Virtue Ethics

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Neither virtue nor the virtues seem to be in the forefront of recent moral or ethical thinking. I have never heard anyone seriously ask whether some man or other was virtuous. The very suggestion that he is, is faintly ridiculous, perhaps insulting. The virtuous Isidore in Maupassant's novella of that title, is a village idiot. And since the sexual revolution, interest in and concern about the virtue of women also seems to have declined enormously. Even feeling virtuous, which some people do and talk about, is usually confined to relatively trivial matters, such as writing a letter to an old aunt, chopping the firewood or refusing a second helping of dessert. To say that one felt virtuous when, at the cost of a leg, one had rescued a person battling with a shark, would surely be to misdescribe what one felt. Thus, it is not so much that virtue has changed its denotation—as it did in Victorian England when it came to mean only one of the virtues, chastity—but rather that the term is now hardly used at all; that if someone did use it, one would think him quaint or suspect him of being facetious or one would remain in doubt about exactly what he meant to say.

This seems to me a serious threat to morality and with it the good life for all. I would guess that one of the causes of this development is the spread of the belief—sound enough as far as it goes—that the decisive factor in determining the good life for the individual is the design of the social order and especially its economic sector. It is natural but nevertheless mistaken to infer from this that if we but reform the social order, we can forget about individual virtues and vices.

There has been a similar shift in ethical theory. In the words of Georg Henrik von Wright,

"Virtue is a neglected topic in modern ethics. The only full-scale modern treatment of it, known to me, is by Nicolai Hartmann. When one compares the place accorded to virtue in modern philosophy with that accorded to it in traditional moral philosophy, one may get the impression that virtue as a topic of philosophic discussion has become obsolete, outmoded."

Under the influence of von Wright and others there has been a revival of interest in the topic. However, this revival has taken two forms, a moderate and a radical one. The moderate form, espoused by von Wright, Frankena, and others, points to the peculiarities of the concept of virtue and the virtues and stresses their importance in a complete account of ethics without, however, rejecting the modern insistence on the primacy of the axiological and deontological notions in ethical theory.
Thus Frankena says,

"I propose therefore that we regard the morality of principles and the morality of character, or doing and being, not as rival kinds of morality between which we must choose, but as two complementary aspects of the same morality. Then, for every principle there will be a morally good trait, often going by the same name, consisting of a disposition or tendency to act according to it; and for every morally good trait there will be a principle defining the kind of action in which it is to express itself. ... Even if we adopt this double-aspect conception of morality, in which principles are basic, we may still agree that morality does and must put a premium on being honest, conscientious and so forth. If its sanctions or sources are not to be external, ... if it is to have adequate 'internal sanctions,' as Mill called them, then morality must foster the development of such dispositions and habits as have been mentioned."

By contrast the radical version conceives of virtues, not as dispositions or habits to behave in certain ways specifiable in advance but rather as character traits possessed by a person to the extent that he approximates the type of character which the trait represents.

Thus M. F. Burnyeat says,

"...the best way of dealing with virtues and vices and other character traits seems to be by analogy with the character of individuals. One may list a number of things as characteristic of a person but the conjunctive unity of a list is not enough to represent his individuality or to make 'acting out of character' as surprising as is compatible with being possible; for that the items listed must be seen as having a certain coherence, as fitting together to make up the 'essence' of a person. Similarly, listing actions, motives, emotions, and so on is inadequate to define a trait of character: They must be thought of as characteristic of a type of person before they will cohere into a whole. Then we can say that a man possesses the trait to the extent that he approximates the type it represents.

This gives a sense in which 'the notion of a brave, generous, temperate, etc., act is secondary to the notion of a brave, generous, temperate, etc., man.' (This is a reference to von Wright's The Varieties of Goodness, p. 142.) Isolated acts of courage or generosity are not excluded, but it may be hard to pick them out without
further consideration of the agent's character in the light of other actions and even other virtues. Correspondingly, a morality centered on being rather than doing will not presume to map out a path of the good life in individual-prescribed steps.  

It should be noted that the main contention of the radical view that virtues "belong to" being rather than to doing does not require the radical conclusion that the ethics of being is prior to or independent of the ethics of doing. On the contrary, von Wright argues, in my view persuasively, that

"The right choice in a situation, when a virtue is involved, need not be the choice of a so-called virtuous act (Thus a man of courage may sometimes rightly choose to retreat from danger, but that is never an act of courage)"

hence

"a virtue is an 'inward' trait of character rather than an 'outward' feature of conduct."  

Yet

"virtues are no ends in themselves but instruments in the service of the good of man and ...it is only by being aware of harmful consequences of yielding to passion that man has a rational ground for aspiring after virtues."  

It is perhaps worth adding that they would not be virtues if there were no good reason for aspiring after them.

It seems to me that whereas the moderate form of the revival of the ethics of virtue is eminently sound and may even help to reinvigorate moral education, the radical view understandably popular among Ancient philosophers, is mistaken. I want to sketch what such a radical Virtue Ethics, one in which "being has priority over doing," was like, and how and why it was gradually and rightly superseded by an ethics of doing.

My first sketch is of the morality of the Homeric Greeks. There, the central question was not, as it is today, 'What ought one to do?' but, 'What is a good man? An agathos?'. And the answer to this question, formulated in the most general way, was: a good man is a man with a certain set of qualities, excellences, or aretai, the Greek term usually translated as virtues.

This is simply a special case of the general answer the Greeks later give to all questions of the form, 'What is it for something to be a good thing of its kind?' namely, to have the relevant set of qualities, excellences or "virtues". Ships, shields, horses, athletes, soldiers, and physicians are good or bad ships, soldiers, horses, etc., depending on the extent to which they do what is expected of them in their partic-
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ular role or function. It is a corollary of such things being good ones of their kind, that it is then appropriate for people to adopt the appropriate favorable attitude towards them, and when they are bad ones the appropriate unfavorable one. The Greeks were not completely clear about what were appropriate attitudes in different cases. They did not say, for instance, whether the appropriate attitude towards a good horse is the same as that towards a good man. And if not, what is the difference and why.

In any case, the Greeks thought that the sort of thing that makes someone a good X, say, a good doctor, captain, soldier, and so on, namely, the excellences relevant to the role also makes him a good man, that is, a good one not as a certain sort of role player but simply as a man. The Homeric Greeks do not seem to have distinguished these two questions at all clearly. Perhaps if they had, they would not have been satisfied with their own answer, namely, that the excellences of a man as a man are the same as the excellences of a man in his role as a member of the ruling warrior class. Speaking very roughly, the social order of the Homeric Greeks centers not on a state, not even a city state, but on the oikos, the household. Attention is paid mostly to what goes on inside the household and only minimally to the relations between different households, as when they exchange gifts, look for wives, or form alliances to make war. This social order divides the members of a household into two major classes, the well-born (that is, the lord of the household and his family), and the others, his retainers and slaves. The primary task of the well-born men is to protect the members of the household against its enemies, and perhaps the occasional organization of a war on its neighbors. The role of the not-well-born is the performance of productive tasks and services to the well-born. Members of this lower class are expected to admire, honor, defer to, serve, and obey the well-born, especially those who have the excellences associated with their class role.

Note, however, that the agathos, the excellent or virtuous man, was judged on the basis of what we would now regard as two radically different types of quality: one type was directly related to their class task, the other was not so related. To perform their primary role task well, the members of the ruling class had to be physically strong, intelligent in the planning and conducting of wars, brave in battle, and protective of their dependents. But these role-related excellences were neither necessary nor sufficient conditions of being an agathos. Achilles remains an agathos even though he sulks in his tent and refuses to fight when he should have joined in the fight against the Trojans. Paris remains an agathos despite his indefensible behavior in stealing Helen, which brings the disastrous war to Troy, and despite his failure to join his brothers in the fight. Penelope's suitors behave disgracefully but they remain agathoi nevertheless. Conversely, only those with noble status can be agathoi. Even those who once had it but somehow lost it, e.g., by being captured and turned into slaves or by losing their wealth, cannot remain agathoi however admirable their other excellences. Members of the lower classes cannot be good men, agathoi; they cannot have the virtues. They can only be good servants, shepherds, and so on. The Homeric conception of the virtues thus is not strictly meritarian but aristocratic, class-bound. What counts are not simply the acquired role-specific skills, motives, and behavioral dispositions on account of which men succeed in performing their role function, but all those characteristics, among them noble birth and wealth, on account of which a person has power and prestige, for
which he is envied, flattered, honored, feared, admired, and deferred to. These include but are not limited to those attitudes which can be acquired and emulated if one makes the effort, and whose possession is necessary and sufficient for success in the role tasks.

The primary question in the Homeric morality was: Is he a good man? The other major question of ethics, What exactly ought one to do? was not in the forefront of the Greeks’ mind. Insofar as they asked that question at all, it was formulated in terms of what it was honorable or contemptible rather than right or wrong to do, and the answer was derived from the answer to the question they regarded as primary. The thing one ought to do, the honorable thing, was whatever an agathos would typically do. To answer that question, one would ask oneself what some paragon of Homeric virtue, such as Odysseus, would have done in the circumstances. The Homeric Greeks felt no need to justify calling any of these particular characteristics virtues. It must have seemed to them self-evident that Odysseus was par excellence worthy of admiration and emulation. For if one was like him, one was in fact admired and honored by everyone that mattered, and what further justification for calling him virtuous could one demand? They never thought of raising the question whether one really ought to do what was generally admired and emulated in their society, whether it was truly worthy of admiration and emulation. To later Greeks this was much less obvious.

My second brief sketch is of another and immensely influential Greek virtues-ethics, namely, that found in Plato’s Republic. For our purposes, the most important novelty in this theory is the important role assigned to Reason, both in the structure of the individual human mind and in the organization of the ideal society. According to Plato, as will be remembered, the human mind has three different aspects or parts, the desiring part which contains the appetites, the spirited part which contains some of the emotions, and the reasoning part which contains the most important mental power, the Reason. In different persons, different parts are dominant. If one’s desiring part is dominant, one will want to lead a life in which much time and effort is devoted to gaining those positive and negative payoffs which result from feeding the appetites. If one’s spirited part is strong, one will not be overly concerned to satisfy the desires, but rather to advance the self, one’s safety, fortune, achievements, reputation, and honor. If one’s reasoning part is strong, one’s primary concern will be with knowledge, judgement, and calculation. One will want to stand back from the appetites and emotions as they arise in one and consider not so much how they might be best satisfied and catered to, but rather whether and to what extent they should be satisfied or whether perhaps they should be modified or altogether extirpated if possible. Such judgements by the reason are made on the basis of what must be done in order to make one’s life as a whole as good as possible. Reason thus has two importantly different functions: a cognitive one—to judge what is the best thing to do from the point of view of a truly good life—and a practical or executive one—to conform one’s behavior to the judgements of one’s Reason.

On the basis of this theory of the human mind, Plato advances the claim that a truly good life is possible for anyone only if the Reason is in control both in the person’s own psyche and in the social order in which he lives. For the social order this means, in the first place, that Plato has to split up the Homeric ruling class into
a class of real rulers or guardians and a second subordinate class of assistants or auxiliaries. However, class membership is not by birth but by natural endowment. It is the guardians' difficult task to detect such endowment as early as possible and to make class assignment on that basis. The guardians are of course chosen by the strength of their Reason, the auxiliaries by the strength of their Spirit. The role of the guardians is to formulate the general directives or laws in accordance with which the members of the society are to live. The role of the auxiliaries is to carry out and enforce these directives against all those who will not obey them of their own free will. Plato thus introduces a real state. The directives of the guardians are not to be merely advisory but backed by force.

To the third class are assigned all those in whom the reasoning and spirited parts are comparatively weak and in whom the appetites would dominate if they had not by education come to see the need for control by Reason. Plato assumes that in many of those in whom the reasoning and the spirited parts are weak, these parts are nevertheless sufficiently strong for them to recognize the need for guidance by Reason, though not of course their own Reason, and for control of the appetites by Spirit, if not entirely their own spirit, at least their own when aided by that of the auxiliaries.

Plato thus goes along with the Homeric division of society into classes with different functions. But apart from subordinating the warrior class to that of the intellectuals, he does so on the basis of native talent and taste, not of birth. What is more, he significantly enlarges what might be called the horizon of moral eligibility. His theory makes members of all classes capable of excellence or virtue. No one is so lowly or humble as not to deserve recognition or appreciation or approval for playing his part well. No matter what a person's native talents or tastes may be, his interests and concerns are to be taken into account in the design of the social order. And he is to be taken into account, in the sense of being assigned a part which his abilities enable him to play well, a part which, when played well, will make his life worthwhile for him and useful to others, and so deserving of recognition, approval, and, as we should now say, respect.

On Plato's view, then, a society approaches the ideal or falls short of it, the greater the extent of its virtues. It is the more just, the more it succeeds in achieving willing acceptance of the proper hierarchical arrangement of the three social functions. It is wise to the extent that the guardian is wise, courageous to the extent that its auxiliaries are courageous, and temperate to the extent that all its classes are in harmony, each class satisfied to play the role assigned to it and to see others play theirs.

Unlike the Homeric Greeks, who uncritically accepted their social order and merely ranked members of the ruling class on the basis of how well they performed their function, Plato sets up criteria for ranking societies and so provides a basis of criticizing existing social orders if they fall significantly short of the ideal.

How radical a change in the conception of virtue this is, is best seen by looking briefly at the virtues of individuals. The four cardinal virtues, wisdom, courage, temperance (or moderation), and justice, which Plato takes over from the then current conventional morality, are transformed by his theory. They are no longer, as the Homeric Greeks saw them, patterns of motivation, attitudes, and behavior which anyone can immediately and independently see to be admirable, enviable,
and worthy of emulation. According to Plato, such a package of motivation, attitudes and behavior is a virtue and admirable etc., only in so far as it leads its owner to behave in such a way as to produce a good life for himself and others. It is thus perfectly possible that a whole society should admire people for having the wrong patterns of motives, attitudes and behavior. For what makes such a motive-cum-attitude-cum-behavior a Platonic virtue is a very complex question, the answer depending at least in part on the consequences of having it. What is more, it involves not merely the consequences for oneself of having it oneself, but also the consequences for others, in the same class or in other classes, of a whole class having it. And it involves comparing these consequences for alternative social orders. The epistemologically basic question is thus no longer simply what sort of person everybody should be—because for one thing not everybody should be the same sort of person—but rather, how society should be organized, what walks of life should be available in it, and how people should be assigned to them, and all this in order that everyone may have the best chance of leading a life that is fulfilling and worthwhile, given his particular type of psychological endowments. In Plato's system the virtues are no longer conceived of as definite specific motives-cum-attitudes-cum-behavior, such as chastity or thrift, but rather as those motives-cum-attitudes-cum-behavior that incline one to do whatever makes life worthwhile for oneself and others, and that may vary a great deal from case to case, chastity or thrift in one situation, indulgence or largesse in another.

We have already noted another feature of the Platonic ethics not present in the Homeric one, namely, that the Platonic social order constitutes a true state. The guidelines worked out by the guardians are not merely advisory, but genuinely obligatory: it is not solely each individual's business to decide whether or not to follow them, as if they were the directives of a recipe or an Almanac. The guardians do not have merely expert or charismatic, but genuinely ex officio authority: not merely authority which guides, but authority which binds. Homeric society had no law and no state, for it had no enforcers. The only public official was the herald. The Homeric basileus was not a real king, but more like a medieval baron. The mightiest baron was usually chosen to lead in war, but when the campaign was over, he ceased to be an overlord. The Platonic guardians by contrast can always have their guidelines carried out and enforced by the permanent auxiliaries. As a consequence, the virtues are not simply character traits on account of which their possessors come to be admired, envied, and emulated. Nor is it sufficient that those, though only those, people should be virtuous who happen to want to be admired, emulated, and envied, even if most of them want to. On the Platonic view, the virtues are qualities which members of the society are required to have. People who lack them are not simply inferior like those lacking a special skill, such as harp playing or fencing. Rather they are guilty of a special sort of failing, something on account of which they may be disapproved of or condemned, perhaps even punished, and that is something quite different from merely not being admirable, enviable, or worthy of emulation. It is also different from being looked down upon or despised. It is often thought that features of this kind can be explained only by a different type of ethics, namely, law or command ethics, which stresses the so-called deontic concepts such as duty and obligation, ought and must, rather than the excellences and virtues.
This brings me to my third system: The ethics of Christianity. This, though outwardly a virtue ethics, also contains strong elements of a law or command ethics, in which deontic concepts play a large role. Here I am even more conscious than in the first two sketches of my over-simplifications and the near-arbitrariness of what I select and what I leave out.

Plato's ethics, you recall, suggests the possibility and raises the hope that, as a social order approaches the Platonic ideal, all men living under that order can find a walk of life which gives scope to their talents and caters to their tastes. Plato's own sensibilities and sympathies, we noted, did not, however, extend very far towards the third or producer class of his ideal society. No method of production was so awful (not even the terrible silver mines or the chain-gang labor on some farms), or so degrading (as is most work done by slaves), that in his view it should be outlawed in the ideal society. Plato did not notice, or did not care about, the hopelessness and the misery of men condemned to such debilitating, body-and-soul-destroying existences. His main concern was to ensure that men with the mentality of producers should not aspire to and try to enter on careers in the auxiliary or guardian class. Christianity, by contrast, was most receptive and sympathetic to the plight and desperation of the weary and heavy laden. It preached a message of equality in the sight of God, of universal brotherhood and love, and of human worth and worthiness of concern. The life of Christ raised hopes of redemption and salvation for those who fared badly in this world, which is generally represented by Christian ethics as a vale of tears. Of course, Christianity does not hold out hopes of a change for the better in this world, by way of social change or revolution. Christianity sets its sights very high, and by this exalted standard condemns this world and all its rewards as quite incapable of providing a truly worthwhile or fulfilling life for anybody, however well placed he may be in any social order. Man's true and complete fulfillment can come only in the hereafter. Nevertheless, even that otherworldly hope can give one strength to endure the blows of this earthly existence and engender willingness to accept one's fate or one's social situation. In this way, Christianity provides a dual consolation for those who are underprivileged. It tells them in the first place that even the best on earth is really not worth having and so no one's position is really enviable. And it tells them, in the second place, that what awaits them in the afterlife, provided they are virtuous and obey the commandments down here, is more than an adequate compensation for renouncing the paltry goods this life has to offer.

It is against this background of general teaching that we must understand the Christian ethics of virtue. We should note, however, that that ethics is deeply ambiguous, not to say divided, on the question of whether the virtues are epistemologically basic as we saw they were in Homeric ethics. If one were to sum up the Christian message in one slogan, it would have to be, 'Love'. Love God and love your neighbor. On the face of it this looks like a mental attitude or behavior pattern, a rival of the ancient Greek cardinal virtues. But since the New Testament has to be continuous with the Old, which contains a law or command ethics, this raises many problems. In particular, we must inquire into the relation between love and the other virtues, and into the relation between having the Christian virtues and doing what is required by the moral law or the Ten Commandments.

According to St. Augustine, it certainly looks as though the primary question
is. What sort of a person to be. For his central moral advice is summed up in his famous slogan ‘Love God and then do what you like!’. Thus the question of what a person ought to do can be answered only by reference to the question of what he should be like. But the answer is not quite that simple and straightforward, for the virtues are also to be construed as those behavioral dispositions following which will realize one’s end. St. Augustine distinguishes between man’s natural and his supernatural ends. The latter is to attain salvation and the former is to lead as good a life as is compatible with attaining the supernatural end. To attain one’s supernatural end, one must cultivate the so-called theological virtues, faith, hope, and charity (or love). So the knowledge that these are virtues is not direct, but depends on the knowledge of our supernatural end. All the same, up to this point it seemed that at least we can know what the virtues are without knowing first what we ought to do. Love seems primary, law secondary. But even this is not crystal clear, for St. Augustine manages so to define ‘love’ that it includes the four cardinal virtues of the Greeks, prudence, temperance, courage, and justice, and that it all depends on whether these virtues can be defined independently of how one ought to act. But we need not pursue this further.

Aquinas complicates the Augustian picture by superimposing a systematic natural law theory of morality, thus making the question of what to do co-equal with that of what to be, if not indeed prior to it. Aquinas holds that the world is a sort of cosmic legal order, the law governing it, the Eternal Law, having been imposed on the world by God. Mankind participates in this order in two unique ways. In the first place, man, by means of the light of reason implanted by God in his heart, knows that segment of the Eternal Law, called Natural Law, which governs the part of the universe occupied by man. This insight into the relevant part of God’s plan enables man to guide his decisions and choices so as to attain his natural and supernatural ends. In the second place, man has free will, and so may decide, as he sees fit, to obey or not to obey the Natural Law. Our knowledge of the virtues cannot thus be prior to and independent of our knowledge of what to do. For we know the latter by our reason and independently of our knowledge of the virtues, but what the virtues are cannot itself be independent of what the law tells us to do. Indeed, it would seem that the law is primary, for it not merely tells us how we could attain our ends if we wanted to attain them, but commands us—categorically, as Kant later puts it—to do as the law spells out. Thus, it seems either that Law and Love are co-equal or that law is primary.

There is a third way of construing the relation between law and love, which has been taken by more recent thinkers. The idea is that the New Testament message of love in an important sense completes the Old Testament law morality of the Ten Commandments. The special sense of ‘completion’ is often explained by the New Testament parable of “Walking the Second Mile”. Law lays down the minimum which is morally wanted of us—walking the first mile. Love asks us to do more than that minimum—walking the second mile. The law asks us to do our duty, love asks us to do more than it. On this view, virtue begins where duty ends; where what we do becomes morally supererogatory and meritorious, deserving of appreciation and gratitude, something that could not have been asked of us as our duty, or someone else’s due or right. On this view, law and love are not mutually independent nor is one primary. They presuppose a common dimension: what is morally
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wanted, and they are mutually complementary, between them filling the presupposed common dimension.

So far, I have sketched three instances of genuine types of virtue ethics and emphasized certain differences between them.

The first difference is this. Homeric ethics is a virtue ethics in the fullest sense. The idea of virtue is epistemologically basic. In order to know what a virtue is, no other ethical question has to be answered first: no answer to any other ethical question has any bearing on this one: and all the other important ethical questions have to be answered by reference to it. This is not true of the later forms of virtue ethics. In fact, in them questions of what to do become co-equal with questions of what to be or even prior to them.

The second difference is that while Homeric ethics conceives of virtues as simply those motives, behavior patterns, and attitudes on account of which one is admired, envied, and deferred to, the later theories conceive of virtues as motives, behavior, and attitudes which people ought to have, whether or not they wish to be admired, envied, or deferred to. But these later theories have no good explanation of why one ought to have them.

The third difference is that the two later versions of virtue ethics greatly expand the range of beings whose concerns are taken into account in determining what to be and do and that they show much greater awareness of the need to justify the moral principles they advocate, to those governed by them, in terms of the way being governed by them would affect them. And they differ importantly in respect of what effects are to count.

With these points in mind, we can now turn to modern theories of ethics and modern conceptions of virtue. As we have seen, the earliest virtue ethics regarded as central the question of what sort of person to be, and answered by the question of what to do by reference to what the virtuous person would do. By contrast, modern ethics regard as epistemologically primary the question of what to do, and answers the question of what sort of person to be—insofar as that question is properly ethical rather than aesthetic or whatever—by reference to the kind of psychological and character makeup, possession of which would bring it about that one does the right thing simply by acting “in character”. One might perhaps allow, with Kant, that in certain very special circumstances the requirements of morality might require one to act out of character. Thus a generous man who has fallen on hard times may have to be tight-fisted towards his acquaintances in order to secure essentials for his family. But that sort of thing should happen relatively infrequently in a normal life: for one’s moral education and one’s moral self-improvement would tend to mould one’s character so that in the normal course of life one could count on doing the right thing simply by acting in character.

In contemporary ethics, that first and central question of what to do is approached against a web of beliefs, attitudes and institutions which are significantly different from those of the Greeks and early, or even medieval, Christians.

Perhaps the most important novelty is the modern unwillingness, no doubt due to the success of science, to accept authoritative pronouncements about the unseen and the beyond. Today, even many devout Christians regard talk about an afterlife as metaphorical. Living so as to achieve salvation and avoid damnation is thought by them to lead to something valuable in this rather than the next life.
Thus, insofar as ethics is at all related to the good life, it is related to the good life in this world, not some other world.

A second modern belief is that there is no such thing as the absolutely best life—that no single pattern will suit everybody, that people often find that they have made a mistake in their first choice, that people’s tastes can change along the way, and that no one can tell reliably what life style a given person will find fulfilling. Since it is now widely believed that this life on earth may be the only one we get, the choice of life pattern and life style is one of the most important decisions a person has to make. It is taken as virtually axiomatic that, therefore, every normal adult should, as far as possible, be free to make that choice himself. Even though a given individual may not be the best judge himself, it is nevertheless held that no one else should have the right of, and the responsibility for, making that decision for him.

This highlights the further question of what determines how close a person will come to what he regards as the optimal life for himself. There appear to be five crucial factors: (i) genetic endowment both as regards one’s talents, one’s tastes, and one’s dispositions—what Rawls has felicitously called “the lottery of nature”; (ii) one’s personal good or bad luck; (iii) what one can do oneself to bring one’s life closer to what one conceives as optimal; (iv) what other people can do to interfere with one’s plans or to help one carry them out; and lastly (v) what society can do, especially by assigning one’s social starting place.

So far scientists have been able to do very little—and perhaps that is fortunate—about the lottery of nature. Again, we cannot of course hope altogether to eliminate bad luck. So, there remains only what we can do ourselves, what other individuals can do, and what society can do. With the growth of the power of society, that is, the government, especially during the last 100 years, there has come an increasing concern with making the social factor as favorable as possible for each individual. That has taken the form of various kinds of welfare schemes to lessen the impact of the blows of fortune, and of more radical social reforms aimed at improving some of the walks of life from among which members may choose or into which they may be shunted more or less forcibly by social mechanisms.

Against these convictions, modern moral philosophy has tried to build theories with the aid of which everyone can answer moral questions and solve moral problems. Such theories should of course yield solutions which do not run counter to reason, for if they did, a person could always query whether he should be moral, that is, whether he should do what these theories tell him to do. Indeed, any answer to the central moral question, ‘What ought a given person to do?’, must be taken to imply that that person has adequate, perhaps compelling, reason to act as the answer tells him to act. It must not be the case that there is a better reason for him to do something else.

Moral questions, it is commonly believed, are practical ones. Answers to them can be complied with or disregarded. Such moral questions can be asked, answered, and complied with or disregarded only by rational beings, beings who can reason at least in the sense that they can suitably apply general directives to particular cases, thereby answering moral questions and solving moral problems. If Jones wants to watch a football game and I know that she told Smith she would take him to a certain movie, and if I know that that constituted a promise and know also that
promises ought to be kept. then I can conclude that Jones ought, other things equal, to keep her promise and take Smith to that movie rather than watch the game. Such practical reasoning is intended to enable individuals in a great variety of situations to guide themselves in such a way that their lives will be more worthwhile or fulfilling than they would be if they followed unreflective inclination.

Many of us also believe that moral questions are that subclass of practical questions, concerning which it is rational for everyone to desire that everyone correctly answer them and then conform to his answers. Whether to conform with such answers to such questions is thought to be not solely the agent's own business, but also the business of others. Such rational concern varies in strength in important ways. Where it is rational to complain, disapprove, or condemn a person, when he does not comply, and to take it simply for granted when he does comply, we think of that as his duty or obligation, and that he comply as our due or right. If, as in the case of walking the second mile, it is not rational for others to complain, when he does not conform, and to approve, commend, or praise him when he does, then his doing is said to be something beyond his duty, but still something that is morally wanted or welcome; something that he ought to do, though he need not.

Human beings are not, it is plain, born as moral agents. Everybody has to learn to become one. We could not learn this if we did not grow up in a society which has what is sometimes called the institution of morality. Such a society teaches its members the roles to be played in determining what people may in reason ask of one another and what such requests by others they may reject. The basic role is, of course, that of the moral agent trying to work out what morally speaking is wanted of him in the particular situation in which he finds himself. To be able to do this he must have learnt the skill of practical reasoning and the general directives which formulate what is generally wanted of a moral agent. Being a moral agent thus presupposes the roles of moral teacher and moral learner. But since the general moral directives or precepts which the learner accepts from his teacher are not necessarily sound, he must also learn to play the role of moral critic or reformer, the role moral philosophers have paid most attention to. All the roles mentioned so far are concerned with answering the question of what, morally speaking, one ought to do. But there also are three other roles, those of the moral accuser, defender, and judge. They are concerned with ascertaining the quality of someone's performance as a moral agent, that is, with his performance of the cognitive task of judging what he ought to do, and the executive task of doing it, in short his moral merit--and over time, his virtue. The moral accuser accuses someone, himself or another, of having performed these tasks badly, the defender will come to his defense, and the judge will pass judgement on him. Of course, unlike a legal verdict, such a judgement is never final.

The moral enterprise is thus conceived as one of rational individual self-direction by the application to particular situations of general socially regarded directives or guidelines, formulated from the point of view of what it is rational for everyone to want that others should contribute towards his being able to lead what he conceives of as his optimal life. Now, perhaps the most important part, of what it is rational to want from others is that they should support those changes in the social order which must be made if it is to be rational for everyone in it to follow its purportedly moral directives willingly. The lower classes in a social order such as that of the Homeric Greeks or Plato's Republic did not have adequate reason to
follow its authoritative directives. The Homeric social order did not even purport to be organized in a way which gave them such reason. Plato's Republic did purport to be so organized, but even Plato had to resort to what he called the Noble Lie to make a persuasive case that it really was so organized. Modern societies have followed similar techniques. The theory of the Hidden Hand, of the Two Nations, Social Darwinism, Racism, Sexism, and so on, and so on, are forever renewed by the unfairly privileged to persuade the underprivileged of facts which, if true, would constitute a good case for them to willingly accept the discriminatory social order.

It is easy to see why under such a conception of morality and of ethical theory, the virtues should play a relatively unimportant role. For the question of what sort of a person to be, though not unimportant, is nevertheless seen as theoretically secondary, and the answer as relatively unproblematic, if one knows the answer to the question of what to do. Morally speaking, one ought to be the sort of person who can, and is inclined to, discharge both the cognitive and the executive tasks of a moral agent; namely, to judge correctly what one ought to do and to do it. In a rapidly changing society such as ours, it may be very difficult to specify any set of motives and behavioral disposition, such as courage or chastity or truthfulness or thrift, which would always be the appropriate motives to have and the right disposition to follow. One may in the end be reduced to saying what Kant said, namely, that the only disposition, indeed the only thing, which is unconditionally and so always good is the good will, that is, the will to do whatever reason tells one to do, and that may well not be on every occasion what the courageous, the chaste, the thrifty, or the truthful person, the person with all the virtues would do. One may, in other words, be driven to replace the concept of the specific virtues by the concept of virtue, that which is common to and underlies the many virtues--that in virtue of which they are virtues, that is, virtuous motives, virtuous dispositions or virtuous modes of behavior. But when one has reached this point, one has abandoned a pure virtue ethics--one has defined virtue in terms of what one ought to do, namely, what one has the best reason to think is the right thing to do, whatever one is already motivated to do.
Virtue Ethics

FOOTNOTES


7. If Plato had consistently adopted the view that a virtue was something entirely in one’s character and independent of the rewards of having such a character, then, as Burnyeat points out, "on this view a man has a particular character to the extent that he is "a character" of a certain type, and it may be doubted whether there remains much sense in a Socratic declaration that he benefits if his character is a virtuous rather than a vicious one. That would come close to his benefiting from being himself." (Burnyeat, op. cit., p. 234) But Plato was anxious to show that the just man was happier than the unjust man.