. Such conclusions would be as practically pernicious as they would be intellectually unwise.

The confused story derives much of its support from the idea that there is such a thing as “virtue ethics,” that this thing has a definite describable character and a certain degree of unity, and that it is a major alternative to both the Utilitarian and the Kantian traditions. For it is “virtue ethics” that is taken to have accomplished the transition that the confused story describes, from Enlightenment to neo-Greek theories. And “virtue ethics” is now regularly presented as a major genus of ethical approach. (I don’t say “ethical theory” because the confused story presents virtue ethics as radically anti-theoretical.) In the typical class in medical ethics in the U. S., for example, young doctors learn that there are three approaches to deciding an ethical question: the Kantian approach, the Utilitarian approach, and the “virtue ethics” approach. A similar trichotomy increasingly makes its appearance in high-level works of academic moral philosophy: just one typical example is James Griffin’s recent book *Value Judgements*, which surveys these same three as the major candidates<sup>2</sup>. People who work on ancient Greek ethical theory regularly get called in (whether to give guest lectures, to advise hospitals, or to chat on the radio) as experts in virtue ethics, as if there were a distinct thing that we could all agree to set up in opposition to the other reigning ethical approaches.

In one way, this increasingly popular way of talking is an obvious category mistake. Kant has a theory of virtue, and devotes a great deal of attention to its exposition. Even if the British Utilitarians do not often use the term “virtue”, they have a lot to say about what the good Utilitarian agent would be like, and also a lot to say about whether it is good for society to bring people up to be good Utilitarian agents, rather than people who exhibit a more traditional range of moral virtues. How, then, could “virtue ethics” be a thing on its own, opposed to Kantianism and Utilitarianism, when it is so obviously a department inside both of those ethical theories, as it is also a department inside other ethical theories, such as those of Aquinas and Aristotle? The neglect of Kant’s theory of virtue by some scholars

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<sup>2</sup> Griffin, James, *Value Judgements*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

contributed, to be sure, to the illusion that Kant is in some way opposed to virtue ethics, but by now that neglect has been addressed in too many fine publications for the confused picture to persuade<sup>3</sup>.

What, then, if anything at all, is virtue ethics? Is there a unifying set of concerns that holds together all the writers who are typically associated with that name, writers as apparently diverse, intellectually and politically, as Alasdair MacIntyre and Annette Baier, Bernard Williams and John McDowell, Henry Richardson and Philippa Foot<sup>4</sup>? Or is there nothing at all here except confusion?

I shall argue that there is some genuine unity to the set of concerns that led all these thinkers, and many others, to take an interest in the category of virtue, and to turn to the Greeks, as many have, for illumination on this topic. But this area of agreement, though philosophically significant, is thin. It does not demarcate a distinctive approach that can usefully be contrasted with Kantian and Utilitarian ethics. It is perfectly reasonable to pursue these interests while remaining squarely within either the Kantian or the Utilitarian camp. Many of the major defenders of a return to virtue do, however, have quarrels with either Kantian or Utilitarian ethics in a few cases with both. They see a turn to Greek conceptions of virtue as helping them to solve the problems that they find in these Enlightenment moral theories.

Even in these critiques, however, there is little unity. I shall argue that some "virtue theorists" are best understood as motivated by a dissatisfaction with Utilitarianism. In particular, they question its neglect of the plurality of goods; its narrowly technical conception of

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Sherman, Nancy, *Making a Necessity of Virtue: Aristotle and Kant on Virtue*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; cf. also Herman, Barbara, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993; O'Neill, Onora, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; Korsgaard, Christine, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. One may also think of the prominence of ideas of virtue and moral sentiments in John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this paper I draw my examples from the Anglo-American debate. I apologize for this. I believe there is little "virtue ethics" currently going on in France, but I know there is a lot of interesting work in Germany, of which I am too ignorant to speak well. Of other philosophical cultures I am so ignorant that I do not know whether there is "virtue ethics" going on there or not.

reason, which holds that reason can deliberate only about means and not about ends; and the non-cognitive conception of emotion and desire that has frequently been taken for granted in Utilitarian thought both in philosophy and, even more obviously, in economics. These “virtue theorists” are friends of reason. On the whole they want to give reason and deliberation a larger role in our moral and political life than Utilitarians usually concede it. They are keen on the criticism of entrenched satisfactions and habits. They like the idea that not only our beliefs, but also our passions and desires, can be enlightened by the critical work of practical reason. These “virtue theorists” are likely to turn to Aristotle, or a certain reading of Aristotle, to elaborate their picture of a deliberative political life. They are not hostile to Kant, and they may even desire a synthesis of Aristotle and Kant. Nor are they at all hostile to the idea of systematic ethical theory. They value Aristotle’s theoretical ambitions, and they see these as inseparable from the critical work of philosophy. They are likely to be universalist and anti-relativist. If feminists, they are likely to be attracted to the critical and deliberative potential inherent in Aristotle’s conception of virtue. (In this category I shall place David Wiggins, John McDowell, Iris Murdoch, Henry Richardson, Nancy Sherman, Marcia Homiak, and myself.)

Other “virtue theorists,” by contrast, begin from a dissatisfaction with Kantian ethics. They question the dominant role Kant gives to reason in human affairs. They also question Kantian universalism, together with Kant’s idea that practical judgment should be based on principles that abstract from particular local features of the agent’s situation. These theorists want more recognition of “non-rational” elements in our makeup, and they take emotions and desires to be such elements. On the whole, they believe that our social life would go better if it were less deliberative and less critical, more the outgrowth of entrenched habits of desire and entrenched features of social position. They are hostile to universal theorizing in ethics, and they are likely to have some sympathy with cultural relativism, although they do not all endorse it. These theorists are likely to have an uneasy relationship to Aristotle (or to read him in a reductive biologizing way), and to be more friendly to Hume (or a particular reading of Hume). If feminists, they are likely to be attracted to the generous role a virtue

theory might give to sentiments, habits, and the “animal” side of our personalities, which they hold to be unfairly marginalized by male-dominated Enlightenment philosophy. (In this category I shall place, in different ways, Annette Baier, Bernard Williams, Philippa Foot, and Alasdair MacIntyre, though of course MacIntyre would shrink from being associated in any way with the hated Hume.)

This is still too simple. The anti-Utilitarian group needs further demarcation: it contains a group of thinkers who focus on moral awareness and are relatively indifferent to politics; and it contains a group of critical political thinkers. It also contains different views about the moral work involved in perfecting our emotions and desires. The anti-Kantian group contains different positions with regard to the possibility of ethical theorizing, and its relation to political theorizing. Complex figures such as MacIntyre and Williams do not fit neatly into any box one might construct. Nonetheless, I shall argue that taking the “movement” apart in this way helps us make real progress in understanding where we are, and why.

## *II. The Common Ground*

Insofar as there is any common ground among the defenders of “virtue ethics,” it lies, I suggest, in these three claims:

1. Moral philosophy should be concerned with the agent, as well as with choice and action.
2. Moral philosophy should therefore concern itself with motive and intention, emotion and desire: in general, with the character of the inner moral life, and with settled patterns of motive, emotion, and reasoning that lead us to call someone a person of a certain sort (courageous, generous, moderate, just, etc.).
3. Moral philosophy should focus not only on isolated acts of choice, but also, and more importantly, on the whole course of the agent’s moral life, its patterns of commitment, conduct, and also passion.

As I have already said, these three claims involve no break with Kantian ethics, since Kant plainly agrees with all three of them, and wrote the *Tugendlehre* on that account. They do not really involve a

break with the great Utilitarian thinkers, who did ponder questions of character, although many lesser Utilitarians, especially in economics, tended to neglect such questions in favor of an exclusive focus on particular contexts of rational choice. However, it is fair to say that Anglo-American moral philosophy in the 1950's through the 1970's had not paid very much attention to these questions (with the striking exception of John Rawls's remarkable account of moral development in Part III of *A Theory of Justice*). A corrective was therefore overdue, and it was perfectly plausible to suppose that turning to the Greeks would help us to make the changes that were needed.

One reason why a turn to Aristotle preceded and in some ways motivated a return to Kant's own theory of virtue was that at this time virtually every excellent British moral philosopher, and many Americans, were students and teachers of ancient Greek ethics. People like David Wiggins, Bernard Williams, Iris Murdoch, John McDowell, and Philippa Foot were influenced in no small measure by the fact that they had done degrees in "Greats" and/or regularly taught in that program, which devotes far more time to ancient Greek ethics than to Kantian ethics. On the American side, younger philosophers such as Nancy Sherman, Marcia Homiak, Henry Richardson, and I were all beneficiaries of the exciting revival of Aristotelian studies led by Gwilym Owen.

When ethical questions were taught in those days, emphasis was generally placed on the context of choice. The competing normative theories competed to give the best account of how one ought to choose in a complex situation, and the competing metaethical theories vied to give the best account of what ethical discourse and reasoning aimed at choice really were. To focus for now on the normative analyses, typically the pupil would be confronted with a complex moral case, and then the teacher would point out that a Kantian would handle the case in one way (by thinking about the universalizability of her maxims), and the Utilitarian in a very different way (by thinking of the good that was to be maximized). Consequences then would be drawn from this for the overall structure and the adequacy of those theories. Little or nothing was said about reliable patterns of motivation and choice that might or might not be present in the agent. Little was said about the agent's emotions and desires, and virtually nothing

about alternative analyses of what emotion and desire are. And, given the focus on the context of choice, little was said about the overall ethical life of the agent, the way in which choice both expresses and builds traits of character that have a complex connection with overall ethical and personal goals. In teaching Kant one could hardly avoid noticing that an agent's subjective maxim, and therefore her inner state, makes a huge difference to the moral quality of her act. But this was typically less the focus of concern than was the structure of the principle itself, and its relation to universalizability. Similarly, although the ideal Utilitarian agent is, of course, a character of a very particular sort, namely one who has decided to subordinate all merely personal concerns to the universal good, this agent was typically described as just a set of isolated moments of choice. Thus it did not even seem peculiar when Bernard Williams charged Utilitarianism with a neglect of personal integrity, failing altogether to ask whether his protagonist Jim might not possibly have had a Utilitarian character and a sense of personal integrity that flowed from that<sup>5</sup>. It was just taken for granted that character was something Utilitarians didn't talk about and, presumably, didn't take themselves to have. Although this assumption was false, it was strongly encouraged by the way in which most Utilitarians of the time did philosophy.

Another way of understanding what was lacking is to consider the issue of what is now called moral psychology. This substantial and by now central area in philosophy was virtually empty in the fifties and sixties, and had hardly ever been heard of. Even when people were writing about philosophers who had very substantial arguments about the nature and structure of the emotions, it was rarely those aspects of their view that were discussed. This was true not only of Descartes, Hume, Rousseau, Smith, and Spinoza, but also of the Greek philosophers themselves, whose views on the passions and love and friendship were virtually absent from the philosophical literature of the period.

Nor was the silence about moral psychology benign: for it concealed a tacit agreement that passions and desires were more or less

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<sup>5</sup> See Williams, in: *Utilitarianism: For and Against*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

without thought and intentionality, animal elements in our makeup that pushed people to action without containing in themselves any picture of a goal or thoughts about it. (Some held, instead, the more radical view characteristic of behaviorist psychology, namely that all mental items could be eliminated from scientific explanation, and that talk of emotion and desire would shortly be replaced by talk of stimulus and behavioral response.) When George Pitcher published his critique of the non-cognitive picture of emotion in 1965<sup>6</sup>, it had a revolutionary impact not in the sense that its very sensible arguments were heeded, for they were not heeded until about twenty years later, but in the sense that it really did look like a break with the orthodoxy that more or less everyone believed. This was so despite the fact that Pitcher was essentially endorsing a view of emotion very familiar in the history of philosophy, one that we could associate with Aristotle, the Greek and Roman Stoics, Spinoza, and even Smith.

The non-cognitive view of emotion was a consequence of the neglect of moral psychology, in the sense that the arguments against it are so overwhelmingly powerful that one could not hang onto it except by failing altogether to consider the problem. Its more elaborately defended cousin, the behaviorist reduction of the mental to external stimuli and responses, can also no longer be sustained by anyone who focuses intently on moral psychology<sup>7</sup>. But non-cognitivism about emotions was also a cause of the neglect of moral psychology within moral philosophy. For if emotions are just subrational stirrings or pushes that have nothing to do with thought and intentionality, there is not much that is interesting to be said about their relationship to ethics. They can be fed or starved, but they cannot be cultivated as parts of a character that has a unitary focus. Something like this is

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<sup>6</sup> Pitcher, George, "Emotion," in: *Mind*, 74 (1965). Another important early critique of the non-cognitive view of emotion was in Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion, and Will*, London: Routledge, 1963; his antagonists were Descartes, Hume, and modern behaviorism. An important early critique of behaviorism was Taylor, Charles, *The Explanation of Behaviour*, London: Routledge, 1964.

<sup>7</sup> For behaviorism's experimental failure, see Seligman, Martin, *Helplessness*, New York: W. H. Freeman, 1975, and Lazarus, Richard, *Emotion and Adaptation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. Lazarus remarks that psychology, by overturning the errors of behaviorism, has now managed to return to the point Aristotle had reached when he wrote the *Rhetoric*.

Kant's view, and this view explains why, unlike virtually all of his predecessors in the Western ethical tradition, he did not see fit to offer definitions of the emotions or to devote any serious attention to their analysis.

There was much, then, to be criticized. Even though a concern for motive, intention, character, and the whole course of life was not in principle alien to Kantian and Utilitarian philosophy, it was certainly alien to British and American Kantians and Utilitarians of the period. Not surprisingly, scholars in Greek philosophy, often moral philosophers of distinction themselves, were in a position to make a valuable contribution.

What the virtue thinkers did was to insist that we cannot adequately assess the ethical performance of the agent without knowing quite a lot about the agent's moral life, both in and outside of the immediate context of choice. In the immediate context, we need to know with what motives and intentions the agent chooses and acts; with what quality of deliberation and reflection; and with what reactive emotions. Does she do the just action for its own sake, or for gain? Does she think about it, making it her own, or just do what parents and teachers have taught her? And does she do it with strain, as if it goes against the grain, or easily, as if her whole personality approves of this action? Outside the immediate context, we need to ask how the choice fits into patterns of choice and response that this person has (or has not) cultivated. Does her life in general show a commitment to justice, or is this act an isolated performance? If she has some general commitment, has it organized her motivations in a successful and relatively harmonious way, or has it remained in tension with other ends and their associated motives? If the latter, what, more precisely, is the cause of the tension? Does it lie in inclinations that are relatively impervious to reasoning, in emotions that are amenable to rational modification, or in a commitment to a separate incompatible end?

The first claim in what I have called the "common ground" of virtue ethics is that these questions about the agent are important, and essential to pursue in any complete ethical account. But in order to pursue these questions well, one must embark on inquiries in moral psychology and the philosophy of action. One must try to work out an adequate account of emotions and desires, asking how much object-

directed intentionality they contain and how susceptible they are to reason's influence. One must try to work out the best conceptual framework for the explanation of purposive action. What entities shall we recognize? Reason, belief, will, intention, emotion, inclination, desire, appetite all of these have had their defenders, and they have been combined in a host of different ways. Before we can see exactly what sort of performance an ethically worthy action is, we have to understand its psychological underpinnings better. Once we have done this, we can begin asking pertinent questions about moral development: How are traits of character formed? What part do reason and intentionality play in their formation? Do they involve the suppression of wayward desires, or should we expect morally mature agents to transform their emotions and motives so that they support the choices of reason? Is *akrasia* a permanent possibility even in the best and most mature agent, or should we regard it as a sign of deficient moral development<sup>8</sup>? The second element in the common ground of virtue ethics is that all these questions need to be faced, and that their answer will properly influence our accounts of moral worth.

But ethics cannot meet these demands if it remains focused only on isolated moments of choice, or on related questions about the agent's duties and obligations. The questions I have raised suggest a broader focus on the whole trajectory of the agent's life. What does it mean to her to have a good life, and how has she gone about pursuing that? What does she value, and how much has she reflected about what she values? How do specifically moral ends and commitments figure among the ends that she pursues<sup>9</sup>? To what extent can and should practical reasoning make a whole of one's life, coordinating its various ends and, perhaps, even modifying its passions? The third element in the common ground of virtue ethics is the idea that these

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<sup>8</sup> For the latter position, see Burnyeat, Myles F., "Aristotle on Learning to be Good," in: Rorty, Amélie O. (Ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, pp. 69-92.

<sup>9</sup> This question is posed in a characteristically modern way, presupposing a distinction between the moral and the non-moral that is not drawn, as such, by the Greek thinkers. But if one objects to that characterization, one can rephrase it: for example, what role does concern for other people for their own sake play in her scheme of ends? What role does political justice play in her scheme of ends? And so forth.

questions (the central questions of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers) are of great intrinsic philosophical interest, and are indispensable to getting an adequate account of ethical worth.

Notice that these three commitments, taken together, naturally lead the virtue theorist (whatever her brand of ethical theory) to take a keen interest in literature. For literary narratives display longterm patterns of character, action, and commitment, while investigating the relevant passions with acute perception. They show us, in a way that isolated philosophical examples cannot, what it means to organize a life in pursuit of what one values, and what conflicts and obstacles beset such a search. It cannot quite be said that an interest in literature is part of what I have called "the common ground", in the sense that quite a few people who investigate questions of character, motive, and life plan still prefer to do so with the aid of invented examples rather than complex literary narratives. But an interest in literature is a natural concomitant to an endorsement of the common ground, and it is not surprising that writers about virtue such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Cora Diamond should have taken a very keen interest in the novel as an ally of moral philosophy. Nor is it surprising that one of the leading thinkers of virtue theory in this period was the distinguished philosopher/novelist Iris Murdoch.

One further element in the rise of virtue ethics should now be mentioned. It is the rise of feminism, together with the entry of significant numbers of women into the profession. It is in retrospect hardly surprising that among the major defenders of virtue ethics a substantial number have been women: Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe<sup>10</sup>, Cora Diamond, Annette Baier, Nancy Sherman, Marcia Homiak, myself, and still others. Most of these would call themselves feminists of one description or another<sup>11</sup>. Among the male proponents are outspoken defenders of feminism such as Bernard Williams and Henry Richardson; even MacIntyre, despite the increasingly con-

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<sup>10</sup> I do not categorize Anscombe in what follows. The reason for this is that I consider her salient contribution to be in the philosophy of action, rather than in ethics as such; her articles defending Catholic positions on ethical issues are to a large extent independent of her important work on intentions.

<sup>11</sup> I am not certain about Anscombe and Diamond.

servative nature of his ethical thought, has strikingly repudiated the anti-feminist views of the ancient thinkers whom he otherwise admires.

I myself think (albeit controversially) that a good moral theory is fully universal, that there is no reason why we should expect women as such to have different roles or goals, and also no reason why we should expect them to have a distinctive set of positions. Obviously enough, the people on my list do not have a distinctive set of positions; indeed they disagree strongly about virtually everything, apart from what I have called "the common ground." But I do think that women's experiences have sometimes suggested questions and emphases that have been lacking from the dominant male tradition of moral philosophy. Thus it is not a great surprise to find that group previously excluded from the construction of the dominant tradition brings to the table new ways of doing things.

For example, it is not very surprising that women have been in the forefront of the move to make moral psychology and the study of emotion and desire central in philosophy. One reason for this emphasis is reactive: women have frequently been denigrated on account of their allegedly greater emotional nature, so one way of responding to that would be to understand these elements of the personality better and, for example, to argue that they are not brutish but highly discerning, not devoid of thought but infused with thought. Another reason for the emphasis is that on balance women have more often been encouraged by society to attend to, cultivate, and label their emotions. This means that they are often better placed to undertake such an inquiry. Finally, women have often spent more time than men caring for young children, an occupation that both confronts one every day with a tremendous range of emotions, both in the child and in oneself, and requires one to deal with these responsibly and perceptively. For all these reasons, it is not altogether surprising that, while mainstream male philosophy had swept emotions under the rug, so to speak, as a slightly embarrassing and "soft" topic, women (and feminist men) should have decided to confront this topic and to make it a major part of what moral philosophy would henceforth do.

Women have also often had to focus somewhat more intently than have men on juggling conflicting commitments between children and career, between love and self-expression. In the women's group

at Harvard in the late 1970's (a time when Nancy Sherman, Jean Hampton, and Christine Korsgaard were all in graduate school, Barbara Herman had recently graduated, and Susan Wolf and I were Assistant Professors), I recall that we asked ourselves the question, "What do women as such have to contribute to moral philosophy?" We rejected the idea that women have a distinctive way of knowing just in virtue of being women, and we rejected the idea that women would as such devalue reason and value impulse. But we did think<sup>12</sup> that the experience of repeatedly facing conflicts of values would have prevented each and every one of us from saying some of the silly things about moral conflicts that the tradition has sometimes said: for example, that they do not exist, or that reason can always discover that one of the conflicting obligations is not a real obligation. Women's typical lives, in short, led them to want to investigate the role of reason in charting the whole course of life, and the problems reason encounters when values are plural and the world makes it difficult to organize them.

This is the common ground. Notice what it does not imply. It does not imply the rejection of moral theory. Indeed, partisans of virtue ethics frequently notice that all its major proponents in the ancient Greco-Roman world were strongly pro-theory. Indeed, the way those ancient thinkers typically defended the value of philosophy as against other pursuits that claimed to produce virtue was to emphasize the central importance of reflection and theory in planning a virtuous life.

Nor does the common ground imply the rejection of universality in ethics, asking us to cling to local norms and traditions. That will become an issue for debate within the common ground, but again, all the major ancient Greek and Roman thinkers were strong universalists, commending one (albeit highly general) conception of human flourishing as the best for all people no matter where they are situated. Nor do the ancient thinkers have a lot of patience with local practices and their alleged wisdom. Every single one (even the relatively conservative Aristotle) is a radical critic of existing social norms and

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<sup>12</sup> I cannot remember which of the above-named people were actually present at this particular meeting.

practices. Again, one of the advantages they see in philosophy as opposed to its competitors religion, magic, astrology, parental advice, habit is that it motivates and guides such a critique.

Nor does the common ground imply a rejection of the guidance of rules. Rules are different from theories: theories give overall explanations, showing the point and purpose of a prescription, whereas rules are frequently obtuse. Most of the ancient thinkers about virtue have serious reservations about rules, therefore, as exhaustive guides to practice: they think that once you see the point and purpose of a prescription you will also be able to see that it sometimes is not quite the right thing. Thus there is a natural alliance between theory and a fine-tuned judgment of the particular circumstances of life; rules, standing in the middle, deliver neither the overall understanding nor the fine-tuned judgment<sup>13</sup>. But that does not mean that rules are not frequently valuable in the agent's deliberations. For often agents cannot assess the particular circumstances well enough, whether on account of time, or deficient information, or incomplete moral development, or special bias. To depart from a generally valid rule we need to be very sure that we are not engaging in special pleading<sup>14</sup>.

Nor, finally, does the common ground imply that we should rely less on reason and more on non-rational sources of guidance, such as emotion and desire (if we should construe them as non-rational), and habit, and tradition. Indeed, once again, all the ancient Greek and Roman virtue theorists were strong partisans of reason; that is why they thought philosophy, and not tradition or astrology, was "the art of life." Think of Plato's *Laches*, where the distinguished generals Laches and Nicias cannot give a plausible account of courage. We are to conclude that something extremely important is lacking in their grasp of virtue and therefore, suggests Plato, in their virtue itself. These controversial conclusions are not peculiar to Plato: they reappear in Stoicism, and, in a more moderate form, in Aristotle's ethics, which certainly defends the necessary role of practical reasoning and

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<sup>13</sup> I have discussed this distinction further in "Why Practice Needs Ethical Theory: Particularism, Perception, and Bad Behavior," forthcoming in: Burton, S. (Ed.), *The Path of the Law in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> The best discussion of this question in ancient Greco-Roman ethical thought is in Seneca, *Moral Epistles*, 94-95.

deliberation in virtue. The thing one should notice about these ancient thinkers is that they live in a culture suffused with talk of the virtues. What they offer as philosophers is a specific conception of what it is to pursue the life of virtue, and instruction in that conception. Not surprisingly, given that they are philosophers competing against traditional pedagogues and astrologists and religious leaders and magicians, the conception they purvey ascribes a lot of importance to what philosophy has a lot to say about, namely reasoning and deliberation.

I do not mean to say that these conceptions are just self-serving apologies for the philosopher's own family business. I mean, instead, to say that these philosophers were not just tradesmen, as we sometimes are. They chose philosophy as a way of life, often at considerable cost, when they might have done something else. They chose philosophy in the conviction that what it offered, reasoning and explaining, was central to the pursuit of a good human life. It would therefore have been altogether astonishing if they had concluded, inside their philosophical work, that unreflective habit and tradition were sufficient guides to a good life<sup>15</sup>. Or if they had come to that conclusion, we would expect them to have quit philosophy and gone over to some other way of pursuing the good.

It will be said that virtue is the product of good habits, and that Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics all have a great deal to say about habituation. Doesn't this cast doubt on my claim that reflection is central in their conception of virtue? Not in the least. For Plato's *Republic*, early habituation is quite unreflective, but for those who will ultimately attain full virtue it must be supplemented by years of reflection. For Aristotle and the Stoics, habituation requires practice, but a highly intelligent and increasingly discerning type of practice. It is far removed from rote repetition or behavioral conditioning. And it must in the end be supplemented by a theoretical philosophical education that gives the pupil a grasp of "the why" as well as "the that"<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> There is more to be said here about Epicureanism and Skepticism, which are to different degrees counter-philosophical uses of philosophy; see my *The Therapy of Desire*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

<sup>16</sup> See Sherman, Nancy, *The Fabric of Character*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1989, and *Making a Necessity of Virtue*, o.c.; Annas, Julia, *The Morality of Happiness*, New York:

### *III. The Anti-Utilitarians: Expanding Reason's Domain*

This is the common ground of virtue ethics. At this point, however, virtue ethics ceases to be a single enterprise. Some thinkers interested in virtue remain content with one of the major modern ethical theories and pursue their interest in virtue within that framework. Thus Kant's theory of virtue has been an increasing preoccupation of contemporary Kantians. Among the thinkers who remain dissatisfied with the dominant alternatives and who, for this reason, characteristically get described as proponents of "virtue ethics" for want of a better box in which to put them, we find different fundamental concerns and motivations and different constructive programs. Any taxonomy risks distortion. But taxonomies can also focus our attention on elements of genuine importance in a thinker's thought, illuminating questions of motivation and affiliation.

Among the dissident virtue theorists, then, one can identify one large group that is motivated, above all, by a dissatisfaction with Utilitarianism, especially as formulated in the social sciences and public policy. These thinkers in general wish to give reason a larger role in human affairs than the instrumental and merely technical role given it in versions of neoclassical economics that see preferences as exogenous and impervious to reasoning. They tend to share the following four views:

1. The goods that human beings pursue are plural and qualitatively heterogeneous; it is a distortion to represent them as simply different quantities of the same thing.

2. Because the goods are plural and because they need to be both harmonized with one another and further specified, reason plays a central role not only in choosing means to ends, but also in deliberating about the ends themselves of a human life, which ones to include with which other ones, and what specification of a given end is the best.

3. Emotion and desire are not simply mindless pushes, but complex forms of intentionality infused with object-directed thought; they can be significantly shaped by reasoning about the good.

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Oxford University Press, 1993; Sorabji, Richard, "Aristotle on the Role of Intellect in Virtue," in: Rorty, Amélie O. (Ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, *o.c.*, pp. 201-20.

4. Existing social ideas about the good form defective passions and judgments; we should criticize these deficiencies, and this rational critique can be expected to inform the passions themselves.

These four claims are all endorsed by Aristotle, or at least are widely believed to be so. Thus it is not surprising to find that this group of virtue-theorists are neo-Aristotelians. In this group, as I have said, I would place John McDowell, David Wiggins, Henry Richardson, Iris Murdoch, Nancy Sherman, Marcia Homiak, and myself<sup>17</sup>. (One might also add here Elizabeth Anderson<sup>18</sup>, although she does not make either Aristotle or virtue ethics an explicit theme.)

My classification is a little artificial because no thinker on my list (with the possible exception of myself) dwells on all four claims, though I believe that Homiak, Sherman, and Richardson would all endorse all four of them. Wiggins and Richardson, for example, focus on 1 and 2; McDowell, Murdoch, and Sherman focus on 3, Homiak on 4. McDowell's position on 2 and 4 remains unclear, as does the position of Wiggins on 3. Nor is the anti-utilitarian aspect equally

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<sup>17</sup> McDowell, John, "The Role of *eudaimonia* in Aristotle's Ethics," in: *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, *o.c.*, pp. 359-76, reprinted in: McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 3-22, and "Virtue and Reason," in: *The Monist*, 62 (1979), pp. 331-350, reprinted in: *Mind, Value and Reality*, *o.c.*, pp. 50-76; Wiggins, David, "Deliberation and Practical Reason," in: *Essays*, *o.c.*, pp. 221-40, reprinted in Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987, pp. 215-38, and "Weakness of Will, Commensurability, and the Objects of Deliberation and Desire," in: *Essays*, *o.c.*, pp. 241-66, reprinted in: *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, *o.c.*, pp. 239-67; Richardson, Henry, *Practical Reasoning About Final Ends*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994; Murdoch, Iris, *The Sovereignty of Good*, London: Routledge, 1971; Sherman, Nancy, *The Fabric of Character*, *o.c.*, and *Making a Necessity of Virtue*, *o.c.*; Homiak, Marcia, "Feminism and Aristotle's Rational Ideal," in: Antony, Louise and Charlotte Witt (Eds.), *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993, and "Aristotle on the Soul's Conflicts: Toward an Understanding of Virtue Ethics," in: Reath, Andrews, Barbara Herman, and Christine Korsgaard (Eds.), *Reclaiming the History of Ethics: Essays for John Rawls*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 7-35; for my own views, see *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, ch. 10, "The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Model of Public and Private Rationality," in: *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, ch. 2, *The Therapy of Desire*, *o.c.*, especially chs. 2-3, and "Kant and Stoic Cosmopolitanism," in: *Political Philosophy*, 5 (1997), pp. 1-25, and in Bohmann, J. and M. Lutz-Bachmann (Eds.), *Perpetual Peace*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Value in Ethics and Economics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

stressed in all thinkers. It is very prominent in Wiggins, Richardson, and Nussbaum, implicit in Homiak and Sherman, but quite muted in McDowell and Murdoch. Murdoch, indeed, takes as her official targets, in *The Sovereignty of Good*, Stuart Hampshire and Jean-Paul Sartre, although her views certainly entail many criticisms of dominant economic-utilitarian ideas of rationality. Finally, and connected with this difference of emphasis, not all these thinkers are equally concerned with political and social criticism. It is a central part of the projects of Wiggins, Richardson, Nussbaum and Homiak; Sherman's feminist critique of dominant norms is implicit but evident. McDowell and Murdoch, however, have no evident political views, or at least none that criticize dominant patterns of desire-formation in areas such as greed, group hatred, and misogyny. They separate moral philosophy rather sharply from political philosophy, and construe the task of producing virtue as a purely ethical and personal matter that can apparently be carried on without a larger social critique. Thus this group, though surely more unified than is "virtue ethics" as a whole, does not itself constitute a genuine unity. Now, however, we need to investigate each of the four claims in greater detail.

The first claim that the friends of reason derive from Aristotle is that the goods that a human life appropriately values are plural and incommensurable. (Notice that this is quite a theoretical claim, and a claim that is usually made universally, as true for all human beings.) Friendship, social justice, courage, moderation, and the others each makes its own distinct claim on the agent, and each must be pursued, as Aristotle explicitly urges, for its own sake. To pursue an end for its own sake means to see it as valuable for its own distinctive kind of value, and not as a mere means to a further value, such as pleasure or satisfaction. Thus these theorists argue strenuously against the idea that we can appropriately render the goods of a human life commensurable by considering them all as means to pleasure or satisfaction. As for utility, that vague place-holder, they have no deep objection to the idea that we might give some one name to the ordered set of all the goals an agent pursues in a human life. Aristotle himself did this, denominating it *eudaimonia*. But the problem with the term "utility" is that it is usually combined with the idea of maximizing a single coin of value, and therefore with the idea that the distinct goods in life

each yield a specific type of value that is not simply a quantity of some other kind. It is also typically linked (in its economic form) with an idea of the primacy of self-interest that virtue theorists would agree in rejecting.

As Richardson argues at length, the recognition of non-commensurability does not disable rational choice; nor does it prevent us from applying some type of cost-benefit analysis. It does, however, put us on notice that most of the significant moral work needs to be done before we even get to the stage of adding up costs and benefits. For we need to know which are the goods without which a human life is less complete. We also need to know, if possible, what level of each good a flourishing human life should not be without. A choice in which we forgo (or force others to forgo) the necessary level of a distinctive good must be considered far more tragic than a choice in which we simply ask people to choose between two quantities of the same good, especially where both quantities lie above the threshold of human *eudaimonia*. In short, cost-benefit analysis, well done, is the acolyte of Aristotelian philosophy; it does no interesting philosophical work on its own<sup>19</sup>.

Notice that non-commensurability involves two different thoughts, one of qualitative distinctness and one of separateness. The Aristotelian agent understands work and love to be both of intrinsic value, and distinct in quality. But she also thinks of her children however much like one another they may be in quality (let's suppose that they are identical twins) as each a separate life demanding separate care. Conflicting obligations to family members, or friends, or between family and friends, are painful not only because they involve people who are qualitatively distinct from one another. Given that they are each intrinsically of enormous worth, the very separateness of one from the other can cause painful conflicts. To whom shall I give my time and resources, and for how long? Aristotelians object to the way in which utilitarian aggregation across persons mutes the difficulty of

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<sup>19</sup> For some related thoughts, see Nagel, Thomas, "The Fragmentation of Value," in: *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, 131ff.; for a recent collection of essays investigating the concept of incommensurability few, I think, nearly as lucid as Richardson's excellent book see Chang, Ruth (Ed.), *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

this question. On the other hand, they see that Kantian ethics does face this question (although without a very good account of moral dilemmas); they are therefore likely to have much sympathy with Kantian critiques of Utilitarianism.

Where does virtue ethics come in here? For Aristotle, each of the virtues is an organized way of cherishing a particular end that has intrinsic value. Taken together, the virtues, and their orderly arrangement, represent a set of commitments to cherish all the valuable things, and to organize them all together, insofar as one can. I have suggested that one might see this as the ethical form of Greek polytheism: the idea that the gods are irreducibly many and one must honor them all.<sup>20</sup>) Wiggins and Richardson stress that this organizing does not come easy; Aristotelian deliberation is fraught with difficulty, and they hold this difficulty out as one of its virtues, suggesting that narrow technical concepts of deliberation are attractive to people who want to evade life's complexities. Says Wiggins: I entertain the unfriendly suspicion that those who feel they *must* seek more than all this [viz., the Aristotelian view] provides want a scientific theory of rationality not so much from a passion for science, even where there can be no science, but because they hope and desire, by some conceptual alchemy, to turn such a theory into a regulative or normative discipline, or into a system of rules by which to spare themselves some of the agony of thinking and all the torment of feeling and understanding that is actually involved in reasoned deliberation<sup>21</sup>.

One might grant that deliberation involves understanding and juggling plural and non-commensurable goods, while denying that there is any way in which reason can deliberate about the ultimate goods in a human life. Indeed, some interpreters of Aristotle have held this: they argue that the ultimate ends that are the components of *eudaimonia* must be grasped by non-rational intuition<sup>22</sup>, or by auth-

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<sup>20</sup> See *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, (Spanish translation by Antonio Ballesteros, as *La fragilidad del bien: Fortuna y ética en la tragedia y la filosofía griega*, Madrid: Visor, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Wiggins, David. "Deliberation and Practical Reason," in: *Essays, o.c.*, p. 237.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, John Cooper's *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.

ority, or by tradition. Wiggins and Richardson argue, to my mind satisfactorily, that Aristotle does not hold this; indeed the entirety of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is an extended example of rational deliberation about ultimate ends. Of course one must hold something firm while one deliberates about something else; the whole picture cannot be up for grabs in the same moment. But by advancing in a holistic manner, seeking the best overall composite picture of *eudaimonia*<sup>23</sup>, one may hope to be deliberating in a genuinely rational way about what ultimate parts to put into that picture and, most important, how to conceive of those parts. A great part of such deliberation, as both Wiggins and Richardson argue, consists of producing alternative *specifications* of highly vague and general ultimate ends, and then choosing among them —on the basis of one's other ends, which are also up for grabs in a similar way, during some other part of the deliberation. Richardson's two extended examples of such deliberation concerning the ultimate values of a life seem to me the best contemporary realizations of Aristotelian rationality. I can neither reproduce nor usefully summarize them here, but I commend them, along with Richardson's chapter on specification of ends, as examples that show that this holistic type of deliberation about plural ends can be genuinely rational<sup>24</sup>.

Thus reason's role in deliberation is extended upwards, so to speak. Ultimate ends, rather than being simply set there by desire and taste, as typical utilitarian models hold, are now the work of reason. But at the same time, and in a closely connected way, reason pushes downward, so to speak, informing the structure of desire and emotion. The Aristotelian agent's entire personality can be enlightened by reason. Virtue is a mean concerning both passion and action, because Aristotle expects that the passions, as well as choice, can be crafted by reason until they themselves embody virtue. Self-control is not the ideal state of the virtuous Aristotelian agent, for a merely self-controlled agent betrays, in her inappropriate passions, that she has not

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<sup>23</sup> Richardson stresses, in a very fine passage, that this should not be understood to mean taking consistency as a master value that organizes all the others. That is indeed one value, but it is in the end the rational deliberating agent who will decide how much consistency to shoot for, and of what sort.

<sup>24</sup> Richardson, Henry, *Practical Reasoning About Final Ends*, *o.c.*, pp. 69-86, pp. 209-27.

sufficiently worked on herself. This sort of inner moral work usually carried out in large part during childhood, but a lifelong enterprise nonetheless is a large part of what is morally valuable in the Aristotelian moral life.

The three writers who have done the most to stress this aspect of Aristotelian virtue are Murdoch, McDowell, and Sherman. Murdoch led the way, with her wonderful example of the mother-in-law who behaves perfectly toward her daughter-in-law but finds herself harboring resentful and envious feelings. Over time she criticizes the roots of her own selfish passions and works on the way she sees her daughter-in-law, until she substitutes for the pictures marred by egoistic fantasy new and more accurate pictures, and her passions transform themselves accordingly. By hypothesis her behavior, always perfectly controlled, does not alter; nonetheless, Murdoch persuasively argues, she has done morally significant work. To use Aristotelian language (as Murdoch does not), she is now a virtuous person, rather than a merely self-controlled person. In "Virtue and Reason" McDowell provided a welcome theoretical elaboration of this idea, showing the philosophical work it did against alternative pictures of action and virtue. And Sherman rooted the idea in a much more detailed account of the moral development of children<sup>25</sup>, and in a more detailed analysis of Aristotle's own conception of emotion<sup>26</sup>.

My own work, in addition to focusing on the analysis of the passions, has taken the idea of passional enlightenment in a political direction, in connection with the fourth claim. We know that our society contains a lot of bad emotion: excessive greed, racial hatred, and so forth. On some pictures of emotion and desire including many Utilitarian and Kantian conceptions we can never do better than to control these bad passions. But if we are Aristotelians we must set ourselves a more exigent task: we can, and should, aim to eliminate bad passions, by teaching young people the appropriate valuation of ends. Racial hatred is not a blind unreasoning force. It is based on thoughts and evaluations that can be altered by teaching. Excessive

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Sherman, Nancy, *The Fabric of Character*, o.c.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Sherman, Nancy, *Making a Necessity of Virtue* o.c.; and see also my *Therapy of Desire*, o.c., ch. 3.

greed, again, is based on the inappropriate overvaluation of material objects; we should aim to produce people who have neither greed nor envy. I believe that in many respects this idea of passional enlightenment would be a welcome supplement to Kant's ethical theory; surely it is not deeply in conflict with Kant's ethical and political goals. But it would require a major revision of Kant's understanding of the relationship between humanity and animality; to that extent, I believe Aristotle<sup>27</sup> provides us with a sounder basis for future political thought.

Feminist virtue theorists of the neo-Aristotelian stripe are likely to find in the fourth claim an especially attractive aspect of the Aristotelian view. As Marcia Homiak stresses, feminists typically want a picture of the good life to include a role for the passions. On the other hand, they have very good reasons to mistrust many of the passions that many societies engender. A view that tells us how passion can itself be modified by the critical use of reason is thus a very attractive one for such thinkers: we may retain our attachment to love and care, while making them parts of a life that is governed by practical reason. The form of feminism endorsed by this group of neo-Aristotelians is thus extremely strenuous and highly critical. In no way does it defer to convention; and it expects people to transform themselves not only behaviorally, but also internally.

At this point, neo-Aristotelians will differ in accordance with the precise details of their moral psychology. What exactly is the personality like, and what obstacles to virtue does it contain? To what extent are these obstacles socially shaped, and to what extent does personal change require social and political criticism? Does the personality contain unconscious elements that are recalcitrant to reason's shaping role? Does the fact that we form our personalities early in childhood, in connection with deep attachments to individual people, pose difficulties for the Aristotelian project of the rational shaping of passion?

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<sup>27</sup> It is actually the Stoics who have the most detailed account of how good teaching can eliminate hatred and anger; but, like Adam Smith, I follow them where there *analysis* of passion is concerned, and not in their *normative* claim that we ought to extirpate all the passions. On all this, see my "Kant and Stoic Cosmopolitanism", *o.c.* My own account of the passions is developed in *Upheavals of Thought: A Theory of the Emotions*, the Gifford Lectures for 1993, under contract to Cambridge University Press.

All these questions, and others, will have to be answered in an adequately contemporary neo-Aristotelian psychology. But the goal is clear: the thorough ordering of the passions through the critical work of reason.

The Aristotelian view, so understood, gives reason an extremely ambitious role far more ambitious, in some salient respects, than its role in Kant's moral philosophy. For it not only sets ultimate ends and determines practical choices, it also is responsible for forming the motivational and passional character. If we do the right thing with reluctance, or perform our duty with little sympathy, Kant will not think the less of us, so long as we were using every means in our power to do the right. For Kant thinks that some things just can't be helped, and he is inclined to be merciful to the deficiencies of the passional personality. Aristotle, however, is less tolerant: he asks us to bring every motive, every wish, every passion into line with reason's commitments to ends. Whether this is too taxing a demand to make of human beings is a complicated question, which I shall not address here<sup>28</sup>. That it is a taxing demand is, however, plain. The partisans of Aristotelian virtue ethics, then, far from turning the moral life over to unreason or anti-theory, are highly theoretical rationalists who would like reason to do much more than it currently does in perfecting our moral and political lives.

One way of bringing this out clearly is to refer to a criticism of Aristotle and modern Aristotelians made by the late H. Paul Grice, the distinguished philosopher of mind and language. In a lecture delivered in the early 1980's at the Princeton Ancient Philosophy Colloquium, Grice claimed that Aristotle has "a Prussian view" of human life. "I cannot lay in the sun," Grice said, "simply because I want to." Everything, he said, has to be justified by its role in *eudaimonia*. Now of course the response to this which Aristotelians were ready enough to give is that an Aristotelian view can, as Aristotle's does, make ample space for virtues of playful friendly association, and we can easily defend laying in the sun as a virtuous deed on some such conception. The virtuous agent will be the one who chooses *and desires*

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<sup>28</sup> I approach it in chapter 13 of *The Therapy of Desire, o.c.*, urging that mercy may sometimes be in order, toward other and toward oneself.

to lie in the sun at the right time in the right way for the right reasons, etc. But Grice's point remains: the sheer wish to do some things *not* for a reason is given no place at all in Aristotle's conception. Kant is less "Prussian" than Aristotle, in two crucial respects: (a) once duty is fulfilled, I can do other permissible things as I like; and (b) my duty does not extend to the formation of appropriate desires in the area of sunbathing. It was Epictetus, not Aristotle, who said, "Watch over yourself as over an enemy lying in wait." But there is something like this in Aristotle too, albeit more cheerfully expressed. The neo-Aristotelian group of virtue theorists are bound to push Aristotle even more in Epictetus' direction, to the degree that they more prominently recognize bad motives (whether of cultural or familial origin) seated deep within the personality.

#### *IV. The Anti-Kantians: Assailing Reason's Pretensions*

A different group of virtue theorists begins from a very different dissatisfaction. In effect, they want our ethical lives to be less Prussian although they associate that quality with Kant, rather than with Aristotle. They feel that the Kantian project of giving reason sovereignty over our moral lives has gone too far, neglecting non-rational elements in the personality that have great importance. Duty and reason are heartless masters; our moral life is best understood as governed by other more homey elements: sentiments, intuitions, traditions, habits. To some extent these thinkers simply find Kant's view implausible: they can't believe that reason could ever be as autonomous as Kant wants it to be, and they tend to agree with critics who hold that Kant's categorical imperative has too little content to give good practical guidance. But even were this project to succeed on its own terms, they would not embrace it as a good account of the moral life. Very much in the spirit of Schopenhauer's critique of Kant, they hold that the moral worth of our actions should not be sought in cold reasoning, so much as in the moral sentiments. After characterizing in an unavoidably brief way some of the central views of each thinker in the group, I can return to the four claims of the neo-Aristotelian group and show to what extent this group departs from them.

This second group of virtue theorists frequently finds in Hume's thought rich resources for the debunking of the pretensions of Kantian reason. (I make no claim at all about the correct interpretation of Hume here. I speak only of a Humean tradition<sup>29</sup>.) Both Bernard Williams and Philippa Foot take up Hume's claim that reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions; with some modification, they endorse it<sup>30</sup>. For Williams, nothing can give a person a reason for action unless the person has some motive or desire in her subjective motivational set whose satisfaction either will be served by the action or it believed by him to be served by the action<sup>31</sup>. In that sense, reason is the slave of the passions, although Williams does not deny that deliberation can modify the motivational set.

In an earlier article, Williams endorsed some views that I have associated with the Neo-Aristotelians: in particular, that we may appropriately assess the moral quality of an agent by examining her emotions, treating these as aspects of agency that are amenable, in many respects at least, to control and cultivation<sup>32</sup>. So it is not altogether clear how close to the Humean model he after all wishes to move us: the later article does not advance a definite moral psychology, nor does it make any claim regarding the extent to which agents should be expected to cultivate their emotions. It is clear, however, that "Internal

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Williams, Bernard, "Internal and External Reasons," in: *Moral Luck*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp.101-113. Williams explicitly states that he is building on a schematic version of a Humean position that does not capture all the complexities of Hume's own position; he calls it the "sub-Humean" model.

<sup>30</sup> Foot, however, does not consider herself a Humean, and indeed criticizes Hume severely for his alleged subjectivism: see "Hume on Moral Judgment," in: *Virtues and Vices*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978, pp. 74-80. Again, this has to do with her particular reading of Hume, and does not alter the fact that she endorses a position commonly linked to Hume.

<sup>31</sup> This is a summary of Williams's intricate argument in "Internal and External Reasons", *o.c.*; like any summary of a Williams argument, it is inadequate to convey the complexity of the position developed. Williams stresses that in cases where the agent doesn't know about the relationship of the action to her desire, we should say that she has reason to perform the action only if the connection of the action to the desire is "fairly close and immediate; otherwise one merely says that A would have a reason [to perform the action] if he knew the fact."

<sup>32</sup> Williams, Bernard, "Morality and the Emotions," in: *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

and External Reasons” rejects the externalist claim that having a reason to perform an action can be altogether independent of motivations the agent actually has.

To that extent, Williams’s position departs from Aristotle as well as from Kant: for Aristotle holds that practical reason prescribes a set of ends for us all, and that we all have reason to perform them, whether or not we are right now so motivated. If we have had a very bad moral education we may be unable to listen to those reasons, but they apply to us, and can be used to criticize us, nonetheless. Aristotle does hold that we all have (presumably throughout our lives) a desire for *eudaimonia*; in that sense, the claim that a given action is a constituent of or a means to *eudaimonia* is never totally external to any agent’s motivational set. But that is a connection probably too tenuous to meet Williams’s demand for internal reasons. To the extent that he would reject this connection as too tenuous, he departs from Aristotle. His long debate with John McDowell over internal and external reasons suggests that he wishes to reject not just the Kantian two-world view, but even the moderate this-worldly rationalism characteristic of the Aristotelian position.

It is revealing that, despite his lifelong intense interest in ancient Greek culture, Williams actually has little admiration for or interest in Aristotle. The thinkers to whom he is drawn are the tragic poets; and he wants to return our attention to Greek culture, not to the philosophers, whom he sees, entirely correctly, as being counter-cultural rationalists who understood virtue in a radically different way from their surrounding society. A follower in many respects of Nietzsche, Williams appears drawn to a time when we faced human life directly, without ambitious theories trying to direct us, or to give us the false hope that our actions could be placed upon a rational foundation. In that sense it is not surprising that, despite his lifelong preoccupation with Greek culture, he has no room for the Aristotelian idea of virtue.

Very much unlike Aristotle, Williams rejects the idea that ethical life should be theory-guided. Although he holds that traditional ethical life is often corrupt and that experience, being itself subject to corruption, is not always a good guide to what we should do, he thinks that all the critical bite we need can come from piecemeal criticisms combined with intuitions. He announces himself a methodological intuition-

ist<sup>33</sup>, and insists that “it is a mistake to think that in order to take a critical view of our ethical beliefs, we have to systematize them in a theoretical style... The valid objections to uncritical conservatism can be represented within MI [methodological intuitionism] itself”.<sup>34</sup> Similarly *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* argues that the demand for systematic rationalized theory was a mistake; Aristotle’s theory is more attractive than some others, but it too makes a misguided demand for system and overall organization<sup>35</sup>.

Philippa Foot’s views, like those of Williams, are extremely complex and evolve over time. One prominent strand, however, is a strong type of internalism about reasons. In “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives”<sup>36</sup>, she argues that someone who does not share standard desires may have no reason to choose the things most people consider good. Her terminology (“hypothetical imperatives”) suggests strongly that she considers good choices to be means to the satisfaction of some desire of the agent’s although in a later comment she states that the means-end model may not apply to all such cases, and that to that extent her own terminology is misleading<sup>37</sup>. For Foot, morality is rooted in human desires and passions in the nature of human beings, in effect. It might have happened that we did not desire moral ends; in that case morality would be in peril. But in fact we do have desires for justice and beneficence, and people are prepared to make many sacrifices for them. Thus Foot has repeatedly denied that her position is subversive of morality: “This conclusion may, as I said, appear dangerous and subversive of morality. We are apt to panic at the thought that we ourselves, or other people, might stop caring about the things we do care about, and we feel that the categorical imperative gives us some control over the situation... Perhaps we

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<sup>33</sup> See “What Does Intuitionism Imply?,” in: *Making Sense of Humanity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 182-90.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183. MI is defined as a view that “admits a plurality of first principle that may conflict, and, moreover, ...has no explicit method or priority rules for resolving such conflicts” (182).

<sup>35</sup> *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.

<sup>36</sup> In: *Virtues and Vices, o.c.*, pp. 157-73; the article was originally published in 1952 in: *The Philosophical Review*, 81; a long “Footnote” was added in 1977.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, “Introduction,” p. xiv: “I now wish that I had attacked Kant without taking over his terminology.”

should be less troubled than we are by fear of defection from the moral cause; perhaps we should even have less reason to fear it if people thought of themselves as volunteers banded together to fight for liberty and justice and against inhumanity and oppression<sup>38</sup>.” “I should add that while some people take my position to be inimical to morality I myself do not. Considerations of justice, charity and the like have a strange and powerful appeal to the human heart, and we do not need bad arguments to show that no one could be indifferent to morality without error. If I am right that cannot be shown, but morality may be stronger rather than weaker if we look this fact in the face.”<sup>39</sup>

For Foot, then, virtue ethics means an ethical approach that is grounded in the facts of human desire and passion, one that makes no exorbitant demands on human nature in the name of reason.

Because Foot never announces a definite moral psychology, the relation of her position to those of neo-Aristotelians such as Murdoch and McDowell is very unclear, and she would probably take herself to be closer to McDowell than my groupings suggest. She clearly thinks that passions such as sympathy are parts of virtue and have moral worth, and that some passions can be “the result of a man’s choices and values”<sup>40</sup>. But she offers no analysis of emotion and desire that would show, more precisely, how this might be true; to that extent she leaves us unclear about how far such motives can indeed be the result of reasoned self-cultivation. Certainly she does not dwell on the strenuous process of self-cultivation that is the central focus of Murdoch, McDowell, and other neo-Aristotelians; there is some reason to believe that she does not think so much inner work is possible. Surely it seems likely that, like Grice, she would resist the “Prussian” picture of a life in which each impulse and passion is subjected to reason’s critical scrutiny. But we can reach no definite conclusion on this point.

In a recent article, Foot aligns herself explicitly with Aristotle but with an Aristotle heavily biologized, who holds that morality is a part of natural human endowment that can be assessed as good be-

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<sup>38</sup> Foot, Philippa, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” *o.c.* 1952.

<sup>39</sup> Foot, Philippa, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” *o.c.* 1977.

<sup>40</sup> “Virtues and Vices,” in: *ibid.*, p. 12.

cause it promotes the survival and fitness of the species<sup>41</sup>. I shall comment no further on these new views except to note that they take her not closer to but further from the views of practical reason characteristic of the neo-Aristotelians.

One more member of this group should now be mentioned: Annette Baier. Baier, a distinguished Hume scholar, clearly and unequivocally identifies herself as a follower of Hume. She understands that role to involve a strong criticism of the pretensions of reason to any authority over the sentiments and over traditions of shared belief. Indeed, like Williams, but in a far more extreme manner, she repudiates the whole enterprise of systematic rational theorizing in ethics<sup>42</sup>. Although she speaks of virtue less prominently than Foot and Williams, it is still a major theme in her thought<sup>43</sup>. She understands virtue ethics as an alternative to “the rationalist, law-rigged tradition in moral philosophy,” which she calls the “villain” of her analysis. Philosophers should be much more deferential to the wisdom embodied in culture than rationalist philosophers typically have been: Hume shows us that we should “learn from the nonphilosophers before presuming to advise them.” Any society, she says, will probably contain some reflective critical people such as Socrates or Mary Wollstonecraft “to ask awkward questions.” But Baier is not certain that their presence is “to be welcomed,” nor does she think that professional philosophers are the reflective people we need, even should we need some.

Baier associates her anti-rationalism with feminism. In an article entitled “The Need for More than Justice,”<sup>44</sup> she takes the dominant

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<sup>41</sup> Foot, Philippa, “Rationality and Virtue,” in: Pauer-Studer, Herlinde (Ed.), *Norms, Value, and Society*, Vienna Circle Institute Yearbook, Amsterdam: Kluwer, 1994.

<sup>42</sup> See “Doing Without Moral Theory?”, in: Clarke, S. and E. Simpson (Eds.), *Anti-Theory and Moral Conservatism*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1989, pp. 29-48, reprinted from her *Postures of the Mind: Essays on Mind and Morals*, London: Methuen, 1985, pp. 228-45.

<sup>43</sup> “Doing Without Moral Theory?” begins by characterizing Hume’s enterprise as one of basing moral discourse on shared judgments about the virtues.

<sup>44</sup> In: Hanen, Marsha and Kai Nielsen (Eds.), *Science, Morality and Feminist Theory*, Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1987, and in Held, Virginia (Ed.), *Justice and Care*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995, pp. 47-58.

male tradition of moral philosophy to task for its focus on justice, and praises the empirical work of psychologist Carol Gilligan, which she understands to have solidly established that there are gender-based differences in moral reasoning<sup>45</sup>: men reason by appeal to principles of justice, women by appeal to ideas of care and affiliation. Philosophy ought to focus on people's emotional needs and their connections with one another; at any rate, if it does not do so, it will not offer feminists what they want. In a conclusion somewhat less radical than that of her 1985 article, she claims that the best moral theory "has to be a cooperative product of women and men, has to harmonize justice and care." Baier's deference to shared community judgments and to sentiments uncriticized by reason produces a feminism that is extremely different from the feminism of the first group of virtue theorists, who are highly critical of Gilligan's claim to have described the female perspective correctly, and who hold that in any case it would be mistaken to use the current reasoning of a subordinated group as an index of what is good for that group<sup>46</sup>. The neo-Aristotelians tend to think that the feminism described by Baier is not feminist at all, but a misguided validation of a diseased status quo.

For all three neo-Humeans, then, the turn to virtue ethics is a way of reducing reason's exorbitant demands and pretensions to authority; it is a way of grounding morality in other features of human nature. The three thinkers differ about the extent to which they imagine that the revived virtue ethics will be critical of established norms. Williams is keenly interested in social and political criticism, and Foot also appears to be so: but they believe that the motivational set of human beings contains sufficient material to get the requisite critique going without any ambitious rationalist theory to drive things for-

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<sup>45</sup> I do not myself hold this view. There have been many highly effective criticisms of Gilligan's empirical work, citing the small size and social narrowness of her sample, her own insensitivity to her effect on her subjects, and her very biased reading of her own questionnaire results. See for example Broughton, John M., "Women's Rationality and Men's Virtues: A Critique of Gender Dualism in Gilligan's Theory of Moral Development," in: Larrabee, Mary Jane (Ed.), *An Ethic of Care*, New York: Routledge, 1993, pp. 112-42.

<sup>46</sup> See the discussion of preference-distortion in my *Sex and Social Justice*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, chapters 2 and 5; related views are expressed by Homiak.

ward<sup>47</sup>. Baier seems the most conservative, willing to rely on judgments that are widely shared. Oddly, she thinks that Aristotle agrees with her. Of both Aristotle and Hume, she says, “neither of these two... anticipate much disagreement among their readers about the actual moral judgments they endorse in their philosophy”<sup>48</sup> despite the fact that Aristotle states that the only thing people agree about, regarding *eudaimonia*, is its name, and that beyond that there is tremendous disagreement. It would not take long to show that the judgments endorsed by Aristotle are in many respects radically critical of conventional Athenian norms, and, furthermore, are understood to be so by Aristotle himself. At any rate, of our three neo-Humeans Baier assigns philosophy the least critical and humblest role: it should simply learn about the culture, and then it can in a limited and untheoretical way, give some advice, the way medical ethicists currently do.

The fourth thinker in this group shares Baier’s concern with sound social practices, although, unlike Baier, he believes that our current practices are in a disastrously bad state. For Alasdair MacIntyre<sup>49</sup>, appeals to reason never in fact resolve ethical disagreements. They could be expected to do so in an era when we had a secure extra-human conception of our natural end, and reason and virtue simply charted the routes to that end. In the modern world, however, we encounter vestiges of that idea of reason, without its head, so to speak without the secure grasp of an other-worldly *telos* of our actions. Such unanchored reasoning can never reach a definite conclusion that will command universal assent; thus we find interminable disagreements in which people conform to the behavior described by emotivists: they use moral language simply to influence and persuade. Like Foot and Williams, MacIntyre is strongly opposed to emotivism; he sees in some sort of return to an ethics of virtue the only hope for reconstructing moral discourse in a reasonable way.

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<sup>47</sup> Foot, Philippa, *Virtues and Vices*, *o.c.*, Introduction; Williams, “Reply to Critics” in: Altham, J. E. G. and Ross Harrison (Eds.), *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Philosophy of Bernard Williams*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

<sup>48</sup> Baier, Annette, “Doing Without,” *o.c.*, p. 29.

<sup>49</sup> *After Virtue*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987.

But MacIntyre holds out no hope that we can perform the necessary reconstruction simply by doing moral philosophy in a new (or old) way. His elaborate analysis of the alleged failure of the Western philosophical tradition shows that we are in a pretty hopeless state philosophically, stuck with the vestiges of theories whose entire point has been taken away. We therefore need political change in order to give our actions order and coherence. MacIntyre imagines that the good moral community would be rather like the ancient Greek *polis* as he imagines it! That is, it would be a place where there was no agonizing deliberation about what to do, because each person had a well-assigned role or function, and understood exactly what range of actions that function entails. Thus virtuous action is a matter of authority and tradition: one has to be assigned a role, and one has to have internalized that role so well that one simply does it without reflecting. He compares a well-ordered agent to a hockey player who receives a pass in the closing seconds of a game. This person (he says) does not need to stop to think about what to do, because he has thoroughly internalized his role. MacIntyre seems to hold that we need to get this functional order through some sort of political authority: the new rule of St. Benedict that he obscurely promises at the end of *After Virtue* becomes the authority of the institutionalized Church in *Whose Justice?*

Like Williams and Foot, MacIntyre doubts that reason can accomplish as much as many philosophers have supposed. Certainly it cannot establish first principles: these must be known by some other non-rational faculty and transmitted by authority. Unlike Williams and Foot, he seems to have relatively little confidence in passions and desires as vehicles of virtue unless authority steps in to assign the agent a role and to school desire in accordance with this role. Thus he is not only officially a strong opponent of Hume; he is also, in the substance of his thought, less Humean than the others, turning to authority for the guidance Hume finds in the sentiments. He also denies reason the role in social criticism that at least two of the neo-Humeans clearly want to preserve for it. Baier is correct in seeing that MacIntyre's views and her own are not all that far apart, in the sense that both reject the guidance of reason and search for it in social traditions; the main difference between them, as she sees, is that she

holds out hope for resolving disputes within the parameters of a modern secular culture, going by its traditions and sentiments, and MacIntyre does not<sup>50</sup>. He believes that only a return to some form of quasi-religious authority can solve our problems.

MacIntyre appeals frequently to Aristotle; he appears drawn to the Aristotelian tradition. But even in interpreting Aristotle's own thought he ignores Aristotle's tremendous stress on deliberation and reflection, and the evidence that Aristotle believes deliberation to be capable of justifying a view of *eudaimonia* itself, including its first principles. His hockey-player image underrates the amount of thinking involved in good sports activity; but it all the more clearly underrates the element of critical thinking in the life of Aristotelian virtue<sup>51</sup>. It is of course true that an agent who is virtuous in Aristotle's sense does not need to stop and deliberate each time she acts: once she has formed a virtuous disposition in herself, action will often be automatic. But this hardly shows that most people do not need to reflect much at all during their lives, or that being assigned one's proper social functions make reflection otiose. And it is these conclusions that MacIntyre needs to defend in order to link his own position with Aristotle's. Thus he is a neo-Aristotelian of a very peculiar stripe, one who does not really approve of some of the central aspects of Aristotle's thought. (He makes this explicit by stating that Augustine has supplanted Aristotle, although he gives no clear reason for this judgment.)

Let us now return to the four claims made by the first group of virtue theorists. What will our second group have to say about them?

1. The goods that human beings pursue are plural and qualitatively heterogeneous; it is a distortion to represent them as simply different quantities of the same thing.

Our four anti-Kantians can endorse this claim, and Williams makes a major point of doing so. A major critic of Utilitarianism as well as Kantianism, he has offered some of the most eloquent criticisms of maximizing strategies currently used in utilitarian econ-

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<sup>50</sup> See Baier, Annette, "Doing Without," *o.c.*

<sup>51</sup> See my critical review of *Whose Justice?* in: *The New York Review of Books*, December 1987.

omics<sup>52</sup>. The conclusion he draws from the existence of plurality, however, is different from that drawn by the neo-Aristotelians: for he takes plurality to support Methodological Intuitionism and therefore the rejection of overarching philosophical theory, whereas the neo-Aristotelians think it shows only that the theory has to accommodate plural ends and to support political strategies aimed at bringing these ends within people's grasp.

Foot and Baier show little interest in issue of plural ends. MacIntyre's *After Virtue* presents an eloquent account of Sophoclean tragic dilemmas, a central element in which is a recognition of the plurality of the sources of good. But little is done with this analysis in the book's forecast for the future; oddly, the analysis itself is dropped without comment in *Whose Justice?*, which endorses as correct Aquinas' rejection of moral dilemmas, a position that the earlier book had criticized.

2. Because the goods are plural and because they need to be both harmonized with one another and further specified, reason plays a central role not only in choosing means to ends, but also in deliberating about the ends themselves of a human life, which ones to include with which other ones, and what specification of a given end is the best.

Our four anti-Kantians think that nothing like this follows at all. It is our sentiments, traditions, and (in the case of Williams) a daily untheoretical use of practical reason that will solve our practical problems. None of the four imagines that even ordinary practical reason can produce a justification of ultimate ends of human life. MacIntyre and Williams deny this explicitly, the others implicitly. Williams's impressive *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* attempts to show that no philosophical account of anything like the foundations of ethics is successful<sup>53</sup>. The ambitious neo-Aristotelian constructive enterprises of Richardson and Nussbaum are presumably as objectionable to the Anti-Kantians as other ambitious uses of philosophical theory.

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<sup>52</sup> See, for example, the Introduction to Sen, Amartya and Bernard Williams (Eds.), *Utilitarianism and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

<sup>53</sup> See my criticism of his treatment of Aristotle, in: "Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics," in: *World, Mind, and Ethics*, *o.c.*

3. Emotion and desire are not simply mindless pushes, but complex forms of intentionality infused with object-directed thought; they can be significantly shaped by reasoning about the good.

Williams clearly endorses this claim in "Morality and the Emotions," but he appears to lose interest in it later. At any rate, his internalism is not deeply shaped by its recognition: if it were, the difference between his view and that of McDowell would become much thinner, and might disappear altogether. Foot endorses something like the neo-Aristotelian claim, but she has little to say about it, and she seems not to envisage any of the ambitious critical uses of this insight that Homiak, Murdoch, McDowell, and Nussbaum all map out. MacIntyre says nothing extensive about moral psychology. Baier explicitly denies that Hume has a cognitive account of the emotions, and she views this as a good thing in Hume; she asserts that the logic of the emotions is altogether different from the logic of belief<sup>54</sup>.

4. Existing social ideas about the good form defective passions and judgments; we should criticize these deficiencies, and this rational critique can be expected to inform the passions themselves.

This idea, as I have said, was a central motif in Aristotle, and even more central in the thought of Epicureans and Stoics. Their ideas, in turn, heavily influenced such modern thinkers about the passions as Smith and Rousseau, who tirelessly attacked the deformation of compassion by social hierarchy, the social formation of greed and envy, the inappropriate exaltation of honor and rank and fortune. Williams's thought contains a space for this idea, but he does not really fill in the space. His internalism would have to be made considerably more complex if he did. None of the other three really makes room for this idea.

The anti-Kantian group of virtue theorists differ greatly in their politics. MacIntyre is (currently) a religious conservative; all the other three are liberals of some sort, and Williams is interested in radical social and political criticism. But their philosophical views about virtue give them little or no help in this regard. Baier and Foot are

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<sup>54</sup> See her "Hume's Analysis of Pride," in: *The Journal of Philosophy*, 75 (1978), pp. 27-39, replying to Donald Davidson's "Hume's Cognitive Theory of Pride," in: *The Journal of Philosophy*, 73 (1976), pp. 744-56.

inclined to believe that things are more or less all right without reason taking an ambitious role; Williams thinks that they are not all right, but that philosophical reason would almost certainly make them worse. He is inclined to make a rather sharp separation between politics and morals: in politics, critical theory has a valuable role to play, but this theory will not be a moral theory, and it will not offer guidance for a more general cultivation of the person. Thus none of them holds out the hope that the first group does along with Kant for a transformation of both person and society through the critical work of philosophically guided reasoning.

V. *Doing Away with "Virtue Ethics"*

This exposition has been too crude to capture many of the subtleties of each thinker's position. (I feel that Williams has suffered from this more than others, because he is a thinker of such subtlety and complexity, whose views on all these topics do not lend themselves to summary.) But even this crude account should at least have shown one thing: that the current tendency to teach that there is any such unitary approach as "virtue ethics" is a big mistake. It is, first of all, a category mistake of an elementary kind, given that lots of other people are writing and thinking about virtue within the Kantian and Utilitarian traditions. Virtue ethics cannot, then, be an alternative to those traditions. But even if we focus on that loosely assorted class of thinkers who for one or another reason reject both Kantianism and Utilitarianism and associate themselves with the insights of ancient Greek and Roman thinkers, there is no unity to that group either (just as there is no unity to the group of ancient Greek and Roman thinkers, especially if we include non-philosophers in that class). They have different targets and different positive views. These views have widely different consequences for the role of the professional philosopher in society, for the criticism of existing habits of greed and anger, for the whole project of placing our hope in reason. What I have called the "common ground" is significant: but it can be pursued within Kantianism, within Utilitarianism, and within neo-Aristotelian and neo-Humean projects of many different sorts.

I propose that we do away with the category of “virtue ethics” in teaching and writing. If we need to have some categories, let us speak of Neo-Humeans and Neo-Aristotelians, of anti-Utilitarians and anti-Kantians and then, most important, let us get on with the serious work of characterizing the substantive views of each thinker, and deciding what we ourselves want to say.