

Lists of the Virtues

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ABSTRACT

Virtuous action is action according to the virtues. But which are the virtues? What might be our basis for a list of virtues? In this paper I consider some of the possible answers that have been offered, reviewing material from Plato and Aristotle and the New Testament, also from Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Linda Zagzebski.

KEYWORDS

Virtue, Plato, Aristotle, naturalism, eudaimonism, exemplarism, Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, Alasdair MacIntyre, Linda Zagzebski.

I

Virtue ethics tells us to act “in accordance with virtue, by which I mean contrary to no virtue.”¹ But which are the virtues? Broadly, we might agree with Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1106b36 that nothing can be a moral virtue unless it is “a disposition of choice”, a character-trait that works to transmit our values into our actions; but consensus looks harder to come by when we try to get beyond this rather simple and obvious necessary condition. Or perhaps we will not even get this far: Hume notoriously defines a virtue as *any* trait the disinterested contemplation of which produces in us “the pleasing sentiment of approbation”.² As is well-known, this seems to capture a much wider class of traits than Aristotle’s necessary condition does.

Beyond these points, one obvious problem for virtue ethics is the relativist worry where the virtue ethicist gets her list of virtues from: “what historical enquiry discloses is the situatedness of all enquiry, the extent to which what are taken to be the standards of truth and of rational justification in the contexts of

¹ P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2002, p. 14.

² “[M]orality is determined by sentiment. It defines virtue to be whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation; and vice the contrary.” (Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals, Appendix 1, p. 10) Query: is it morality that does this defining? Or sentiment? Probably the latter, but Hume’s “it” is ambiguous.

practice vary from one time to another”.³ There is research that gives quantitative-analysis evidence of changing language about which are the virtues, and which ones matter most, even within one society, the US, during the twentieth century:

A study by Pelin Kesebir and Selin Kesebir found that general moral terms like “virtue,” “decency” and “conscience” were used less frequently over the course of the 20th century. Words associated with moral excellence, like “honesty,” “patience” and “compassion” were used much less frequently. The Kesebirs identified 50 words associated with moral virtue and found that 74 percent were used less frequently as the century progressed. Certain types of virtues were especially hard hit. Usage of courage words like “bravery” and “fortitude” fell by 66 percent. Usage of gratitude words like “thankfulness” and “appreciation” dropped by 49 percent. Usage of humility words like “modesty” and “humbleness” dropped by 52 percent. Usage of compassion words like “kindness” and “helpfulness” dropped by 56 percent. Meanwhile, usage of words associated with the ability to deliver, like “discipline” and “dependability” rose over the century, as did the usage of words associated with fairness. The Kesebirs point out that these sorts of virtues are most relevant to economic production and exchange.⁴

Of course there is a sense in which this kind of finding is not news. Different societies have always had different lists of virtues. Classical Greece had the four cardinal virtues justice, temperance, courage, and wisdom - and in earlier lists, holiness/ piety as well. Christian Rome, and its successor civilization, has the three theological virtues faith, hope, and charity. (Alasdair MacIntyre famously wrote that “Aristotle would certainly not have admired Jesus Christ and he would have been horrified by St Paul”: AV p.184.) Some say that the Jewish tradition today recognizes six virtues: justice, truth, peace, loving-kindness, compassion, self-respect.⁵ Elsewhere in world history, Confucianism recognizes humanity, propriety, beneficence, reverence, practical wisdom, selflessness, and exemplariness.⁶ Buddhism sometimes gives us a list of three virtues (detachment, mindfulness, pity⁷), sometimes a list of ten (good habituation, study, keeping good company, teach ability, helpfulness, truthfulness, industry, contentment,

³ A. MacIntyre, appealing to Robin Collingwood in the Prologue to *After Virtue*, 3rd edition, University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

⁴David Brooks, “Opinion: What our words tell us”, *New York Times* May 20 2013. Online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/21/opinion/brooks-what-our-words-tell-us.html?hpw& r=2> . Thanks to Natalia Skradol for the reference.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_ethics

⁶ <http://philosophy.lander.edu/oriental/main.html>

⁷From personal conversations with Buddhist friends.

mindfulness, and insight).⁸ Islam, apparently, admits no fewer than thirty-six virtues.⁹ Back in the Western tradition, besides the three “theological virtues” of 1 Corinthians 13, St Paul’s epistles are awash with other lists of desirable characteristics for Christians to display: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control” (Galatians 5.22-23). (More on these lists later.) Much of the *Secunda Pars* of Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* is dedicated to making out and defending one long and intricate list of virtues and sub-virtues, graces and gifts and fruits, centered on, but not confined to, Aquinas’ fusion of the Classical Greek and Roman Christian lists into one list of seven virtues.¹⁰ Hymns, too, often contain catalogues of desired virtues, even if in some cases what the catalogue is apt to prompt today is the retort “Not desired by me”:

Let holy charity
 Mine outward vesture be,
 And lowliness become mine inner clothing;
 True lowliness of heart,
 Which takes the humbler part,
 And o’er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.
 (Bianco da Siena, “Come down, O love divine”)

A list of virtues that looks very different from either Bianco da Siena’s or Aquinas’ is derivable from what is anyway an interesting exercise in street-level experimental philosophy - a survey of the Lonely Hearts columns. In this important contemporary list, alongside the perennial favourite GSOH, the most important virtues probably turn out to be kindness, romanticness, liking pets, and being a non-smoker.

There is this diversity even within the Western tradition which all of us here and now inhabit and from which most of us are culturally descended; never mind the further diversity outside that tradition to which we are nowadays equally exposed. So it looks hopeless for any virtue ethicist to simply accept a list of virtues wholesale from her society or tradition, and just construct a virtue ethics uncritically upon that unquestioned basis. This makes it all the more striking that the *Nicomachean Ethics* might seem to do exactly that. In NE 2.7, from 1106a34 onwards Aristotle just introduces one virtue after another for discussion, “taking them” (as he disarmingly says there) “from the diagram”. (We are presumably to imagine that he has a blackboard or the like next to him as he speaks these words.)

⁸ <http://www.buddhapadipa.org/meditation/10-virtues/>

⁹ <http://islam.ru/en/content/story/36-islamic-everyday-virtues>

¹⁰ For a fine study of Aquinas on the virtues (and related characteristics) see A. Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective in Aquinas's Ethics: Virtues and Gifts*, London, Routledge, 2011.

Aristotle's Book 2 list of virtues includes only three of Plato's four cardinal virtues, and adds in seven other virtues as well. It runs: *andreia*, *sophrosynê*, *eleutheria*, *megaloprepeia*, *megalopsychia*, *praotês/ philia*, *alêtheia*, *eutrapêlia*, *nemesis*, *dikaiosynê*. (Wisdom, both theoretical and practical, he leaves to Book 6.) Aristotle makes no attempt to say (explicitly) why these and just these are the virtues that *ought* to be in his diagram. The list of virtues that he goes through in NE 2.7, where his main concern is clearly to establish the doctrine of the mean, he goes through again, in greater depth and generality, in NE 3.6-5.11. (But with two small modifications: (a) second time around he either forgets or deliberately leaves out *nemesis*; (b) at 1126a20 he oddly says that the virtue that comes after *megalopsychia* in his list is nameless, though it seems to be the same as what the first list called *praotês* (1108a7) or *philia* (1108a28).) Second time around just as first time, Aristotle says nothing to justify his list of virtues: neither when he begins it at 1115a4, nor at any later point.

At the very least there is a sharp contrast here with Plato, whose entire career as an ethicist is devoted to the question which the virtues are, and why. If Aristotle seems to incline towards an uncritical traditionalism, Plato inclines, on the contrary, towards a hypercritical rationalism. For him, above all in the *Republic*, it is of the utmost importance to be able to give a complete theoretical justification of his list of the virtues: especially justice, of course, but the other cardinal virtues too, since justice cannot be defined with full clarity except relative to them. Famously, he sees the virtues as emerging one by one from his city-soul analogy, though perhaps not in the way that we might antecedently have expected. Courage, *andreia*, is the distinctive virtue of the warrior class in Callipolis, as it is of that part of the individual psyche that Plato calls the *thumos*; and wisdom, *sophia*, presumably is the distinctive virtue of the ruling guardians, as it is of the *nous* or intellect in the individual. But *sophrosynê*, temperance, is *not* the distinctive virtue of the lowest order of Callipolis, the wealth creators or business class, even though they are paralleled with the individual's *epithumiai*, base desires. Of course that class, as much as any other, needs to have the virtues; but it has no *distinctive* virtue. Temperance is not its distinctive virtue; rather, temperance is an agreement in all parts of the city, or soul, about which part should rule, and thus comes to sound uncomfortably close to justice as Plato defines it (*Republic* 443b), which is the condition of the city, or soul, when each part within it knowingly and willingly performs its own proper function and no other part's.

But perhaps, on second thoughts, something like Plato's schema for generating the virtues is still present, albeit not explicitly spelled out, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*? There, it could be said, the cardinal virtues can be imagined to emerge in orderly sequence, in parallel with Aristotle's review of human nature "upwards" from its lowest to its highest parts, in NE 1.13. As this picture has it, temperance regulates our desire for pleasure, and courage regulates our fear of pain; then

justice is there to give right order to our relations to our fellow-citizens. As for wisdom, which had been the fourth and highest of Plato's virtues, this maintains its preeminence in Aristotle's thought, but with a curious duplication in its nature (which is also presaged in numerous places in Plato, beginning with *Meno*97a-c's famous admission that true belief can be as good a guide as knowledge to human affairs): Aristotle recognizes both practical wisdom, *phronêsis*, as a master-virtue for human affairs, and also theoretical wisdom, *sophia*, as a virtue that takes us beyond the human to the divine.

If this is, at least implicitly, the schema whereby Aristotle generates his list of the virtues - or at any rate four of them - we might have almost as many doubts about it as about Plato's. The schema of the *Republic* is manifestly a creaky, clunky, and contrived way to generate a list of virtues. The psychological schema that I have just suggested might be attributed to Aristotle is a vast improvement on Plato's schema, but it is still extremely rough and ready. Of course, that might actually be an advantage: given the extremely crude psychological science that was available to him, Aristotle could hardly have done better by basing his schema of the virtues on a preciser psychology.

Nonetheless, modern-day Aristotelian virtue ethicists do not typically go in this psychological direction if they want to give a foundation for a list of the virtues. They look instead to the notion of *eudaimonia*. Aristotle, as we have just seen, simply *presents* us with a list of virtues; he never says explicitly that he is going to generate a list of virtues from the contours of human psychology. No more does he ever say explicitly that he is going to generate a list of virtues by asking "What are the character-traits that humans need in order to live flourishing lives?" That has not deterred a host of attentive and intelligent readers, with Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse at the forefront of the host, from concluding that this is what he is really up to in his ethics.

One attraction of this conclusion - we are told - is that it makes Aristotle into what, in modern terms, is called a "naturalistic ethicist"; another, connected, attraction is that it seems to make his ethics dovetail very neatly with biological science. Now I am pretty sure that Aristotle would not only have found the concept of "naturalistic ethics" unintelligible himself - he would have insisted too that we don't really understand what we mean by it either.¹¹ This possibility has not deterred Philippa Foot and her followers. One crucial advantage they claim is that, on their reading, ethics can be given a descriptive or factual grounding. What makes humans flourish or fail to flourish is, Foot liked to point out, a matter of biological or zoological fact, just as it is a matter of biological fact what makes a plant or a tree flourish. What the traits are that lead to this flourishing are also, therefore, at least in principle factually establishable. Hence there is such a thing

¹¹ For more on this see my "Aristotle's naturalism", in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Political Thought*, Ryan Balot ed., Oxford, Blackwell's, 2009.

as the unique objectively correct list of the virtues, and the contents of that list can, at least partly, be read off the nature of human beings as a zoological species in nature.

As some species of animals need a lookout, or as herds of elephants need an old she-elephant to lead them to a watering-hole, so human societies need leaders, explorers, and artists. Failure to perform a special role can here be a defect in a man or a woman who is not ready to contribute what he or she alone - or best - can give. There is also something wrong with the rest of us if we do not support those of genius, or even of very special talent, in their work.

In spite of the diversity of human goods - the elements that can make up good human lives - it is therefore possible that the concept of a good human life plays the same part in determining goodness of human characteristics and operations that the concept of flourishing plays in the determination of goodness in plants and animals. So far the conceptual structure seems to be intact. Nor is there any reason to think that it could not be in place even in the evaluations that are nowadays spoken of as the special domain of morality... Men and women need to be industrious and tenacious of purpose not only so as to be able to house, clothe, and feed themselves, but also to pursue human ends having to do with love and friendship. They need the ability to form family ties, friendships, and special relations with neighbours. They also need codes of conduct. And how could they have all these things without virtues such as loyalty, fairness, kindness, and in certain circumstances obedience?

Why then should there be surprise at the suggestion that the status of certain dispositions as virtues should be determined by quite general facts about human beings?¹²

One obvious objection to this philosophical programme – zoological naturalism, as we might call it - is that it is one thing for an ethics to dovetail with *Aristotle's* biological science, and quite another for it to dovetail with *our* biological science.¹³ There is no such thing in modern evolutionary zoology as the notion of flourishing. For evolution, the only thing that counts is surviving long enough to pass on your genes, and for that it is simply immaterial whether you are flourishing or not. In many species, the may-fly for example, breeding is something that happens very late in the life-cycle, when the organism is already literally falling apart.¹⁴ Or consider the praying mantis: when the female praying mantis eats the male after they have mated, is the male *flourishing*?

¹² P. Foot, *Natural Goodness*: 44-5.

¹³ For more on this objection see James Lenman, "The saucer of mud, the kudzu vine, and the uxorious cheetah: against neo-Aristotelian naturalism in metaethics", *European Journal of Applied Philosophy* 1.2 (2005): 27-50.

¹⁴ [http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/189544/mayfly/39534/Mating-and-egg-deposition:](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/189544/mayfly/39534/Mating-and-egg-deposition) "Mating takes place soon after the final moult. In most species death ensues shortly after mating

But it did not, if you ask me, need the emergence of modern evolutionary zoology to tell us that there is something wrong with flourishing, understood in the biologically-based way that Foot and her followers understand it, as a basis for a virtue ethics, or any ethics. The notion fails to fit Foot's own requirements, in at least two ways.

First, Foot and her school are resolutely anti-consequentialist (and hurrah for that). But zoological-naturalist virtue ethics itself is, or is very naturally understood as, a consequentialist view. Specifically, it is a consequentialism of the dispositions: it tells us to have the dispositions that will most promote flourishing. So zoological-naturalist virtue ethics fits the charge that Derek Parfit and Brad Hooker think applicable to virtue ethics in general, the charge of collapsing into at least indirect consequentialism.¹⁵

Secondly, if we are going to resist what Hursthouse likes to mock as "high-mindedness" (she takes John McDowell to be a key exemplar of this vice), and insist that flourishing for humans really is significantly like flourishing for wolves, then it seems impossible to avoid the objection that no such "low-minded" conception of flourishing can possibly be *relied on* to generate e.g. justice, charity, and temperance as virtues rather than, say, ferocity, cunning, and stealth. In conjunction with other materials, a zoological-naturalist conception of flourishing *might* produce an intuitively plausible list of virtues. But (first) there again, it might not. And secondly, when things do turn out right, it seems to be the other materials in the argument that have this happy effect - in particular, the account of human reasoning and rationality that the zoological naturalist offers - and not the zoological-naturalist's distinctive account of flourishing.

Foot and her followers are of course not unaware of these difficulties, and have spent much energy on attempting to address them. Hursthouse, for one, is particularly insistent that her account of human flourishing is *not* offered from a neutral scientific view: "Everyone who is taking the Aristotelian naturalist line takes it as obvious that they are not pretending to derive ethical evaluations of human beings from an ethically neutral human biology, but are already thinking

and... egg deposition. Winged existence may last only a few hours, although *Hexagenia* males may live long enough to engage in mating flights on two successive days, and female imagos that retain their eggs may live long enough to mate on either of two successive days... Mating is completed on the wing. After her release by the male, the female deposits her eggs and dies. A few species are ovoviviparous—i.e., eggs hatch within the body of the female generally as she floats, dying, on the surface of a stream or pond."

¹⁵Derek Parfit has frequently expressed this view in correspondence with me, as a reason why he does not need to engage with virtue ethics in, for instance, the project of conciliating the different moral theories that he undertakes in his *On What Matters*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2011. Brad Hooker argues the case that Judith Jarvis Thomson's and Rosalind Hursthouse's virtue ethics are both really forms of indirect consequentialism in his "The Collapse of Virtue Ethics", *Utilitas* 14.1 (2002): 22-40; Hursthouse responds to Hooker (though not mainly to this charge) in the same issue, pp.41-53.

of human beings in an ethically structured way”.¹⁶ But first, one suspects a little hyperbole here: it is less than clear that either Philippa Foot or Michael Thompson, for instance, do in fact take this to be *obvious*. And secondly, if Aristotelian naturalists are indeed not “pretending to derive ethical evaluations of human beings from an ethically neutral human biology”, then there is a serious question what their often fairly detailed claims about (human and other) nature are actually *for* - what work those claims do to shape their moral theory if not, as I have been suggesting, to ground it in the factual and descriptive matter of “Aristotelian categoricals”¹⁷. Thus for Hursthouse in Chapters 9-10 of her *On Virtue Ethics* - the most plausible response to these problems that I have seen - the naturalistic foundation of her virtue ethics is reduced to the four points that humans are social, that they seek enjoyment, that the continuance of the species is a priority for them, and they have close and particular ties with particular others, especially their families.¹⁸ All of which seems obviously right, and to furnish us, as Hursthouse says, with some important constraints on what ethics can be for creatures like us. Yet none of these claims seem necessarily dependent on anything like the kind of zoological naturalism that Foot lays out in *Natural Goodness*, or that Michael Thompson lays out in “The representation of life”.¹⁹

What goes wrong in zoological naturalism, I think, is at least partly the philosopher’s characteristic mistake of over-ambition. Like Plato, the zoological naturalists seek a single uniquely complete and correct account of how to generate the virtues, from the ground up;²⁰ like Plato, the picture they end up with is unconvincing.

II

It is also, I suggest, deeply un-Aristotelian. It isn’t Aristotle’s project in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to derive a list of virtues solely and exclusively from an account of flourishing. And this is not because his project is, rather, to derive a list of virtues exclusively from an account of human psychology. As already pointed out, it isn’t his project to *derive* a list of virtues at all. *A fortiori*, he isn’t trying to derive a list of virtues from anyone source exclusively.

¹⁶R. Hursthouse, “Human nature and Aristotelian virtue ethics”, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 70 (2012): 169-188, p.174.

¹⁷P. Foot, *Natural Goodness*, chapter 2.

¹⁸R. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2002.

¹⁹In R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence, and P. Quinn eds., *Virtues and Reasons*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.

²⁰Hursthouse often remarks that she rejects foundationalism; but the relation of this rejection to her endorsement of the idea that the nature of morality, for us, depends on the natural facts about us, is not clear.

So what *is* he doing? Well, he's doing what he says he's doing in the *Ethics* itself (7.1, 1145b3-8):

We must, as in all other cases, set the observed facts before us and, after first discussing the difficulties, go on to prove, if possible, the truth of all the common opinions ... or, failing this, of the greater number and the most authoritative; for if we both refute the objections and leave the common opinions undisturbed, we shall have proved the case sufficiently.

Aristotle's thoughts about the virtues, and his presuppositions about which is the right list of the virtues, begin in and with his own tradition. As he explains here, that does not mean that his ethics is necessarily wide open to the relativist accusation that he simply takes a list of virtues for granted. *Tithenai ta phainomena* is sometimes translated as "accept the appearances"; but "posit them as a starting point" would be better. What Aristotle undertakes to do in these lines – which happen to be prefaced to his discussion of akrasia, but could stand as his statement of method at almost any point in his writings – is to *start* from the *endoxa* (common opinions) of tradition; but not to *end* there. The common opinions, the traditional views that we've inherited, are to be exposed to each other, to check their internal consistency. But they are also to be exposed to whatever "difficulties" (*aporiai*) they may seem intuitively to face. And this - I suggest, though I admit the point can't be proved - is not just a test of their internal coherence, but also of their correspondence to the way things are in the world beyond them.

The method that I think we can draw out of Aristotle's words here is not just a method for arriving at a list of the virtues; it is a method of quite general usefulness in philosophy. As John McDowell puts it:

It is a deep truth that all thinking, just as such, is anchored in traditions. Reflection has nothing to go on, anywhere, but a putative grasp of *the that*, which (at least to begin with) is merely inherited.²¹

The method is not the Cartesian one of getting rid of everything we already think, and trying to start somewhere else, somewhere suspended in the vacuous abyss of "pure inquiry". The method, rather, is to *start* from everything we already think, and subject it, not to one single all-purpose philosophical test (such as, for instance, Cartesian doubt), but to a variety of different tests and questions that we can use, not usually just to abandon our initial view, but to refine it.

This way we can have the great advantage of traditionalism or conservatism, that it starts off with our pre-philosophical opinions. (As Aristotle says in NE 1173a1-3, there isn't really anywhere *else* to start.) Yet we avoid its great disadvantage, that of being insufficiently critical about those starting-points for

²¹ J. McDowell, *The Engaged Intellect*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2013, p.57.

thought. The critical element is supplied by the questions and tests that we apply to our initial presumptions. And our balance, our common sense, and our resistance to fanciful skepticisms are all preserved by the fact that it is *questions*, plural, and *tests*, plural. *Pace* writers like Peter Singer,²² there isn't one super-methodology that does away with pre-philosophical common sense. Rather, there is a variety of methods for adjusting it, with none of those methods being preeminent and exclusively correct, and the correct application of them being, as always, a matter of judgment.

This way we can also have the advantages of systematic and constructive philosophy, that it will actually be possible for us to present an interesting positive and structured view as our philosophical position, rather than courting the familiar accusation that we are “quietists” or “conservatives” or “just being negative” (or opposed to what we might call edifactiousness²³). Yet we avoid the great disadvantage of system-building philosophy, that we make it look as if *our* theoretical structure were the only possible one, or as if our philosophical approach were all-or-nothing. We are freed of the supposed duty to derive our list of the virtues “from the ground up”, so that our derivation is either the only possible one and completely inexpugnable, or else completely impossible and a complete failure.

This cautious and piecemeal methodology, balancing a default presumption in favour of received opinion with a willingness to revise it for sufficiently good philosophical reasons, and balancing an openness to the sheer variety of what “good philosophical reasons” might be with a healthy skepticism about the philosophical fanaticism or monocularism that again and again becomes fixated with just one sort of philosophical reason - this, I want to suggest, is the truly Aristotelian method in philosophy, and the method that Aristotle himself tries to apply: with resounding success at times, and resounding failure at other times. In philosophy in general, there are explanations for most things, but there is no one explanation which is *the* explanation for even most, let alone all, things. In ethics in particular, there are reasons that ground most cases of rightness and wrongness, goodness and badness, but there is no one foundational reason, or kind of reasons, that grounds everything, or anywhere near everything. If we liked we might call this an intuitionist method, in the methodological sense of “intuitionism” that Bernard Williams endorses in “What does intuitionism imply?”.²⁴ Or we might prefer to keep things simple, and just call the method common sense.

²²See Peter Singer, “Ethics and intuition”, *Journal of Ethics* 9 (2005): 331-352. For a forceful reply see James Lenman, “Scepticism about intuition”, in Sophie Grace Chappell ed., *Intuition, Theory, Anti-Theory in Ethics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp.24-39.

²³ John Maynard Keynes' word for Henry Sidgwick, in Keynes' well-known letter to Lytton Strachey, quoted by Williams in *Making Sense of Humanity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.155.

²⁴In B. Williams, *Making Sense of Humanity*, pp. 182-191.

III

I have abjured the search for one test or criterion that, all on its own, will give us a complete and definitive list of the virtues; I prefer talk of *tests* and *criteria* - plural. So what is in this plurality of tests, and how do the various individual tests interact to give us the right results? And how can we be sure they won't interact to give us the *wrong* results? (An obvious piece of arithmetic shows that the number of possible interactions of the tests is a much larger number than the number of the tests: so this multiplicity might seem really worrying.)

The answer to the how-can-we-be-sure question is, of course, that we can't be sure (in advance): that is what I meant by talking, a moment ago, about judgement. What we can be sure of is that intelligible argument about what the virtues are will always be conducted by appeal to these tests. But there is no guarantee that all intelligible argument about the list of the virtues will be *plausible* argument about the list of the virtues. Working out what is wrong with an implausible argument, or an implausible list, will often be a subtle and delicate matter, and will usually be a case-by-case one too.

We should enter another reservation too at this point, and before we go any further. This is about the supposed definitiveness or objectivity of the list of the virtues that we might hope to end up with by deploying the multi-criterial and intuitionist method that I have sketched. Here too there is a contrast with the over-ambition, as I see it, of zoological naturalism, which as we saw above, at least aims to give us a completely objective and definitive list of virtues, in principle applicable to all societies, but as far as I can see, specific to none.²⁵ These claim strikes me as implausibly over-ambitious; and as unnecessary, even for those who, like me and the zoological naturalists, agree in endorsing moral realism.

Notice here the philosophical advantages of moral realism over moral irrealism of whatever stripe. If moral irrealism is the thesis that no moral propositions are objectively true or false, moral realism is simply the negation of that thesis. Moral irrealism, therefore, is refuted by a single example of a moral proposition that *is* objectively true, or false; moral irrealism is intolerant of objectivity.²⁶ Moral realism, by contrast, need not be at all intolerant of subjectivity: since it is the thesis that *some* moral propositions are objectively true or false - and of course, preferably the central and important ones - there is room for subjectivity within moral realism, in a way that there cannot be room for objectivity within moral irrealism.

So in the present case, while the moral irrealist *cannot* say that there is - really, ultimately - any such thing as the correct list of virtues, and *must* say that there is

²⁵ "Morality which is no particular society's morality is to be found nowhere": MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Second (corrected) edition (with Postscript), Norfolk, Duckworth, pp.265-266.

²⁶ Cp. Timothy Chappell, *Ethics and Experience*, Durham, Acumen, 2011, p.42.

no such thing, the moral realist is free to say either that there is or isn't such a correct list. Provided the moral realist takes *something* (and, of course, something important) to be objective, there isn't even an apparent threat to his moral realism if he denies that lists of virtues are objective, or are fully objective.

Well, I am a moral realist; and although I don't actually want to go as far as outright denial that there is such a thing as *the* correct list of the virtues, I do want to say that there is often something rather beside the point about anxious queries whether this or that list of the virtues is or is not "objectively correct". To take it that lists of the virtues are actually meant, by those who propound them, to be - and to be nothing but - flatly descriptive of an antecedently given reality seems to me a rather naïve kind of literalism. Very often the intentions of those who offer us such lists are, and are patently, *prescriptive* rather than descriptive. They are not so much attempts to describe a reality that is already there, as to summon a reality into being by sketching an ideal and exhorting one's hearers to live up to it.

This hortatory function of lists of virtues has a number of explanatory applications. For one thing, it makes it perfectly explicable, for the moral realist, why there should be so many differences between different societies' lists of virtues. Some of those differences no doubt do reflect substantive philosophical disagreements: consider, for instance, the differences noted by MacIntyre between Jesus' and Aristotle's conceptions of the virtues, or again the differences between the virtues of a Socrates and those of a Thrasymachus.²⁷ But many other differences are merely a matter of emphasis or of the division of topics. Between somebody who (say) takes gentleness to be a primary virtue and humility to be an offshoot or subcategory of gentleness, and someone who sees things the other way round, there need be no more than a difference in the order of exposition.

The hortatory function of lists of virtues is particularly obvious, I want to suggest, in the writings of a figure who - along with Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas - is one of the three or four most influential propounders of lists of the virtues that Western ethics has ever seen, namely Paul of Tarsus. One list of his we have cited already:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control.

ὁ δὲ καρπὸς τοῦ πνεύματος ἐστὶν ἀγάπη, χαρά, εἰρήνη, μακροθυμία, χρηστότης, ἀγαθωσύνη, πίστις, πραΰτης, ἐγκράτεια: κατὰ τῶν τοιούτων οὐκ ἔστιν νόμος. (Galatians 5.22-23)

There are plenty of others:

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one

²⁷See Timothy Chappell, "The virtues of Thrasymachus", *Phronesis* 38(1993): 1-17.

another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you forgive each other. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. (Colossians 3.12-17)

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, think on these things. (Philippians 4.8)²⁸

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, along with malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4.31-32)²⁹

It isn't that there are no standards of correctness for such lists; if St Paul had recommended that the Ephesian Christians seek not only to be kind, forgiving, and tender-hearted, but also louché and cynical, there would have been something wrong with that. Or if he had recommended that the church at Philippi think not only on the true and the lovely, but also on the crafty, that too would have justified a readerly double-take. There are standards of correctness for these lists, but the standards are standards for exhortatory, not for descriptive, catalogues. Contrast the zoological naturalists and their would-be straight-descriptive lists of dispositions that, as a matter of fact, promote flourishing.

Though come to think of it, perhaps the zoological naturalists are also wrong about the sort of list that their account of the virtues implies: perhaps a list of the characteristics that, say, a wolf needs in order to live a life that is long, healthy, and largely undisturbed except by predation-opportunities is *also* rather more open-ended than they like to admit. (One obvious thought that points in this direction: what those characteristics are is determined in large part by the wolf's environment; and environments change.) Still, as I say, their list is (at least

²⁸ Is this a list of virtues at all? Isn't it rather a list of things to meditate on?" It is certainly the latter; its being the latter does not preclude its also being the former, since these subjects of meditation are apparently classes of actions or of the dispositions that produce them. Though even if it isn't a list of virtues, the relevance to a virtue ethics of such a list of reflective practices, or topics for reflective practice, is obvious; it is a key part of virtue—Paul is telling us—to reflect on things like these.

²⁹ And of course behind all St Paul's lists of virtues stands Jesus' list, the Beatitudes: Matthew 5.1-12.

intended as) a *straight-descriptive* list: it is meant to capture *the facts about* what characteristics *actually* achieve or tend to achieve a supposedly given end, namely biological or quasi-biological flourishing. If such a descriptive catalogue of the virtues is, in fact, open-ended, it will be so for quite different reasons from the reasons that make for open-endedness with St Paul's lists of virtues and ideals.

We are close here to the large and interesting question, what a list of the virtues is supposed to be for anyway; exhortation has been suggested as one possible function, but maybe there are others. At any rate it would be bizarre to suppose that the list of the virtues is meant to be deployed directly in agents' deliberation, as their main means of thinking about what to do. The zoological naturalists do not suppose this: that is why Hursthouse often invokes the notion of the "v-thoughts", the thoughts that motivate the virtuous person, which can be but are not necessarily coincidental with the thoughts about the virtues that, according to her, give the criterion of rightness for all action.

It has often been argued that this manoeuvre rescues Hursthouse's virtue ethics from an implausible picture of how agents deliberate, at the price of making the very distinction between deliberative procedure (DP) and criterion of rightness (CR) that makes so much trouble for utilitarianism.³⁰ Without getting too deeply into this debate here, I will say simply that the DP/ CR distinction in itself seems to me entirely unproblematic. The problem comes only when a theory is forced to suppose that an agent is bound to entertain thoughts on the one side of the distinction that subvert or contradict thoughts that she is bound to entertain on the other side. Utilitarianism of every variety known to me is clearly refuted by its failure to avoid this problem about internal consistency; it is less clear that every version of virtue ethics is.

Anyway, St Paul's practice gives us further evidence that is that there are other things that lists of virtues can be for, besides straightforward description of moral reality, and the equipping of the agent with materials for (more or less direct) deliberation, and for devising and applying a criterion of rightness. A list of virtues can also be for *meditative attention*: it can be an ideal, or constellation of ideals, that we reflect on in order to internalize. It is clear that St Paul thinks that such meditative attention is a powerful form of moral discipline, and a powerful source of moral transformation. And on that, of course, modern thinkers such as Iris Murdoch will agree with him.

³⁰For a fine discussion of the issues, and of the two main sources of the charge in work by Tom Hurka and Simon Keller, see Glen Pettigrove, "Is virtue ethics self-effacing?", *Journal of Ethics* 15.3 (2011): 191-207.

IV

So though there are certainly (according to realists like me) antecedent realities that a list of the virtues needs to fit, presenting a list of virtues is not merely a matter of describing antecedent realities. As the case of St Paul makes clear, it is also, at least as much, a matter of prescribing: of exhorting one's hearers to see things in a certain light, to dispose themselves in particular ways, to attempt to approximate some ideal or ideals, and to "think on" those ideals: to reflectively internalise them.

We can keep this thought in mind as we turn to the question that section III left outstanding, the question of what the tests are that should determine our list of the virtues. After the remarks I have just made about the exhortatory value of such lists, it would be odd to attempt to offer a complete and definitive answer to this. But I will offer three suggestions. The first is about *eudaimonia*; the second is about the notion of a *technê* or practice; and the third brings us back to the idea of reflecting on and imitating ideals or exemplars.

The first suggestion, then, is just the idea that the notion of human flourishing or *eudaimonia* can give us some help in formulating a list of virtues. Perhaps it looks as if I have already excluded all reference to *eudaimonia*; but actually what I have rejected is eudaimonism, by which in this context I mean the view that the point of the virtues is to promote *eudaimonia*, and so that our list of the virtues can be derived *solely* from thinking about what promotes human flourishing. I have denied this in particular where the notion of flourishing that we are working with has the misleadingly scientific look of zoological-naturalistic flourishing. But to deny these claims is not to deny that there is *anything* to the notion of human flourishing. Of course there is, but the notion is a "folk" notion, not a scientific one: what we count as flourishing is not part of our science but of our form of life.³¹

My second suggestion arises from MacIntyre's discussion of the nature of the virtues in *After Virtue*. MacIntyre's approach rephrases the question "Which character-traits are the virtues?" as the question "What character-traits do we need for successful pursuit of the practices?" His account of what a practice is - the notion has obvious affinities to Aristotle's and Plato's notion of a *technê* - is this:

Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and the goods involved, are systematically extended.³²

³¹A point which, as we have seen, the zoological naturalists of course attempt, at least sometimes, to accommodate. In my view, not successfully; but that is an argument for another time.

³²MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 187.

Examples of practices that MacIntyre gives include farming, chess, music, science, history, novel-writing, and (a very Aristotelian example, this) politics. As MacIntyre brings out, the mark of all these practices is that in order to practise them, one needs honesty, humility, preparedness to learn from others, and responsiveness to the legitimate demands of others: so one needs something very like justice. One also needs persistence and self-discipline – so something very like temperance – and the optimism to keep going when the practice seems impossibly difficult or overwhelmingly complicated: so something very like courage. And what one learns through the practices is how human understanding and expertise is articulated in particular cases and contexts, and how to move from those particular contexts and apply their lessons to the overall context of living our lives: so something like wisdom too.

The flourishing of the virtues requires and in turn sustains a certain kind of community, necessarily a small-scale community, within which the goods of various practices are ordered, so that, as far as possible, regard for each finds its due place within the lives of each individual, or each household, and in the life of the community at large. Because, implicitly or explicitly, it is always by reference to some conception of the overall and final human good that other goods are ordered, the life of every individual, household or community by its orderings gives expression, wittingly or unwittingly, to some conception of the human good. And it is when goods are ordered in terms of an adequate conception of human good that the virtues genuinely flourish. “Politics” is the Aristotelian name for the set of activities through which goods are ordered in the life of the community.³³

We do not learn the virtues *only* through the practices; but that is one very obvious place where we do learn them. When we look at the dispositions of character that are required for expertise in some particular practice, what we arrive at very quickly comes to look pretty much like a list of the virtues that we need in *any* practice, and in the living of our lives overall.

Here then is a second way of arriving at some ideas about what the virtues are. It is a way that Iris Murdoch at least gestures towards as well:

If I am learning Russian, I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect. The task is difficult and the goal is distant and perhaps never entirely attainable. My work is a progressive revelation of something which exists independently of me. Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality. Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny

³³MacIntyre, Preface to the Polish edition of *After Virtue*.

or make unreal. The honesty and humility required of the student - not to pretend to know what one does not know - is the preparation for the honesty and humility of the scholar who does not even feel tempted to suppress the fact which damns his theory... Studying is normally an exercise of virtue as well as of talent, and shows us a fundamental way in which virtue is related to the real world.³⁴

My third and final suggestion about the tests that we might use to derive a credible list of the virtues is that at least some of the content of any plausible list of virtues is generated by thinking about *examples* of good people, and especially of remarkably good people - saints, or ideals, or exemplars of the virtues.

Exemplarism, the thesis that we can derive our conception of the virtues from thinking about exemplars of the virtues, is a venerable and important part of the virtue tradition. One way to develop it I deployed myself, in a paper that I toured for a couple of years in the early nineties without ever managing to get it published. The idea was to work from thin descriptions to thick: the key question was “If you know of Jane only that she is *a good person*, what further descriptions may you reasonably expect to be true of Jane?” I thought then, and twenty-five years later I still think, that there can be an interesting answer to this that gives us a good deal of information about the nature of the virtues. To be sure, we get that information in the form of a long, loose and defeasible disjunction; and to be sure, the information we thus get is filtered via my or our reasonable expectations, which no doubt are both cognitively imperfect and culture-relative. But these points are philosophical commonplaces. They constitute serious obstacles only to an attempt to use this “key question” as the *unique* method that *definitively* gets us to *everything* we need to know about the correct list of the virtues. As should be obvious by now, I am not in that game at all; I doubt I was, really, even in 1991.

In recent philosophy the exemplarist approach to virtue ethics has been argued for by other strategies than the one I tried out in that old draft of mine: by Linda Zagzebski in one way³⁵, and by me in another³⁶. For both Zagzebski and myself, Aristotle is the source and authority for this thesis whom we quote the most, though we could also have quoted St Paul, who repeatedly tells the readers of his letters to imitate Jesus (e.g. Galatians 3.27, Philippians 2.5, Ephesians 4.14). (Paul also tells them to imitate himself at least twice: 1 Corinthians 11.1, Philippians 3.17.). The Christian tradition has made rich use of exemplarism: that, for instance, is one reason why the church has the lives of saints to meditate on.

³⁴I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of God*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970: 89.

³⁵ L. Zagzebski, “The admirable life and the desirable life”, in T. Chappell ed., *Values and Virtues*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.

³⁶ T. Chappell, “The good man is the measure of all things”, in Christopher Gill ed., *Virtue, Norms, and Objectivity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Part of the point of exemplarism is, as Zagzebski stresses, that a living exemplar of a given virtue gives us far more detailed information about what the virtue actually involves than any abstract description or definition of that virtue could. We might say, as she does, that what we learn from the exemplar is basically knowledge by direct ostension – “The virtue is *like that*” – rather than knowledge by definition. Or we might make what seems to be a closely-related point, that what the exemplar gives us is not, or not only, explicit and propositional knowledge of the virtue, but also tacit and non-propositional knowledge of *what it is like* for someone to have that virtue; or perhaps practical knowledge – knowledge *how* to exercise the virtue. Or again, we could observe with Iris Murdoch that attention to exemplars of virtue – those found in novels and plays, to give two obvious examples – feeds our imagination and our moral vision in a richer and psychologically deeper way than if-and-only-if equations do. Or we might make all of these points, as in fact I think we should; they seem perfectly consistent with each other. And what they add up to, in combination, is a striking picture of how much more there can be to moral knowledge than straightforwardly propositional knowledge.

How, though, do exemplars get established as exemplars? Very often, I suggest, it is because some person or some deed comes across to us as immediately admirable. In print or in person, we come across some Gandhi or St Francis or Martin Luther King or Sophie Scholl, and that person strikes us - directly and primitively - as awesome, as having done something noble or wonderful, perhaps even beautiful. Two well-known cases of this sort of experience are given by Rai Gaita early on in *Good and Evil*: the cases of the nun in the hospital working selflessly and unendingly to relieve the sufferings of her patients, and Primo Levi’s description of the sufferings of Ladmaker in Auschwitz: “Charles’s behaviour showed a goodness to marvel at”.³⁷

What thinking about exemplarism gets us to see here, in fact, is something that we might find profoundly missing from approaches to virtue ethics such as zoological naturalism. It is that any plausible and attractive list of the virtues is going to depend at least as much on the notion of the morally fine or beautiful – in Greek, on *to kalon* – as on the notion of flourishing or the advantageous – in Greek, on *to ophelimon*. The virtues are not just the dispositions that tend to lead us to the *desirable* life. They are also, and perhaps even more fundamentally, the dispositions the exercise of which is *admirable*, and makes us *admirable people*.³⁸ (But the point, of course, is to be admirable, not to be admired; it is to have in us what necessarily makes admiration apt, not what actually prompts admiration. Here talk of the beautiful is preferable to talk of the admirable, precisely because it lacks this misleading connotation.)

³⁷R. Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, London, Macmillan, 1991, xvii.

³⁸ For the admirable/ desirable contrast cp. Linda Zagzebski, op.cit.

We can put this as a point about the familiar old question “Why be moral?”.³⁹ So put, the point is that the answer to “Why be moral?” is quite often “Because that is the beautiful thing to do”. It’s not that the moral act is itself prudentially disastrous, but just happens to be, unfortunately enough, one of a class to the whole of which we are somehow committed, if we are committed to any part of it - as theories like rule-consequentialism and Gauthier’s contractualism too often tend to suggest. Nor is that the moral act is prudentially advantageous in *some* way - just a very obscure way, one which is consistent with the fact that the moral act is attended with terrible penalties like those that Hans and Sophie Scholl faced, or those described by Callicles in Plato’s *Gorgias* (486b). We need not think that there is *any* prudential advantage, in *any* sense, in the gravely-sacrificial moral act. (Notice here how close to the surface we find a false assumption that I have criticised elsewhere:⁴⁰ that reasons for action have to be future-directed.) At least in some cases, advantage simply isn’t the point. It is rather that the moral act demands to be done even if it *does* involve a grave sacrifice - just because it is beautiful.

Perhaps this appeal to *to kalon*, The Beautiful, is the answer to the puzzlement expressed by the person who said of Sophie Scholl and those who suffered with her that “the fact that five little kids, in the mouth of the wolf where it really counted, had the tremendous courage to do what they did, is spectacular to me. I know that the world is better for them having been there, but I do not know why.”⁴¹ Perhaps it is also the best answer to the difficulty that Philippa Foot is struggling with in her rather convoluted discussion of the “Letter-Writers”, a group of victims of the Nazis who thought it was worthwhile to die rather than to give in to Hitler⁴². Foot’s difficulty is, precisely, to square the Letter-Writers’ willingness to die, and their obvious virtue, with Foot’s own eudaimonism: the virtues are supposed to lead, or at least tend to lead, to flourishing, and here the virtues are, in all their glory, leading their possessors directly to death. (And not only leading but tending to lead, given the nature of Hitler’s Germany.) Despite repeated study of what Foot says about their case, I am not entirely sure how she thinks their case can be squared with the eudaimonist idea, which goes back at least to Socrates, that “the virtues benefit their possessor”. But I know how I want to respond to their case. On the grounds precisely of cases like the Letter-Writers’, I simply deny that the virtues *do* necessarily benefit, or even tend to benefit, their possessor. As the

³⁹ The next two paragraphs draw on Chapter Eight of *Knowing What To Do. Imagination, Virtue, and Platonism in Ethics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁴⁰ In Chapter Three of *Knowing What To Do*.

⁴¹ Lillian Garrett-Groag, quoted in the Wikipedia article on Sophie Scholl. The remark is quoted—from the same source—and discussed by Eleonore Stump in *Wandering in Darkness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010:149 and 549. In the present context we are close, of course, to Gaita 1991’s remarks about “a goodness to marvel at”, cited in the last chapter; there is bound to be some overlap between the notions of glory and of nobility.

⁴² P. Foot, *Natural Goodness*: 95-6.

Letter-Writers show, there are cases where the exercise of the virtues can be utterly disastrous for their possessor - and yet, the virtues continue steadfastly to point us towards “the thing to do”. For the Letter Writers, what their virtues do is make their possessors, and their terrible submission to the suffering that confronted them, admirable/ fine/ beautiful/ *kalos*. But that, in the circumstances, was the very opposite of *benefiting* them.

Eudaimonia, the dispositions that we need for the practices, the power of examples: all of these are resources that we can appeal to when attempting to refine our list of the virtues, or assess whether we really think that this or that disposition of character *is* a virtue or not, and why. No doubt there are other resources too. My suggestion is not that any one of these resources would give us all we needed to derive a list of the virtues - even if *deriving* a list of the virtues from scratch, rather than refining the list(s) of the virtues that we have already inherited from our traditions, were really what we are engaged in doing. Rather, the three resources that I have looked at here suggest tests and diagnostic questions and criticisms that may be applied to *already existing* lists of the virtues. Such evaluation of lists of the virtues is therefore more like a matter of good judgment than of the application of a simple algorithm. But that, of course, is precisely what we would expect, and entirely as it should be.