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Aristotle's Ethics in Brief

If we consider Aristotle's ethics writ large, we can see that three central elements take pride of place: a conception of human nature, a conception of human flourishing—*eudaimonia* in the Greek—and a conception of virtue that enables humans to flourish, along with external goods. Aristotle's view, we might say, is an ethic of self-realization. Given the capacities that we have by nature, we can flourish or live well only by being virtuous and having external goods. In this way, we are parts of the natural world. Our flourishing parallels the ways in which non-human animals and plants thrive. This is Aristotle's *ethical naturalism*. Our goodness does not depend on non-natural or divine elements, but on our abilities to develop our capacities for virtue. According to this view, just as a cat who is born with only three legs instead of four is defective of its kind, so, too, a human being who is not virtuous is a defective member of the human species.

Of course, far more can be said on this point, and philosophers who endorse, study, or critique ethical naturalism have explored its nuances in considerable detail. For now, let us note one central claim about virtue that emerges in the neo-Aristotelian tradition: being virtuous depends crucially on choice; it is a matter of the will. We must consciously decide and make efforts

to be virtuous. This requires cognition and deliberation. Only by deliberately and thoughtfully striving to be virtuous can we live well, that is, be *eudaimon*.

Let us explore Aristotle's views on virtue in more detail. Aristotle believes that we are not naturally virtuous or vicious, though we have the capacity to go either way. We acquire virtue through guided and habituated practice. That is, before we've reached the age of reason, our parents and families should habituate us to be virtuous, with support from our communities and the state. Under their guidance, we should learn to take pleasure in virtuous actions. When we reach the age of reason, we should be able to make virtuous choices for ourselves. For Aristotle, habituated virtuous action builds up virtuous dispositions. These dispositions should ideally be entrenched. As the neo-Aristotelian philosopher Rosalind Hursthouse (1999, 123) says, they should "go all the way down," to be deep parts of our characters. These dispositions then give rise to virtuous actions. Virtuous dispositions, such as the disposition to be courageous or generous, are multi-track in the sense that they (a) enable us to perceive when virtuous action is called for; (b) enable us to reason in ways that allow us to be virtuous and to act virtuously; (c) enable us to have appropriate motivations; and (d) enable us to have appropriate emotions. Virtuous dispositions stand as

intermediate states between vicious states of excess and deficiency, enabling us to hit the “targets” of virtue, that is, to be successful in acting virtuously and avoiding vicious actions. Other things being equal, a courageous person will act neither cowardly nor rashly; a generous person will not be stingy or wasteful in her actions or attitudes.

Let us examine the elements of virtuous dispositions and how they work to produce virtuous action in more detail. Perception or *aisthesis* enables a person to recognize or see when virtuous action is called for. Some philosophers who are influenced by Aristotle, such as John McDowell (1979), believe that the virtuous person “sees” the world in certain ways—in ways that are shaped and informed by her virtue. I think this is correct. We can illustrate this point, and contrast the virtuous perspective with the vicious one, by noting that a compassionate person sees the suffering of another as an occasion to help, whereas a cruel or callous person would see it, perhaps, as an occasion for malicious fun. Seeing a person being bullied who is on the verge of tears, a compassionate person would intervene to render aid and comfort. A cruel person might see the plight of the other as an opportunity to intensify the bullying for the sake of malicious enjoyment. Other examples can illustrate the perception of the virtuous in more refined ways: a generous person might understand that buying an expensive gift for someone poor would make her feel embarrassed and feel the burden of reciprocating the gift, whereas a non-generous person might just buy the expensive gift.

The perception of an occasion to be virtuous is intimately connected with thought and deliberation about how to be virtuous. Seeing someone being bullied, the compassionate person would think about how best to act in the situation. She might form a plan to intervene, either by doing so herself or by enlisting the aid of others. We should note that for Aristotle, the virtuous person possesses *phronêsis*, or practical wisdom. This is a suite of virtues that enable the virtuous to perceive situations that call for virtue and to deliberate about how best to act in those situations. For Aristotle, we cannot have virtue without practical wisdom, nor can we have practical wisdom unless we are virtuous. An implication of this view is what is called the “unity of virtues” thesis, or the ‘reciprocity of virtues’ thesis. The strong version of this view, as found in Aristotle, is that we cannot have any virtues unless we have them all. Most

contemporary virtue ethicists who are influenced by Aristotle reject this thesis.

Before turning to the motivational element of virtue, we should make one further observation. Practical wisdom leads to the choice of virtuous action; that is, the virtuous person uses it in deciding whether and how to act virtuously. However, as McDowell (1979, 1998) recognizes, Aristotle also believes that virtue can and should become habituated – an ingrained part of our characters. If we are disposed to act virtuously and virtuous dispositions have truly become entrenched parts of our character, we should not need to deliberate each and every time a virtuous action is called for. Instead, virtue has become, in McDowell (1998)’s terms, “second nature.” We simply act virtuously more or less spontaneously when we see that virtue is required, unless there is a difficult situation that might require deliberation. As we’ll see, neo-Aristotelians other than McDowell endorse and seek to explain this view of how virtue can become part of our characters and give rise to virtuous action without the need for overt deliberation.

Motivation is the third element required for virtue. Aristotle is adamant that we cannot be virtuous unless we are appropriately motivated. We will explore this topic in some detail as we examine the work of neo-Aristotelians in the rest of this article, but here we can note that we act virtuously, according to Aristotle, for the sake of the noble, the admirable, or the fine—to *kalon*. Acting for the sake of the noble, admirable, or fine is what *eudaimonia*, or living well, consists in. This is how we achieve excellence as members of the human species. Debates have raged about exactly what this means. In particular, Aristotle has been charged with advancing a form of egoism, self-centeredness, or moral self-indulgence (see, for example, Hurka 2001, and Toner, 2006, 2010). According to this charge, I must be the one to act virtuously or nobly. It is *my* moral excellence or flourishing that I thereby seek to achieve. Ultimately, I think this objection fails because it does not recognize the deeply social nature of Aristotelian virtue. The *Nicomachean Ethics* was written as a preliminary to the *Politics*. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle makes clear that the good of individuals can only be attained by life in the *polis*, or Greek city-state. It is only in community, in the company of others, that we can become virtuous and live well. To illustrate, we act generously only when we give selflessly, for the good of the other, and not, for example, to ingratiate ourselves with him or her—per-

haps with some ulterior motive in mind. We act courageously when we overcome our fears for the sake of some greater good, for example, in order to protect our country from danger, and not for the sake of accruing heroic honors for ourselves. And so on. Genuine virtue is genuinely other-regarding. Even temperance, which might seem to be purely self-regarding (moderation in food, drink, and sex) has other-regarding aspects. Consider how unpleasant it is to be around drunkards, or how intemperance in sex (too much or too little) can ruin a marriage.

Finally, we should comment, if only briefly, on the role of emotion in virtue. To be fully virtuous, we must have emotions appropriate to each virtue. For example, we are courageous only by overcoming fear, compassionate only by feeling sorrow for the plight of another in distress, and generous only by giving wholeheartedly, not grudgingly.

I have dwelt on virtue because that concept is the centerpiece of Aristotle's theory. However, as mentioned at the outset of this article, virtue enables humans to flourish—to live well. It is the stable and controlling element in flourishing. Yet we also require external goods to flourish. For Aristotle, these were noble birth, wealth, friends, good children who haven't died, and good looks. These were the goods needed for Greek male property owners to contribute to the life of the Aristotelian *polis*. Virtue and the external goods enabled these people to “cut a fine figure”—to be active and successful in community life, in a word, to flourish.

Let us make two observations about roles for virtue and external goods in a flourishing life. First, in requiring both virtue and external goods in order to flourish, we can contrast Aristotle with the Stoics, who thought that only virtue is needed to flourish. We can, according to them, flourish even while being tortured on the rack, provided that we retain our virtue. Second, neo-Aristotelians have not adopted Aristotle's view that full virtue and flourishing are available only to a select group of people. All rational persons have the capacity to be virtuous. In addition, I would suggest that we can update the list of external goods to include goods that are not only private, but also, public. We cannot flourish without clean air and water, being and feeling safe, adequate health care, food security, a stable home, and the social bases of self-respect. With these remarks in hand, let us turn to an overview of recent work in neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics.

Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

The beginning of the virtue ethics revival is typically traced to a seminal article by Elizabeth Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” published in 1958. In it, she laments the lack of an adequate philosophical psychology, criticizes deontology and utilitarianism, and urges moral philosophers to look to Aristotle for inspiration. Some moral philosophers have done just that. Philippa Foot, for example, was influenced by Aristotle as well as Aquinas in her work on the virtues, which began in the 1970s and continued into the 2000s (see, for example, Foot 1978; 2001). John McDowell, too, has been influenced by Aristotle since the 1970s (see, for example, McDowell 1979, 1998). In 1981, Alasdair MacIntyre's book, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, was published. This sweeping critique of modern moral philosophy reflects the influence of both Anscombe and Foot in their rejection of deontology and utilitarianism, as well as their criticism of the notion that facts and values are clearly separable and distinct, and looks to Aristotle for inspiration. MacIntyre recommends seeing virtues as contextualized within practices, which themselves are parts of larger traditions. In 1996, Linda Zagzebski published *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge*. There she offers a unified virtue-oriented approach to ethics and epistemology and provided an account of virtue that she calls “motivation-based.” Her account of virtue bears clear resemblances to Aristotle's, though I would not place her work squarely in the neo-Aristotelian tradition.

I mention these philosophers because their work, to my mind, are early milestones in the development of virtue ethics as a whole. Virtue ethics, especially neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, took off in earnest with the publication of Rosalind Hursthouse's book, *On Virtue Ethics*, in 1999. It is difficult to underestimate its impact. It was the first attempt to develop virtue ethics as a type of ethical theory that can provide a viable alternative to deontology and consequentialism. In the rest of this article, I offer an overview of Hursthouse's work, followed by a review of Daniel C. Russell's magisterial work, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (2009), which defends practical reason as essential for virtue ethics.⁽¹⁾ I then turn to several recent accounts of virtue development, and conclude with a discussion of

1. My discussion of Hursthouse (1999) and Russell (2009) draws on Snow (2020), 10-16.

selected work on virtue ethics and psychology.⁽²⁾ I have chosen these contributions because each represents a different area of the theoretical development of virtue ethics, taking it into new and mostly uncharted territory that is ripe for further investigation.

Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (1999)

Hursthouse's aim in *On Virtue Ethics* is to develop virtue ethics as a *bona fide* alternative to consequentialism and deontology. She does this at least partially in response to critics such as Loudon (1984), who claims that virtue-based accounts cannot deliver on a central requirement of ethical theories, namely, providing action guidance. The idea is that we expect ethical theories to guide our actions, for example, should we tell a lie or sacrifice a life for the greater good, should we break a promise to a friend, and so on. Accounts centering on virtue give us only vague guidance, such as "Do what the phronimos [the wise person] would do." But this doesn't tell us much. Or so the objection goes. Consequentialism and deontology, by contrast, supply decision procedures that give guidance for acting in various circumstances. Hursthouse spells out exactly how consequentialism and deontology do this and argues that virtue ethics can do the same.

Her argument is to show how all three ethical theory types—consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics—are structurally similar. One crucial structural similarity is that each theory takes an ethical concept as central and understands other ethical concepts in terms of that basic concept. For deontology, the concept of duty is central, and other concepts, such as the good and virtue, are understood in terms of it. For example, when I do my duty, my action is good. An action that violates duty cannot be considered good. For some deontologists, such as Kant, virtues are those traits that help me do my duty (see Hill and Cureton, 2018). Virtue in a very general sense is the strength of will that enables me to do my duties, which are identified by the Moral Law or Categorical Imperative (see Kant, 1993). For consequentialism, the good—identified as some conceptualization of happiness or pleasure—is the central ethical concept. For utilitarianism, the main variant of consequentialism, I do my duty by maximizing happiness. Virtues are those traits that enable me to maximize happiness and minimize pain. Virtue is the central concept for virtue ethics. It enables us to attain

the good, or eudaimonia. I do my duty, or act rightly, when I act virtuously.

Another structural similarity is that each theory takes a principle as central for providing action guidance. The Categorical Imperative has already been mentioned as the principle which, for Kant, enables us to identify our duties. Utilitarians adopt the principle of utility, which enjoins us to maximize happiness or pleasure, that is, to seek the greatest good for the greatest number. The central principle of virtue ethics, Hursthouse contends, is to do as the virtuous person would do. This principle supplies the criterion for virtue ethical right action: "An action is right [if and only if] it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e., acting in character) do in the circumstances" (Hursthouse 1999, 28).⁽³⁾

Hursthouse points out that each principle requires supplementation, that is, additional content, if it is to provide action guidance. Utilitarians need to explain what they mean by "pleasure" and "happiness." Jeremy Bentham famously held that all pleasures were alike, but John Stuart Mill subsequently distinguished between higher and lower pleasures. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill also articulates a complex conception of happiness, and subsequent utilitarians have understood happiness in terms of mental states, as well as in terms of the satisfaction of preferences. For the most part, Kant's duties track traditional Christian precepts, and include absolute prohibitions on lying, killing, suicide, etc. These are Kant's "narrow" or "perfect" duties. Other duties, called "wide" or "imperfect," allow the agent greater latitude of choice, but track Christian precepts nonetheless. Examples include developing one's talents and beneficence to others. The identification of duties allows us to use "rules of thumb" in our daily lives, such as "don't lie," "give to charities," and so on. The supplementation that virtue ethics furnishes is in terms of the virtues, which provide the basis for "v-rules" (see Hursthouse 1999,

3. We should note that Hursthouse modifies the virtue ethical criterion of right action stated here after a discussion of dilemmas. Tragic dilemmas, in which a virtuous agent is obliged, through no fault of her own, to choose between two evil actions, force a revision of the criterion as follows: "An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would, characteristically, do in the circumstances, except for tragic dilemmas, in which a decision is right iff it is what such an agent would decide, but the action decided upon may be too terrible to be called 'right' or 'good'" Hursthouse 1999, 79). A tragic dilemma is one from which a virtuous agent cannot emerge with her life unmarred.

2. Other work is, of course, significant—see especially Kristjánsson (2018) on virtuous emotions.

36-39). We can refer to virtues such as honesty, compassion, and so on to generate prohibitions and prescriptions. Should we tell an unpleasant truth or should we lie? Honesty requires truth-telling. Should we come to the aid of another in need, or turn a blind eye? Compassion requires that we help. Hursthouse admits that the v-rules are not always precise. Sometimes, deliberation is needed to come to a conclusion about when and how to act. In other words, the v-rules cannot and should not be mechanically applied like an algorithmic decision procedure. Sometimes, the performance of a putatively virtuous action can be defeated by a good reason. Maybe I should not render aid, for example, in the case of someone having a heart attack, if I'm not qualified to do so. Practical wisdom, required for the exercise of virtue, advises me to stand aside and let qualified personnel assist in the case at hand. This fact about how the v-rules are to be used is captured in Hursthouse's formulation, quoted earlier, that right action is what the virtuous agent would characteristically, that is, acting in character, do in the circumstances. In the case of the heart attack victim, the virtuous agent would let qualified personnel assist. She would then be acting in character, that is, in accordance with practical wisdom.

Hursthouse insists that the other theory types are similarly imprecise in their criteria for action guidance. That is, we sometimes do not know how to maximize happiness in given circumstances, nor exactly what our duty requires. In each case, the agent needs further guidance about how to act than can be given by principles alone.

Far more can be said about Hursthouse's contributions to virtue ethics. Her major impact lies in her efforts to put virtue ethics on the same footing as deontology and consequentialism. The contours of that argument have been presented here. That said, one of the most interesting critiques of Hursthouse's criterion of virtue ethical right action is made by Johnson (2003). He observes that the criterion of right action fails to capture cases in which someone is lacking in virtue and takes steps to improve. Such a person might need to perform actions that a fully virtuous person would not need to do. The example that Johnson (2003) gives is of a person who sometimes lies in difficult situations and wishes to be more honest. She might keep a journal of the times that she lies or tells the truth as a way of monitoring her progress in overcoming her failing. From a virtue ethical perspective, this is the right action. Yet

this falls foul of Hursthouse's criterion for virtue ethical right action, because a virtuous person, acting in character, would not do that. Johnson (2003)'s example is important, because it highlights what was then a deficit in virtue ethics—the need for further work on developmental aspects of virtue.

Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (2009)

Russell's aim in *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* is to defend what he calls "hard" virtue ethics against "soft" virtue ethics. Hard virtue ethics requires that every virtue be informed by *phronēsis*, or practical wisdom. Soft virtue ethics does not require this (see Russell 2009, xi). In articulating this defense, he makes three noteworthy contributions to our understanding of virtue ethics. The first is his account of practical wisdom. The second is his discussion of the "enumeration problem." In addition, he offers a new twist on an old thesis, namely, the "unity of virtues" thesis, that has always been problematic for virtue ethicists.

Russell (2009, 20–25) believes that practical wisdom is actually a suite of five different virtues of the practical intellect: comprehension, sense, intelligence, deliberative excellence, and cleverness.⁴ Comprehension (*sunesis*, *eusunesis*) is the ability to "read" a situation, or to reflect correctly about a person's words or actions and is a crucial part of deliberation. Sense (*gnōmē*) is the discrimination of what is reasonable and appropriate. Russell (2009, 21) remarks that in Greek as in English, the cognates of "sense" are both "sensible" and "sensitive." He (2009, 21) notes that, "Aristotle emphasizes that a person with sense has sympathy (*sungnōmē*), and ... this suggests an ability to see things from another's point of view in deliberating about what is reasonable or appropriate." *Nous* or intelligence is more complex, as it "appears in both theoretical and practical reasoning" (Russell 2009, 22). Aristotle compares intelligence in practical reasoning to visual perception; those with intelligence have acquired through experience something like a perceptual capacity that gives them insight into how best to act virtuously. Intelligence involves problem-solving abilities that are built up over time through experience. Deliberative excellence (*eubolia*) is grasping the correct ends in one's deliberations and how to take the right steps toward them. Unlike practical wisdom as a whole, which has a grasp of the global

4. This paragraph is taken from Snow, Wright, and Warren (2021, 77-78).

human good, deliberative excellence allows us to aim for more specific goods. Cleverness (*deinotēs*) is good means–ends reasoning. Whereas someone can be clever without being virtuous, she cannot have practical wisdom without cleverness. Cleverness, as Aristotle conceives of it, can be directed toward ends that are good, bad, or neutral. As part of practical wisdom it is always directed toward good ends.

Russell's account of practical wisdom draws directly on Aristotle, and makes clear, to a great extent, the complexity of Aristotle's views. I say "to a great extent" because there is considerable ambiguity in Aristotle's text. Russell's contribution is important because it offers a clear, convincing, and authoritative account of practical wisdom that makes it accessible to virtue ethicists who, unlike Russell, do not have the expertise to interpret Aristotle's Greek. Russell's second notable contribution to virtue ethics is his treatment of the "enumeration problem," which, until recently, has not been discussed by virtue ethicists. Recently, however, concerns about the proliferation of virtues have come to the fore (see, for example, Snow, 2019). Russell (2009) offers an account of virtue ethical right action that requires that we know what all of the virtues are—that we be able to enumerate or list them. The enumeration problem is the problem of whether such a list exists, and how we can know it. Russell's (2009) account of virtue ethical right action is too extensive to be considered here, but we should note that on his view, it requires the agent to take into account all serious practical concerns (see Russell 2009, 44). This means that there must be a finite, specifiable list of virtues, for if the list is infinite, agents will not be able to take into account all serious practical concerns when deciding how to act, and consequently, virtue ethical right action would be impossible. Thus, a finite list of virtues is necessary if virtue ethics is to provide action guidance. The upshot is that, without knowing what all the virtues are, virtue ethics will not be able to "say what right action is action in accordance with, or what it would be to be a virtuous person" (Russell 2009, 145). In addition, according to Russell (2009, 172), human psychology is finite, and thus, precludes the possibility of infinitely many virtues. There are only so many virtues that we are capable of having and acting on.

Russell (2009, 148-150) does not think that Aristotle provides help with enumerating the virtues. He believes that Aristotle's enumeration of virtues in Book IV of the

Nicomachean Ethics requires more structure. He looks to Plato, the Stoics, and Aquinas, who follows the Stoics, in adopting four cardinal or primary virtues, namely, justice, temperance, wisdom, and courage, and arguing that other virtues are related to these four by way of subordination. His detailed account cannot be fully reviewed here, but a key feature is his claim that subordinate virtues are related to primary ones by shared general reasons, and not by the contexts in which they are exercised. For example, the same general kinds of reasons that lead us to perform generous actions in ordinary situations would also apply to magnanimity—the virtue of giving lavishly in certain contexts. That is, the same general kinds of reasons that lead me to give a friend a nice birthday gift also apply when a philanthropical organization is able to give on a grander scale. I find this view implausible and elsewhere have argued against it.⁵

Finally, let us turn to Russell's (2009) perspective on the "unity of virtues" thesis (also called the "reciprocity of virtues" thesis). Aristotle maintains that one cannot have any virtue unless one has them all (see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI 13.1144b30–1145a a2; Russell 2014, 213). On Aristotle's view, practical wisdom is necessary for every virtue, and every virtue is connected to every other through practical wisdom. Thus, one cannot have any virtue without possessing all the others. The thesis is highly counterintuitive, and many virtue ethicists have struggled to make it more palatable by offering more plausible interpretations. To the best of my knowledge, the only contemporary neo-Aristotelian philosopher who holds the thesis in its strong form is McDowell (1979). Following Badhwar (1996), Hursthouse (1999, 156) claims that, "anyone who possesses one virtue will have all the others to some degree, albeit, in some cases, a pretty limited one." This, too, seems unlikely. If I have known someone for years and he has been consistently kind but has never once shown an ounce of courage, why would we want to insist that he is brave just because we recognize that he is kind?

The unity thesis has traditionally been understood

5. I argue against this approach in Snow (2019), opting in favor of the view that the list of virtues is neither finite nor infinite, but indefinite. The virtues, I argue, respond to spheres of human life, which are shaped by cultural forces. The cultural influences on spheres of human experiences gives rise to a potentially indefinite list of virtues. The list is not infinite, however, because virtues are ultimately grounded in the facts of human nature.

as a claim about the attribution of virtues to individuals. Russell (2014, 215–216; 2009, chapter 11) argues for a new twist: instead of regarding it as an attributive thesis, we should interpret it as a claim about the “natural makeup of the virtues” (2009, 362) and an ideal to which we should aspire.⁶ According to Russell (2009, 371–372), the natural makeup of the virtues is such that, unified by *phronēsis*, they ideally develop together in a balanced and integrated way. As an aspirational ideal, we should expect improvement in one virtue to contribute to, and even require, improvement in others as virtuous sensitivities develop and mature (Russell 2014, 216).

Russell’s broadly developmental perspective on how the virtues come to ‘hang together’ in a person’s overall character leads to a question which, until recently, has been relatively neglected by virtue ethicists: how do we acquire virtues?

Recent Work on Virtue Development

Aristotle’s remarks on virtue development in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are notoriously sparse.⁷ He says that virtues are developed when we are young, through guided practice and habituation, supported by our families and the larger *polis*. A handful of important papers specifically address Aristotle’s view of moral development (for example, Burnyeat 1980, Vasilou 1996, and Curzer 2002). A breakthrough in this area occurred with *Intelligent Virtue* (2011) by Julia Annas. Taking her cue from ancient philosophers who believe that the acquisition of virtue is like the acquisition of a practical skill, she argues that virtues, like practical skills, should be deliberately cultivated. Two motivational characteristics of learners are central to her account: the need to learn and the drive to aspire (Annas 2011, 16ff). Cognitive characteristics, too, are important for learners. The learner must seek to go beyond mere imitation of a teacher or role model, to develop her own style of being virtuous in accordance with her own personality and circumstances, and to become flexible and intelligent in her virtuous actions and responses (Annas 2011, 17). Annas (2011, 10–20) also imposes the “articulacy requirement”: both teachers and learners must be able to offer explanatory reasons for how and why they act virtuously.

6. Aristotle does not advance the unity thesis as aspirational (see Russell 2014, 215).

7. My remarks in the first three paragraphs and last paragraph of this section draw on Snow (2020, 16–17).

Russell (2015), too, argues that Aristotle’s view of moral acquisition is best understood along the model of skill development. He identifies three main features of Aristotle’s account:

- Moral development consists of acquiring certain long-term attributes (*hexeis*) called virtues.
- The virtues are acquired through practice and training that must ultimately be focused and directed. In other words, the virtues are like skills in how we go about acquiring them.
- The virtues combine the pursuit of certain kinds of goals with practical reasoning that is effective in making and executing plans for realizing those goals. In other words, the virtues are also like skills in their cognitive structure (Russell 2015, 30).

Russell (2015, 22) maintains that virtues, and the ways in which we acquire them, are mundane—part and parcel of everyday life. That is, the virtues are rational excellences, which, like other human excellences, are ways of being good at something within the human sphere of life.

Snow (2006, 2010, 2016, and 2018) investigates the development of Aristotelian-type virtues in light of work in empirical psychology. In Snow (2006), I examine how setting virtue-relevant goals can help us develop virtues through a psychological process called “goal-dependent automaticity.” Some virtue-relevant goals, such as being a good parent or promoting peace, can become deep-seated parts of our psychological economies. Stimuli relevant to these goals can then trigger them, resulting in behavior that promotes them, outside of conscious awareness. This is called “non-conscious processing,” and is explained by dual-process theory. Non-conscious processing stands in contrast to conscious processing. Whereas we are aware of conscious processing, according to dual-process theory, we are unaware of non-conscious processing. For example, I am consciously aware of my word choices as I write this, but I am not consciously aware of what I do as I am typing; that is, I do not say to myself, “Now place your right pinky finger over the letter ‘p’ on the keyboard and press down.” Similarly, if I have the goal of being a good mother and see my five-year old fall off a swing at the playground, I do not need to say to myself, “Johnny has fallen off the swing and is crying. I should go over there.” I simply respond and do it. Psychologists maintain that behaviors resulting from goal-dependent

automaticity are not rote responses, but are intelligent and flexible. In the case of virtuous behaviors, we can say that virtues that advance certain goals have become deeply embedded parts of our psyches, and that practical wisdom, as well as the virtues it guides, have become, to use McDowell's (1998) words, "second nature."

In Snow (2010), I further explicate this account, and extend the discussion to include conscious virtue acquisition and vice inhibition. I offer the case of an irritable woman who wishes to become kinder. The woman makes a conscious decision—namely, to cultivate kindness in herself. In her case, this requires not only consciously trying to become kinder, but also deliberately trying to inhibit a vice—the tendency to be irritable, rude, short, and so on.

Vice inhibition can be explained using studies from the psychology of prejudice on stereotype activation and inhibition. Vices, like stereotypes, are deep-seated constructs that are often activated outside of conscious awareness. We might not be able completely to rid ourselves of these constructs, but we can make ourselves aware of what activates them. In the case of stereotypes, these could be personal characteristics such as gender and skin color. In the case of vices such as irritability, it can be behaviors we find annoying, for example, certain manners of speaking, tones of voice, or address. Once we have identified the triggers, it is up to us to inhibit the expression of the stereotypes or vices. The constructs might be activated, but we need to suppress our emotional responses and their behavioral expressions. The irritable woman, for example, needs consciously to work on not becoming annoyed when faced with situational triggers.

In Snow (2016), I turn to the role played by habits in virtue acquisition in three virtue paradigms: what I call, "folk virtues;" the accounts of virtue endorsed by Annas (2011) and Narvaez and Lapsley (2005); and Confucius' view of virtue. "Folk" virtues are acquired by ordinary people in the course of living their lives, such as the mother who spontaneously attends to her injured son. These people are not directly interested in acquiring virtue for its own sake; that is, they do not seek to become compassionate, for example, because doing so is the virtuous thing to do. Instead, they seek to become compassionate (or to acquire some other virtue) because it is a goal they have adopted. Having the virtue will make them a better mother, teacher, friend, nurse, and so on. In Snow (2016), I indicate my belief

that this rather minimal conception of virtue is broadly compatible with Aristotelian conceptions of virtue. In Snow (2018a), I argue for that claim.

The other two paradigms I discuss in Snow (2016) are Annas's (2011) account of virtue development (I treat this along with the expertise model of psychologists Narvaez and Lapsley [2005], which meshes nicely with Annas [2011], and Confucius' view). Each paradigm—the minimalistic "folk" account of virtue, the accounts put forth by Annas (2011) and Narvaez and Lapsley (2005), and Confucius—allows roles for the interaction of conscious and nonconscious processing. Consequently, for each paradigm of virtue, habits play an important part in virtue acquisition.

As indicated, in Snow (2018a), I make good on my contention that the virtue of the "folk" is compatible with Aristotelian conceptions of virtue. I sketch in more detail how "ordinary" virtue is acquired. This occurs when someone who has virtue-relevant goals realizes that having a virtue can be instrumentally valuable in achieving a goal. One can come realize, for example, that having patience with one's children can really help one become a good parent. Making this realization requires knowledge, reflection, and self-appraisal. It requires reflection about the kind of value the virtue has for achieving one's goals. It also requires what I call "phronetic capacities," that is, knowledge and self-appraisal. To be a good parent, one needs to have knowledge of what a good parent is like—what psychologists call "schemas." A good parent, for example, spends time with his or her children, is gentle and patient with them, teaches them skills, and so on. This knowledge is socially transmitted; what being a good parent amounts to depends to a great extent on one's culture and traditions. Self-appraisal is another phronetic capacity. We are able to look at ourselves and judge whether and in what respects we fail or succeed at being a good parent—at achieving our goal. This requires knowledge of the schema of "good parent," and honest comparisons of our own beliefs, attitudes, and activities to see how well we meet the normative expectations, or standards, entailed by the schema.

Using reflection, knowledge, and self-appraisal, ordinary people can, but need not, enrich their understanding of the value of virtue. That is, they can realize that virtues are not only instrumentally valuable for achieving their goals, but they can also come to know that virtues are constitutively valuable for their lives. A

parent might come to realize, for example, that patience helps not only with his children, but in other spheres of his life, for example, at work, among friends, and in other social interactions. Our parent might find this and other virtues to be enriching—to make his life go better. When one's life goes well, one flourishes in the Aristotelian sense.

Instrumental and constitutive value are not the only kinds of value that virtues have. They are also intrinsically valuable. How might ordinary people come to acknowledge the intrinsic value of virtue? People recognize the intrinsic value of virtue when they endorse a virtue and act according to it even when doing so does not make their lives go well. Honesty provides an example. Often, being honest about one's mistakes is not conducive to self-interest. Admitting an error or a failing might cause one to lose one's job or some other socially valuable opportunity. If one decides to be honest despite these costs, one has recognized that honesty is intrinsically valuable, and one's knowledge and self-appraisal should reflect this. We can imagine someone saying, "I know that admitting this mistake will damage my reputation and that I'll suffer financial losses. But I cannot lie or cover it up. I'd rather be honest than live a lie." Such a person is aware of the costs but chooses to be honest instead. This person is more concerned with being upfront about her failings, making amends, and moving forward. She has chosen to be virtuous and recognizes the intrinsic value of virtue.

The upshot of the foregoing remarks is that ordinary people can make what we might call a "progression in virtue." Starting by recognizing the instrumental value of virtue and using reflection and the phronetic capacities of knowledge and self-appraisal, they can move to an understanding and appreciation of the constitutive and intrinsic value of virtue. The recognition of the constitutive value of virtue brings them closer to having Aristotelian virtue in the full sense. People reach that point when they recognize virtue's intrinsic value.

This is, of course, not the final word on virtue acquisition. For example, Kristjánsson (2015) argues that a program of Aristotelian character cultivation can be integrated into schools. Wright, Warren, and Snow (2021) also remark on virtue development. They advance the "integration thesis" as an alternative to the "unity" or "reciprocity" thesis. According to the integration thesis, which is a practical claim about virtue development, virtues develop together in response to

the circumstances of daily life. Suppose that a child sees another child bullying a playmate and that she defends the bullied child and seeks to convince the bully that what he or she is doing is unfair and unkind. The first child's responses to external factors are important mechanisms of virtue development because they are among her initial forays into the exercise of virtue. These responses cannot be called "virtuous" because the child's practical wisdom has yet to develop. However, as children's reason develops, they become more able to act virtuously of their own accord and use practical reason in choosing when and how to act virtuously. At some point in development, the capacity for reason should enable them to take a reflective stance on their behavior and come to endorse it. Eventually, we can hope, children come to see the value in generous or kind behavior, and it becomes integral to their emerging characters.

Recent Work in Virtue Ethics and Psychology: Snow, Wright, and Warren (2020) and Wright, Warren, and Snow (2021)

During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a group of philosophers calling themselves "situationists" launched a critique of Aristotelian virtue ethics based on work in empirical psychology (see, for example, Harman 1999, 2000, 2003; Doris 1998, 2002, and Merritt 2000).⁸ They pointed out that virtues are traditionally thought to be "global" or "robust" traits, that is, that are manifested across a wide range of different types of situations. If a person possesses the virtue of honesty, for example, he or she can be expected to be reliably honest at work, at home, when under oath in court, and so on. Situationists drew on work in empirical psychology to make the case that situations, not dispositions, are largely responsible for influencing how we act. They also claimed either that virtues in the Aristotelian sense do not exist (Harman 1999) or exist in such small numbers that they have little if any effect on producing behavior (Doris 2002).

The situationist critique generated a large literature, some of which draws on empirical psychology to counter the criticism. In Snow (2010), for example, I argue that we can admit that situations influence behavior without abandoning the view that virtues are global

8. This was not the only critique launched by situationist philosophers. A second, arguing for the alleged fragmentation of conscious and nonconscious processing, was advanced by Merrit, Harman, and Doris (2010).

traits. I argue that virtues can be conceived of a subset of traits that are explained by the cognitive-affective processing system (CAPS) as developed and supported with empirical evidence by psychologists Walter Mischel and Yuichi Shoda. More recently, I have partnered with developmental psychologists Jennifer Cole Wright and Michael Warren to argue that individual virtues can be conceived of in terms of another, more recent psychological framework, Whole Trait Theory (WTT). My colleagues in psychology, along with some philosophical critiques of my use of CAPS, have convinced me that WTT provides a more promising empirical framework for thinking about virtue.⁽⁹⁾ Many of the same types of social-cognitive units that made CAPS attractive as an empirical framework for conceptualizing virtue are also integral to WTT (see Jayawickreme and Fleeson 2017, 76; Fleeson and Jayawickreme 2015, 84).⁽¹⁰⁾

WTT is a model of personality traits (see Fleeson and Gallagher, 2009; Fleeson and Jayawickreme, 2015; Jayawickreme and Fleeson, 2017). It is called “whole trait” theory because it unites the “descriptive side” of a trait, represented by the frequency with which a person behaves in a trait-appropriate manner over time and in different situations, and the “explanatory side,” which involves the underlying social-cognitive systems that are responsible for producing this person-specific distribution of trait-appropriate responses.

9. Philosophers who have critiqued the use of CAPS include Papish (2017); Miller (2014, Chapter 5); and Alfano (2014, 78-79).

10. In the paragraphs that follow, I draw in abbreviated fashion on Snow, Wright, and Warren (2020) to explain our view. This paper summarizes aspects of Wright, Warren, and Snow (2021). A caveat about the conception of virtue endorsed by Snow (2010), Snow, Wright, and Warren (2020), and Wright, Warren, and Snow (2021) is needed. In Snow (2010) and later work with her colleagues, virtues are conceptualized as tightly integrated bundles of motivations, cognitions, and affect, in which the motivations that are characteristic of specific virtues shape cognition and affect. For example, a compassionate person is motivated by the desire to help another in need, and this desire sets in train thoughts about how to help, emotions such as sympathy, and so on. Should the desire to help be removed or replaced, different thoughts and affect would ensue. A cruel person, for example, might be motivated to have malicious fun at the other's expense; her thoughts and feelings would then be shaped by a desire that is very different from that of the person who is motivated by the compassionate desire to help. This conception of virtue differs from Aristotle's and that of other neo-Aristotelian philosophers, such as Hursthouse and Russell, who do not claim that motivations shape the other elements that constitute virtuous dispositions

Let us first consider the descriptive side of a trait. WTT maintains that the degree to which a person possesses a trait is determined by the “density distribution” of their trait-appropriate responses. “Density distribution” refers to the range of situations in which those responses are produced and the frequency with which the responses occur. Consistency as well as habituality can help us understand density distributions. “Consistency” is the extent to which a person has trait-appropriate responses to trait-relevant stimuli. It can be measured along the dimensions of depth and breadth. “Depth” refers to how frequently someone has trait-appropriate responses to the same or similar trait-relevant stimuli. “Breadth” refers to the number of different trait-relevant stimuli to which she has trait-appropriate responses and indicates how global the trait can be considered to be. “Habituality” is the extent to which trait-appropriate responses have become a dynamically automatic response to trait-relevant stimuli. The use of the word, “dynamically,” is meant to highlight the fact that habitual trait-appropriate responses, though largely prompted outside of conscious awareness, are intelligently sensitive to rapidly changing environmental stimuli. This approach to habituality is consistent both with Snow's earlier work on virtue development, sketched earlier, as well as with McDowell's (1998) conception of how virtuous responses can become “second nature.”

The explanatory side of WTT explains how the perception of trait-relevant stimuli (inputs) is processed by a variety of interactive social-cognitive systems (intermediates) to produce trait manifestations (outputs). The perception of trait-relevant stimuli is relatively straightforward. Someone who perceives trait-relevant stimuli “picks up on” features of a situation that she sees as calling for a trait-relevant response. In virtue-theoretic terms, her perception is not merely descriptive; it is also normative. A compassionate person, for example, sees the suffering of another as a *prima facie* reason for a compassionate response on her part. The force of *prima facie* is simply to note that she could become aware of reasons that defeat that response—for example, the presence of another who is more qualified to help.

It is clear from this explanation that perception is not simply a matter of stimulus and response. The perception of stimuli as trait-relevant and as calling for response is itself an intelligent interpretation. This leads to a consideration of the intermediate systems,

which function with perception to process trait-relevant stimuli in a way that produces a trait-appropriate response or responses. These social-cognitive systems are organized into five sub-system types: interpretative, motivational, stability-inducing, temporal, and random processes. None of these system-types functions in isolation but, instead, as an interconnected, dynamic system. The interpretative and motivational systems shape the essential core of the trait.

The interpretative system is composed of a broad range of inter-related perceptual, cognitive, and affective states, mechanisms, processes, capacities, and structures that determine how trait-relevant information is analyzed and interpreted. It includes what Cattell (1971) called “crystallized” structures, such as propositional, episodic, and procedural (“know how”) knowledge, schemas, prototypes, scripts, roles, episodes, and so forth (Cattell, 1971; Cantor, 1990). These structures allow us to store past experiences and use them to perceive and process new instances of trait-relevant stimuli efficiently. The interpretative system also includes what Cattell (1971) called our more “fluid” capacities for analyzing, reasoning, problem-solving, and perspective-taking.

These structures and processes allow the agent to interpret the situations she encounters as “calling for compassion,” “requiring justice,” and so on. They furnish the background knowledge that enables her to make sense of the world and supply schemas and scripts for action. For example, the interpretative system allows a person to discern situations calling for honesty, as when a cashier makes a mistake in her favor when returning change. She can then access scripts that guide possible action responses in the scenario, such as “say nothing and pocket the money,” “alert the cashier to her error and return the change,” and so on.

What should the person in the example do—keep the change or return it? The answer will likely depend on what she has most reason to do, and the motivational system provides clues about what her reasons might be. The motivational system is comprised of a broad

range of interrelated motivational states, mechanisms, processes, capacities, and structures associated with desired and feared trait-relevant end-states. What we strive toward and away from, and are committed to or against, create the directional impetus for trait manifestation. For example, if the end-state a person desires (her goal) is being honest, she has reason to return the change. The goal of being honest influences her choice of action in this situation. On the other hand, if her goal is to get as much as she can for herself, she has reason to pocket the change. People could have both goals, but whichever is activated more strongly by the situation is more likely to guide behavior.

The foregoing discussion of WTT, brief and abbreviated though it is, should show its relevance for understanding virtue. Perception, interpretation, and motivation are all important aspects of how virtues are understood in neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics and in other approaches to virtue that are broadly compatible with neo-Aristotelianism. WTT fleshes out in considerable detail the psychological processes and mechanisms by means of which traits, including virtues, become manifested in behavior. It provides not only a psychological framework within which virtues can be understood, but also gives psychologists promising insights into how virtue and various aspects of it might be measured. Though not discussed here, Wright, Warren, and Snow (2021) also provides a conceptualization of character as a constellation of virtues that are integrated by practical wisdom and offers suggestions for measuring character as a whole.

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to furnish an overview of important work in neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. Readers should note that alternatives to neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics are alive and well (see Snow 2020 and selected chapters in Snow 2018b). Even within the rich tradition of neo-Aristotelianism, I have been able to offer but a sample. The sheer volume of quality work in virtue ethics today attests to its ongoing importance in the larger landscape of ethics.

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