

Guest Editor's Preface

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Virtue ethics was originally presented by its proponents as a rather special normative conception that was radically different from that of what was known as the ethics of duty.¹ There were at least two important thematic lines behind this claim. The first concerned the way of delimiting the area of thought, behaviour and passions belonging to ethics², while the second concerned questions connected with the nature of practical deliberation.³

As regards the first aspect, those upholding virtue accused deontological ethics and utilitarianism of delimiting ethics to questions such as respect for *other* persons and their individual moral rights or the promotion of *their* happiness. In this description ethics is the combination of those institutions, rules and psychological dispositions that focus on how we should relate with *others* (with their freedoms, their goods, their desires) and does not directly concern the self, its needs and its development in its various dimensions. The proponents of virtue ethics have notably modified this way of delimiting the content of their area of enquiry. Ethics is that area of thought, behaviour and passions that concerns characters: that is to say, practical dispositions that involve passionate and cognitive elements that arouse our approval and disapproval. A virtue is such, not only when it is the expression of our benevolent traits or those that inspire impartial behaviour, which are necessary for social cooperation, but also when it is the basis of those activities that mainly concern care of one's self. The moral subject described by virtue ethics not only has benevolent traits or dispositions necessary for respecting the rules of group life, but also possesses other admirable qualities such as courage,

¹ For a discussion of this issue, see M. Slote, *Virtue Ethics*, in M. W. Baron, P. Pettit, M. Slote (eds.), *Three Methods of Ethics*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1997, pp. 175-238. See also M. Slote, *Morals from Motives*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, ch. 1.

² See S. Van Hooft, *Understanding Virtue Ethics*, Chesham, Acumen, 2006, ch. 1.

³ See S. Van Hooft, ch.1. See also D. Statman, *Introduction to Virtue Ethics*, in Statman (ed.), *Virtue Ethics. A Critical Reader*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1997, pp. 2-41 and R. Crisp, M. Slote, *Introduction a Virtue Ethics*, in R. Crisp, M. Slote (eds.), Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 1-25.

prudence, steadfastness in achieving one's goals, and the vocation to seek and follow one's deepest impulses.⁴

As regards the second aspect, those upholding the virtues claimed that these structural features modified the nature of the thinking that was in play in deliberative processes. It was a transition that was generally described as a change in the way of understanding the kind of practical questions that are at the centre of ethics, which is marked by the shift from the question "what should I do?" to "what kind of person do I want to be?" In this reconstruction virtue ethics put on one side what had been regarded as the perspective of modern philosophy that limited itself to actions and invited us to consider more complex practical problems as to the kind of life we should live.

More recently, after the initial opposition between virtue ethics and deontological ethics and consequentialism, a new phase has begun, marked by a flowering of many different virtue ethics.⁵ Alongside new theories that offer to develop Aristotle's moral philosophy we have seen various new currents that are working on theories of virtue elaborated in modern moral philosophy. In recent years, not only Aristotle, but also Hume, Kant, John Stuart Mill and Nietzsche have been the most frequent sources for conceptions of ethics that revolve around ideas of virtue and character. The interest in Kant's *Doctrine of Virtue*, the development of a Kantian ethic of character and new positions on the role of the emotions in Aristotelian ethics have been the basis of recent attempts by Barbara Herman, Marcia Baron and Rosalind Hursthouse to show important areas of convergence between Kantian and Aristotelian ethics.⁶ Other perspectives, however, have shunned Aristotle's rationalist and eudaimonistic ethics. Julia Driver has expressed the need to reconcile recognition of the centrality of virtue with a perspective that reduces the importance of moral knowledge and that reconstructs moral value starting from the consequences of actions.⁷ More recently, Julia Annas has formulated a virtue ethics that starts from the Aristotelian thesis

⁴ B. Williams, *Morality. An Introduction to Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 79.

⁵ For a systematic discussion of this new phase, J. Oakley, *Varieties of Virtue Ethics*, «Ratio», 9 (1996), pp. 128-152; S. M. Gardiner, *Introduction to Virtue Ethics, Old and New*, in S. M. Gardiner (ed.), Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press, 2005, pp. 1-7. See also T. Chappell, *Virtue Ethics in the Twentieth Century*, in D. C. Russell, *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, Oxford-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 149-171.

⁶ See B. Herman, *Making Room for Character*, in S. Engstrom, J. Whiting (eds.), *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, reprinted in B. Herman, *Moral Literacy*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 1-28; M. Baron, *Kantian Ethics*, in M. Baron, P. Pettit, M. Slote (eds.), *Three Methods of Ethics* Oxford, Blackwell, 1997, pp. 3-91; R. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁷ J. Driver, *Uneasy Virtue*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

of virtue as a practical skill.⁸ A virtue ethics that draws on David Hume informs the work of Michael Slote⁹ and Lorraine Besser-Jones¹⁰. It is a particularly promising conception as it combines a pluralist and sentimentalist perspective on the virtues with a conception of human nature centred on sympathy and on the self-conscious emotion of pride.¹¹

The essays in this collection are an expression of this second happy phase of contemporary thinking on the virtues. Each of them has a clear philosophical perspective behind it. Yet they are not presenting an abstract defence of their orientation, but are seeking, rather, to defend it by showing how it is best fitted to respond to important aspects of our moral experience or able to provide a better explanation of some constituent principles of human psychology.

Lorraine Besser-Jones examines how well eudaimonistic virtue ethics is holding up in the light of two recent objections: the *self-effacing objection*, which claims that virtue ethics is problematic because it sets out to justify the virtues in a way that is not part of the motives of those acting in favour of virtue, and the *self-centeredness objection*, which claims that virtue ethics, at least in its eudaimonistic version, expresses a selfish conception of ethics that does not take account of the other regarding passions that make up a central aspect of moral theory and of our shared ethical experience. Through an extensive discussion of the interdependent nature of the self, Besser-Jones shows how these objections are effective only in the false hypothesis that the self is egoistic. On the contrary, a virtue ethics that takes on board a relational conception of the self, supported, moreover, by influential research carried out by empirical psychology, can defend a version of eudemonics that is immune from these criticisms.

The essays by Gopal Sreenivasan and Julia Driver both discuss the theme of moral deference. More precisely, they examine the situations in which a moral agent defers to a so-called moral expert in ways that leads us to consider him as an agent that falls short of our ideal of moral agency. Using various arguments, these essays show that though moral deference is a less than perfect outcome from the point of view of agency, this does not constitute a proof that the agent is not virtuous or, more precisely, that she does not possess that specific virtue on which she is asking advice of the expert. As Driver observes, what matters in these cases

⁸ See J. Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2011.

⁹ M. Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*, London, Routledge, 2007 and *Moral Sentimentalism*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2009.

¹⁰ L. Besser-Jones, *Eudaimonic Ethics: The Philosophy and Psychology of Living Well*, New York, Routledge, 2014.

¹¹ See J. Taylor, *Moral Sentiment and the Sources of Moral Identity*, in C. Bagnoli (ed.), *Morality and the Emotions*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 257-274. See also D. Hart, M. K. Matsuba, *The Development of Pride and Moral Life*, in J. L. Tracy, R. W. Robins, & J. P. Tangney (eds.), *The Self-Conscious Emotions. Theory and Research*, New York – London, The Guilford Press, 2007, pp. 114-133.

is that the agent is properly oriented in performing the action: that is, that the agent is responding to moral reasons although she may not be able to perceive them as such. The two essays, and particularly Sreenivasan's, also show how virtue ethics, especially his version, which rejects the Aristotelian thesis of the unity of virtuous traits, has a greater chance of grasping this fundamental aspect of our everyday moral experience.

The theme of the limits of moral understanding, considered in the framework of feminist ethics, is again present in Caterina Botti's essay. Using a complex and eclectic method of enquiry, which draws on psychology as well as philosophy, Botti underlines that, though the relations between human beings are fact of human life that cannot be by-passed, they are marked by a constituent opacity. In her contribution, Botti explores the effects of this epistemological thesis on how to describe the virtues at the centre of the ethics of care. On the one hand, care cannot be based merely on the spontaneous exercise of compassionate inclinations, but will presuppose the cultivation of our imaginative resources, our receptiveness and our attention, which bring better understanding of the characteristic, distinctive aspects of specific care situations. On the other, Botti's perspective brings out how the effort to understand others meets a limit, a threshold beyond which the other is not knowable. According to Botti, our willingness to care must therefore be associated with the virtue of humility, a trait that expresses our awareness that our cognitive resources are limited and imperfect.

In continuity with his most recent works on care and moral sentimentalism, Michael Slote investigates the psychological causes of our altruistic inclinations. After distinguishing empathy – the psychological mechanism by which human beings and animals communicate their passions and opinions to each other – from sympathy, which is a term that identifies the active psychological principle that leads us to take care of others, Slote claims that there is a fundamental connection between these two psychological principles: empathy motivates sympathy. Slote's enquiry offers to give a new and original explanation of this tie. Unlike psychologists such as Gregory Batson, Nancy Eisenberg and Martin Hoffman, Slote claims that the relation between empathy and sympathy/altruism is not an empirical, but a conceptual question. In this essay, Slote develops in particular Elizabeth Anscombe's well-known thesis on the conditions of intelligibility of some desires. Following the structure of Anscombe's argument, Slote claims that empathy constitutes a condition of intelligibility of our benevolent desires. Slote's intention, with this explanation, is to provide an important argument in favour of a sentimentalist conception of the virtues. Slote shows that a perspective that appeals to David Hume's teaching and that regards the mechanism of empathy as a constituent element of human nature can give a full account of that part of the virtues that coincides with the benevolent traits of character.

Julia Annas and Sophie-Grace Chappell examine the continuing relevance of Aristotelian ethics. Annas discusses the inexplicably neglected topic of the nature

of vice, while Chappell deals with the question of the method, or methods, for determining the list of the virtues.

In Annas' contribution, an examination of our everyday moral experience reveals, in her view, the soundness of Aristotle's analysis of this concept. Like virtue, vice too can be regarded as an internally unconflicted state of character. More precisely, just as the virtuous person, unlike the enkratic person, succeeds in doing the right thing without having to combat contrary motivation in order to do so, in the same way the vicious person is one who does not possess virtuous motives without feeling any regret for this lack. Secondly, Annas convincingly shows that vice, like virtue, is a psychological state that cannot be explained except as the result of a particular kind of upbringing. As a stable state of character, vice should be learnable in a way that virtue is learnable. According to Annas, the difference between these two states of character can be explained if we use the metaphor of a skill. Annas claims that every skill has its own intrinsic standard that concerns the acquisition of goods that are in some way intrinsic to that skill and that need to be pursued for themselves. Annas' thesis is that though the vicious agent, unlike the virtuous one, can learn the skill, she will no longer be able to satisfy their standards. As she does not consider the goods internal to the skill to be pursued for their own sake, the vicious person merely acquires the skill because she considers it a means for pursuing other purposes.

In her fascinating contribution, Chappell reflects on the methods for identifying the virtues within a certain community. Chappell is impatient with Foot's ethical naturalism and, more generally, with every form of foundationalism that claims to derive admirable character traits starting from a morally neutral description of the excellent exercise of human faculties. Following this approach, Chappell proposes a cautious and piecemeal methodology that brings together three different suggestions: a non-finalistic conception of Aristotelian eudaimonistic ethics, McIntyre's argument about the virtuous traits necessary for the successful pursuit of human practices, and the aesthetic and emulative value of the living exemplars of a given virtue.

My aim was to assemble a cornucopia of varied current issues in virtue ethics. Yet, as is probably already evident from this preface, it is easy to identify some recurrent themes. For example, in their different ways the essays by Gopal Sreenivasan, Julia Driver and Caterina Botti all give attention to the issue of moral epistemology. Julia Annas and Sophie-Grace Chappell have a common interest in Aristotle's legacy to contemporary virtue ethics. The notion of the social and empathic agent runs through the papers by Lorraine Besser-Jones and Michael Slote. And, taken as a whole, they show the endless fascination of virtue ethics.